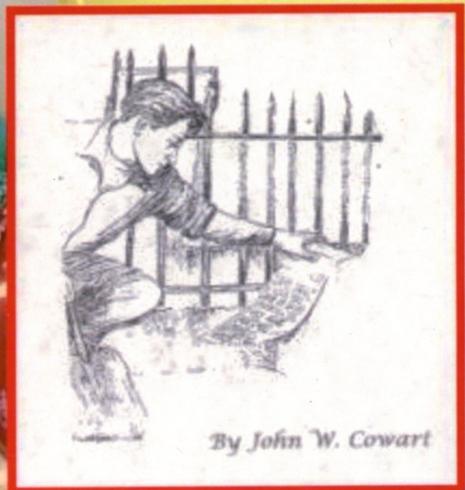
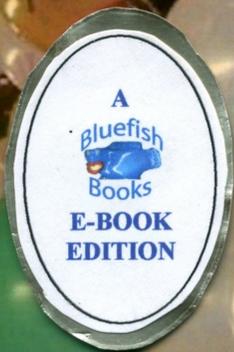


**GRAVEDIGGER'S
CHRISTMAS
&
Other Tales**



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**GRAVEDIGGER'S CHRISTMAS
AND
TALES FOR OTHER OCCASIONS**
Fact, Fiction & The Normal Daily Grind

JOHN W. COWART

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**This book is dedicated
to
VIRGINIA**

**Christmas, Easter, 4th of July —
To me you are all happy holidays rolled into one
Especially Thanksgiving
— John**



GRAVEDIGGER'S CHRISTMAS AND TALES FOR OTHER OCCASIONS

Fact, Fiction & Our Normal Daily Grind

Legend Of Symbols:

 — Christmas Season,  — Easter,  — Patriotic,  —
Halloween,  — Our normal daily grind,  — Thanksgiving
Day,  — Love,
 — St. Patrick's Day,  —April Fool's Day,

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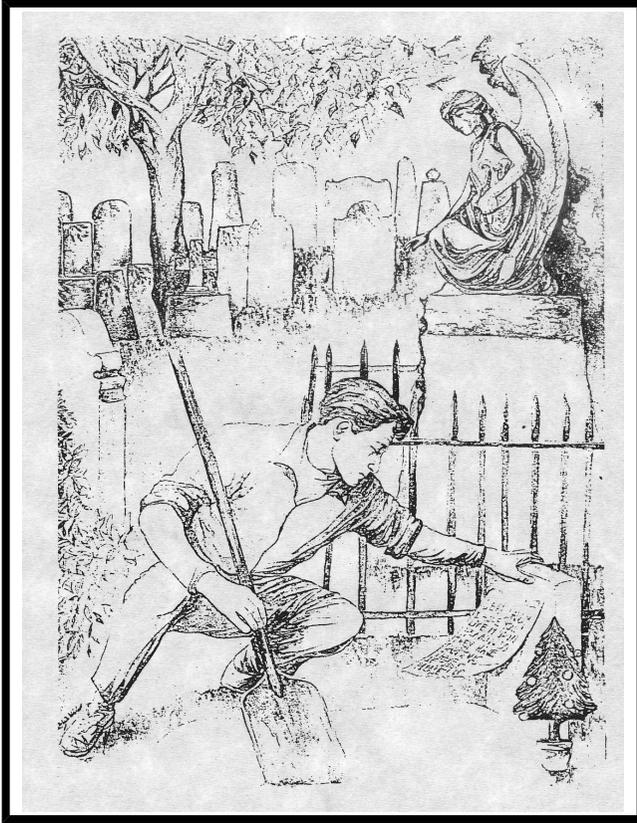


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**GRAVEDIGGER'S CHRISTMAS
AND
TALES FOR OTHER OCCASIONS**
Fact, Fiction & Our Normal Daily Grind



GRAVEDIGGER'S CHRISTMAS

A true tale
by
John Cowart

A pleasant surprise awaited me at the cemetery.

But I didn't know about it.

I felt depressed and frustrated as I drove to work on Christmas Eve morning. I wanted to give my three children more presents than I could afford. Their grandparents on both sides were lavishing goodies on our kids, but I only had a few dime-store trinkets and some primitive wooden toys I'd made by following the instructions in a library book.

I parked the car and someone yelled, "Hey, John, get your fat tail over here and look at this." I walked up

the hill to the work shed where we reported to work each morning.

This shed is a rickety, corrugated tin lean-to screened from the beautiful cemetery grounds by thick clumps of bamboo.

It's built over -- and supported by -- the chimney of an old brick bar-b-que pit where the labor force cooks lunch. Usually tin cans, scraps of aluminum foil wrapping, crushed paper sacks and empty bottles litter the dirt floor, but, during the night, some unknown benefactor had raked the place out, cleaned the fireplace, moved in a table, and decorated a small Christmas tree trimmed with gold styrofoam balls, blue ribbons and icicles.

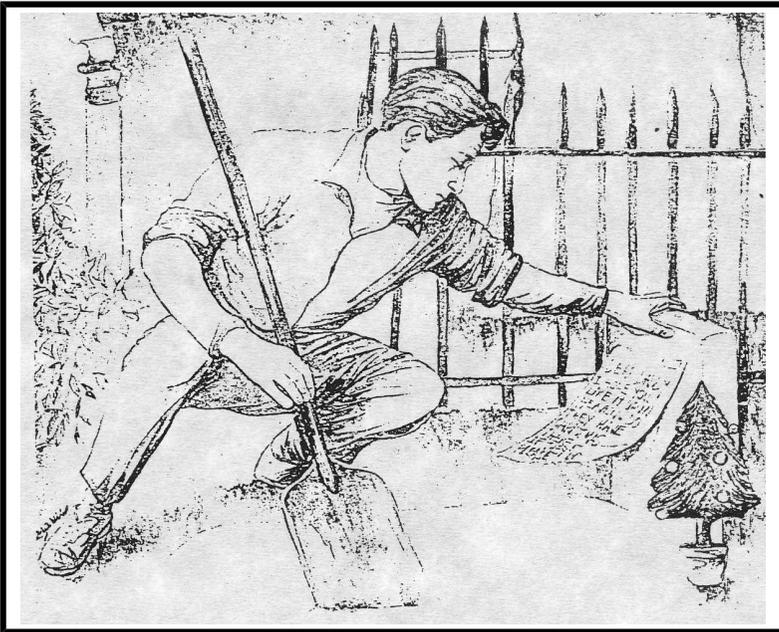
Beneath the tree lay 28 individually wrapped and tagged presents, one for each of us on the labor crew.

An enormous Christmas card propped against the chimney provided the master touch -- a note from Santa written in red felt-tipped pen said, "Merry Christmas this year. But if you guys don't clean out this #*&!! fireplace, I ain't coming here no more!"

With grins on our faces, we tore into our presents. Each gift contained a candy cane, two cigars, a candy bar, and a few comic books which told various Bible stories. Laughter filled the shed as we speculated on the origin of these gifts. Several of the men remarked that this was the first real Christmas present they'd received in years. Smokers traded off candy for extra cigars, and illiterates puzzled over the simple words of the comics. We joked and teased each other as the supervisor assigned our duties for the day; then we cheered when he announced that the last funeral to be serviced would be at 1 o'clock and we could have the rest of the day off. He teamed me with a man I thought of as a degenerate old wino, Harry Gilby. We were to serve a 10 o'clock burial then edge stones in Section 18 till the one at 1 o'clock.

After the early funeral, Harry and I took a break before starting over to Section 18. We lounged against a fence puffing our gift cigars and looking out over the cemetery.

For over 100 years, families have erected monuments to their dead in this Florida cemetery. Gigantic angels hover on marble wings above some tombs; granite obelisks tower over others. Tiny stone lambs curl asleep atop the graves of children. Fine cast bronze markers lay flat over other resting places. And in honor of the season, thousands of poinsettias, holly wreaths or miniature Christmas trees decorate the cemetery blending with the natural solemn beauty of the grounds. I noticed that streams of morning sunlight slanted through the branches of one ancient oak making a silver lattice-work silhouette out of the trailing beards of Spanish Moss.



A few yards away from us something fluttered against the flat bronze marker of a recent grave.

Curious, Harry and I strolled over to see what it was -- a letter from a child scotch taped to the

tombstone: "Dear Daddy, I hope you like it up in heaven. Do they have Christmas there? If they do, get me a big teddy bear and a ..." Rain had faded the rest.

The letter brought back to mind my own financial problems; how could I give good gifts to my children with this miserable minimum-wage job? I wondered why the Lord had put me in such sad straights -- or was it my own mismanagement of opportunities that reduced me to grave digging?

Harry scrutinized the child's letter; then said, "Little kids. Death's rough on 'em; life's rough on 'em -- Look here, John. I wants to ask you about something. There's this girl, see. She lives upstairs at the place I stay at. She's got this little boy, see. And she don't have nothing for him, see. She's hooked on the stuff and I doubt if she even really knowed Christmas was coming till this morning. She was gonna go down to the Welfare or someplace and get him a present, but she's been high and forgot. Then she comes and tells me this morning, but I ain't got nothing but bus fare to get to work... I mean, there's nothing for this kid. What with his mama out peddling her ass or high all the time, there ain't never gonna be nothing for him. What I was wondering -- you got kids -- was if you might have some li'll old something you was 'tending to give yours that you could slip me for him? I'm gonna give him these little comic books from this morning, but that ain't no toy. What's you say?"

I felt indignant.

If Harry were so concerned, why hadn't he saved up a few dollars to buy the kid a present instead of drinking up his paycheck? Doesn't the government have programs to help out people like her? Or the churches? Why should I share the little bit I had for my kids? After all, this unknown street walker had chosen her own lifestyle; let her live it. If she could buy dope, she could...

Even as I reasoned, I recalled the words of Jesus who said nothing about the deserving poor but who spoke of "the least of these my brethren".

Why is it that the words of the Bible come to mind at the most inconvenient times?

Anyhow, I looked at the letter on the grave marker -- at least my kids have a father who cares -- then hesitatingly, I said, "Well, Harry... I don't know what we can do... but we'll work something out. How old is this kid anyhow?"

"I don't know, 'bout three or four, maybe five, I reckon."

After the rest of the crew left for the day, Harry and I took the little Christmas tree from the tin shed and stuffed it in the back of my car. We'd decided to fix that kid up in style. (I justified this theft by thinking somebody would just burn the tree in the fireplace after the holiday anyway). And we drove to my house.

We pulled down the box of toys squirreled away out of my kids reach in the top of the closet. Then I began the painful process of deciding which plastic trinkets to give up.

I wanted more for my kids, not less. I could think of good reasons to keep each thing: Donald needs this truck for his sand pile in the back yard; save that dot-to-dot book because Jennifer is just learning her numbers; but I bought this cute pull-toy especially for Eve Mercy. Slowly, reluctantly, I laid aside treasures to go.

Virginia, my wife, was out grocery shopping with our kids when Harry and I arrived at the house, but now she walked in the door to find me and a man she'd never seen before decimating her children's presents.

"There is need," she asked. I nodded, and she herded our children into the bedroom so they couldn't see their presents. Then she returned and began helping us select stuff without question.

Although I took it for granted, Harry was amazed at her reaction and enthusiastically told her about the situation. She said, "They'll need something for dinner. I've just come from the market and I've got a canned ham; that'll be just the thing." She rushed out to the kitchen to pack up some groceries.

I was beginning to feel good about what was happening. I snatched down some foil paper and began to wrap a little red fire engine.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," Harry said.

"Why in the world not," I demanded. "We want to fix up the best Christmas we can for this kid. He ought to have some stuff wrapped."

"Yeah, But you doin' too much to do good, see what I mean. I mean we takes her a tree that's all decorated and a ham that's most already cooked and if the presents is already wrapped... then what's for her to do for her own kid? She needs to do some of the fixen or it just ain't her's -- and she wants to give the boy something. That's what this is all about, ain't it?"

I felt ashamed because I suddenly recognized this woman's desire to give good gifts to her child as the same yearning I felt about giving my three more than I could. It feels terrible not to be able to give at Christmas time. Everyone wants to be a giver; it makes you feel important. "What should we do?" I asked Harry.

"Let's just put the paper and ribbons in the bag of stuff and let her wrap the things. A mama needs something to busy her on Christmas Eve. And this gal needs to feel like a mama."

After we had tucked away their own presents, Ginny called our kids out and briefly told them about the little boy who wouldn't have a Christmas unless we shared. Then we bowed around our glittering tree and she led a prayer for this child and his mother.

Looking at the groceries and toys packed to go, I was surprised at how much share-able stuff our family

had. God always sees to it that we have everything we actually need and enough to share with those who don't -- why, we aren't poor at all!

Jennifer, our seven-year-old, helped Harry and me load the stuff in the car beside the little tree. She clamored to go along. Thoughts of Christmas excited her to a near frenzy. I relented and let her go with us.

Following Harry's directions, I wove through streets more and more desolate. We parked at the curb behind the rusted out hulk of an old Ford sitting on wheelless axles.

Harry carried the tree, Jennifer, the bag of toys; and I followed with the groceries. It was a huge, old Victorian home chopped up into one-room apartments. There was something nasty -- I think it may have been a pig's skull -- in the garbage littering the front yard.

We went in. Things scudded inside the walls. No bulbs in the light fixtures on the stairway. Strips of cardboard nailed over windows. Foreign music blared from somewhere. Smells reeked in the darkness. I felt uncomfortable -- afraid -- apprehensive -- on guard. The folks who have to live here must feel that way all the time.

The woman, Sharon, disappointed me.

I guess because she looked normal. I'd expected a bombed-out, glassy-eyed zombie, or a brazen, vulgar hussy. But this was the woman in line beside you at the supermarket, the woman standing at the bus stop, the woman across the aisle in church -- just a pleasant-looking normal young woman.

She greeted us with warmth and delight. She oohed and aahed over the little tree. She woke up her little boy, Kevin, to show him its wonder. She apologized for not having coffee to offer us.

"How'd you find me," she exclaimed. "I went down to the Salvation Army place, but I couldn't find the

address. I didn't even fill out no application. Harry, this is all your doing!"

Harry beamed with pride and accepted all the credit.

"Oh, I got to get busy wrappen and fixen," she said. Then she paused in her excitement. "Look here Mister," she addressed me. "There's this girl, Corinthia -- lives over across the way. She's got a baby boy too. Suppose you folks at the Army can get some stuff for her -- they is like we was --won't have nothing tomorrow."

Harry said, "He cain't give out no more stuff like that. He ain't from the Army or the Welfare, Sharon. He's just another guy, works at the cemetery like me."

When this information soaked in, Sharon did something which amazed me.



She spread out the goodies on her kitchen table and began to divide them into two equal piles. Finished, she loaded one pile back into the bag and shoved it over to Harry. "I cain't do nothing about a Christmas tree," she said, "You cain't give what you ain't got. But I wants you to take this here over to Corinthia's place -- don't you tell her where it come from. She and that baby ought to have a Christmas too."

Jennifer and I slipped out while Sharon gave Harry directions to Corinthia's place. I had climbed those steps feeling like I was a 300-pound male Mother Teresa, swooping in to bless the poor heathen. I went down humbled. Old wino Harry knew more about giving with dignity than I did. My wife gave without hesitation, without question. The streetwalker addict Sharon gave more generously -- two equal piles.

Do I need to tell you about Christmas Day?

The grandparents outdid themselves. Uncles sent in boxes of stuff. Our landlady came bearing gifts. Two-thirds of the gross national product of Taiwan flooded our living room. God made sure my kids were provided for. We lacked nothing -- but then, when you come to think of it, His children never do.



HEARTHUNGER

An Essay to help us through our Daily Grind
by
John Cowart

On Monday, my mail box contained a Mr. Bubble bath sponge for my little girl, a Victoria's Secret spring lingerie catalogue for my curvaceous young wife, and a senior citizens' newsletter for me.

Guess which one I looked at first.

You're right!

My wife says I have reached that awkward age -- Again.

All my life, both physically and spiritually, I've always been at an awkward age. Haven't you?

By awkward age, I mean those times when we hunger for different, almost opposite levels of maturity -- like the Christmas when one of my sons wanted both a teddy bear and a Rambo rifle, and one of my teenage daughters wanted both high heels and a skateboard.

I think we all hunger or yearn for something higher and something lower at the same time.

As a Christian, I believe that how we respond to our hungers and which of our desires we seek to satisfy says a lot about our eternal happiness -- or lack of it.

In his *Confessions* the great theologian St. Augustine speaks of a God-shaped niche in the human soul where nothing less than God fits. I picture this niche as a vacuum inside us, like a black hole in space, which can be filled to capacity by the Infinite but which sucks in everything else and still remains empty.

A vacuum demands filling.

Some say that our hunger for God indicates His existence.

Makes sense.

You feel thirsty. That means that somewhere water exists to satisfy that thirst. It does not necessarily mean you will taste that water, some poor folks do perish of thirst, but it does mean that such a thing as water does exist.

You feel hungry; that means that somewhere food exists to satisfy that hunger.

You feel horny; that means sex does exist.

You feel cold; that means heat exists.

You feel a desire for God; that means...

Does wanting God mean that He exists?

Maybe so. Maybe no.

But wouldn't it be odd to yearn for, to long for, to strongly desire something that does not even exist?

And we do have a heart hunger.

We do yearn for Something.

For Someone.

For I-don't-always-know-what.

For Can't-put-my-finger-on-it.

For Right-on-the-tip-of-my-tongue.

For God.

Even when we are little kids, we feel this desire, this emptiness of the soul, and we hunger to fill it. I remember laying awake at night on the sofa where I slept and thinking about GOD, big and huge (to my five year old mind there was a distinction); Sweet, so sweet as to be hugged and hugged and hugged; yet Scary too, the awesomeness of the Creator being totally foreign to all created things.

I tried to describe my feelings to my mother, she thought I was trying to talk about Billie Michelle, the little girl who lived next door. "Puppy love," Mama said. "Isn't that cute. Johnny's got puppy love".

Gurrrr! How do you write a five-year-old boy's snarl? No way did I love Billie Michelle. She was a GIRL, for Heaven's sake.

If gnawing heart hunger means puppy love, then who needs it!

This same dynamic works over and over again in everyone's life.

When we were young and sought the meaning of existence, then the world, the flesh and the devil dismissed our yearning as adolescent growing pains. We hungered for eternity and they said it was just hormones flowing. The wise voices teased that we were only hungry for sex. *You need a woman; you need a man*, they said.

To a young man, the wise voices whisper, *you hunger for success. Advance in the company. Get trappings: lear jet, board membership, gold card. Success is what you want.*

As we mature, the voice of the world, the flesh and the devil says, *"What you are hungry for is security. Buy bonds. Get a home. An insurance policy is what you need. Security will make the hunger pangs go away"*.

But the deep heart hunger of the soul never ceases.

When we sprout white hair, yet still know that heart-longing ache for Something -- or Someone, then the devil taunts, "*You silly old fool! You're just longing for your lost youth*".

Thus many of us are tricked into never getting the one thing we want most desperately. And we die just as we lived -- at an awkward age, desiring the eternal but settling for gutter glitter.

But there is hope even for such awkward folks as us.

Look at this:

King David, slayer of giant Goliath, sweet psalmist of Israel, a man of wealth, power and position, a man who had all this world had to offer, he also understood the same heart-hunger that you and I know. In his Psalms he talks about it again and again:

"As the deer panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God," he said (Psalm 42:1).

"The Lord upholdeth all that fall and raiseth up all those that be bowed down. The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thine hand and satisfiest the desire of every living thing," Psalm 145:14

"The Lord is nigh ... He will fulfill the desire of them that fear him; he also will hear their cry, and save them," Psalm 145: 19

"I stretch forth my hands unto thee: my soul thirsteth after thee, as a thirsty land, " Psalm 143:6).

If even the king panted, hungered and thirsted, if he longed and desired and yearned for God, surely the whole thing is much too complex for such as us — we who merely feel vague whims toward an undefined Something Better now and then.

Not so.

We tend to make godly living into a complex worm's nest of worry. That ain't the way it works.

King David taught his readers how to focus and find joy in a way that's simple yet profound:

He said, "Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart," (Psalm 37:3)

Think of that!

The desire of your heart.

The single thing you've hungered for most all of your life is right at your fingertips.

How wonderful.

How utterly wonderful!



I know the plans I have for you,

**says the Lord,
They are plans for good and not for evil,
To give you a hope — and a future.**

— Jeremiah 29:11



THE MAN BEHIND SANTA CLAUS

Nicholas of Myra (d. December 6, circa 343)

Christmas Nonfiction

by

John Cowart

Father, Father! Father, wake up! There's a man climbing the lattice beside our window," the girl cried.

The weary father shook off sleep. He stumbled, half-awake, to his daughters' bedroom and peeked out the window. Someone was stealthily climbing the lattice.

"Now what? As if I didn't have troubles enough already," said the father. "I'll fix this rascal." He picked up a hefty length of firewood from beside the hearth and crept outside.

The troubled father had spent a restless night. When he lay down, his mind kept skipping from problem to problem. Three marriageable daughters and no dowry to offer even one prospective groom! Poverty had sapped his resources. He had decided to sell the girls to a local brothel. That appeared to be the only way out. But he was dissatisfied with his decision and sleep eluded him. Now this!

As he opened the door, he heard a thud. The intruder had thrown something into the girls' room and was now scurrying down the lattice.

The angry father pursued the running intruder. Soon they both collapsed, panting against a rock wall. The father, too tired from the chase to lift his cudgel, saw that the intruder was only a breathless adolescent boy.

The eldest daughter came running up. "Look, Father," she exclaimed, "Look what he threw in our window." She held out a leather bag stuffed with gold coins. "What is the meaning of this?" demanded the father. His captive explained that he was a Christian and that his parents had died recently leaving him an inheritance.

The young man explained:

The Lord said that we should sell what we have and give to the poor, then follow him. I want to follow Jesus, so when I learned of your problem and what you planned to do ... what else could I do? If a man has anything of this world's goods and sees a brother in need and hardens his heart against his brother and does not give, then how can the love of God abide in such a man?

The puzzled father, still suspecting a trick, asked, "Why did you sneak up to our house at night? What are you really up to? What is your name?"

The boy replied, "My name is Nicholas. I came secretly because Jesus commanded that when you give to the poor, you shouldn't let your left hand know what your right hand does; keep your giving a secret. Keep the money, Sir, but I beg one favor in return; don't let anyone know about this. Keep it a secret"

The father promised, and for years did not disclose how he got his daughters' dowry.

This story, told by Metaphrastes, a Greek bishop who published his book, *The Acts of Nicholas*, in A.D. 912,

reveals one reason why St Nicholas, the historical person on whom the legend of Santa Claus is based, is one of the world's most popular figures. *The Acts of Nicholas*, written about 600 years after the fact, is the oldest documentary evidence of the Nicholas legend.

Nicholas was born in the third century in Patras, a city in Asia Minor. His wealthy parents were devout Christians. When they died, he used his inheritance to help the poor and entered the Monastery of Holy Sion, near the city of Myra, to get an education.

When he came of age, Nicholas made a life-changing trip to the Holy Land. He went to Bethlehem to see the spot of the Nativity. He stood on the Mount of Olives where Christ had taught. He visited Golgotha where Jesus died on the cross. And he prayed in the empty tomb from which Jesus had risen. This pilgrimage confirmed in his mind what he had studied in the Scripture: that Christ was indeed Emmanuel, God-with-us. This settled conviction shaped his future career.

As he sailed home, his ship ran into a storm. Nicholas helped the sailors in the rigging and took over the tiller. The sailors attributed their survival to him; he attributed safety to God. He vowed to go to church to offer thanks as soon as the vessel reached land.

While Nicholas was on his pilgrimage, the bishop of Myra had died. Church leaders disagreed about who should fill the office. After a long debate, one suggested, "We'll let God decide! First man who comes through the church doors tomorrow morning will be the new bishop."

Nicholas's ship docked at dawn.

Immediately he went to give thanks for deliverance from the storm. The church leaders greeted him at the door with miter and staff of office. Thus, according to legend, he became one of the youngest bishops in history. Some sources indicate he was still a teen-ager when he took office.

It was not long before Bishop Nicholas came into conflict with government authorities. A famine descended on Myra. Crops withered in the fields. No food was to be found anywhere. His people looked to Nicholas to save them from starvation. Eustathios, the provincial prefect, commandeered several cargo ships loaded with grain riding at anchor in the harbor at Andriaki. This corrupt official planned to hold the grain until scarcity forced prices to their highest. Nicholas revealed the governor's hoarding and shamed him into releasing the shipment

Nicholas further aggravated Eustathios when he learned of the proposed execution of three political prisoners. Nicholas argued for the release of these innocent men.

“Too late,” Eustathios cried. “They're on the way to the chopping block now.”

Nicholas rushed to the town square where the executions were to take place. The first prisoner lay with his neck on the block, his head over the basket

The executioner swung.

Nicholas grabbed the sword as it descended, snatching it out of the executioner's hands. He cut the prisoners' bonds and set them free. Public acclaim assured the men's continued safety. The governor backed down—for a while.

On February 23, A.D. 303, the Emperor Diocletian issued an edict which launched one of the most systematic and prolonged persecutions the Christian church has ever endured.

The Diocletian persecution marks one of the first organized attacks on the Scriptures, for the edict demanded that Christians turn in their holy books to be burned.

To refuse meant death.

Felix, bishop of Thibiuca, told the arresting officers, "It is better for me to be burned than the divine Scriptures." The faithful resorted to various subterfuges, such as turning in grammar books, medical books, collections of sermons, and other religious books to protect the Scriptures. These actions forced the Christians to clearly define which writings should be considered divinely inspired and which should not.

Strangers confiscated property owned by Christians. The situation repeated the outrages reported in a letter by Dionysis, bishop of Alexandria, a few years earlier when mobs " rushed to the houses of Christians, breaking in on those who were known as neighbors, and looted and plundered. The valuable property they stole; the cheaper wooden articles were strewn about the streets and burnt, so that the city looked as if it had been taken by an enemy. But the believers . . took joyfully the spoiling of their goods."

Eusebius, an eyewitness, said:

Words cannot describe the outrageous agonies endured by the martyrs.... They were torn to bits from head to foot with potsherds like claws, till death released them. Women were tied by one foot and hoisted high in the air, head downwards, their bodies completely naked without a morsel of clothing. ...

I was in these places and saw many of the executions myself...The orgy went on so long that the murderous blade became blunt and killed by its weight. The executioners themselves became exhausted and took turns at the work.

Relatively few Christians dramatized their faith with stirring last words before an audience in the arena; for most, the fear, the anxiety, the uncertainty, the hiding, the imprisonment, and the anguish went on for years and years. Christian children grew up knowing no other conditions.

Like many others, Bishop Nicholas was caught early in the persecution and imprisoned. They beat him. They branded his skin. They used iron pliers to pinch various parts of his body. Then he was left alone in his cell till his wounds healed enough for the process to begin all over again. The persecution kept up for years.

Yet Nicholas would not deny that Jesus is very God of very God.

At the height of the persecution, a plague broke out. Fearing contagion, pagans dumped sick members of their own families in the streets.

But Christians, Eusebius said, “heedless of the danger, took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them ... drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors. . . . The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner... Death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.”

When the plague passed, the pagans resumed the persecution with renewed vigor. Judges “made a show of cruelty... and in a wretched competition for new tortures attempted to best their rival judges as if they were striving for a prize.”

They sentenced young Christian girls to be chained naked in brothels for the use of any passerby.

The pagan emperor died. Constantine assumed the throne and stopped the persecution.

Nicholas had endured the torture, but now he confronted a more insidious danger threatening to undermine Christianity.

Arius, a popular Alexandrian preacher, began teaching that Christ was inferior to God. He taught that Jesus was not God-become-man, but rather an intermediate spirit creature which was *enfleshed* — neither God nor even quite human.

Arius spread his ideas by setting them to the music of drinking songs which were popular at pagan orgies.

His most well-known song, disparaging the Incarnation and birth of Christ, was "Thalia." It bordered on the obscene, but the tune was so catchy that soon virtually everyone was whistling it in the streets and markets.

"So scandalous did the situation become that in the very theaters of the unbelievers the venerable teachings of God were exposed to the most shameful ridicule," said Eusebius.

Confessors, who had survived the persecution as Nicholas had, preached and reasoned with the people about Jesus, pointing to such Scriptures as:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form...

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. ...

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.

All this doctrine was to no avail. Arianism appealed to minds which reasoned that since they could not understand the Trinity, there could be no Trinity.

Constantine called a council of church leaders at Nicaea to discuss whether or not Jesus is really God, the teachings of Arius, and other matters dividing the church.

Those attending the Council of Nicaea had survived the Diocletian Persecution. A number of them concealed the stubs of lost limbs beneath their robes. Many were hamstrung. (Prisoners in the mines were crippled in this way to keep them from escaping.) Many had empty sockets where their tormentors had gouged out eyes.

Legend has it that in the course of his presentation to the Council, Arius began to sing the “Thalia.” Some of the bishops rushed out of the meeting. Others covered their ears.

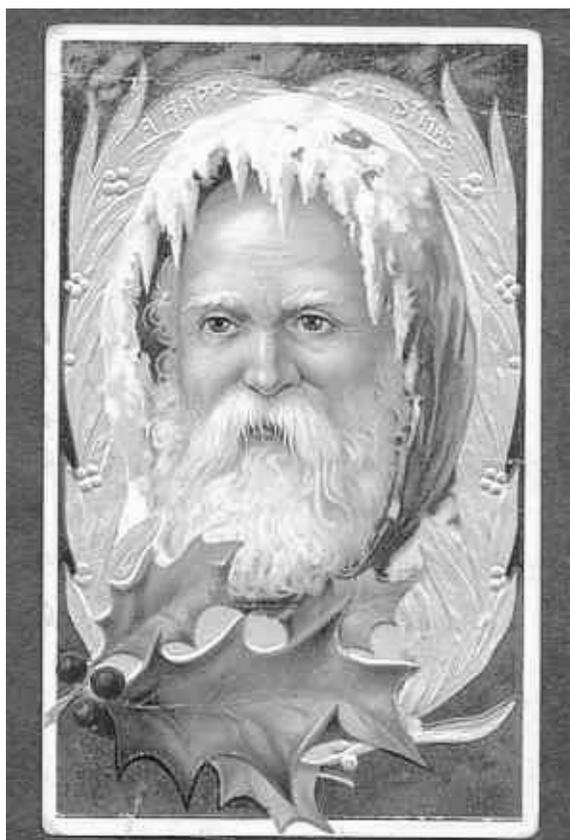
St. Nicholas walked slowly to the center of the floor where Arius sang — and deliberately punched him in the mouth!

The shocked bishops sympathized with Nicholas but could not condone his action. After all, the Christ whom Nicholas defended was he who taught his followers to love their enemies and be people of peace.

They deprived Nicholas of his bishopric (he was later restored to office) and they expelled Arius. Before the Council ended, they wrote the Nicene Creed which states what most Christians believe about Jesus. No other document which Nicholas may have helped write remains.

Nicholas spent the rest of his life in Myra caring for the sick, founding orphanages and protecting the poor from exploiters. He was noted for playing with children and scandalized his more dignified contemporaries by letting street urchins wear his bishop's hat

Nicholas died on December 6 around A.D. 343; but his love for Jesus, his defense of the Christmas doctrine of the Incarnation, and his habit of generous secret giving, all combine to cause his shadow to linger in the legendary figure of Santa Claus.





David's Death of Socrates

ANIMAL THEOLOGY

An Essay to help us through our Daily Grind
by
John Cowart

The Greek philosopher Socrates used a mule to argue for the existence of God.

It didn't work.

His enemies executed him anyhow. Made him drink poison hemlock.

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah used an ox and an ass in his reasoning about God's existence.

He got executed too.

They sawed him in half.



The martyrdom of Isaiah from a medieval illuminated manuscript

Me? As a fundamentalist Christian, I like to play it safe; when I talk about God's existence, I use a skunk for my argument.



That makes me smarter than Socrates. At least, ain't nobody thinks I'm worth executing.

Maybe it's just that no body wants to argue theology with a skunk.

When Socrates was on trial for his life in Athens, he pointed to a mule plodding past the Theater of Dionysus where the trial was held. He observed that mules never have baby mules. All mules are sterile. Mules are the offspring of female horses mated with male donkeys.

Therefore, the philosopher argued, every time you see a mule that proves the existence of at least one horse and one donkey. And since all life only springs from life, then those animals must have parents too.

Then the parents must have parents and so on and on till you come to an original source of life -- God.

When you see any effect, you know it must have a cause, and the First Cause of all effects is God, Socrates reasoned.

"Who in the world would believe in sons of gods if they did not believe in gods," Socrates asked? "That would be just as odd as believing in sons of horses or asses, but not in the horses or asses themselves!"

His enemies responded to his reasoning with a sophisticated argument of their own.

"Here, drink this. It won't hurt a bit," they said.

The prophet Isaiah also used an animal analogy to reason with people about God:

"The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider," Isaiah said (Isaiah 1:3).

Walt Disney movies and *Reader's Digest* magazine both understand the validity of Isaiah's observation. Every once in a while, both organizations display the story of some family going on vacation with their dog or cat. Somehow the animal gets left behind and makes it way over a thousand miles of rough terrain to arrive home.

A joyous reunion follows. Everybody hugs everybody. Tears flow.

The story, whatever the animal or the details, touches our hearts.

Deep down, we know exactly what the story teaches and with full hearts we rejoice.

If dumb animals hunger for Home and know how to get there, then why don't people recognize God who is our home?

Fact is, we do. We just hate to admit it.

A deep hunger and longing in the human heart manifests itself as a yearning for something. We desire something and we know what it is. We know that what we desperately seek is not a something, but a Someone.

We know this but sin keeps us from the desire of our hearts, the Desire of all Nations -- God. And we pretend that we are dumber than Isaiah's ox and that we don't really know.

Isaiah also addresses this false thinking:

"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1: 3 & 18).

In other words, God's message is, Come Home.

Jesus said, in the Father's house are many mansions -- not just buildings but homes -- being prepared for us.

Jesus' message is always, Welcome Home, Stranger!

So, Socrates' mule argues for God's being the First Cause of all effects. Isaiah's ox argues for God's being the answer to the yearning of our hearts.

What does Cowart's skunk argue for?

When I lived up in Maryland, I used to hike in the Patuxent Wildlife Refuge, a bird sanctuary where huge

flocks of ducks gather in marsh ponds during their migrations.

A park ranger there once explained that something was killing the baby ducks.

He said over zealous hunters had blasted most of the area's skunks. But because a favorite food of the skunks was snapping turtle eggs, now the ponds were overrun with snapping turtles and the favorite food of the turtles was duckling.

Skunks are vital to the food chain! No skunks, no ducks. Nothing left but hungry snapping turtles.



Skunks prove there is an order to creation.

The whole scheme of things fits together.

It's all balanced.

You could almost say it was planned.

A plan means a Planner. A design demands a Designer. A creation requires a Creator.

Theologians say that Socrates' mule illustrates an ontological argument for God's existence; Isaiah's ox illustrates an argument from man's universal desire for God; and Cowart's skunk illustrates a teleological argument.

St. Paul summed these ideas up when he said, "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

That's fundamental.



A Typical Florida Indian Mound Illustrates This Bit Of Short fiction

A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE BLUEGILL MOUND

A Science Fiction Story (note the date in Plutarch's legend)
by
John Cowart

In his *De Oraculorum Delectu*, Plutarch records that in the reign of The Emperor Tiberius an Egyptian ship's captain named Thamus piloted his boat through a violent storm which blew the vessel far out into the Atlantic.

Contrary winds pushed the ship west for days before Thamus regained control of the helm and made landfall at a coast he called Epirus (location unknown). Desperate for fresh water the sailors entered the mouth of a broad river. As Thamus neared the

shore he heard many voices in the forest by the river screaming in grief, wailing and weeping and mourning as they shouted, 'The great god Pan is dead! He's dead! The great god Pan is dead!'

Terrified, Thamus and his crew refused to land but chose to retrace their course to the east. After a brutal voyage the ship landed at Sardis where the sailors spread the news they had heard from the eerie grieving voices in the forest.

By examining Plutarch's calendar of events during the reign of Tiberius, from ancient times scholars have dated this incident as having occurred on December 25th in the year One.

I believe I have located the site of ancient Epirus.

Because of slanderous remarks printed in the popular press, I feel it is only right that I begin this report with a brief statement of my professional qualifications:

I majored in archaeology at Florida State University graduating in 1974 and I earned my masters from the University of Arizona. I traveled to Germany and received my Doctorate from Tübingen University.

After that, I returned to Florida and for the past six years I have been a field archaeologist for the Florida State Historical Survey Board. During this time, I have acted as a consultant for the St. Augustine Restoration Commission. I have also conducted underwater research in the caves of Wakulla Spring and directed the excavation of the Interstate Highway System in the State of Florida. My mission for the Survey Board is to excavate and preserve historic and prehistoric sites threatened by construction and development as Florida's population expands.

Never before in my career has my professional integrity been called into question.

The Bluegill Mound is located in Mandarin, Florida, a suburb of Jacksonville. Mr. Fred Dubbs, a surveyor working on the Route Planning Commission laying the path for Interstate 295 -- Jacksonville bypass -- brought the mound to my attention. The property on which the mound is located has been in the possession of the Bluegill family since 1912. Before that, this parcel, a 500-acre tract, numbered Du58 through Du62 in the University of Florida site survey file, was part of one of the McIntosh indigo plantations; and before that, it was included in the Don Benito land grant from the Spanish Crown. The land was purchased by the Federal government in 1996. In so far as I can determine, no previous owner of the land would have had the educational background necessary to perpetrate a hoax.

On November 12, 1997, I began excavation of the mound with a team of six archaeology students from Jacksonville University. Our first step was to clear the mound of dense undergrowth. The mound was covered with smilax, scrub palmetto and the thickest profusion of wild grape vines I have ever encountered. This may have been a clue to our later discoveries. We also removed four holly trees and numerous small oak trees. A large water oak, approximately 48 inches in diameter, which grew near the summit of the mound, we left standing at that time. There was absolutely no evidence that the mound had been disturbed in recent history.

The cleared mound proved to be an elongated oval eight feet six inches high and thirty-four feet long. The oval was oriented on an east-west axis and the west end was cut away by erosion due to inroads of a salt marsh at that end of the mound.

I decided to run a step trench from the east end of the mound to determine if the contents were of significant value to warrant the labor of removing the large water oak. I drew a base line along the

longitudinal axis of the mound and laid out a grid system to pinpoint the exact location of each artifact uncovered. This entire dig was conducted in a totally professional manner; our techniques and procedures can be verified step by step from the extensive field notes compiled by myself and Ms. Rita Wilson, who acted as recorder. I am confident that any intrusion into the mound since it was originally constructed would have left evidence which we would have discovered. There was no such evidence.

With the exception of Dale Green, the team photographer, all the students had worked with me on previous digs in the Duval County area. We rotated the duties so that each student could gain experience in every phase of the work. Two men worked as excavators, another two took the wheelbarrows of dirt to the dump area where one man ran the dirt through a sieve to filter out small articles. I personally charted and recorded the artifacts in the trench while Ms. Wilson recorded beads, potsherds, teeth, etc. recovered by the sieve.

The work proceeded slowly because the ground was interlaced with matted roots from the extensive vegetation which we had removed. At no place in the work did we find this system of roots previously disturbed. This indicates that the primary burial must have remained intact since the original interment. If these remains are proved to be a hoax, then the perpetrators must have been Indians, and they did not cultivate goats.

In Grid E6, under two feet of soil, we uncovered the remains of an intrusive or "basket" burial. These remains included two adult males, three adult females and a child of undetermined sex. The only artifacts associated with these bones were 18 clay beads and the shards of an incomplete bowl (St. John's Check Stamped, Phase III, sand tempered). This pottery dates these remains in the late 16th Century. Such "basket" burials are quite common in Florida. The people who

made them were not Mound Builders themselves, but moved into the area at a later time. These people, the Timuquana, still considered the mounds as "sacred ground" although they did not build mounds. Instead, the Timuquana stored the bodies of their deceased in a charnel house in their villages until all the flesh rotted away. All the bones in the charnel house were then gathered into a single basket which was buried in the side of an existing mound.

In Grid Es3, we uncovered the skeleton of an adult female, approximately 20-years old, a typical burial of the Florida Mound Builders. Apparently, each mound was begun around the palm log crypt of some chief, shaman or other important individual who would be the primary burial. A small mound would be raised over his crypt. As other individuals in the tribe died, their bodies would be placed on the original mound in a flexed position and covered with dirt mixed with iron hematite to give the earth immediately around the body a red coloration, possibly signifying blood or life. Then the grave was covered with a thick layer of oyster shells to protect the body from animals and then more dirt was added to smooth out the contours of the mound. The skeleton in Es3 had been buried in this manner.

Her funeral offerings included two small bowls (Deptford series-shell stamped) and six flint arrowheads. A polished soap-stone pendant lay above the sternum. All the bones were badly broken up by the inroads of the roots. After the mound was fully excavated, we found it contained twenty-one individuals buried in this secondary fashion. All were young females approximately the same age. Later findings show that, other than the primary burial, there were no males or children buried in this mound, but fetal remains indicate that six of these females were pregnant at the time of death. In the light of later discoveries, these fetal remains bear further investigation. At the time we uncovered this first complete skeleton in Es3, we had

detected nothing at all out of the ordinary about this mound.

The first indication that this mound contained unique remains occurred in grid Nw-18, at a depth of five feet below the present-day ground surface. There we uncovered a rough slab of coquina rock. This slab (6'X2'4"X3") lay in a horizontal position supported by four vertical slabs of the same material thus forming the first rock crypt found in the state of Florida. At first, I thought this was of Spanish construction because the Spanish made extensive use of coquina in their building programs. However, no object of European origin was uncovered during the entire excavation. Unless the skeleton in the primary burial came from Greece, I believe that the crypt was constructed by Native Florida Indians.

When we had removed enough sand to see that a rock crypt was involved, I decided to enlarge the trench, and starting at the present day surface, began to systematically level the entire mound.

The five slabs comprising the crypt were not joined with mortar. They appeared to be natural slabs of unworked stone. At the northwest corner of the crypt, the stones did not touch and we found that it was not completely filled with sand.

Survey Board staff photographer Dale Green mounted a camera and fiber-optic light system on a periscope affair, and with this equipment, he was able to photograph the inside of the crypt before we removed the top slab. His photographs revealed the hollow chamber to be about two feet high with a smooth floor covered with sand washed in through the spaces between the stones of the coquina structure. The photographs also revealed a large effigy urn (Weeden Island- incised) partially buried in the silt and laying in such a position in the SE quadrant that it would have undoubtedly been broken as we removed the top slab if we had not been aware of the urn's location. Mr. Green

has published a monograph on his periscope camera in *Antiques Technology* (Vol. IV #3. 1998). This technique should prove invaluable in examining ancient tombs before they are opened.

By rigging a block and tackle system from an overhanging oak branch we removed the top slab of coquina. We also removed the long side-slab at the south end to facilitate excavating the crypt. By this procedure, we recovered the effigy urn intact.

From this point on, I did the actual digging myself using small hand trowels and brushes. The rain-washed silt covered the floor of the crypt to a depth of 18 inches. Starting at the open south end of the crypt, I cut away vertical layers of sand down to virgin soil.

The first bones I uncovered were the humerus, radius and ulna of a left arm. The individual was stretched out on his back with his head to the east. From the small size of these bones, I first thought it was a young boy's burial. Among the bones of the left hand was a primitive wind instrument consisting of a graduated series of short vertical flutes bound together with the mouth-pieces in an even row. The pipes of the flutes were carved of polished soapstone and they were bound together with hammered copper bands.

I uncovered the ribs and found eight fresh-water pearls in the thoracic cavity. There were also twenty copper beads. By carefully removing the sand in the rib cage and charting the position of each bead, I was able to reconstruct the necklace as it must have been when it was originally strung. As I worked down towards the hips, I realized for the first time that the bone structure was peculiar; the pelvic girdle seemed twisted and the upper ball joints of the femurs were set at an angle to the side. In the center of the pelvic girdle was a tapering curved shaft of bone fifteen inches long with smooth knobs at each end. It was a baculum (penis bone) such as is found in mink, dogs, goats, and whales.

At this point only the mid-section of the skeleton was uncovered and I coated the revealed bones with a mixture of cellulose acetate in suite to prevent their deterioration.

Near the left shoulder of the skeleton, I uncovered a shallow bowl (Weeden Island- cord marked) filled with oyster shells and peach pits, apparently the remains of a votive offering. Then I uncovered the skull itself. It was cracked in two places, probably the result of tree roots. However, the flicking of my brush revealed that growing from the temporal bones were the castings of two back-curving eight-inch corrugated horns.

And, when I removed the sand covering the unfamiliar bone structure below the pelvis, I found that his legs ended in small hooves.



Warnings and Illicit Kissing On Christmas Eve

Yes, this embarrassing incident really happened to me
— John Cowart

Cautions: this column contains -- among other things -- a warning about illicit kissing.

What would a nice, 35-years-married, old guy like me know about illicit kissing?

Well, let me tell you:

When Ginny and I were first engaged, I drove a brand new 1967, four-on-the floor (I don't think they even had automatic transmissions back then), Mustang. Bright yellow, the yellow you only see nowadays edging the cover of a *National Geographic* magazine.

Wow! A sporty new car and a beautiful woman.

Wasn't I something!

On Christmas Eve, Ginny wanted a few last minute things from the mall and I was proud to drive her in spite of the heavy traffic.

To turn left off the main highway into the mall, we got stuck in a monster long line of plain drab old cars which inched up a steep hill and trickle through the light one or two at a time. We were obviously going to be stuck in traffic on that hill for a while and since even back then I was a biblically minded man, I decided to "redeem the time".



So... whenever the line of traffic stopped, I reached for Ginny, or she reached for me, and we smooched fervently.

HONK! Honk, honk!

What's this?

The guy behind me kept hitting his horn, the creep.

What's the matter with him? Traffic isn't going anywhere.

We started kissing again.

Again, he started honking.

The spoilsport. Let him find his own girl. What business is it of his what I do in the privacy of my own new yellow four-on-the floor Mustang.

The light changed. I crept forward in the line maybe three car lengths and stopped again.

Again I kissed; again he honked. He not only honked, he also flashed his lights at me!

Now, I'm getting mad. This guy is a pest, a creep, a voyeur, a busybody. I'm half a mind to...

The traffic light changed again. I inched up the hill toward the turnoff again and stopped on red to resume smooching.

The dirty so-and-so really leaned on his horn this time.

I ignored the killjoy and kept on kissing Ginny until.....

CRUNCH!

Here, younger readers should know that a car with a manual transmission requires that the driver keep one foot on the brake and the other foot on the clutch when stopped on a hill in traffic. If you don't do that, then your car rolls backward.

That's what I had done!

Yes, every time, I'd lean over to kiss Ginny, I had let up on both clutch and brake until I rolled backward and smacked into the driver behind, who had done everything in his power to warn me of the danger.

I did not feel quiet so sporty when I had to get out of the car and apologize to him. I felt stupid and silly ...and I discovered that I'd crumpled my own rear end (You can take that figuratively and literally.).

Now let me say straight out that as a fundamentalist Christian I have nothing against engaged couples kissing. I wish them joy.

However, I'd be a dunce if I did not learn from my own experience that when God warns me about something He's not being a spoilsport, a killjoy or a busybody meddling in affairs which are no concern of His.

If the scripture teaches nothing else, it teaches that God hates to see His children get hurt.

So he warns us.

He warns us again and again.



He blows the horn and blinks the lights when we do certain things because He can see that by doing them we are going to crumple our own rear ends.

But most of us do just like I did with that other driver, we ignore the danger signs or get peeved at the person doing the warning.

As sure as cars roll downhill when the driver is not keeping his foot on the brake, there are other rules in

the universe. The rules are not arbitrary; they are absolute.

Take an easy one for instance, the Bible again and again warns us that we ought to care for the poor.

"He that hath pity on the poor lendeth to the Lord," says the Proverb (19:17).

Jesus equates our care of the poor to our own eternal destiny (Matthew 24).

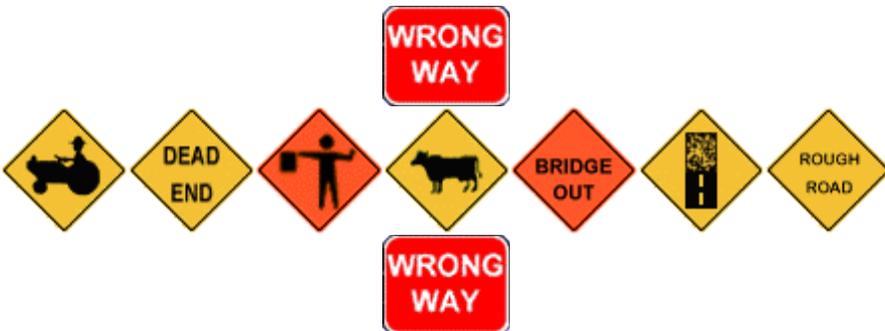
Yet, the Bible also reveals a flip side to this concern for the poor.

In Leviticus 19:15, the Lord declares, "Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbor."

In other words, right is right and wrong is wrong regardless of the status of the person acting. Stealing the pennies from a blind beggar's cup is stealing -- and charging a few personal bucks on Donald Trump's credit card is also stealing.

And God's word warns us not to steal. Stealing makes us thieves and God hates to see that happen to one of His beloved ones. And that's just what you and I are, beloved ones of God.

As a fundamentalist Christian, I believe that Christ warned and warned us away from the sins that bring us down, defeat us and corrupt us.



Then He died to save us from the sin that has us beat. He died for us and rose again from that death to lift us up to where He is.

Wow! What can we say after all that?

Unfortunately, most of us don't say much. We're too proud to say thank you to God or to even repeat the warnings to those we care about most.

I suspect most other people do just like I did when they ignore the warnings and back into trouble: I fussed and fumed and blamed and then ended up driving around with my own rear end crumpled.



Nobody should live like that.

St. Paul was not speaking tongue in cheek when he linked two rules for living in I Thessalonians 5:14; he told Christians to "warn the unruly" in one breath and in the next commanded, "Comfort the feebleminded."

That's fundamental.



DR. MARY EDWARDS WALKER AND HER CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR

Patriotic Nonfiction
by
John Cowart

Only 2,639 men -- and one woman -- have won a Congressional Medal of Honor since the award was established in 1862.



The nation's highest honor for heroism is "awarded to those members of the Army who distinguish themselves conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life, above and beyond the call of duty, in action involving actual conflict with an enemy".

Until quite recently, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker was the only woman to win this award.

How she won her medal, lost it, and received it back again makes for an odd story:

Her war, like all wars, was terrible.

"Men fall around us like leaves in autumn... The dead are lying everywhere; the wounded are continually passing to the rear; the thunder of the guns and roll of musketry are unceasing and unabated until nightfall... All along the road, for miles wounded men were lying. They had crawled or hobbled slowly away from the fury of the battle, became exhausted and lain down by the roadside to die... What must have been their agony, mental and physical, as they lay in the dreary woods, sensible that there was no one to comfort or care for them..."

On September 20, 1863, Col. John Beatty wrote these lines concerning the Union wounded during the

retreat following the Battle of Chickamauga in southern Tennessee.

Within weeks, the Union and Rebel forces would fight again at Chattanooga, Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge. Close to 60,000 Union soldiers would be wounded, killed or horribly mutilated.



Knowing that his men faced near certain chances of being wounded, just a few days before the retreat from Chickamauga, General George H. Thomas, Commander of the Union Army of the Cumberland, had taken an unprecedented action.

He appointed a woman officer.

Dr. Mary Edwards Walker became the nation's first female officer. She served as a contract surgeon while holding the rank of First Lieutenant with the 52nd Ohio Regiment.

Even though the need for qualified surgeons was great, the Army Medical Director and the men of the 52nd Infantry protested her commission.



Not only did they object to the rarity of a woman doctor, they especially disliked Mary Walker because she refused to wear a dress.

She insisted on a modified male officer's uniform including pants with gold piping and tunic. Her preference for masculine-style attire kept her in trouble. In later years, police arrested her several times for "impersonating a man" because of her pantsuit.

General William T. Sherman raged at her, "Why don't you wear proper clothing? That toggery is neither one thing or the other!"

However much Sherman did not like her "toggery", he did recognize her ability.

The fierce battles in southern Tennessee produced thousands of casualties. The crude field hospitals overflowed with wounded.

Captain Augustus C. Brown described a typical scene as an ambulance wagon drawn by six mules approached one hospital tent:

"I saw one man with an arm off at the shoulder, with maggots half an inch long crawling the sloughing flesh, and several poor fellows were holding stumps of legs and arms straight up in the air so as to ease the pain the rough road subjected them to".

Brown tells how teams of surgeons performed assembly-line amputations. "In a very few moments an arm or a leg or some other portion of the subject's anatomy was flung out upon a pile of similar fragments behind the hospital, which was then more than six feet wide and three feet high... Heaven forbid that I should ever again witness such a sight!"

Dr. Mary Walker witnessed such sights daily.

Even before she was officially commissioned, she had voluntarily gone on to the battlefields south of Washington, D.C. and brought wounded men into a temporary hospital which she had helped set up in the halls of the Government Patent Building. In that endeavor she worked with Clara Barton who later founded the American Red Cross.

Dr. Mary Walker also organized a Women's Relief Association in Washington to help the wives, mothers and girlfriends who came to the Capitol seeking news of wounded loved ones and who were often shamefully treated in D.C.

It seems strange that, with all of the thousands of Union wounded in Tennessee to care for, Dr. Mary found time to cross into Confederate held territory to deliver babies and give medical attention to ill civilians. She made numerous excursions into the enemy camp doing supposed humanitarian work and returning to General Sherman's headquarters.

Rebel officers grew suspicious, and in April, they captured her in North Georgia and accused her of being a spy.

Perhaps she was; the month after her capture, Sherman invaded Georgia and started his infamous march to the sea.

The Confederates imprisoned Dr. Mary in Castle Thunder, a warehouse on the bank of the James River converted into a prisoner of war camp for officers. While there, she offended Southern sensitivities by refusing to wear a dress. She insisted on her pantsuit and a contemporary article in the *Richmond Examiner* grumbles, "Among other things, she refused to assume garb more becoming to her sex".



While Dr. Mary upset the Confederates; the Union wanted her back. Only four months after her capture, the two warring governments arranged a POW exchange. For the rest of her life she boasted, "I am the only woman in history who, when held as a captive of war, was exchanged as a prisoner of war for a man of equal rank in the army of the foe". She was traded for a Confederate Major.

Shortly after her return to Washington, President Lincoln, following the recommendations of both General Sherman and General Thomas, signed the citation to award her the Medal of Honor. But before the award ceremony could be held, John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln. Therefore, it was President Andrew Johnson who, on November 11, 1865, presented the nation's highest award for valor to the woman doctor -- who wore pants to the ceremony.

The inscription engraved on the back of her medal read, "Presented by the Congress of the United States to Mary E. Walker, A.A. Surgeon, U.S. Army."

An updated design of the medal was again issued to her in 1907.



Dr. Mary was only 33 years old when the Civil War ended. She had to decide what to do with her life.

For a while, she worked for a New York newspaper where she claimed to be America's first female reporter.

She attempted to return to private medical practice at her home in Oswego, N.Y., treating mostly charity patients.

She toured Europe lecturing as a war celebrity. She tried dress designing, promoting what she called a "Dress Reform Undersuit" reputed to be rape and seduction proof.

Finally she found her calling; she would work for women's rights. She joined the suffragette movement to win for women the right to vote.

She appeared at meetings with Susan B. Anthony, Susana Harris, Lucy Stone and Belva Lockwood, who ran for president in 1884 and 1888.

At first, Dr. Mary's support as a war hero delighted the suffragettes. But soon they became embarrassed by her.

For one thing, she refused to argue for the Nineteenth Amendment; she claimed women already had the right to vote under the Constitution -- they just needed to exercise that right.

For another thing, she continued to wear pants.

"Her coat from the shoulders to waist closely resembles a woman's ordinary attire, but from the waist downward the cut of both coat and pantaloons is masculine. Her hat is the merest chip of straw," said one contemporary.

In 1875, Dr. Walker was appointed to a Civil Service job in the Treasury Dept. Her female co-workers objected to the way she dressed and barred her from the office.

For two years, Mary Walker reported to work each day and sat in the lobby of the building doing absolutely nothing. Finally, a guard evicted her. At this indignity, she sued the government for back pay! The Treasury made an out-of court settlement with her for \$900, a year's pay.



Her mode of dress made her an easy target for ridicule.

One antifeminist columnist pointed to Mary Walker as "America's example of a self-made man". Another called her a "curious anthropoid".

Newspaper cartoonists had a field day and police arrested her several times for being a public spectacle.

New York patrolman Patrick H. Pickett arrested her on June 14, 1866. When the booking officer asked her where her home was, she snarled, "Wherever float the Stripes and Stars!" When he asked why she dressed as a man instead of wearing long skirts as becomes a lady, she declared, "I wear this dress from high moral principle; the fashionable dress of the day is not such as any physiologist can defend... It sweeps the filth from your sidewalks; it fastens the lungs as within a coffin and it is an abomination, invented by the prostitutes of Paris and as such unfit to be worn by a modest American woman."

The booking officer let her go.

Once, in Washington, when a dog began barking at her heels, a patrolman noticed her unusual attire, arrested her, and charged her with -- of all things -- antagonizing the dog!



Dr. Mary also antagonized smokers. Whenever she saw a man smoking, it was her habit to roll up her umbrella and swat the cigar or pipe out of the unwitting fellow's mouth.

Even when she was not antagonizing people, she stayed in the newspapers. For instance, she once got publicity by offering to raise money for a tuberculosis sanitarium by cutting off her right index finger for auction.

Having alienated dogs, smokers, feminist leaders and the general public by her outspoken and visible

eccentricity, Dr. Mary proceeded to antagonize the government which had honored her bravery.

In a series of confrontations over the years, she was thrown out of the Treasury building, evicted from the Patent Office, and barred from the Capitol Building.

She vehemently opposed the government's popular policy in the Philippines. She publicly called President McKinley a common murderer. In 1901, when Czolgosz shot McKinley, Dr. Mary objected to the assassin's being executed, a stand which cost her much public sympathy.

The government retaliated to her attacks by instituting a special investigation into her military benefits. They stopped her \$8.50 a month pension.

This government action gave Dr. Mary something new to pester officials about. She resorted to gadfly tactics, harassing congressmen about dress reform, voting legislation, her own pension, smoking and women's rights.

United States Senators ran into the men's room to hide when they saw her coming.

When the United States entered the First World War, Dr. Mary, along with many other suffragettes, opposed the war with Germany. They argued, "Why should women support the war effort when we're not even allowed to vote for the government which declares that war?"

Mary Walker, like other suffragettes, persisted in calling the President -- "Kaiser Wilson"!

The government again retaliated.

In 1916, the Adverse Action Medal of Honor Board discovered that a clerical error had issued awards to 866 members of the 27th Maine Infantry Regiment by mistake. This discovery prompted a general review of the Medal of Honor list of heroes. The Board claimed to

find ambiguities in Mary Walker's status as a member of the Army.

On June 3, 1916, they took away her medal.

Actually they didn't take it away.

They wrote a letter notifying her of their decision and asking her to return the medal.

Feisty Dr. Mary, who was now 83, said in effect: I didn't ask for this medal, Congress gave it to me. I didn't mint it, they did. They gave me the original one and they gave me the new one in 1907. I wear one or the other every day. And if they want my medal back, They can come get it!

Who would have dared?.

In 1917, suffragettes marched on Washington. Police ripped down banners denouncing Kaiser Wilson and dragged demonstrators off in shackles to prison where they had to force feed the ladies. Suffragettes chained themselves to the White House fence and to the office doors of government officials. In the confusion,, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker tumbled down the steps of the U.S. Capitol building!

She died two years later as a result of her laming fall.

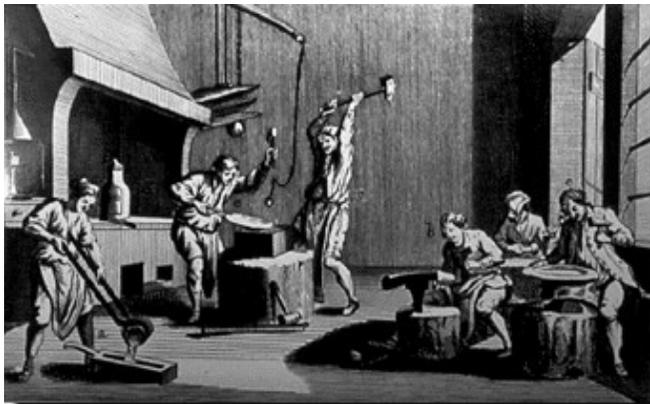
On June 10, 1977, sixty years and seven days after they took away her medal, the Senate Armed Services Committee gave it back.

Senators Edward W. Brooke (R-Mass.) and Birch Bayh (D-Ind.) co-sponsored a resolution to return Dr. Walker's medal. Secretary of the Army Clifford L. Alexander Jr. restored the Medal of Honor.

In a way, the Senate action was a formality because Dr. Mary never gave up her original medal. She wore it until her death and then left it to the Oswego Historical Society near her home in New York where it remains to this day.



The U.S. government has issued two postage stamps honoring her.



Paul Revere's Silver Shop

MOVE OVER, PAUL REVERE

Yes, This really happened too.
— John Cowart

There was no way my wife could find out about it.

She'd never suspect a thing.

I'd be able to do it without her getting the slightest inkling. Her church choir would practice for their Christmas special music for at least four hours. That would occupy her all evening, and I would be alone in the house -- supposedly innocently watching tv.

Also, both boys planned to spend the night at Stevie's house after their Scout meeting. No one in the family would know for sure where I was or what I'd be doing. I would be free to pursue my plan in secrecy.

Even before she left, I casually began to get things ready. Under the pretense of fixing myself a snack, I checked the silverware drawer. The spoons were there in the back. Solid silver. Antique flatware, an inheritance from my wife's aunt. We seldom used them. They'd never be missed. And the old cast iron pot we used in summer camping rested uselessly in the cabinet under the oven. It also was expendable.

As I banged around in the kitchen, I practiced not looking guilty.

I feared my expression might give me away. But I succeeded in appearing innocent; she rushed off to church never suspecting a thing.

I chuckled with anticipation.

The car had no sooner cleared the drive than I started to work. I pulled the charcoal grill out of the utility closet and carted it into my den. (There was a heavy rain that night so I had to do it inside; besides, I didn't want nosey neighbors observing my clandestine activities.)

The tin snips weren't in my tool box!

I nearly panicked. Where were they? Would scissors do? I rummaged around getting out the charcoal and a can of fire starter. Then I remembered seeing Freddy using the tin snips for some Boy Scout project. I dashed up to his room. Lord, what a mess! He had cached the snips and a spool of wire in a tennis shoe under his bed. Thank God I stumbled onto them.

I threw open the den window for ventilation, pyramided the charcoal in the grill, soused the briquettes with starter fluid and lit the fire.

Too much smoke.

I ran back to the utility closet and pulled down a fan from the shelf. Plugged it into the hall socket and positioned it so the flow of air pushed the smoke back toward the den and mostly out the window. Good.

Back to the kitchen. How many spoons would I need? The silver looked thin. Three ought to do; better make it four.

Using the tin snips, I cut the spoons into small chunks -- silver is tougher than it looks -- and I dumped the chunks into the iron pan and set it on the grill in the den.

Everything was going fine.

Now for the plaster. There wasn't any plaster. I was sure I had a box somewhere. Last time I saw it was... Halloween! Just before Halloween, Johnny had been making a plaster statue of Frankenstein's monster. I dashed up to his room.

How could he have gotten the whole box wet making one little statue? Hoping there was powder in the bottom, I peeled the cardboard away. A solid white brick. I could have scalped him. Why don't those boys ever put away...

The only thing to do was to jog down to the 7-11. I had to have that plaster of Paris. I checked my fire and started sloshing through the rain. They had one box left

on the shelf. If only I could get it home without it getting wet. I should have driven her to church, then I'd have the car.

When I got back, the iron pot was red hot and the little silver giblets had turned black; but they weren't any softer. I added more charcoal. Dropped some on the living room rug... Clean it up later.

I mixed the plaster over the kitchen sink and poured it into a shallow aluminum pie pan. While it stiffened, I went to my desk to get the arrowhead.

Actually, I think it was a spear point; it's too long to fit on an arrow. When I was a teenager, I found it underwater while diving in Ichetucknee Springs, Florida. Some Paleo-Indian chipped this flint into shape long before the Spaniards landed. A flawless stone blade, primitive and lethal, yet possessing the balanced symmetry of perfection. It looks as "right" as an egg, or a feather, or a sand-dollar.

I kept it nested in white cotton in an old watch case in my bottom drawer. Such care seemed incongruous for it remained keen-edged after maybe 10,000 years on the river bottom. Once, perhaps, it had been embedded in the hide of a mastodon or saber-toothed tiger; now, I was going to cast its exact proportional shape in silver as a Christmas present for my wife.

Envision it, an elegant slender taper of silver on a delicate silver chain against the deep royal blue of her best dress. Such simple perfection. Such loveliness. Besides that, it wouldn't cost anything.

Having bought the boys a road-racing set at a price which would dent Rockefeller's budget (also two pair of skates, two BB guns, and a puppy, still to be picked up at the kennel), I was near broke. So the silver arrowhead represented a gift which would be beautiful, meaningful, valuable (the price of silver being what it is) -- and cheap.

My father was a molder and I absorbed the general idea of metal casting from him. All you have to do is melt the metal, pour it in a mold, let it cool, and voila! -- the precise replica of your pattern. Only...

Only my silver wouldn't melt.

It seemed no softer than when I'd cut it. I tried to remember how my father melted metal in the foundry... a Blast Furnace! Much hotter than a regular fire. What a brilliant idea.

Taking the canister vacuum cleaner out of the closet, I fastened the hose at the exhaust outlet so the vacuum blew instead of sucked. I threaded the flexible hose through the lattice back of a chair and aimed the nozzle directly into the bed of coals. What heat. That should do the trick.

Back in the kitchen, I buttered my precious arrowhead so plaster wouldn't stick to it and pressed it into the pie pan. After a bit, I lifted it free and there was its exact impression. I felt inordinately pleased with myself. Paul Revere, move over; another skilled silversmith is in the making.

The pungent stink of burning interrupted my self congratulations.



A Tankard made by that other silversmith

I dashed into the den. The jet of forced air from the vacuum blew the grill's heat laterally against the door to my den. Its paint blistered. The door smoldered. But the silver in the pot was beginning to puddle. I refused to stop this close to success.

Rushing to the yard, I tripped over a sprawled bicycle -- last Christmas'. "Never buy 'em another present," I muttered groping for the garden hose. I poked a hole in the den's screen window, shoved the hose through and twisted the spigot full blast. Dashed inside and tried to capture the end of the hose which thrashed around like a wounded octopus. Caught it. Soaked the door enough to stop its smoking. Let the hose go again and dashed out to jerk the flailing thing back outside.

Scrambled inside. Thank God, the silver was liquid. But the hose had wet my fire. I rushed the molten but cooling liquid to the kitchen and poured it into my plaster mold. Good Lord! I forgot the eye for the chain in back. Quick. Before the metal hardens.

I snatched a little can of apple juice from the refrigerator, popped the top and thrust the aluminum ring part way into the back of the hot silver arrowhead. Whew...

I sagged against the kitchen counter, breathing. I ran a little cold water in the pie pan, then cracked the mold open. The silver arrowhead came out exactly as I envisioned it -- only more beautiful.

The fire still blazed in the grill. The vacuum roared. The door smoked. The hose gushed in spastic arches on the lawn. And the front door burst open.

Freddy and Johnny rushed in. "Dad. Dad," they yelled, "We saw smoke from Stevie's house. What's wrong? What happened?"

"Calm down, Boys," I said. "I want you to help me clean up this mess and swear to keep it a secret."

Nothing's wrong. I'm just making your mother a necklace for Christmas."



THE BOOMERANG FOOD BASKET

*Yes, This tale for Thanksgiving really happened too.
— John Cowart*

Once a few years ago my wife and I sent a food basket to a poor widow and her children.

They never got it.

That event forever changed our attitude about giving to the poor.

At the time I was digging graves at a local cemetery to support us and our three children while waiting for my first novel to sell. The novel was never published, but I have moved on to better jobs since. And now we have four children.

The cemetery employed 20 or so gravediggers - maintenance caretakers, they called us. Besides taking care of the grounds, we buried from two to ten people each day.

Funerals were mechanical affairs for us. We prepared the gravesite, stood at a discrete distance during the service, closed the grave as soon as the mourners left, then moved on to the next one.

The deaths didn't touch us - except one.

A young husband and wife, hardly out of their teens, and their two little boys drove an old clunker to Florida, lured by the state's low unemployment rate. They rented a house trailer in Jacksonville while looking for work. They didn't find it.

One day as they nursed their car down the highway, something gave way underneath. The old muffler scraped along the pavement striking a shower of sparks. The husband jacked the car up and crawled under to try to wire pieces together long enough to make it back to the trailer park. The wife and boys watched from beside the road.

Vibration from a passing truck shook the car off the jack.

The falling car squashed the young man's head between the frame and the pavement.

The truck driver had not seen it happen and kept on moving. The widow and children had to wait over an hour before they could flag down a passing car for help.

The woman and her children were stuck in a strange city with no husband, no father, no family, no friends, no church membership here for support. And, of course, they carried no insurance.

The burial was held in the cemetery's least expensive section.

The salesman who arranged the funeral served as pastor of a little store-front church as well as selling burial plots. He conducted the graveside service; only the teen-aged widow, the two toddlers, and a crew of us gravediggers attended.

We discovered that the young families plight was compounded by the fact that she was absolutely broke. She didn't even have anything to feed the children that night.

Fortunately we buried him on a Friday - a payday.

A liquor store down the road customarily cashed our paychecks, so when one of the guys passed the hat for that family, the whole crew chipped in. A pittance really. Minimum wage pay limits generous hearts. But we did what we could.

That night I told my wife, Ginny, about the situation.

"How much did they collect?" she asked.

"I don't know. Twelve or fifteen dollars, I think".

"Well, that'll get them through tonight, but..."

She stopped and pondered the problem. "Let's check the cupboard and see what we can spare," she said. "Do they have a refrigerator? Just in case, we'd better just send imperishable stuff"?

We pulled everything off the kitchen shelves and took inventory. Immediately we ran into problems.

“Here’s a canned ham,” she said, “Should we send that or keep it for Sunday dinner”?

“Better keep that,” I answered. “But send ‘em these three cans of tuna”.



“You put those back. We’re having tuna casserole tomorrow”.

“Darn,” I said. “That stuff is fit for nothing but cat food”.

“Well, you’d better learn to like it because it’s tomorrow’s casserole. What about coffee? I have an extra pound”.

“You’re not going to give away my coffee, are you”?

“There’s this pack of herbal tea Aunt Hazel sent last Christmas”.

“Good,” I said. “I hate that glop. Look. Here’s two cans of bacon, what about them”?

“They’re for Donald’s scout trip. Pass me the beets and the box of powdered milk”.

We ended up with one box and two grocery bags of stuff and I took it over the pastor’s house so he could deliver it to the poor family.

Driving back home I recalled the Bible verse where Jesus said for us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked because doing things like that for “the least of these my brethren” counted as service to Christ Himself.

I felt pretty good about that. I had done a good deed. Wow. Jesus must think I’m a really neat guy, I thought.

I told Ginny that the deed was done. And that ended the matter as far as we were concerned - or so we thought.

I've heard church folks say that you can't out give God. "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord," they quote. They say that when you give, God will repay you with interest.

That's not exactly how it worked out for us.

God did pay us back, but without interest. It happened like this:

A few weeks after we sent the food basket our fortunes changed.

Our car broke down.

Our rent went up.

Shoes wore out.

Bills poured in.

Every thing got hard but me.

I moved to a better paying job, but the period between my last paycheck from the cemetery and the first one from the new place looked ghastly.



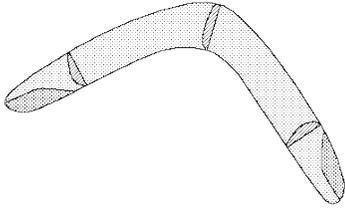
Ginny coped gallantly. She met the crisis by feeding us tuna with noodles, tuna and rice, tuna-based potato salad...

We had to pray for our daily bread daily.

We ran out of coffee. We longed for coffee. Steak we could do without, but we craved coffee.

One morning Ginny and I had to wake up early and collect beer cans along the road to turn in at a recycling center to earn enough money to buy breakfast food for the kids before they left for school.

That afternoon Ginny was figuring out how to cook supper for the five of us from a bottle of ketchup, two eggs, and a half-jar of green maraschino cherries - all that we had left in the house.



There was a knock on the door - the cemetery salesman.

“Remember those groceries you gave me for that girl,” he said. “When I took them out there to the trailer, the woman was getting ready to move back to Detroit; her mother wired her money for bus fare home. She couldn’t take that stuff you sent and I’ve been driving around with it in the trunk of my car for weeks now. I was just passing by and thought of it. Come on out to the car and bring it back in”.

Were we glad to see that food!

Sort of...

I mean it was perfectly adequate tuna fish and beets and corned beef and herbal tea. We were thankful as we unpacked the bags... but regret tempered our thanks.



Looking over our boomerang food basket, Ginny said, “Don’t you wish we’d sent her that pound of coffee”.

“Or the canned ham,” I said. “Think of ham with sweet potatoes and apple sauce”.

“Well, here’s the can of applesauce, but we didn’t send the ham”.

“If we’d sent her the bacon, we’d have flavoring for the dried peas”.

“At least, thank God, we sent powdered milk and oatmeal; we’ll have breakfast stuff till payday”.

“If it ever comes,” I said.

It did.

But until then, we ate simply — but we did eat.

We ate the very same food we had sent to the poor widow.

And as we dined, we teased each other...

“Wouldn’t it be great if we had sent...” punctuated every meal; “Yes, but I wish we’d sent...” was always the response. The exchange became a family joke.

But we passed through that bad time.

The other night we heard a stewardship speaker quote the Bible verse that says, “Cast thy bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days”. He applied the verse to people’s giving and God’s repaying.

Ginny and I glanced at each other with a private smile as we tried not to giggle. We think that verse makes sense not only as an investment-type promise from God, but also as a caution - after all, you may get back the very same bread!

Now, whenever we occasionally send a little something to the poor, Ginny always laughs as she makes out the check or packs the bag. “Should we send them ham and coffee this time,” she says.

“Absolutely!” I say. “I can’t get along without my coffee”.



Bad Children/Good Children

Short Happy fiction for Halloween

by
John Cowart

Billy Holden leaned over the seat back and whacked Terry on the head with his social studies book.

Terry twisted around grabbed the book with both hands and ripped off the front cover. Billy grabbed a handful of hair and pulled as hard as he could bracing his foot against the seat back for leverage.

With Terry stretched backward against his seat like that, Monica, a third-grader from Ms Carson's class who sat beside him, took advantage of his strained position to poke his belly with her purple false nails.

Nat, who sat with Billy, pushed over the seat to snatch Monica's lunchbox off her lap. "Give that back!" she shrieked. "That's mine. Give it back right now".

"Or you'll do what" Nat sneered.

"You kids stop that right now! Get quite. I won't have this racket on my bus!" yelled Old Miss Evert from her driver's seat. She was not watching traffic but looking in her rear view mirror trying to see who was being bad this time. She swerved to avoid creaming a tiny Ford Escort in the left lane.

"Old witch," Bobby said giving the handful of hair an extra twist before shoving Terry's head forward.

Mrs. Evert hated bad kids. She hated having to drive the school bus through evening traffic with 34 kids screaming and fighting and squirming in their seats. Some afternoons they threw spitballs at the back of her head. Sometimes they threw things at passing cars when drivers got so stupid as to pull up along side the big yellow bus. They pushed. They shoved. They yelled. They fought. They teased. They made nasty signals with their fingers.

Day after day after day this went on.

Well-behaved kids, and few they were, ended up knocked to the floor and stomped by the others. They broke one kid's glasses. They took one girl's Harry

Potter book, one she got for her birthday, and threw it out the window.

Mrs. Evert lectured them to no avail.

“Old hag” they called her to her face. “Stupid old witch”.

She even reported them to the principal.

“What happens off school grounds is not the school’s responsibility,” the wimp said. “You are in charge. These precious children are our future. You must maintain discipline on your bus. And remember, there’s no such thing as a bad child”.

The principal has a master’s degree in educational theory. All day he stays in his office doing paperwork. With the door closed.

On Monday afternoon a new kid got on the bus. A good kid. His parents were from China or Viet Nam or one of those country.

“Slanty-eyes” Billy called him and the name stuck.

“His skin is yellow and he’s got a yellow streak down his back,” Terry said.

“You people eat puppy dogs”, Betty Jordan said. “Is that what you bring in your lunch box”?

“Naw,” Bret said. “He’s free-lunch. Poor yellow trash”.

Mrs. Evert called back, “You hooligans stop teasing the new kid. Ain’t proper to tease somebody just because they’re different”.

“You’re the one whose different, you old witch,” Monica called.

“Who said that? Who said that? Who was it said that?’ the driver yelled

“Who. Who. Whooo”. Chanted the bus load of children. Imitating owls. Cackling like witches.

Miss Evert reported the incident to the dean of boys. "Now, Miss. Evert, it can't be that bad," he said. "The children have been sitting quietly in class all day; when they get out, it's only natural for them to release some of that pent up energy. All kids are good kids. You need to focus their creative energies... Maybe you could teach them to sing *Row, Row Row Your Boat* on the bus".

Tuesday afternoon Nikita sat in the very back row of seats and when the bus picked up speed on the Interstate, he pulled down his pants and mooned passing cars.

Wednesday, Mary Lou teased Rodney till he threw up on the floor. All the kids laughed and pointed and held their noses. Kenny held Rodney down and rubbed his hair in it. Mary Lou kicked Kenny and got some on him. Broyston stabbed Rachel in the arm with a pencil. And Marvin stole Paula's Simpson watch.

When the bus got to the stop where Marvin's mother met it every day, Miss. Evert told his mother about the watch.

"Are you accusing my child of stealing? I'll have you know my Marvin's a good boy. You're a bitter old witch. Just because you don't have children of your own... My Marvin is not a thief. He got that watch in a Happy Meal. Didn't you, Honey. I'm going to report you to the school board. If you can't handle little children, you shouldn't be driving a school bus. You're not suited for the job".

Thursday, Tina scrubbed a picture of a bat with black crayon in Sandy's library book. Patricia chewed a big wad of bubble gum and pressed it into Leslie Martin's long blond hair. Pressed it in and smeared it around so good that her mother would have to take scissors and cut those tresses. That'll teach her to show off... But while Patricia was leaning over to glop up Leslie's hair, Carl unwrapped a Baby Ruth, warmed it in his hand and put the candy bar in Patricia's seat so that

when she sat back down it stuck to the back of her shorts and when she got up to leave the bus at her stop, all the kids laughed and pointed and she didn't know why at first. But when she brushed the back of her shorts, she flew into a rage and bit Tonya.

Miss. Evert had to break up the fight and both girls kicked her shins and yelled, "Leave us alone, you stupid old witch. Leave us alone. Child abuse! Child abuse!"

When the last child finally got off the bus, Miss. Evert circled back along her route, turned down a dirt crossroad, parked the big yellow bus beneath a tree, got out, walked into the woods and had a long talk with two of her oldest friends.

Friday, Billy Holden brought his basketball on to the bus. He bounced it off the heads of kids sitting in front of him. Somebody got hold of it and soon it was ricocheting all over the inside of the bus. Nobody was safe.

Willy used a knife he'd snuck into school to cut both straps on Cindy's backpack. Cindy swung the book bag by one strap and hit him in the face. His nose bled. He wiped with his finger and flicked blood at everybody in the first two rows. "Hey, Dweebs," he yelled. "Suppose I got AIDS" Huh. Suppose I'm infecting your asses".

Kids screamed and climbed all over the seats to get out of the spatter.

Miss. Evert did not say a word to quite them.

If anyone had noticed, today she wore a set of headphones with her Walkman tuned to a golden oldies station. She hummed along with the Beachboys to *Help Me Rhonda* as she signaled for a left turn off the main road. The basketball bounced off the back of her seat as she slowed to a stop beside the crumbling brick wall of the old Anderson cemetery. Out of habit she flicked on the bus's flashing red safety lights; no car is supposed

to pass a stopped school bus when its loading or unloading children.

Releasing her safety belt, she pulled the lever to open the bus door. Standing up she called above the din of the children. "Everybody off the bus. Everybody off the bus".

"This ain't our stop'" several children protested.

"Ran out of gas'" the old witch lied. "Everybody off the bus. Wait right here. I'm going to fill the tank and I'll be right back for you".

Pushing and shoving, gouging and hitting, the children clambered down the bus steps. They milled around in a pack as Miss Evert closed the door. They watched the big yellow bus pull away leaving a hanging cloud of dust as it bumped down the dirt road out of sight.

Some of the kids fought with sticks they'd picked up off the ground. Some threw rocks at birds. Some chased others, pulled hair, taunted the weak.

It got dark.

Two huge shapes rose from behind the brick wall.

And stepped over.

Morg and Taint, two gigantic trolls, friends of the old witch, herded the squealing children up against the wall. Some kids tried to scatter and run. Morg caught them and dropped them in his basket.

Some kids clustered together hugging each other and sniveling in fright. Taint scooped those into the basket picking up six or eight at a time.

Tommy Norton tried to poke Morg with a stick. Morg snatched him up in one claw and squeezed his head till his tiny brains gushed out his nose.

Monica tried to hide in a niche in the wall. When Taint tried to pull her out, her arm came off, so he ate her on the spot before she bled out.

Soon every kid left alive was safely in the basket.

The only thing left on the road was the basketball.

Morg kicked it into the bushes.

Late that night, Morg and Taint lounged in front of their camp fire. Taint stretched leisurely and yawned, his yellow fangs reflected the moon.

Morg covered his mouth politely as he gave a soft belch. "Excuse me," he said. "Those certainly were good children."

"Yes, indeed. Best we've ever had. Don't you think. Miss Evert out did herself this time?"

"Yep," Taint said. "Those really are good children... any left?"

"Six or eight, I think," Morg said, lifting the lid of the basket and reaching inside. He lifted out a squirming child, admired it in the moon light then bit down. Juices ran down his chin and dripped on his hairy chest.

"Good children," he said wiping his mouth on his forearm, "Really good children."



THE Mattress In The Middle Of The Bridge

*Yes, This really happened too.
— John Cowart*

We kept our newest baby in an egg carton – not one of those Styrofoam ones with pockets for a dozen eggs, but the large cardboard box that hundreds of eggs come in. My resourceful wife had covered the box with some flannel material printed in nursery scenes, and this make-shift arrangement served well enough as a bassinet. But now the baby was five months old and too big to sleep in the egg carton anymore.

At the time I was struggling through school while working nights, collecting and counting mosquitoes for the City Health Department in Jacksonville, Florida. If I'd been paid a penny for each mosquito in the traps, instead of by the hour, I could have afforded all sorts of luxuries, such as a crib for our third baby. But supporting a family of five on a part-time job imposes quite a few financial limitations, so the baby slept in the egg carton.

One night in our family devotions my wife explained the whole situation to our Lord. “Dear Jesus,” Ginny prayed, “We’ve just got to have a new crib mattress. Eve is too big for her little box, and she needs a bed. You know we have that old crib in the storeroom, but it was secondhand when we got it. And after Jennifer and Donald outgrew it, that mattress was in tatters, so we need a new mattress. Soon, please. Amen”.

Ginny’s prayer made me mad.

I felt frustrated because I was trying to live as I thought God wanted, and I felt He had let me down. I attended school because I thought He wanted me there. My job seemed to be the place He had for me and I was trying to raise my family right. But I couldn’t even afford a mattress for a secondhand baby crib. It just didn’t seem fair.

Another thing complicated our situation. Early in our marriage Ginny and I had decided to attempt to live without buying anything on credit, without borrowing money, and without ever telling anyone except God about our needs. We have not always stayed within these guidelines, but they represent part of a standard of faith we acknowledge. I suspect the real reason we first aspired to this life style was that we were too hard-headed, proud and stubborn to admit how poor we actually were. At any rate; the baby slept in a box, Ginny prayed, and I was mad at God.

One afternoon during the week after Ginny's prayer, one of my fellow students needed a ride to work after school, so I gave him a lift. We had to cross the Main Street Bridge over the St. Johns River. This bridge spans nearly a mile of river and arches about 100 feet above the water. It carries the traffic for U.S. Highways 1 and 17, and is one of the most heavily traveled bridges in the city. A huge metal grating in the center of the bridge rises to allow ships to pass underneath in the main channel of the river. As we drove across that metal grating, something lay right in the center of the roadway - it looked like a brand-new crib mattress.

Since a truck was following me closely, I couldn't stop to check. I had to follow the flow of traffic into downtown Jacksonville where one-way streets forced me to make an eight-block loop before I could re-cross to the south side of the bridge. Then I had to drive through a complicated clover-leaf before I could head north over the bridge again. All this maneuvering took close to 30 minutes, but when I returned, incredibly, the crib mattress still lay on the grate untouched by the busy traffic.

I paused on the center span. My friend leaped out, threw the crib mattress in the back seat, and jumped back in the car again as traffic honked behind us.

The mattress probably had fallen from the back of a truck or something, and there was no way for me to

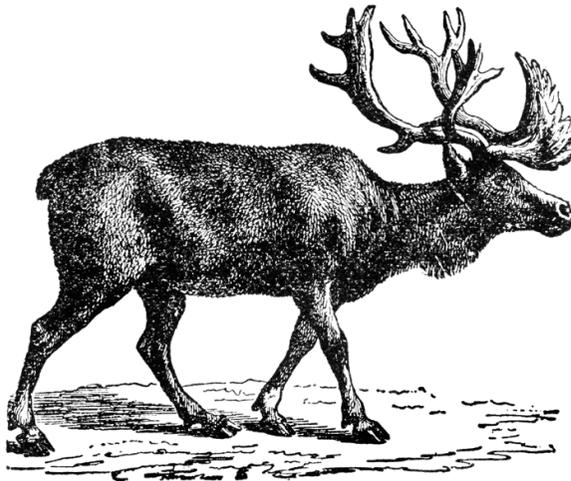
locate its original owner. Except for a scuffed place in one corner, it appeared to be in perfect condition.

That night as Ginny and I put together our old crib to receive its new mattress, I hesitated. "Suppose it's not the right size for our crib?" I said.

"Hand me the Phillips-head screwdriver," Ginny replied. "God wouldn't send us a mattress that doesn't fit".

She was right.

NOTE: The above incident happened in the late 1970s. Baby Eve grew up healthy and happy, won college scholarships, studied in London, earned her Master's degree, and is now a head librarian.



Are There Reindeer In Heaven?

An Essay for the Daily Grind
by
John Cowart

My neighbors across the street still haven't put away their Christmas yard display.

Seeing it out my window I think of a great joke so old I can't remember where I first heard it:

A wealthy couple returned from their vacation in Europe aboard an ocean liner.

On board they became acquainted with a young woman from Finland who impressed them with her enthusiasm and brightness. She told them about her plans to immigrate to the U.S., find a job, enroll in school and become a naturalized citizen.

The couple talked it over and decided they wanted to help the young lady get established, so they called her to their cabin for a job interview.

"Are you a good cook?" the wife asked. "O, no M'am. Back home my mother does all the cooking," the girl replied.

"Well then, are you good at cleaning house?" asked the husband.

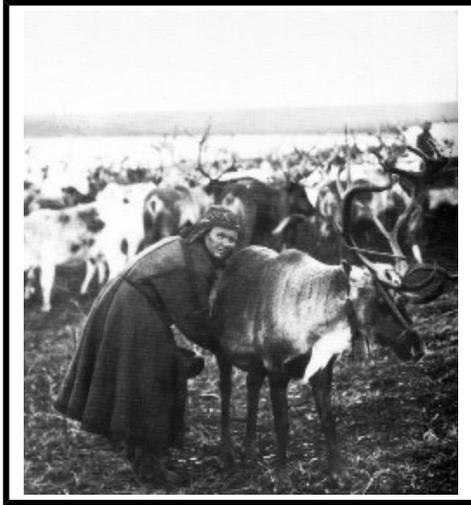
"No, Sir," the girl said. "My older sister does all the housecleaning".

"Hum. Perhaps you could be a nanny. Are you good with children?"

"No. My younger sister takes care of all the little ones at home".

"This is really a problem. You have no marketable skills at all".

At this the young woman grew indignant. "Of course I do," she exclaimed. "Everyone for miles around says that in our whole village there is no body better than I am at milking reindeer!"



I think we all can identify with this young woman.

We are fast approaching the Far Shore on our voyage from our old world to the new one.

And, for myself, I find that, on reflection, the skills and talents and values which I relied on in the old world, will not make the grade in the coming world.

For instance, I'm proud of my ability to cast a shrimp net. I'm good at it. Yet I read in the apostle John's *Revelation* these odd words:

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea".

No sea in Heaven?

No sea?

Surely that's a mistranslation of some obscure Greek word. If there is no sea in Heaven, then where exactly am I supposed to shrimp?

What good is knowing how to cast a net in a perfect circle so that every sinker hits the water at the same time going to be in a Heaven where there is no sea?

Well, what about my other talents and abilities? For instance I pride myself on being a published writer, but from my business relationships with earthly editors and publishers, I seriously question whether any of them will be in Heaven either.

Maybe so. God is merciful and He will save anybody, so perhaps there will be some publishers and editors in Heaven. But, even if they are there, what would they publish?

What possible use could my writing be in Heaven?

On one level I write about religious stuff in order to think through and know my own beliefs. But in Heaven I will not need to do that anymore because as Paul said, "Then I shall know fully, even as I am also known".

Now another quality of mine that I feel proud of in this world is my sexual ability. My wife assures me that I'm great in bed. In my heart I'm sure that James Bond envies my prowess. Poor Zero Zero Seven.

But, is this a quality of mine that will cut the mustard in Heaven?

Doesn't look that way.

All four Gospels record Jesus as saying, "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in Heaven". (Whatever that means??? Who knows anything at all about the sex life of angels???)

I don't know about you, but when I get to Heaven, first thing, I intend to check under my white robes to see what's there!

So, the three qualities of mine which I value most in this world, casting a net, writing, and sex (not necessarily in that order) will be as valuable in Heaven as being the best reindeer milker in Manhattan.

I want to complain to The Management!

Our culture, and virtually every other culture, places great value on material wealth. Let's face it; on our voyage to the New World some folks do get to travel in First Class. But we all disembark at the same place. And we'll every one go through customs. And at that judgment we'll all stand empty-handed with no merchandise to declare. Our buckets for milking reindeer will be useless on the Far Shore.

So what does really matter when we get from here to There?

Right off the top of my head I think of two Scriptures which address that question:

The Prophet Micah asked, "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the Most High God"?

He mentions several unacceptable possibilities and concludes, "He has showed you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God"!

Do justly.

Love mercy.

Walk humbly.

Those are the Prophet's answers.

St. Paul also offer's three answers to our question of what really matters:

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love".

Personally, I find Paul's observation a trifle discouraging.

Faith. -- Even as small as a mustard seed. Ha. My faith is so wobbly and so small that I can't move a paperclip much less a mountain. I'm ready to deny my faith at least three times a day. Even a toothache makes me doubt God's love, care or even His existence.

Love -- Fat chance. For a curmudgeon like me? Most of the time it's all I can do to tolerate others much less love them.

So I'm left with hope. "To cherish a desire with the expectation of fulfillment" That's what my dictionary says hope is.

That's great!

I have to leave faith and love to better people than I am; but my expectation of Jesus is marvelous.

I expect Him to be what He says He is and to do what He says He will.

"In my Father's house are many rooms," He said. "I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am".

And once we're there, then what?

In John's *Revelation* he saw that Far Shore and heard thousands and thousands and ten thousand times ten thousands encircling the throne and chanting: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and praise"!

When is He supposed to receive all this good stuff?

And who is He supposed to receive it all from?

Here and now. There and then.

From you and me.

He is worthy.

That's fundamental.



THE GIRL IN MY SHOWER

Not an every day occurrence, but again, this really happened to me.

— John Cowart

At 12 minutes after midnight on our daughter's wedding day, my wife and I buried a dog in our back yard.

She held the flashlight, I wielded the shovel.

We cried and said a prayer.

No, this is not some weird fundamentalist Christian marriage ritual.

It's just that Friendly, our old dog, had given up the ghost that same afternoon but because of the pressure of wedding arrangements -- baking the cake, mixing the punch, hunting car keys, answering the phone -- we could not get around to burying our pet until after midnight.

That was not the oddest thing to happen that night.

An hour or two earlier in the evening, I drove down into Springfield, the toughest section of the city, to pick up the boys who volunteered to serve as ushers at the wedding. They planned to stay near the church with our head-usher son overnight so I would not have to pick them up in the morning. They were supposed to meet me at a corner near Main Street.

I pulled up to the dark corner, saw the boys down the street and honked the horn.

Out of nowhere a skimpily-dressed young lady appeared at my window.

"Looking for company," she asked.

Flustered, I said, "No, thank you, Miss. I was honking for those boys down there".

"Well," she said planting her fists on her hips, "If you're the sort who prefers boys..."

And she flounced away.

I sat there with my mouth agape; I never had a chance to explain that I'm a nice innocent Christian type. My arm is strong because my heart is pure -- Why, I can bench press all of eight (8) pounds.

Rats! We Christians seldom have a chance to explain.

Back when the Roman emperors Nero, Marcus Aurelius and Diocletian were feeding us to the lions (Is it true that Christians give lions and everyone else indigestion?) few people had any chance to explain the faith which had brought them to the arena. The Christians -- with notable exceptions like the 86-year-old Polycarp -- were sacrificed in droves, not one at a time.

Picture a thousand scared Christians milling around on the stadium's 50-yard line, all high-stepping through kitty litter while the fans cheer and do the wave -- no dramatic speeches there. Too late to explain anything by that time.

The saints were too busy whacking cats to make speeches.

The Fourth Century church historian Eusebius said that when they hauled one believer away for burning, his astonished neighbor cried, "But he was such a good man, I would have never guessed he was a Christian!"

Movies such as *Ben Hur*, *Quo Vadis* and *The Robe* give the impression that everybody got to make a dramatic speech giving a glowing testimony before the lions' cages were opened.

That ain't the way it was then; that ain't the way it is now.

Chances to testify take us by surprise; we always have to be ready.

But we're not --

Like with the girl in my shower.

Here's what happened:

Years ago I drove an over-the-road truck hauling bed-bugs (that's what truckers call your household goods) for a company headquartered in Indianapolis, Ind.



About 3 a.m. one night I was in the terminal bunkhouse taking a shower -- big green tile room with a dozen shower heads -- to scrub off road grime. I thought I was the only person in the place until a naked young woman stepped into the shower with me.

"I'll soap your back if you'll soap mine," she said.

With the lightening quick wit for which I am famous, I said, "Huh?"

She repeated her offer in more explicit terms.

Personal Evangelism class had never prepared me for this.

"How much?" I asked.

She named a price and I said, "That's an intriguing offer. There's only one thing wrong; you don't charge enough."

This time she was the one to say, "Huh?". She backed away obviously thinking that she had a real kinky one on her hands.

We fundamentalists do occasionally appear a trifle out of step with the rest of the world. Is that because our values are different?

"What do you mean, not enough," she asked cautiously.

I explained that she was worth more than the few dollars she had asked; she was much more valuable, more precious. Jesus treasured this young woman in the truck terminal shower so much that he shed his own blood, gave up his own life for the likes of her -- the likes of me -- the likes of you.

She started crying.

Apparently most folks she'd met -- even good solid church folks -- had always told her that she was not worth much.

What a crying shame.

Well, I turned off the water, towed off and got dressed. My new friend and I went out for coffee and talked till dawn. She wanted to hear the Good News over and over.

I suppose when we fundamentalists do have a chance to explain, the most important thing we ever have to tell anyone is this:

Don't sell yourself short; God regards you as a person of immense, exquisite value. To him you are worth something more precious than IBM stock in a steel safe. He'd die for you; in fact, we believe he already has.

You are immensely valuable.

That's fundamental.



THE SHELLING OF FORT MCHENRY

Patriotic nonfiction

by

John Cowart

Tonight I'll eat supper in Baltimore -- or in Hell," declared British Major General Robert Ross.

He had every reason to expect success for his attack on the third largest city in the United States during the conflict known to history as the War of 1812.

By September 12, 1814, America was fighting for her life. The British had defeated Napoleon and exiled him to Elba. They transferred masses of seasoned troops including "Wellington's Invincibles", the soldiers who beat Napoleon, to the American front.

Despite a few impressive victories at sea, America was losing the war. Detroit, Chicago, much of Maine and northern New York state were occupied by the British. Indian tribes, supplied with British arms, raged on the western frontiers. The enemy navy had turned the Chesapeake Bay into a British lake. And, in August 1814, General Ross had captured Washington D.C.

President James Madison ordered the evacuation of the Nation's Capital. His courageous wife, Dolly, whisked away some of the portraits and best furniture from the White House.

General Ross and Sir George Cockburn set Washington ablaze. They burned the White House, the Capital, and many other buildings. Ross boasted that he rode his white horse away from the burning city with his pockets stuffed "full of old Madison's love letters."

General Ross had other reasons to expect he could take Baltimore, which was both larger and more economically important than Washington. For one thing, some of the New England states, with Massachusetts as the leader, were forming a popular plan to secede from the United States and sue for a separate peace with England. The war was that unpopular with those whose livelihood depended on trade. Another factor was superior British weaponry.

The English expeditionary force which occupied the Chesapeake Bay, besides troop transports and supply ships, included 16 warships. Among these were several bomb-ketches.

Naval historian, C.S. Forester, describes bomb-ketches as having an "enormous mainmast which had to make up in the amount of canvas it carried for the absence of a foremast. The mizzenmast, stepped far aft, was better proportioned to the diminutive vessel ... On either side of her midline were the two huge mortars... bedded upon a solid mass of oak against her keelson.

" Mortar fire from a bomb-vessel was the uttermost refinement of naval gunnery, brought to a high degree of perfection. The high trajectory and the low muzzle velocity of the projectile, and the avoidance of the disturbing factor of irregularities in the bore of the gun, made it possible to drop the shell with amazing accuracy."

Forester says that the mortars were like big cauldrons in the eyes of the bomb-ketch. They used powder made up in cartridges of a pound, half a pound, and quarter of a pound. A midshipman tore open a cartridge of each size and poured the contents into the mortar, and pressed it home with an enormous wad of felt. "Each explosive shell had its own fuse which had to be cut and lit separately from the propelling charge. If the bomb's fuse was too long, some brave soul might extinguish it on the ground; if the fuse was cut too short, the bomb would burst in air before it reached the target".

The curve of the thirteen-inch shell, with the fuse protruding was just level with the rim of the muzzle, says Forester.

The gunnery officer "took hold of the smoldering linstock, and applied it to the fuse of the shell... he left himself a five-second margin in case the fuse burnt unsatisfactorily and had to be relit... then he pressed the linstock into the touch hole of the mortar and it went off with a roar.. (He) could see the shell rise, its course marked by the spark of the burning fuse. Up and up it went higher and higher, and then it disappeared as it began its downward flight at right angles to the line of sight."

Not only could Major General Ross depend on his mortars and other superior weaponry, but he had also formulated an excellent plan of attack.

On the morning of September 12th, when he made his boast about supper in Baltimore or in Hell, he disembarked with 5,000 battle-hardened troops on North Point to draw the city's American defenders in that direction. The fleet began a naval bombardment from the east and a second British landing force landed south of the city and moved north.

Maryland Senator Samuel Smith, a general in the militia, marshaled the city's defenses. One of his riflemen shot General Ross off his white horse.

The general did not eat supper in Baltimore that night.

On Ross's death, Col. Arthur Brooke took command of the British forces.

The defenders dug entrenchments north and south of the city, and they sank some old ships in the middle of the channel to keep the British warships from approaching too close.

Fort McHenry guarded the entrance to Baltimore's harbor. Major George Armistead commanded the regular American garrison of about 100 soldiers inside the fort. Major Armistead, in anticipation of the British attack, prepared an oversized 15-star, 15-stripe American battle flag to fly over the ramparts of the brick star-shaped fort. Because the field cannons in the fort were too light to reach the British ships -- which anchored miles away -- there was little Armistead and his men could do but defy the enemy and endure.

Beginning at dawn on September 13th, the bombardment of Fort McHenry commenced.

The enemy warships laid a barrage of 1,800 rockets, shells and bombs on the fort. One bomb weighing 186 pounds hit the fort's magazine which contained over 1,000 pounds of gunpowder packed in kegs. The bomb's impact extinguished its fuse — Otherwise ...

For 25 hours, the Americans endured and endured and endured.

On a small sloop anchored behind the British fleet, an American lawyer, Francis Scott Key anxiously watched the battle. He had sailed out to the enemy fleet two weeks earlier to negotiate a prisoner-of-war release for Dr. William Beanes. The doctor had been captured by the British soldiers as they withdrew from burning Washington. The English agreed to release Dr. Beanes, but would not let the Americans return to shore until after the battle for Baltimore.

Key, Beanes, and Col. John S. Skinner, the U.S. Cartel agent, watched the enemy's bomb-ketches lob shells down on the fort. They tracked the trajectory of the bombs by following the trail of sparks sputtering from the burning fuses.

Occasionally, a puff of smoke from the fort showed that the defenders were returning the fire, but a splash in the water revealed that the defenders' shells fell short. The three Americans felt frustrated and helpless seeing this assault on their country.

They stayed on deck all night and saw more of the pyrotechnic display of war. And occasionally they saw a glimpse of the oversized flag still waving defiantly over the fort.

Shortly after midnight on the 14th, the guns ominously, suddenly, fell silent. Did this mean the fort had fallen? No, the British were trying a two-pronged landing south of the fort and didn't wish to bomb their own men. American soldiers beat both prongs of the British land assault back into the sea.

The three Americans in the sloop had no way of knowing the outcome of the battle until the dawn's early light showed through the mist and drizzle that the American flag still flapped in the sea breeze above the fort.

Poetic inspiration struck Key. On the back of an envelope he found in his coat pocket, he began scribbling lines. Later in the day, back on shore, he wrote a clean copy of four stanzas to this poem:

The Star-spangled Banner.

O! say, can ye see by the Dawn's early light
What so proudly we hail'd by the twilight's last gleaming?
Whose bright stars & broad stripes, through the clouds of the fight,
O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming?
And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air,
gave proof through the night that our flag was still there,
O! say, does that Star-spangled Banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave?.

On that shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half-conceals, half-discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected, now shines on the stream,
'Tis the Star-spangled Banner, O! long may it wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave.

And where is that host that so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war & the battle's confusion
A home & a country should leave us no more?
Their blood has wash'd out their foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling & slave
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave,
And the Star-spangled Banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free & the home of the brave.
O! thus be it ever when freemen shall stand
To whom their lov'd country's honor & safety depend,
Blest with vict'ry & peace, may the heav'n rescued Land
Praise the power that hath made & preserved us a nation.
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: In God is our trust.
And the Star-spangled Banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Washington
24th 71 - 48.

T. Key

Col. Skinner persuaded Key to take the poem to the newspaper office of the *Baltimore American*. Before the English warships had cleared the Chesapeake waters, people were singing the new anthem in the streets.

The music was adopted from an old English trumpet march. The melody was already popular before

Key wrote new words, and it was often played on patriotic occasions, such as Washington's Birthday and the Fourth of July. The tune first appeared in 1775 as the song of the Anacreonic Society, an organization of wealthy music lovers. It was called *TO ACACREON IN HEAVEN*.

In 1931 President Hoover signed Public Law 823 making this song our official National Anthem.

When Francis Scott Key was asked about his song, he said it was the result of seeing the flag: "With it came an inspiration not to be resisted; and even though it had been a hanging matter to make a song, I must have written it... Does not such a country and such defenders of their country deserve a song?"



Fort McHenry's Flag is now in the Smithsonian.

THE STAR SPANGLED BANNER:



Oh, say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last
gleaming?

Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the
perilous fight

O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly
streaming?

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in
air,

Gave proof through the night that our flag was
still there.

O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the
brave?

On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the
deep,

Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence
reposes,

What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering
steep,

As it fitfully blows, now conceals, now discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, now conceals, now discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first
beam,
In full glory reflected now shines on the stream:
'Tis the star-spangled banner! O long may it wave
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brave.

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion
A home and a country should leave us no more?
Their blood has wiped out their foul footstep's
pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the
grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth
wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the
brave.

Oh! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved homes and the war's
desolation!
Blest with victory and peace, may the heaven-
rescued land
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved
us a nation.
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust."
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall
wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the
brave!



THE GREAT BRASSIER HUNT:

*Yes, this is An Excerpt from my own diary
— John Cowart:*

Thursday, September 5, 2002

Yesterday, as Gin & I walked to the bus, we discovered a huge pile of clothes and shoes deposited at curbside where some people have moved out around the corner. I walked back with my wheelbarrow and collected these items for the Lord's Store mission. Why let perfectly good shoes and clothes (we're talking Calvin Kline, Air Jordan, Nike, Oshgosh, etc) be trashed when poor people need them.

I don't know if my being a Christian with a modicum of compassion for the poor has anything to do with my actions or whether it's just my conditioning for ecology that makes me hate to see things wasted. I'd like to think there is some love for Christ involved though I doubt it. Anyhow, I collected all I could salvage from the trash (Isn't the biblical term "gleaners" so much nicer than "rag-picking dumpster diver" or "bag lady"?), wheeled them home and spent today washing clothes for the poor - who are always with you and are always a pain in the ass....

Monday, September 9, 2002

Gin off to work.

Donald off to his class.

Me, I went on a brassier hunt.

When I did the washing last week to take all those clothes we'd collected to the mission, I laundered some of our own clothes along with the ones for the poor.

Now for the past 35 years Ginny has worn a favorite bikini for swimming now and then. She's pleased that she still fits into it (mostly) as well as she did when we first married. Of course over the years the swimsuit has stretched a little but then so has she. Well, Saturday Ginny discovered that I'd inadvertently sent to

the mission the top of her two-piece swimsuit! I had not been paying attention and packed the bikini top into one of the white plastic garbage bags with the other clothes. This did not thrill her.... So, this morning I drove back to the mission (with another car full of goodies we decided to donate while cleaning up this weekend).

I carried the bikini bottom with me so I could be sure to match the material with the right bra.

At the mission I had the joy of explaining to the manager lady on duty, one I'd only met once before, that I wanted to dig through the dozens of bags of donated clothes, especially lady's underwear, to recover a blue brassier with white stars on it.

I'm such a dignified Christian gentleman that I'm sure she hardly thought I was a pervert at all.

Of course our conversation had to take place in the middle of the floor, me standing there with a bikini bottom in my hand. A dozen or so other women, helpers and clients, listened in. Those other ladies worked hard at stifling giggles as they overheard my explanation.... And I gained the status of an international buffoon as one client translated the situation into Spanish for the benefit of another lady who spoke no English at all.

I'm not sure what exactly was relayed in Spanish, but that lady too tried not to snicker at the guy who'd given away his wife's bra and now wanted it back.

Maybe it's a cross cultural thing.

Why does the Lord let me get into situations like this? Doesn't He have any regard for my dignity:?

Anyhow, Friday's donations had not been sorted and put on the floor yet. Over the weekend workers had piled heaps of donated white plastic garbage bags full of ladies' dainties in the storage and sorting area. Many of the ladies there watched without laughing -- or even choking trying not to -- as I searched bags full of

negligees, sweaters, coats, robes and panties till I did finally find the missing bra.

I have returned it to it's rightful tits.

That pretty much sums up my day.

Come to think of it, that pretty much sums up my life.



SUSPICIOUS SEEDS

Here's a thought for Spring.

— John Cowart

Until recently, I suspected that farmers, gardeners, and seed companies conspire to deceive the public with a gigantic hoax.

My suspicions began when I was a cub scout; I was supposed to grow something from a seed. Since avocados have big seeds, I chose to grow one. Carefully following the instructions in the scout book, I inserted toothpicks all around the large seed and suspended the thing in a glass of water and put it on top of the refrigerator. The water first stagnated and then evaporated leaving a scum in the glass; the seed did nothing.

The only thing that grew was the suspicion forming in the back of my mind that I was the victim of a myth.

My childhood suspicion was reinforced shortly after my marriage. My new wife, in an effort to hold down food costs, decided we should plant a kitchen garden. I reluctantly dug the soil, spaded in fertilizer, and constructed some neat rows for our crop. I even posted one of my old army uniforms as a scarecrow. We bought some packets of seeds with pictures of thriving vegetables on the envelopes. I had read that the Indians taught the Pilgrims a clever trick about growing things from seeds, so I buried a small fish with each grain I planted. As time passed, the cat dug up the fish and the scarecrow fell over, but every seed I buried stayed buried.

This confirmed my suspicion: Nothing Really Grows From Seeds.

My experience led me to believe that information about things growing from seeds was a lie propagated by people who sell seeds. This personal suspicion was backed by all my farming experience -- until last summer's picnic.

At this picnic, two important things happened. The first, was that my little girl sat down in a patch of sandspurs. Sandspurs are malignant weeds with slender stalks ending in clusters of nasty sharp stickers. These spurs are the seed of the plant, and when you touch one, its barbed spines stab deep in your flesh and

cling tenaciously until you forcibly pluck them out. My three-year-old's posterior was covered with them, so I rescued her from the patch and stood her on a rock to remove the spurs, tossing them in a pile beside the rock.

The other important thing that happened was that we had watermelon for dessert, and after our picnic, to keep from having to cart wet trash down to the dumpster, I scooped the juice and seeds out of the rinds and dumped the soggy mess beside the fence.

Summer passed. Last week, when I walked out to the back fence, I found the ground covered with the broad, scalloped green leaves of watermelon vines. They spiraled along the fence in swirling profusion. I was flabbergasted. Could seeds have caused this? I doubted the evidence, so I rushed over to the rock where I had rescued Eve. There, waving their thorny heads in defiant glory, was a brand-new patch of sandspurs. My distorted view of the plant world collapsed. I was forced to admit that things really do grow from seeds.

All my life I've heard the expression, "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," but I didn't believe it. Now I was seeing indisputable proof of that statement. I went back to the fence to examine my vines better. There were small yellow flowers at intervals along my vine, and I discovered tiny nut-shaped warts on the stems. They could only be baby watermelons! I was inadvertently a father -- or rather a farmer.



You do get what you plant. Plant watermelon seeds, get watermelons. Plant sandspurs, get sandspurs. I lay down on top of the picnic table to consider the implications of this discovery. How could I have doubted

such a fundamental principle of the universe? Everyone knows that whatsoever a man soweth, that he shall also reap. If you sow tension, you get ulcers. If you sow resentment , you get bitterness.

If you plant love, you harvest loveliness. The way you treat your parents is the way your children will treat you. You actions have specific consequences. Sandspurs or watermelons. You get what you plant.

As I lay on the picnic table looking up into the branches of an overhanging oak thinking about this basic fact of life, I realized one of the reasons I had doubted it before was that I had discounted the time factor.



No one gets what he plants the same day he plants it. As a child I expected results too soon. When I did not see new sprouts immediately, I concluded there were no results at all.

It had taken all summer for my watermelons to come up; you get the same thing you plant , but you get it later than you planted it.

When you were little, Daddy said, "Don't try to give the kitten a bath." If you gave the cat a bath anyhow, you were immediately scratched. The punishment for your misdeed came right on the heels of the action. In the same way, rewards followed your good deeds immediately. As soon as you finished your spinach, Mother served dessert.

However, as we grow older the time between a deed and its consequences increased. We were told that if we stole a candy bar we would be punished, but we stole the candy and nothing happened. No punishment arrived. We began to suspect that there were no rewards or punishments for most of our actions -- nothing would grow from the seeds we planted.

But no matter how much we suspected, or wanted to believe that nothing would grow out of our deeds, we

still knew that it is a fact of life that what you plant you pick. This mixture of suspicion and sure knowledge leaves us with a gnawing anxiety. We know that we have done some things which should produce specific results. When those consequences do not come immediately, we are perplexed and anxious. Some of us are still waiting for a spanking over a candy bar stolen 30 years ago. In fact, we still anticipate the spanking long after we've forgotten what we did to deserve it.

Knowing that we should get the deserved spanking, we often take the job into our own hands and punish ourselves more severely than God or any responsible adult would do. The man who punishes himself is never sure when he has done enough, so he continues to berate and chastise himself for some deed done so long ago that he's forgotten what it was he did in the first place.

At other times, we know exactly what it is that we did that was wrong and deserving of punishment. We know that we have planted crabgrass in the lawn of our lives, and we don't know what to do about it. We begin to see the consequences for some of our misdeeds, but we don't know how to make things right. We can sympathize with the dilemma of the girl who tearfully asked her mother, "How do I get to be a virgin again?"

Jesus once told a story about a farmer who planted a wheat field only to discover that some enemy came and planted tares (the biblical version of sandspurs) in with the wheat. The field hands wanted to try to root out the sandspurs immediately, but the owner told them to wait until the harvest -- the final gathering in and sorting out -- and then the wheat and the tares could be separated. The point is that God can be relied on to sort out the sandspurs I've planted in my own life. At the same time, I'm sure He intends for me to stop planting more sandspurs. Jesus often forgave people with the words, "Go and sin no more."

Christ died for our sins, taking on himself the ultimate consequence for our deeds. We are to accept his sacrifice, trusting him to sort out the wheat from the tares in our actions while we forgive ourselves and go on planting wheat instead of sandspurs. We can quit our self-accusations and recriminations, realizing that Christ has taken on Himself the consequence of our sin. We are to amend what we can and leave the rest to His judgment. He has picked what we have planted, and He can be trusted to sort out the whole field at harvest time.

There was one other factor I considered as I lay on the picnic table thinking about watermelons and sandspurs. You get the same thing you plant. You get it later than you planted it -- And you get more of it than you planted.

You don't plant an apple and get an apple -- you get a whole tree full of apples. The little morsel of gossip becomes the character-destroying rumor. The shrewd young businessman becomes the miserly Scrooge. The promiscuous young swinger grows into the jaded, dirty old man. Nursing homes are full of sour old grouches who were once chic young cynics.

In contrast to growing evil in a man, we have all met some old Christian who seems to glow with the presence of God. We look in awe at some of these old prayer-warriors and despair of ever reaching such heights of spirituality ourselves. What we fail to realize is that we are viewing the mature growth of seeds planted years ago. The spiritual giant you admire once planted seeds of kindness and gentleness which grew and blossomed into godliness.

When we look at the insignificant seeds we are planting, we often feel inferior. We hear some of our contemporaries telling about spectacular answers to prayer or about how God provides them with thousands of dollars for some project. These reports intimidate us.

It seems to be all we can manage just to build up enough courage to say a few encouraging words to a man at work much less expound some dynamic testimony. We figure we're blessed if the Lord helps us scrape up enough money to pay the past-due balance on the light bill. We only give money to feed the poor on rare occasions and hardly ever take them into our homes.

The best we can do to clothe the naked is to give clothes the kids have outgrown to the Salvation Army.

The seeds we plant are tiny, so minute, so insignificant -- but they are seeds.

And seeds do grow.

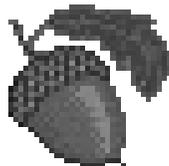
And the seeds we plant in ourselves will grow for all eternity.

Just because you do not see immediate results, don't fall into the error of thinking there are no results. You will get what you plant. You won't get it the same day, but you will get it, and you will get more of it than you planted.

Do not despair of planting good deeds, because the growth of these actions in you will ultimately produce nothing less than Christ-likeness. The Bible says, "When he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

The deeds you sow for God's kingdom may seem tiny, and you may discern no immediate result, but keep sowing them. There is an abundant harvest ahead. Remember that it is the tiny mustard seed of faith that displaces the whole mountain of dirt.

That's fundamental.





WAS JESUS A GHOST?

*Here's a disturbing thought for Easter.
— John Cowart*

After He rose from the dead Jesus Christ did several things which have embarrassed His followers ever since.

Historically Christians have maintained that the resurrected Jesus was not a ghost but that the same physical body which was crucified, dead and buried actually returned to life. Christians eagerly point to that passage of scripture where Jesus reassures his disciples that he is not a spirit by showing them his wounded hands and side (Luke 24:36-40). Those believing in a physical resurrection also appeal to the fact that he ate food to show that he was indeed physical and not a spiritual apparition. But for those who maintain a physical resurrection, the embarrassing fact is that the resurrected Jesus did six very ghost-like things.

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1. He appeared and vanished at will (Luke 24: 30-36).
 2. He entered rooms though locked doors (John 20:19 & 26).
 3. He evidenced control over nature (John 21: 1-6).
 4. He accurately foretold the future (John 21:17-25).
 5. He could be with familiar friends and not be recognized until he chose to be (Luke 24: 13-31).
 6. He displayed telepathic ability in knowing the content of conversations which took place when he was not present (John 20: 24-29).

Even his disciples doubted that it was really Him they saw and at one point "They were terrified and affrighted, and *supposed that they had seen a spirit*" (Luke 24:37). Can this resurrected Jesus indeed be the same physical person they buried? Or is he something different? Do his actions and abilities change from those of a physical being to those of a ghost?

Every year Easter sermons dwell on the empty tomb, the message of the angels, the triumph over death and the transition of dead winter into springtime. But they usually remain silent about the ghostly actions of the resurrected Jesus. His paranormal abilities do not seem to fit into the commonly accepted idea of a physical return to life of a once-dead individual. His post-resurrection behavior seems to embarrass his followers.

In modern times there have been a number of documented cases where people have been revived from death-bed experiences. Some have been resuscitated after being declared clinically dead by doctors. In a seminar given in Jacksonville, Florida, on February 16, 1976, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, prominent psychiatrist recognized as a specialist in the area of death and dying and author of several books on the subject, recounted several factors which these revived

people seem to have experienced in common. According to Dr. Kubler-Ross these common experiences include:

1. Full awareness of the moment of death
2. Consciousness of what the doctors were saying and doing in the operating room
3. A sense of floating above their bodies
4. A feeling of great peace
5. A complete lack of fear of dying after they have been revived.

Some of these people tell of seeing pure light and meeting some religious figure who helps them with the transition between life and death.

But none of the people who have had these revival experiences can do any of the things that are attributed to the resurrected Jesus!

They do not display any ghostly qualities or paranormal abilities. They are essentially the same people with the same normal abilities both before and after their encounter with death. Apparently we can reasonably expect the same behavior patterns from an individual before and after death.

How is Jesus different? What are some of the factors which make him special? Were the abilities and activities of Jesus any different after he had been dead? Did his behavior pattern radically change?

Supernatural Control Over Nature

Eating is a distinct physical action. We are told that on at least two occasions after the resurrection Jesus ate in the presence of witnesses. Once he dined on fish and honeycomb (Luke 24:41-43); and once on bread and fish (John 21:12-15). On this second occasion, which took place on a lakeside after the disciples had spent the night fishing without catching anything, he

provided not only the immediate meal but also a spectacular catch of 153 large fish. This post-resurrection control over nature in providing this meal is paralleled before his death when he fed the multitudes (John 6:1-14); and when he called Peter, James and John from their work as fishermen to become his disciples (Luke 5: 1-11). In fact when he chose these disciples the size of the catch ripped the net and the ship was in danger of sinking. The influence of Jesus over nature in both these incidents is identical; it almost reads like two accounts of the same event. But one occurs before his crucifixion, the other after.

His ability and behavior in this particular area both before and after the resurrection appears to be the same.

Mind Reading or Telepathy

Doubting Thomas ought to be the patron saint of modern times; we can identify with him because he needed to see concrete evidence before he committed himself to belief. John tells us that Thomas was not present when Jesus first talked with the disciples after his resurrection (John 20:24-29). When told that Jesus was alive again, Thomas flatly declares, "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails... I will not believe". All four Gospels unanimously record that at first none of the disciples believed he had risen, but this unbelief was nothing new because they had a long history of not believing in Jesus even before his death (John 6:64-66). Remember the familiar story of Peter's denial at the trial? (Luke 21:54-62)?

The unusual thing in the encounter between Jesus and Thomas following the resurrection is that Jesus knew Thomas' private doubt and statement without having been present at the time Thomas expressed these things. When they did meet, Jesus took the initiative by calling attention to the nail prints in his hands and the spear wound in his side. He knew the content of Thomas' private conversation! When Thomas

realized that Jesus knew his thoughts and saw the very evidence he had asked to see, he responded by falling at Jesus' feet exclaiming, "My Lord and My God"!

Now, it's interesting to note that Jesus had displayed this same ability to know what was in men's minds several times before his crucifixion. He demonstrated this seeming telepathic ability when he called Nathaniel from under the fig tree (John 1:45-51). In Jericho when he called Zacchaeus, the little man who climbed the tree to be able to see him, Jesus showed this kind of perception (Luke 19:1-10). Gospel writer Mark describes the ability of Jesus to know what people were thinking in these words, "Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves... (Mark 2:8).

Luke's Gospel offers another illustration of this paranormal ability (Luke 7:36-50). On that occasion Jesus attended a banquet at the home of Simon, the Pharisee. During the course of the meal, a prostitute entered the hall and threw herself at the foot of Jesus' couch. She wept profusely and began to wash his feet with her tears, drying them with her own long hair. And, breaking open a flask of her perfume, she anointed him.

Although Simon felt outraged at this public display, he said nothing - but, he thought to himself that if Jesus were really a holy man, he would realize what kind of woman she was and repel her. At that point Jesus addressed a parable on the nature of love and forgiveness to the unspoken thoughts of his host. Then he publicly declared that the prostitute's sins were forgiven.

From these incidents it is evident that both before and after his resurrection, Jesus demonstrated this paranormal ability to know the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Vanishing Act

The most ghost-like, and the most embarrassing for Christians, among his special activities after the resurrection is his ability to vanish (Luke 24:31) and to suddenly appear in locked rooms (John 20:19 & 26).

This is not the sort of thing normal, physical people can do.

Because of the unusual nature of these accomplishments, some feel that the resurrection may have been a totally spiritual event, that there was no physical return from death, but that the spirit of Jesus lives on in the hearts of good men everywhere. However, regardless of how strange these abilities seem to us, an examination of the scripture reveals that even these ghost-like actions were attributed to Jesus even before he died!

For instance, once when he was in Nazareth, where he had been brought up, Jesus delivered a controversial speech. His message infuriated the hearers. The mob shouted him down, then grabbed him and hustled him to the edge of a local cliff where they intended to “cast him down headlong”. Frenzied people surrounded him, people who knew him from childhood, people who intended to murder him – yet, Luke cryptically states, “He, passing through the midst of them, went his way”! (Luke 4:16-31)

How odd.

A similar thing happened in Jerusalem (John 8:52-59). In his speech there Jesus openly stated that God is his Father. The hostile mob snatched up rocks intending to batter him to death, but again Jesus “passed through the midst of them” thus paralleling his freedom of movement after the resurrection.

Two Other Phenomena

There remain two additional factors to examine before drawing any conclusions: the first is Jesus’ ability to accurately foretell a person’s future; and the second is the fact that when he first appeared to his assembled

followers they supposed they were seeing a spirit - not a physical person.

Following the resurrection Peter determined to go fishing and took the other disciples out on a boat all night. At dawn Jesus appeared and called to them from the shore and Peter jumped overboard, swimming to meet him.

In the conversation that followed, Jesus revealed how Peter would eventually meet his own death (John 21:1-19). Catholic tradition teaches that Peter's martyrdom occurred just as foretold.

But, this was not the first time Jesus had accurately predicted a future death. On at least three occasions before his own execution, Jesus predicted it in detail saying, "Behold we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him unto death and shall deliver him unto the gentiles: and they shall mock him and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again" (Mark 10:33-34). Even knowing these things Jesus went to Jerusalem anyway and it's common knowledge how true his prediction proved to be.

Since every supernatural aspect of Jesus' behavior after his resurrection is paralleled by similar behavior before his death, then why did his friends sometimes fail to recognize him?

When he visited them, why did his followers "suppose they had seen a spirit"? (Luke 24:37). Were they correct or mistaken? Had they ever previously thought this?

One of the most dramatic things Jesus ever did happened on the coast of Gennesaret (Mark 6:46-54). While he prayed alone at some unnamed mountain, the disciples rowed a small boat across the Sea of Galilee. As they labored, making little progress against a contrary wind, they saw Jesus coming out to meet them.

He walked on the water. When they saw him, Mark records, "They supposed it had been a spirit". Jesus reassured the screaming men saying, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid"; then he climbed into the boat with them for the rest of the trip. As for their reaction: "They were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure and wondered". This is the identical reaction they had upon seeing him risen from the grave. In both these unusual circumstances, when he walked on water before crucifixion and when he visited them afterwards, the disciples supposed they had seen a "phantasma", a ghost.

Can the person who appeared to the disciples be the same person whom they had seen crucified and had personally buried? Or was this a ghost? A spiritual apparition or a physically resurrected individual? Is the person who rose the same one who was buried?

Is Jesus Christ a ghost - or is he something else?

Every ghostly feature of his post-resurrection activities has a precedent before his death. Jesus exhibits no new characteristics after he returned from the grave. He continues doing exactly the same type of thing he did before he died. He even continues to command that men "Follow me" just as he had done before.

He is essentially the same following his death experience.

It appears that the source of embarrassment for Christians about his post-resurrection behavior may lie in two areas; the first is that no gospel devotes more than two chapters to post-resurrection events; therefore the enormity of these events is compressed in mind-boggling brevity. They confuse and embarrass because they are so condensed that we find them incredible. The second factor contributing to this embarrassment is that a temptation exists to think of Jesus as a local boy who made good as far as death is concerned.

If the resurrected Jesus was not a ghost, if the same physical body which was tortured to death and buried arose still consistently performing the same characteristic actions as before, and if these actions are vastly different from the things others can do, then we are forced to suspect that, although he physically rose from the dead, he was not the same kind of being as the rest of us who will also die. Apparently he is at the very least Someone Special. And, if he is not a ghost, then what is He?



WHAT HAPPENED AT THEO'S

You guessed it! This embarrassing Thanksgiving sort of incident really happened to me
— John Cowart

One of the most embarrassing moments of my life came many years ago in Washington, D.C., as a result of my being a mediocre sort of Christian.

When it happened, I could envision newspaper headlines saying:

Nosy Christian Beaned By Cook

or

Enraged Cook Batters Local Man

or

Wino Scam Exposed At Local Eatery

or even,

Cowart Creamed With Soup Ladle: He Deserved It.

Any of the above headline titles would have been appropriate.

It was the girls in miniskirts and tight sweaters that got me into trouble. Or maybe it was the old wino. Maybe it was my wife's fault, she should have told me to meet her someplace else. No, It was all that mean Greek cook's fault; if he'd have listened when I tried to explain, none of the furor would have erupted.

It was not my fault.

I repeat: It Was Not My Fault!

All I was trying to do was be a nice guy, a good steward of my money, a protector of the poor, a kind and noble gentleman, a witness to my Lord, a big-hearted, generous Christian, a... Well, Ok, you're right; I was being a patronizing ass.

Details. You want details. I'll give you details:

See, I was painting the house that day, scraping eaves. Naturally, I wore my oldest, rattiest clothes and, to keep paint flakes from dropping down my collar, I wore this old baseball cap turned around backwards.

That morning, I'd left my keys, billfold, comb -- pocket-stuff -- on the dresser to keep them from getting messed up. A prudent move as I'm a sloppy painter.

Since I was off work, I had not shaved that morning. Actually, now that my rememberer gets better, I hadn't shave that whole week.

No problem. Who's to impress scraping eaves?

Well, my wife had told me to meet her across from the library and when I came to a good breaking-off place early, I decided to mosey on down to the library early.

Really?

Well, no. I wandered down early to sit in the park across the street and watch all the cute co-eds swish in and out the library doors. What can I say; it was Spring Break and the girls strutted at their finest.

Well, this poor old wino (that's what they were called back then) came up to me and asked for money for food. Said he had not eaten anything but a can of sardines and part of a watermelon in days.

Immediately, my thought mode shifted from lusting lounge to caring -- but prudent -- Christian; I'm like that.

I believe that Jesus was serious when he said that to feed the poor is the same as feeding Christ himself.

But, what about His teaching about watching coeds and lusting in your heart?

Well, as a fundamentalist Christian I have this tendency to believe convenient Bible verses more than I believe inconvenient ones, general ones more than specific ones, ones that apply to *you* more than ones that apply to *me*.

Am I the only Christian like that?

Anyhow, the Christian gears in my mind kicked in and Big Daddy John decided to feed the poor heathen. (Eat your heart out Mother Teresa; This one's mine.) The prudent gears of my mind kicked in at the same time saying: *Watch out John. If you give this guy cash, he'll just buy a bottle.*

The two gears meshed and I proudly said, "I won't give you any money -- but I will buy you lunch".

DAH-DA! Cowart the prudent Christian strikes again.

We walked down the street to this little hole-in-the-wall greasy-spoon restaurant called Theos'. And I ordered the house specialty, bean soup and a couple of burgers, for both of us.

I was feeding a real live poor person.

Wouldn't God have been proud of me?

The old wino slurped down his soup in a hurry. The sudden food after days of privation upset his stomach. He stuffed the soda crackers and his burger in his tattered coat pocket and rushed out of the restaurant.

Hey, I never got to witness to him.

I didn't get to read him *Four Things God Wants You To Know*.

I leisurely finished my own meal as the place began to fill up with a lunchtime crowd of clerks and secretaries from nearby offices.

I strolled up to the register to pay the bill and reached for my billfold...

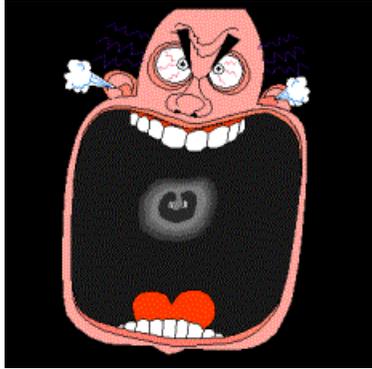
MY BILLFOLD! It was on the dresser at home! I was in my painting clothes. I did not have a cent on me!

I tried to explain to the cashier, a brassy red-head with too much makeup.

"Hey, Theo," she yelled startling the lunchtime crowd. "Hey, Theo. Got a bum out here who won't pay!"

Theo -- big, dark, Greek, tatoos on both arms, beer-belly wrapped in a dirty apron-- stalked from the kitchen hefting a dripping soup-ladle.

"Who's the bum that won't pay," he shouted.



People at the counter stepped back. Several actually pointed their fingers at me.

I tried to explain about being a Christian helping a poor stranger.

Theo would not listen.

He yelled.

He banged on the counter.

"You two bums try to pull this scam off everywhere you go, don't you," he accused shaking the dripping soup ladle in my face.

The watching crowd of well-dressed office workers expected him to brain me with that ladle.

I think they would have cheered.

How could my act of Christian charity have gone so wrong?

Now what was I supposed to do?

What could I do?

I... I... Well, to tell the truth, I started crying.

I felt so embarrassed.

With all those office people looking on too.

It's not supposed to work that way, is it? When you do good you ought to be rewarded, praised, admired. Aren't you?

Not necessarily.

Jesus taught that a servant is no better than his master, a student is no better than his teacher. If the world crucified Christ himself, why should his followers expect any better treatment?

We are to follow him regardless.

Why?

Because He is truth.

A stranger at the counter, I think he was a Jewish gentleman, took pity on me and intervened with Theo. He promised to pay the bill for me and the other bum the next day if I did not come back with the money like I said I would.

Theo knew the businessman and reluctantly let me go.

Even when I returned with my billfold later that afternoon to pay him, Theo suspected a trick.

He examined my money carefully.

He thought I was pulling a scam even then.

He told me to never come back in his restaurant.

And I never did go back there. I felt too ashamed.

That was years ago. Now, whenever a homeless person asks me for help, I try to give it in the form he asks.

After all, I ask for what I want and I expect to receive just that.

Jesus Himself said, "When people ask you for something, give it to them. When they want to borrow money, loan it to them" (Matthew 5:42 CEV).

The Apostle John said, "Whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" (I John 3:17).

John the Baptist said, "If you have two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have any. If you have food, share it with someone else." (Luke 3:11 CEV).

We should live generously

That's the way to live.

But first make sure your billfold is in your back pocket.

That's fundamental.



ST. PATRICK'S STORY

St. Patrick of Ireland (d. March 17, 461)

Magnus Sucatus Patricius traveled to Ireland twice. He went once because of Irish pirates; he went the second time because of God. He did not want to go either time.

His first visit came at a time of great turmoil in Europe. The Roman empire was crumbling. For 470 years Roman legions had controlled Britain, holding back the barbarians and spreading Roman law, living standards and culture. While Roman garrisons manned the walls built across the island to separate civilized Britain from the Picts and the Scots, Roman ships thronged the harbors, bringing the goods of the Empire to Britain.

Roman roads spanned the countryside. Roman baths, theaters and aqueducts graced the cities. But by A.D. 385, hostile barbarians, the Huns and the Goths, in other parts of the empire forced Rome to withdraw her troops, leaving British citizens to defend themselves.

The last legion sailed from Britain in A.D. 400 and immediately the Norse, the Caledonians, the Saxons, and the Irish began to ravish the formerly protected towns and estates. Roving bands killed, raped, looted and captured slaves for sale in their homelands.

Irish pirates crept along the coast in *currachs*, wicker frame-work boats covered with stitched cowhides. These lightweight boats were perfect for coastal raids. Powered by twelve oarsmen, the shallow-drafted *currachs* could sneak up the estuaries silently for pre-dawn attacks.

Patrick's father was a deacon of the Christian church and a *decurion*, a local official of the national government. He was also a minor member of the nobility and owned a seaside villa which was particularly vulnerable to pirate raids.

The attack came when Patrick was sixteen.

Screaming barbarians charged up the slope from the sea, hacking down startled defenders, and casting nets over fleeing victims. Although his parents and the rest of his family escaped, Patrick and



many of his father's servants were captured, bound and thrust into the bottom of a pirate boat to wallow in bilge water as the raid continued along the coast.

Saint Patrick was on his way to Ireland for the first time.

In Ireland Patrick was sold as a slave to Miliucc of Slemich, a Druid tribal chieftain who put the boy to work herding pigs. Patrick felt lost and helpless; he had gone from being nobleman's heir to swineherd overnight. Slavery beat pride and dignity out of him. He had no chance for education, no friends, no possessions, no name, no hope.

He labored in filth and squalor among the animals. Finally, deprived of every human consolation, he turned to God. In his book *Confessions*, he wrote, "I was sixteen and knew not the true God but in a strange land the Lord opened my unbelieving eyes, and I was converted."

Patrick gives few details, but apparently his memory of Christian teaching he had learned as a child resulted in his conversion.

The new convert spent much time in the presence of the Lord and eventually came to thank God for his captivity as an opportunity to know Christ. He became convinced that his slave state was a gift from God, so he served his barbarian master well, laboring as unto the Lord. He said, "Anything that happens to me, whether pleasant or distasteful, I ought to accept it with equanimity giving thanks to God... who never disappoints."

Patrick learned to pray as he worked or walked or rested.

He said, "Love and reverence for God came to me more and more, building up my faith so much that daily I would pray a hundred times or more. Even while working in the woods or on the mountain, I woke up to

pray before dawn... Now I understand that it was the fervent Spirit praying within me.”

His devotion to God earned him the teasing nickname “Holy-Boy” among his fellow slaves. He remained a slave of the Druid for six years. Then came escape.

One night as he lay sleeping, Patrick heard a voice in a dream telling him, “Wake up. Your ship is waiting for you.” He sneaked away and struggled through two hundred miles of hostile territory to the coast where he found a *curragh* “of more than one hide” preparing to sail.

The captain refused passage to the runaway slave. But as Patrick walked away praying, one of the crew called him back to the ship. After an arduous voyage and near starvation, he arrived home. “Again I was in Britain with my people who welcomed me as their son,” he wrote.

In his own mind Patrick was through with Ireland and the Irish. At twenty-two, he had many opportunities before him: he could continue his education, catch up with his social life, assume his responsibilities as heir of a nobleman.

Little is known about this time in his life. Patrick may have studied in France or Italy; he may have entered the priesthood at this time. He does not tell us. The next event he relates in *Confessions* is how God called him to return to Ireland.

He wrote, “I did not go back to Ireland of my own accord. It is not in my own nature to show divine mercy toward the very ones who once enslaved me.”

Concerning his return to Ireland as a missionary he wrote, “It was the furthest thing from me, but God made me fit, causing me to care about and labor for the salvation of others.”

This change in attitude toward his mission came in part as the result of another dream. He saw a messenger named Victoricus coming across the sea from Ireland bearing letters labeled “The Voice Of The Irish.”

When Patrick began to read these letters, he thought he heard the people in the Wood of Focluth, where he had been a slave, crying out to him saying, “Holy-Boy, we beg you, come walk among us again.”

He awoke knowing he had to go back.

Patrick still faced three major obstacles: his family, because they wanted him to stay home; the clergy, because they thought the Irish were not worth saving; and finances, because he wanted to pay his own way. His *Confessions* reveals how God dealt with each hindrance.

“Since I was home at last having suffered such hardships, my family pleaded with me not to leave,” he said. They were justly alarmed. As an escaped slave, he faced horrible retribution. The Druids were known to weave criminals and runaway slaves into giant wicker baskets and suspend them over a fire to roast alive.

Patrick often lovingly mentions his family, which had survived the pirate raid, and he refers to the pain of leaving them again. He said, “Leaving my home and family was a costly price to pay; but afterwards, I received a more valuable thing: the gift of knowing and loving God.”

“Many friends tried to stop my mission. They said, ‘Why does this fellow waste himself among dangerous enemies who don’t even know God?’”

These churchmen considered the Irish to be barbaric enemies not worth saving. But Patrick attributes a more worthy motive to his detractors: “Their objection was not due to malice. The project just didn’t appeal to them. I believe it was because I am so uncouth.”

His lack of education bothered Patrick all his life and he often apologizes for it in his writings.

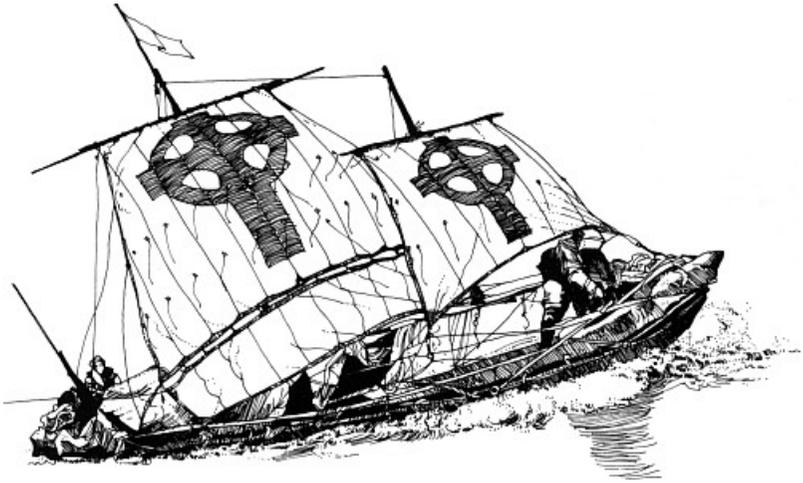
Because Patrick believed his enemies were worth saving, he could later say, "Once the Irish worshipped idols and unclean things, having no knowledge of the True God, but now they are among God's own people. Even the children of their kings are numbered among the monks and virgins of Christ."

Patrick insisted on paying his own way. He wanted to give what was his and not what belonged to other people.

He said, "Contrary to the desires of my seniors, when supporters offered me gifts, I refused to accept them, thus offending the contributors... Some devout women pressed me with gifts, even offering their jewelry, but I returned these love-offerings to them. They were also offended. The reason I acted thus was to demonstrate prudence in everything... I did not want to give the unbelievers even the smallest thing to criticize."

But if he refused to accept financial help from church or friends, how could he finance his endeavor? He said, "I was born free, the son of a *decurion*; but I sold my title of nobility - there is no shame nor regret in this - in order to become the slave of Christ serving this barbaric nation."

Patrick used his inheritance money to purchase a boat and finance his mission. He and his party sailed back to Ireland in A.D. 432. Landing at the port of Inver Dea, they were welcomed by a rock-throwing mob.



They sailed along the coast of Ireland, landing and preaching along the way. Patrick preached at isolated farms, to hostile crowds on the beaches, to women and children drawing water at country wells.

At one farm, tradition tells us, Patrick came upon an old man who was dying. Patrick sought to comfort him and lead him to salvation in Christ. The invalid argued for his old way of life. Finally Patrick asked him, "Why are you grasping at a life which is even now failing you? Why do you neglect to prepare for the life to come?"

The old man pondered the questions. Then he repented, believed and was baptized. He eventually recovered from his illness and became one of Patrick's staunchest followers. As Christianity became more established, Patrick assigned this man, whose name was Ros, the task of codifying Ireland's laws, bringing them into conformity with Christian belief and morality.

Patrick's attempts at evangelism were not always so successful. He returned to Slemich to confront his former owner with the claims of Christ. Rather than forsake his heathen gods, Miliuce sealed himself inside his house and set it afire. The Druid drowned out Patrick's pleadings with screamed curses and invocations to his gods. He cremated himself and all his possessions.



Patrick traveled over the Irish countryside in a chariot, spreading the Gospel and bringing with it social reform and a written alphabet. He conducted open-air schools to teach his converts to

read and write.

Until this time, writing was the jealously guarded secret of Druid wizards who used the Ogram script to inscribe pillars of stone. But Patrick believed in educating his converts to read the Scripture.

A clash with the Druids was inevitable.

The religion of the Druids was firmly entrenched in Ireland. They worshiped and tried to appease manifold spirits in the guise of stones, trees, storms and the sun. They may have constructed megalithic monuments similar to Stonehenge to aid in their style of astrology.

Druid sorcerers claimed to be able to control weather, so it was important to them to be aware of celestial changes. One of their most important rites occurred at the vernal equinox when the sun begins its return to warm the Northern Hemisphere. In A.D. 433, the vernal equinox fell on March 25th, Easter Sunday. Patrick chose that day to challenge the wizards.

At the time Ireland was a loose confederation of warlords under High King Leary. They all met to seek the blessing of the Druids on the vernal equinox at a hill called Tara.



MOUND AT TARA

In order to call the sun back to the north, the Druid custom was to extinguish all fires in the kingdom. The chief wizard then ignited a bonfire as part of the ritual. Then runners bearing firebrands lit at this bonfire raced through the fields carrying new fire to each village. Thus the Druids showed that it was their enchantments which brought warmth back to the hearths of the nation.

On the night of the ceremony, as the warlords and wizards worshiped in the darkness of their great stone circle, there was a huge bonfire already burning on the hill opposite their megalith. Patrick had lit a blazing Paschal fire this Easter to commemorate Christ, the Light Of The World.



Standing Stone at Tara



Aerial view of Tara

The Druids were outraged. They dispatched troops to bring Patrick to the council and demanded an explanation for his blasphemy. Patrick spoke to them on the nature of the Trinity, the mystery of the Incarnation, and the triumph of Christ's resurrection.

Some believed.

Others attempted to kill him.

Legend colors this encounter at Tara with many fantastic incidents, including the burning of one of Patrick's followers in a wicker bower as a human

sacrifice by the Druids. No matter what actually happened that night, Patrick became a national figure, and his controversial message was discussed everywhere.

Patrick believed that he was living in the last days before Christ's return and that the Lord deserved to be worshiped by men from every nation even the barbaric Irish. So he felt responsible "to preach the Gospel to the edge of the earth beyond which no man lives." He says that Christ called His people to be fishers of men. "Therefore, we must spread a wide net so we can catch a teeming multitude for God."

Patrick's sense of gratitude to God for creating and saving him permeates his writings. "I was an illiterate slave, as ignorant as one who neglects to provide for his future. And I am certain of this: that although I was as a dumb stone lying squashed in the mud, the Mighty and Merciful God came, dug me out, and set me on top of the wall. Therefore, I praise Him and ought to render Him something for His wonderful benefits to me both now and in eternity," he wrote.

This gratitude and burning love for Christ drove Patrick to challenge heathenism wherever he found it. He entered the stockades of the warlords, preaching to hostile warriors dressed in strips of fur, or naked with their bodies painted with blue clay and scarred with whorled tattoos.

He crisscrossed Ireland in his chariot. He visited the waddle huts of slaves, bearing comfort and hope. He even preached at the racetracks, converting men in the midst of gambling, drinking and orgies. Thousands of Irishmen were converted through his relentless evangelism, motivated by loving gratitude.

He not only preached but ministered to the whole person, bringing a gospel which raised the standard of life for the Irish. He paid judges' salaries out of his own pocket so they could judge impartially rather than depend on a reward from the person who won a suit. He

founded monasteries which survived as centers of learning till the age of the Vikings.

Having been a slave himself, he was concerned with the plight of slaves. He wrote, "The women who live in slavery suffer greatly. They endure terror and are constantly threatened. Their masters forbid these maidens to follow Christ, but He gives them grace to follow bravely."

Although Patrick was compassionate in his preaching and conscientious in his social programs, on occasion he demonstrated a fiery, scathing indignation.

After his ministry was established in one of the coastal towns, Patrick baptized a large group of converts. Shortly after the ceremony, the town was raided by soldiers of King Coroticus, a nominal Christian king from Britain.

The raiders slaughtered the men and children. The good-looking young women, still dressed in white baptismal gowns, were captured to sell to a brothel in Scotland.

Patrick was furious.

He fired off a scorching protest to the people of Coroticus, excommunicating the perpetrators of this "horrible, unspeakable crime" and demanding restoration of the hostages. He wrote:

The church mourns in anguish not over the slain but over those carried off to a far away land for the purpose of gross, open sin. Think of it! Christians made slaves by Christians! Sold to serve the lusts of wicked pagan Picts!

I don't know who to cry for the most; the ones murdered, the ones captured, or the agents of the devil who did this—because they will be slaves in the everlasting torments of Hell."

Because of his stands for righteousness, Patrick suffered insult and persecution. The Druids often tried

to poison him. Once a barbarian warrior speared his chariot driver to death, thinking he was killing Patrick.

Patrick was often ambushed during his evangelistic tours, and at least once he was enslaved again for a short time. He sometimes had to purchase safe passage through a hostile warlord's territory in order to continue his mission. He wrote, "Every day I expect to be murdered or robbed or enslaved; but I am not afraid of these things because of the promises of Heaven."

Patrick faced opposition not only from nominal Christians, pagan warlords and Druid wizards, but from his church as well. Ecclesiastical authorities in Britain questioned his fitness to be a bishop and held a hearing at which he was not present and at which his dearest friend spoke against him. The records are murky, but it is possible that for a time he was suspended or placed on probation, and his convert Benigus, a former tribal warlord, may have succeeded him as bishop of Ireland.

At the time a controversy concerning Pelagianism was brewing between churchmen in Britain and on the continent. (Pelagius in Britain had taught that men could live good lives and by their own free will win salvation). Although Patrick in his writings does not dwell on church bickering, it appears that he may have been the victim of the power struggle between the factions involved.

The most important result of this crisis in his life was that it prompted him to write his *Confession*. This book, a hymn, and his letter to the people of Coroticus, comprise the only surviving records of his life and thoughts.

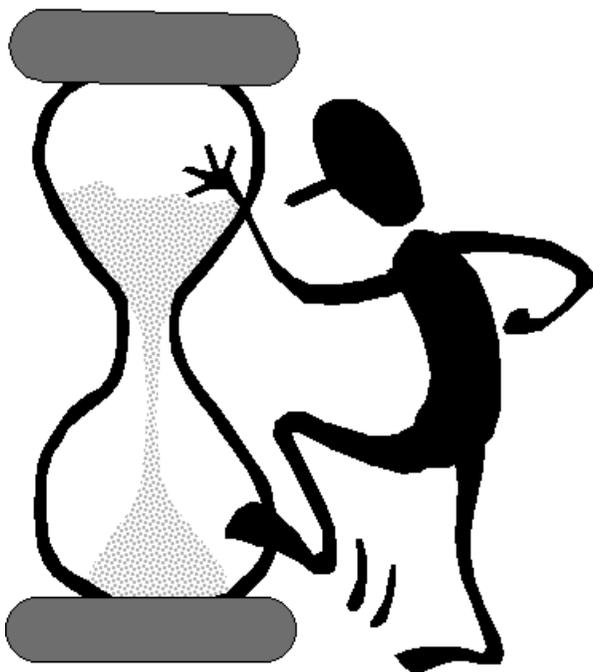
Near the conclusion of his *Confessions* he wrote, "The only reason I had to return to the people I once barely escaped from was the Gospel and its promises."

Patrick preached the gospel and its promises to "the edge of the world beyond which no man dwells" and speaking to his readers he advised, "I wish that you also

would exert greater effort and begin more powerful acts for God.”

Author’s Note: *While I wrote this sketch of St. Patrick, my father was in the hospital dying of cancer. My mother wanted one of us to stay with him at all times and I drew the all night shift for— what wasn’t, but seemed like — months. Because I was writing this on a strict deadline and there was no writing surface in Daddy’s room, I wrote 90% of this piece in longhand on a yellow pad while laying on my belly on the floor under his bed. My youngest daughter was born just weeks after Daddy died; naturally we named her Patricia, the feminine form of Patrick. The name means NOBLE.*

—jwc



BUT LORD, I HATE TO WAIT

An essay to help us get through the daily grind.

*by
John Cowart*

Ruth may lose one of her breasts. She's waiting for some test results before she'll know. She waits in apprehension.

The judge found William guilty, then announced, "Appear in this court Friday morning two weeks from today's date for sentencing." William faced anything from probation to a year in jail, but he told me, "I wish she'd gone ahead and passed sentence. This waiting is the worst part."

But Lord, I Hate To Wait!

The following day, another of my friends joyfully proclaimed, "I've won an award! The review committee just called to make sure I'll be at the banquet Saturday night. I don't know if I've won first, second or third, and I won't know till the banquet -- I can hardly wait."

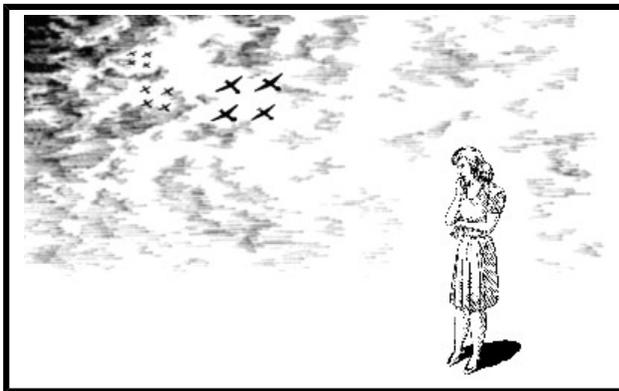
My five-year-old daughter, Eve, rocks in her little chair with the Sears toy catalogue open in her lap, starry-eyed over a Christmas which is still months away. She waits in anticipation.

Everyone must wait.

You make an important phone call, and a secretary puts you on hold; so you hold and hold and hold. The train chugs across the crossing until you finally see the caboose; then it clatters to a halt and begins to creep backward. You need your car, but the dealer has to order the part and apparently there's a dock strike in Yokohama.

Waiting is part of life -- an aggravating part. Whether we wait in apprehension, apathy or anticipation, waiting bothers us. We are an impatient race.

We hate to wait.



For one thing, waiting means the delay of our personal plans; for another, it means our forced submission to another's will or to the dictates of

circumstance. Above all, waiting means that something is out of our control.

One of the most poignant pictures of waiting in literature occurs in that portion of Scripture known as the Song of Deborah:

"The mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice: 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?' Her wisest ladies make answer, nay, she gives answer to herself, 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoil? -- A maiden or two for every man...?'" (Judges 5:28-30). She did not know of her son's shameful death after the battle. She only suspected that something was wrong and "gives answer to herself," reassuring herself that something had delayed his return.

All of us who wait in apprehension of some feared event go through these same steps of doubt, questioning, worry, seeking reassurances from others, and giving answer to ourselves, only to doubt again.

All types of waiting include an element of uncertainty. Whether waiting for bad news or for a happy event, we are not sure what is going to happen to us. Waiting unsettles the mind. We continually percolate the good and bad aspects of the situation and can think of virtually nothing else. Anticipating future good is as unsettling as worrying over future horror; picture the expectant father in the hospital waiting room.

Those who wait feel frustrated and may be tempted to "speed things up". However, if we are looking forward to some future good, anticipation actually sharpens the pleasure, and the pleasure of the event can be diminished by not waiting -- as in the case of the engaged couple who jump the gun before their marriage or the prowling child who discovers all the toys in the closet and is therefore left without a single surprise on Christmas morning.

But Lord, I Hate To Wait!



King Saul provides a tragic example of a man who refused to wait.

Contrary to God's command, Saul sacrificed a burnt offering instead of waiting for Samuel; therefore, Saul lost his crown. The Prophet denounced him saying, "You have done foolishly... Now your kingdom shall not continue." (I Samuel 13:13-14).

Saul is not the only person in Scripture told to wait; with various wording, the Bible tells us no less than 54 times to wait for God:

"Wait for the Lord, and he will help you" (Proverbs 20:22).

"I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me" (Micah 7:7)

"For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness" (Galatians 5:5).

"For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him" (Psalm 62:5)

"Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord!" (Psalm 27:14)

Since God is not the author of confusion, it's obvious that these holy instructions should not involve the annoyance, frustration, and mental turmoil we commonly associate with waiting.

When circumstances scream for action, does God intend that we do nothing?

Perhaps we have a wrong understanding of what it means to wait on the Lord.

One of the most commonly used Hebrew words translated "wait" means to bind together by twisting. This word is used in Psalm 25:3, "Let none that wait for thee be put to shame". Picture the intertwined strands of a rope. Our interests are to be so interwoven with God's that one strand does not move without the other. "Wait for the Lord, and keep to his way, and he will exalt you to possess the land" (Psalm 37:7).

The Psalmist David sometimes uses a Hebrew word that indicates waiting in the midst of pain and anguish. "Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself" (Psalm 37:7)

This same word is used to refer to a woman writhing with birth pangs; she endures intense pain but anticipates the joyful delivery of her baby.

Paul uses a Greek word for wait which conveys the idea of dwelling, abiding or staying in a given place or relationship. "You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead" (I Thess. 1: 9-10).

Paul also uses a word which means to sit near, to attend as a servant. "Those who serve (KJV -- wait) at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings" (I Cor. 9:13). In this case, "wait" means to serve, to stay alert to see when and where service is needed.

Other Hebrew and Greek words translated *wait* convey the following meanings: to scrutinize with expectant hope (like a cat at a mouse-hole); to expect fully, to accept from some source (like a drowning swimmer with his eye on the approaching lifeguard); to be stopped short with astonishment (as when your name is announced as sweepstakes winner).

Annoyance has no place in scriptural waiting.

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To the contrary, the Bible indicates joy connected with waiting on the Lord. "Lo, this is our God; we have waited on him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa. 25:9)

Waiting on the Lord anticipates unimaginable happiness, not aggravation.

"From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no one has seen a God besides thee, who works for those who wait for him" (Isa. 64:4).

Waiting demonstrates, like nothing else, our utter dependence on something or someone outside ourselves. Waiting involves either enforced or voluntary self-denial. The reason most waiting aggravates us is that we have no desire to deny ourselves.

When scripture tells us to wait on the Lord, it is instruction us to be a certain kind of person -- a person who endures troubles with the hope of Christ; a person who is determined to hang on for God; a person who abides in his given place, staying alert to serve; a person who intertwines his own will with God's will in the warp and woof of everyday life, not just in panic situations; in short, a crucified person, like our Lord.



ONE CRAZY LADY

*A short fiction tale
by
John Cowart*

Ok, so I'm liberated, but I'm still old fashioned enough to come out of town to have it done.

No way am I going to tell my mother. She'll never know. Who needs that hassle?

And Mark. He's so tied up with the Tournament of Players Championship being at Sawgrass this week, he probably doesn't even know I'm gone. While I'm here in Baltimore, I'll bet he's practically living at Ponte Vedra Beach with his golfing buddies. Making contacts. Getting to the top -- brown nosing is what it is. He doesn't even like golf.

A junior partnership is what he lives for. That and nights with me -- or afternoons. Or mornings.

But not life.

He's not ready for a life commitment. I'm not sure I am either when it comes right down to it. He's fun. He's more or less secure. He's healthy. And in this day of AIDS, what more can a woman expect?

My mother. of course, thinks he's ruining me.

But Lord, I Hate To Wait!

Oh, she's over the stage of regarding me as a scarlet woman. But her tight-mouthed silences are as bad today as her hurt pouting was last year.

Being around her is like walking with a candle through a room full of little firecrackers. You never know what's going to set her off, or whether the explosion will be the big one with everything popping at the same time, or just another little annoying Pow.

I mean, when we drive over to her house, I go trying to think of a harmless subject to talk about. But what's harmless one day may be explosive the next.

Any remark can set her off.

Like that time, Mark mentioned Annapolis. How was he to know that back during World War II she'd been in the WAVES and is still touchy about what the Navy did to her?

But anyhow, my business is my own. I don't have to get anyone's permission. And I don't have to talk it over with either one of them. I have to decide what's best for me for now.

And this is the best thing...

I think.

At least I thought so till this morning.

When I visited the crazy lady.

Mama asked me to visit Mrs. Gregg while I'm here. She knows I'm in Baltimore for a week or ten days but doesn't know why. My job takes me here and there so neither she nor Mark think it's unusual for me to be out of town.

And this trip has been scheduled for months so they don't suspect anything. I mean I was supposed to come here to present the Maxillofacial brochure to The Johnson & Johnson people but when I mailed them the proofs they bought the whole package right off.

I don't have to make the presentation because the contract's already signed and I really didn't have to come here -- not for the company anyway.

So I had the free time. And my reservations at the Omni International and for the flight from Jacksonville were already confirmed, so I came ahead here. I phoned beforehand to make the appointment with Dr. Matlock and she can see me Thursday so I flew up Sunday night just as I was scheduled to and then I had four days to kill.

If it were not for the extra time I had to knock around, I probably would have made some excuse to Mama for not having time to see her friend.

She always asks me to do some perfectly reasonable but horribly inconvenient thing every time I go off.

There was no reason for me to avoid visiting Mrs. Gregg. But I put it off just on general principal. I knew that visiting an old friend of Mama's would be a drag.

To kill time I spent Monday seeing the sights. Fort McHenry. the Constellation. The Walters Art Gallery.

Talk about sore feet!

But there was this little shop down on the wharf near the Constellation where I bought a pirate sword for Mark. It's a rusty old cutlass with deep nicks in the blade where you can tell it's been hit against another blade.

I think I'll give it to him with a card about being a gay blade or on the cutting edge of things. Or maybe it'll be a gag card about your blade is getting rusty.

Come to think of it a sword is a pretty phallic gift. It had better not be too long for my suitcase!

I just thought of that.

And how do you get a sword through airport security?

Damn.

But Lord, I Hate To Wait!

Maybe I can get the thing wrapped and send it by UPS... but then he'll open it when it gets to the condo. He's like a child when it comes to packages in the mail even if they're addressed to me. Once, in the elevator, he popped open a sample pack of tampons some company had sent me.

I bought Mama another teapot for her collection. Thank God for small favors. She's easy to buy for; just pick out another teapot -- one without a chipped spout.

Maybe all gifts are phallic?

Anyhow, the tea pot reminded me of Mrs. Gregg. She collects teapots too. That's how Mama got to know her. They both write letters to the editor of some teapot magazine. Then they got to writing to each other and once exchanged visits to see each other's collections.

I suspect that in the back of Mama's mind she hopes to get the old lady's collection when she dies. Mama wouldn't admit anything so mercenary but that might have something to do with her urging me to visit the old lady while I'm here in Baltimore.

Mrs. Gregg lives in a condo on Bay Street. From the hill the place sits on you can see ships moving out in the Chesapeake.

I called from the lobby phone beside the door and she buzzed me in. She lives on the tenth floor and I took the elevator up with an old man who clutched an aluminum walker.

Her thin nervous hands are the first thing you notice about Mrs. Gregg. They never stop moving. They flutter and twist and rub together constantly like she's wringing them over some ancient grief. Like Lady Macbeth's hands would have done if she'd grown old.

"Come in. Come in, my dear. I'm so happy to see you," she said. "You're such a pretty thing. Such lovely hair."

She wore jeans and a bright flowered apron which she kept twisting. It was clean and crisp but worn. The right corner of it was frayed from the constant twisting.

She led me through the foyer into a sunny living room which would have been spacious if it had not been crammed with floor to ceiling shelves filled with teapots. It reminded me of my mother's place.

Right off I recognized a Worcester blue and white with the "Bamboo Root" pattern, circa 1750. A small chip marred the lid, which is a shame because in fine condition this teapot would set you back a good \$1,600 in today's market. See, you don't live 26 years as a collector's daughter without some of the mania rubbing off.

I've picked up enough of the jargon to talk a little about lemon, flower and crown finials; about saltglaze, Bottger glaze or Rookwood standard; or about ear-handles and S-Scroll handles. In silver, I can see the difference between John and Thomas Settle's work and R & W Wilson's. But that's just enough to keep a conversation going with a collector for a little while.

And I know what to admire and what's just filler in the collection.

Of course to the true collector like Mrs. Gregg and my mother nothing is "just filler". Each teapot has its own charm or memory connected to it. True collectors like Mama treasure even the little Japanese ceramic with "Souvenir of Elko, Nevada" decal on the bowl, or the novelty pieces with two spouts, or those shaped like dragons or camels or clusters of grapes.

But even with my background, I can only talk teapots for so just long before I flounder. And even a true enthusiast like Mrs. Gregg can only sustain a teapot conversation with a novice so long.

Eventually our conversation had to run in other channels.

But Lord, I Hate To Wait!

That's when I realized she was crazy.

I don't mean wild-eyed, teapot smashing crazy. She can function in society; obviously she's been doing so for years.

Her's is the quite crazy that you know about yourself. The kind that lives alone in an otherwise empty apartment on a Sunday afternoon when there's nothing on TV but football. The kind of kink that only terrorizes the person who has it -- and those to whom she chooses to reveal it.

She served tea (Constant Comment out of an exquisite Imari Pearl, circa 1810) frittering about her tiny kitchen.

We spoke about the view, my job (of which she hadn't the slightest comprehension) and about Jerry Falwell, whom she ardently admires.

Then it happened.

"Are you married; any children?" she asked.

"No. That's still far in my future," I said.

"I was married once," she said. "Let me show you my baby."

She drew a velvet-covered photo album from a shelf and sitting down beside me on the sofa flipped it open with practiced ease.

"This is Gerald. Isn't he cute?" she said.

"Just look at those rosy little cheeks," she said turning the page.

"And that dimple," she said, her hands fluttering from one old black-and-white snapshot to another.

Each photograph curled, yellowing with age. Little black triangular corners encased each picture of the tiny baby.

On some pages, light brown squares showed blank spaces where long ago some picture had been removed.

It was a cute baby. He lay still on a satiny cushion.

Each photograph was a close-up.

You could see the edge of the bassinet, or something, in some of the pictures.

Each photograph presented the same pose.

In each his eyes were closed.

He never changed position.

I felt uneasy. "How old is Gerald now," I asked.

"He's just three weeks old. Isn't he such a big boy?" she said.

"Coochie Coochie Coo," she said fingering a photograph. Over years of doing this, her repeated action had worn a ragged hole in the paper.

"When was he born," I asked.

"January 15, 1939. I remember it so well. His father drove me to the hospital all in a dither. Just like a man. And Doctor Cornstern met us at the door. It was snowing that night and he was worried that we couldn't get through the drifts.

"I hurt so bad. You wouldn't think it now, but I was a delicate little thing. Mr. Gregg could put his two hands all the way around my waist when we first married.

"I hurt so bad. If I had not been so little... I was in labor over 30 hours. The ether gagged me so they couldn't use it. And I hurt and hurt.

"Then it was over. And I had Gerald. My own. My very own baby." she said.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Happened? Why, nothing happened. My baby's healthy. Nothing's the matter with my baby. We came

But Lord, I Hate To Wait!

home from the hospital. Me and Mr. Gregg and my baby; we came home. Mr. Greg died in November 22,1963, the same day they shot the president. But I have my baby. I'll always have my baby. Nothing can happen to my baby. Nothing. Not ever. Nothing."

She patted the album.

She smoothed the cover.

She worried the frayed edge of her apron.

She poured more tea.

I made my excuses and finally got away.

Crazy old woman. Her and her pictures of the still baby, never moving all these forty years.

Tacky.

Ghoulish to take pictures of a child in its coffin.

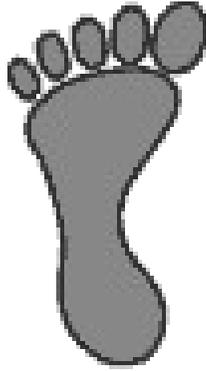
Mother-love? Bonding?

Maybe so.

Some people can't let go.

I wish I'd never meet her.

My appointment with Dr. Matlock isn't until Thursday.



JOHN BURNS HIS OWN STUPID FOOT

An Excerpt from my diary:

Thursday, April 1, 1999:

Spent the day cleaning up the yard extra good for Easter.

I was up on a ladder trimming vines with the electric hedge trimmer and smoking my pipe at the same time. To reach a difficult place, I started to put my pipe away and stretched down to tap it out on the heel of my left boot, a habitual practice.

A ladder is not the best place to do this.

I missed my own heel.

As I knocked my pipe out, the dottle, the lump of red hot charcoal left in the bottom of the bowl as a residue of burning tobacco, fell into the top of my boot. It was still as hot as a charcoal briquette. Intense pain.

Of course, I was wearing high top boots instead of my usual canvas slip-ons as a safety measure because I planned to be running the lawnmower; so it took me a while to cut off the power trimmer, climb down from the ladder, unlace the boot, pull it off and crush out the burning coal.

My sock had caught fire!

Horrible pain.

But Lord, I Hate To Wait!

It burned a hole the size of a quarter in the side of my ankle, burned it right down to raw flesh. I think I could see the surface of my ankle bone in there. I nearly fainted. I believe I went into shock. Intense pain

Thank God that Ginny caught a ride home from work and I did not have to walk to meet her this afternoon.

The comment of my sympathetic, compassionate wife as she bandaged my wound this evening:... "Oh well, John, the Surgeon General has warned you that smoking can be hazardous to your health".



RATS!

Some thoughts on Christian profanity
by
John Cowart

I'm sure the rat I found last Saturday had to have weighted less than 75 pounds.

The reason I know is that I'd picked up the trashcan he was hiding in and carried it all the way across our yard and I can't lift more than 75 pounds. So the rat had to have weighed less.

In our yard I use that old garbage can to store lengths of worn out garden hose, and I was working on a project that called for a piece of hose. So I carried the can across the yard and began pulling out sections of hose.

Did you know that rats can jump?

I don't mean jump.

I mean Jump.

I mean Olympic Gold Medal Jump!

Flatfooted.

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From the bottom of the can to over the top of my head jump.

Mr. Rat jumped. In the air he was eye level with me as he turned, landed on the grass and ran into the bushes.

Being a serious, dedicated, former Sunday-School-teaching, Spirit-baptized, card-carrying Christian, the first word out of my mouth was religious.

I said, "Holy".

The second word out of my mouth was not religious.

It was decidedly secular humanist, referring not to the world of the spirit but to the purely physical realm.

That pretty much sums me up: Christian and human.

And my speech reveals this combination every day.

I bring this up because last month a dear Christian lady told me that she would never let her teenagers read my website because I use dirty words in writing about religious matters.

My first reaction was to get defensive and write her off as a kook.

You know that almost-Scripture: *Unto the pure, all things are pure -- everybody else thinks like I do.*

But on further reflection I began to take her gentle rebuke to heart. Maybe she has a point. Maybe my writing is not suitable for children. Maybe my writing is not suitable for Christian adults. Maybe my writing is not suitable for anybody.

When it comes to payment, editors often seem to hold that last opinion. And, if the truth be told, in the privacy of my own home, I've used some words

describing editors which they themselves would never allow in print.

I've even called them Yankees!

Now, as any Southerner knows that is only half a word. There is an implied prefix - a word going before which, though usually not spoken, is understood by anyone from the South.

Once back in the mid 1970s, one of the first stories I attempted to write for publication (in a religious magazine for boys) was rejected by the editor; his note said that a common expletive I used carried as an implied suffix a dirty word to follow. He said my story was unsuitable for Christian readers.

Apparently for a supposedly religious person, I have a dirty mouth.

This really came out earlier this month when I walked barefoot out to the kitchen to make coffee one morning at my usual time and noticed the floor tiles felt hot.

Since our home was built about 50 years ago on a concrete slab, this could only mean that an underground hot water pipe, a cast-iron pipe, had rusted through and broken. Under ground. Under the concrete. Under our home.

"Rats!" I said.

"Oh my," I said.

"Oh dear!" I said.

"Oh Good Grief," I said.

No I didn't. That's not what I said at all - but you get the general idea.

There I stood in the kitchen at 4 a.m., empty coffee pot in hand, no water coming from the faucet, dancing back and forth to keep my bare feet from burning - and cursing the Japanese!

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Now where did that come from?

From my Dad.

Because of his World War II experiences, whenever anything anywhere went wrong, Dad would blame the Japanese.

So there I am echoing the curses I'd heard in my childhood even though obviously the Japanese had absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with my house, my plumbing, my problems.

Profanity is not exactly rational.

I blundered out to the tool shed, got a key and turned off the main water valve at the street.

By this time I felt more rational. I stopped cursing the innocent Japanese and went after the real culprits – the guys who build my house 50 years ago and all the former owners who had never replaced those old iron pipes. I cursed their cheap, shoddy workmanship, the kennel their mother was raised in, their -- well, again you get the idea.

I even cursed the God who had created them – and me.

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Something had inconvenienced me and I did not like it one bit.

I questioned why God would allow such a disruption to enter my life. I questioned His character and His love. I mean, if God really loves me, why would He let a pipe under my house rust through? Why would He let me ever get a flat tire? A toothache? Arthritis? Why would a loving God ever allow me to experience the stuff of everyday life that happens to everyone living in this fallen world?

I ought to be exempt!

I demand to be exempt!

So I cursed everything and everyone from Heaven to Japan and all points in between.

These curses did not come from my Dad; these curses arose from my own heart.

Once Jesus told His disciples, "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: these are the things which defile a man". (Matt 15:18-19).

After my 4 a.m. temper tantrum, a modicum of self-control and rationality crept in slowly. The real question is not why did this happen to me, but where do I go from here?

I recalled the words of the Apostle James: "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain".

Humm. Where does that leave me?

James went on to say: "The tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so".

Here I am, priding myself on being a Christian writer, scribing words geared to save souls, convert the wicked, sanctify the saints, comfort the feebleminded, revive the church, relieve maidens in distress, encourage the hopeless, glorify the Lord, enhance my own reputation --- I babble about this stuff all the time. But let one little pipe break... a few drops of hot water... a hall carpet that squishes a bit when you walk across it -- and what do I say?

That pesky Apostle James (who obviously never had a pipe under his house break) said, "Doth a

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fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?... no fountain (can) both yield salt water and fresh”.

Am I the only guy to babble like a fountain with a broken pipe, babbling fresh water and foul?

And what am I to do about it?

Well, I'm not the first. When one Old Testament visionary saw the Lord High And Lifted Up, the first words from his mouth were, “Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips”. Yet, God made Isaiah foremost among the prophets.

And at the trial of Jesus, one man there “Began to curse and to swear, saying, ‘I know not the man!’ - And immediately the cock crew ”. (Mtt. 26:74).

Yet God used Peter to write two of the greatest New Testament letters.

From these examples I gather that no matter what we've said, no matter what we've done, God is greater than all that; His mercy endures for ever.

There is hope for the foul-mouthed.

Bits and pieces of these thoughts flashed through my mind as I stood on the front lawn still in my underwear - who's to see, it's 4 a.m. - turning off the main valve and I said a prayer of repentance, apologizing to the Lord, for being the way I am.

I even made a solemn resolve that henceforth I shall refer to editors only as “Northerners”.

I also asked for guidance about what to do next.

Later that day I asked my friend, Rex, a licensed building contractor, to take a look at my plumbing problem and give me some advice. Rex, bless him, not only looked at the plumbing, he took days away from his family to come over, knock holes through our house

walls, rip out rusted-shut pipes, replace cast-iron with pvc, and patch the holes so you can't even see where they were.

And he did it all without uttering one single word of profanity!

However, as I watched Rex work on our plumbing, from within my own heart there arose more comments related to the builders who had done the original plumbing in this house 50 years ago.

Oddly enough, I was not thinking about cursing them.

No. My mind did a flip-flop. What I got to thinking about was how people 50 years from now may view my work if any of it is still around.

Will these people of the future come across places where I did shoddy things and will they curse my unknown name?

All the time as a writer I'm tempted to shoddy workmanship. I'm tempted to jazz up a tale a bit to make it more dramatic; to shave non-fiction incidents to make them read smoother, to change the sacrosanct material inside quotation marks so my own work comes across as more polished; to steal ideas without attributing them to their original source.

To lie — To cheat — To be dishonest — To earn the curses of someone 50 years from now.

To make myself look good at the expense of some future researcher who's trying to be honest.

What should my work be like? How true? How solid? How accurate? How honest?

That most prolific of New Testament writers, Paul, said, "Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him".

That's fundamental.

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THE TRANSFIGURATION OF WHAT'S-HIS-NAME

A bit of historical fiction for Easter

*by
John Cowart*

The three demons who ruled First Century Caesarea Philippi, a city of lascivious sexual passions where the dums thought they worshiped the great horny god Pan, swooped in listless arcs above the city -- bickering loudly among themselves as usual.

The demons, of course, could scarcely fly as honest birds or bats do; instead, each sunset the trio crawled out of their cave beneath the city, climbed up the cliff and to the top of a high building, and launched themselves on an updraft. Then they tilted their leathery wings to a steep angle and spiraled to catch a stronger thermal to gain height over their domain.

This evening, as usual, they had launched from their favorite spot, a fluted column rising in front of the great temple which that old reprobate Herod had built to honor Augustus Caesar and Pan.

As usual the three had clawed their way out of the cave in the cliff a thousand feet beneath the temple and scrambled to the top of the column scratching and gouging each other in their nightly race to be first. Like crabs in a bucket, when one seemed to be getting to the top stepping on the upturned faces of the others, those others would drag him down.

This evening, their scrap did not last long because Stud and Gaylord ganged up on Longdong. One biting his tail, the other scratching his face because he had launched first for three consecutive evenings and they rebelled at his lording it over them. Of course, their team work was short lived because although, Gaylord had promised to let Stud launch first if he helped discomfort Longdong, naturally, Gaylord himself had launched as soon as he topped the pinnacle of the temple leaving the other two fighting.

"Sloppy seconds to you both," he screeched as he flung himself from the column, his wings opening with a whomp.

The others stopped clawing each other long enough to spit venom at him.

At any rate, all three finally got airborne and like hunting buzzards sniffing for carrion, they circled the city savoring the stench from the squalid night sins of the dims below them.

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A few sparse stars glimmered in the murky sky smudged with smoke from thousands of kitchen fires as people in the city cooked their evening meals over dried camel dung, charcoal or wood depending on the financial status of the household.

From the air, the city appeared as an oasis of gentile culture set in a barren Jewish setting; unlike other drab Jewish communities in the area, this Roman outpost sported statues, baths, race-tracks -- exotic color against a plain Judean backdrop. The last few rays of sunset reflected off the white marble columns of Pan's temple. A smattering of torches outlined the stadium where a crowd was gathering for an animal fight. There, in only a few years Romans would feed both Jews and Christians alike to the unprejudiced lions.

As the demons sailed over, none of the still waters in the 82 pools and public baths of the city reflected their images. Demons cast no shadows. They reflect no light. And they speak and live outside the scope of human perception. Outside the city limits, day's dying heat still shimmered upward from the desert's darkening rocks on the lower slopes of Mount Hermon.



The white tile roof of the Roman governor's lavish palace -- presently occupied by one Pontius Pilate whose vanity encouraged him to engrave his name on a plaque at the other Caesarea (found by archaeologists centuries later) as though he owned the place instead of being merely one in a long string of transient official tenants -- created a thermal and the demons spiraled upward from its heat.

At the top of the thermal draft, the air mushroomed out and the demons broke free to soar over Theata Alley and gaze down at the rows of multicolored banners flying in front of the brothels lined up in ranks like the legionaries who patronized them enthusiastically.

Caesarea Philippi boasted the area's finest R&R facilities for the Roman occupational troops and tonight just happened to be a payday, so this section of the city resembled a house to house orgy -- much to the disgust of the city's three invisible rulers.

"Bleah, I loath these vermin," Longdong said glaring at the unaware people far below him. "Look at them rut. Pleasuring in rubbing against each other. I'd line the females' insides with stinging thistles if I had my way."

"I'd leave the females but give the all the males organs as flexible as live eels," Stud said. "Look, there's one at it now; let's try to make him soft, spoil his pleasure, make him think about that promotion in rank he missed getting. That ought to soften him up. Yuch, but I hate dims."

"Dims ain't much. At least they're pretty sure to fade to black," Gaylord said. "It's the flickers I hate. You never can tell when one of them is going to blaze on you. "I wish they'd all stay the way they're born instead of brightening on us."

"That's a stupid thing to say, you puke," sneered Stud. "If they stayed sparks like when they're born, we never get to see them blacken. No, if we just keep them dim long enough, they're food -- Oh, hell and damnation, here comes trouble."

From far away, across the foothills south of Mount Hermon, a blacker shadow flapped clumsily, lumbering through the air, propelling itself laboriously across the dark sky.

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"Greetings, Tock, what the hell do you think you're doing. This is our territory," Gaylord shouted.

Ignoring his challenge, Toxicity swooped straight in scattering the other demons in his haste to gain the thermal.

"Get the hell out of here; this is our air and you can't have any," snarled Longdong.

"In your eye, if you was a human you'd be a priest or a pansy -- maybe both," Toxicity panted, clinging to the thermal as the others pushed him away toward dead air. "Don't do that, Damn you! I got a special mission from Capernaum. I got just as much right to be here as you guys."

"Special mission, Hell. Who'd trust you with stealing toilet sponges? Get out of my face," snapped Stud.

"Got orders straight from Capernaum Council and there ain't nothing you can do about it. So there! Nah, nah, nah."

"The CC ain't diddle over here. No jurisdiction," Longdong said, "You got no right coming into our space."

"I got the right to fart in your face, you slimy afterbirth. My orders come from lower down, if you take my meaning -- and you'd damn sure better. There's some light creeping in under the blanket and you'd damn sure better help me squash it or there'll, be Hell to pay."

"No need to get nasty, Tock. We was just asking," Stud said with a wink at his fellows. "You got a different situation there in Capernaum, here we just ... Hey, a dim bitch just snuffed out! Lets get her. Damn it, wait for me. I saw her first!"

When they'd finished with the woman's screaming residue, the four demons resumed their patrol and their argument.

"Damn! But I love it when they squirm like that," Tock said licking his bloated lips. "The look in her eyes when she died and saw us swooping in, the way she pleaded when Stud clapped that first nursing worm to her tit, the way she screamed for her husband to run rescue her when her feet hit the fire and then cursed him when he couldn't hear her even though she could see him standing there weeping his eyes out right there beside the bed and whimpering for What's-his-name to bless the dear departed little woman -- that's gonna be one eternally miserable bitch -- it all makes me want to sing."

"Makes you want to piss," Stud said. "Look, you're dribbling already."

"So I am., So I am. Here, let me cruise a little over to the left there, I see an evening garden party and the stupid dims ought to have a chance to curse. Bet they blame it on seagulls," Tock said.

Longdong deliberately bumped Tock's wing as he passed and knocked him into a steep dive on his back. Tock recovered scant inches above the ground and flapped back toward the others screeching.

Gaining altitude, he yelled, "You gonna pay for that. I'm here on an official mission for the CC and you flutters had better respect my position. I ain't about to forget this. I'll laugh while you roast in Hell."

"He's on an official mission. We'd better respect him," Gaylord said. "Else, he might piss on his own leg some more."

"Now, cut that out. You just better hope you live long enough to get prostate trouble -- you deserve it," Tock replied.

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"What's this official mission for Capernaum? You three sots over there loosing control of your dims again? Too many flickers? More incompetence?," Longdong said with a loud belch in Tock's face.

They all knew about the recent trouble in Capernaum.

The dims of Capernaum, unlike those of Caesarea Philippi, were not given to the common sins of the flesh. No, Capernaum sported an ancient -- even for Israel -- synagogue. It was a hotbed of pious activity with its own colony of dim religious writers, religious lawyers and religious insurance agents. No hanky-panky in Capernaum, the dims there refrained from fleshgrunting. They were too proud.

This character trait delighted that city's own triumvirate of demon rulers, Toxicity, Rancid and Cynthia.

"I love religious dims. Double the guilt, none of the pleasure," Rancid always said.

Oh, of course, a few sneak dims now and then played two-back in secret with like-minded folk; but they didn't even acknowledge each other in public. They had to consider their dignity; most preferred other sins.

The varied thought atmospheres in these two rival cities called for different administrative technique and the two competing demon triumvirates stayed at each other's throats boasting about how hard their own city was to rule and gripping about how any fool could control the other city.

Their argument had raged for centuries.

"You can keep the pride and resentment of a flicker scholar in Capernaum seething for years till he finally dims out and fades to black," Longdong often complained, "But once a man's gone soft, he goes to sleep! How the hell are we supposed to keep the vermin sinning if they go to sleep? Now Caesarea, this place

takes top demons to make it go on sinning; any gut with a goose quill can keep religious writers at it."

"Nonsense, you twit," Cynthia always said whenever they met. "All dims worship their own bellies. Everyone of them has an oozing slime god between their legs. It's a cinch to use that god to trap them. When they're young intrigue them with it; when they're mature make them cheat the ones they love most with it; when they're too old to get stiff or slick, make them long for what they're missing. You can keep them dissatisfied all their feeble lives -- even when sex is at its best. Then when they fade to black, the first thing I always remind them of is that the soft body parts rot first!

"So, with a city given to sins of the flesh like your's is, no wonder Boss can let boobs rule it," she always said.

"On the other hand, the dims we deal with in Capernaum ... Scripture, scripture, scripture. It takes real skill to make them ignore what that stuff says and think it's written for somebody else. We labor under a cruel disadvantage. In Capernaum recently we've even had this bright young rabbi who has the audacity to try to twist scripture so that it seems to make sense. He's a pain. Unsettles the whole place. Gets the dim scholars thinking naughty thoughts. His time is coming, you'd better believe it," she said.

"Fortunately, we are the world's foremost experts in pride. Of course, we ought to be. We are the best. Although, of course, Rancid and Tock are being trained by me. Apprentices, you understand," she said.

At annual Triumvirate Of Cities conferences for centuries she had said essentially this same thing.

"Ruddy parrot," Longdong always yelled above the other catcalls.

The Caesarea Philippi Authority (CPAs) naturally hated the Capernaum Council (CCs); so, when the CPA

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triumvirate learned the nature of Tock's official mission, they screeched, whined and griped so loudly their caterwauling stirred up a dust storm which coated Caesarea Philippi with yellow grit and drove the dims indoors.

Having people curse the dust brought the demons little pleasure.

Like great ungainly vultures bloated with carrion, the four demons glided down to thump into the ground breaking branches and crushing tender plants. Once on the ground, they waddled into Pan's cave and burrowed down into crevasses to think things over.

Three sulked.

One gloated.

The Jordan River runs in an almost straight north-south line. In the south, at its mouth, the Jordan empties into the Dead Sea, lowest and most salty of all earth's bodies of water. From there the land rises steadily northward to lofty Mount Hermon 11,000 feet above sea level.

At the river's mid-point, it flows through the fresh water Sea of Galilee on the northeastern shore of which, right by the Jordan, sits the city of Capernaum. About ten miles north of Capernaum, the river widens to form a smaller fresh water lake called in biblical times, Lake Merom.

About 15 miles north of the reedy marshes of Merom, the city of Caesarea Philippi was built in the highlands at the source of the river.

When Alexander the Great conquered the land, his soldiers discovered that the source of the Jordan River ran out from a great cave beneath a thousand-foot-high cliff on the western side of Mount Hermon. Caesarea Philippi sits on top of this cliff. Alexander

named the area Panias in honor of Pan, god of sexual excess and cruel laughter.

Years later, Herod the Great built a lavish temple to Caesar Augustus and Pan at the top of the cliff above the cave.

The ancient Jewish historian Josephus described the place saying, "At this spot a mountain rears its summit to an immense height aloft; at the base of the cliff is an opening into an overgrown cavern; within this, enclosing a volume of still water, the bottom of which no sounding-line has been found long enough to reach, is the pool".

Half the pool of still water lies inside the cave; the other half extends out from the base of the cliff. This water pools inside a deep crevice on the floor of the cave, but part of the cave floor, while damp and dank, remains dry enough for exploration though it is cluttered with rocks and boulders fallen from the soaring vaulted ceiling.

Alexander's soldiers used to throw victims off the top of cliff down into the pool as a sacrifice to Pan. If the victim sank, the soldiers assumed the god was pleased; if the victim floated to the surface, archers on the cliff used the unaccepted girl for target practice.

Centuries ago when they were young, Stud, Gaylord and Longdong used to lurk beneath the dark water and use their tails to push live victims to the surface. The ones who hit the water dead from the fall, they let sink. The dim soldiers never did figure out the game and wasted many an arrow better used in battle.

But now a better game was afoot and because he was bigger, stronger and meaner than the resident demon triumvirate of Caesarea Philippi, only Tock of Capernaum would get to play.

"Big bully," Gaylord whimpered in his crevice in the cave wall, "Comes barging in here like he belongs."

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"Quiet, he might hear you. Sound carries in here," Longdong whispered.

"Don't care if he does," Gaylord said, lowering his voice to whisper his reply. "I hope he fails. You know how Boss feels about failing."

"Shut up, Losers," Tock's voice boomed in the cavern, "Someone's coming. Aw, look. Young Love. Ain't that sweet!"

Sprawling Mount Hermon boasts three peaks rising above undulating foothills. The two highest peaks stay mostly snow-covered all year but the runoff from snow which does melt seeps into the ground only to gush forth in springs around the mountain-- the Bible's Lower Springs of the Jordan -- making the area one of the most lush and fertile in Israel. The steep valley of the Jordan channels moisture into a narrow band along the river while outside that verdant band dry rocky desert lies envying the valley.

Unlike the land to the south where porous thirsty limestone drinks up even the rain of heaven, here to the north, dark basalt rock keeps moisture near the surface. Wheat grows well and pear trees outnumber the olive. Honeysuckle, clematis and wild rose thrive among the huge basalt boulders and oleanders with red, white and pink -- but poisonous -- flowers grow in forest-sized clumps.

Ancient people entering the cave -- where a marble plaque found by modern archaeologists still says, "Sacred to the God Pan and His Nymphs" -- brought votive offerings to cast into the recesses of the dark pool. Some brought incense; some, spices; some coins. No one since the Greeks left threw living women into the pool anymore. But from time immemorial, virtually every visitor cast a hand-picked and handwoven garland of oleander onto the water.

Lydia, Marcus, and Flavius all cast garlands in the water; Benjamin, being Hebrew, did not.

Of course, strictly speaking, Benjamin should not have even been playing with the Gentile children and certainly the watery cavern beneath the thousand foot cliff of Mount Hermon was no place for children of any kind to play. But in the way of children everywhere, the four disregarded the scruples and warnings of their stodgy elders and scampered together near and far over the mountain side and in their playing they blundered down the easy southern slope then back around to the foot of the high cliff on the western side where the pool oozed out of Pan's grotto.

They all knew they should not be there.

But Lydia, older by two years than the three boys, lured them on with a promise -- not stated outright but hinted -- that she knew a new game she just might let them play.

Sensing a provocative wonder, the boys would have followed her anywhere. But once they gathered garlands -- Lydia wove an extra one for her hair -- and entered the cave, she turned coy, while they, with hot but unfamiliar yearnings, pressed her.

In the way of all mankind, the louder their passions grew, the softer their voices.

"Come on; no body can see us here," Marcus said.

"There's too much light. We have to get back further in," she said.

"This is a good place right here," Flavius said.

"The ground's too wet. We have to get back away from the water where it's dryer," she said.

Misty blue light filtered from the cavern's huge entrance. Green lichen coated boulders dropped in ancient days from the cave's high ceiling. Black shadows loomed far back in the cave as the children skirted the edge of the still silent pool.

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"This is back far enough, isn't it," Benjamin said.

"No it isn't," Lydia said. "What if someone -- like one of our dads -- followed us down the hill from town. If they came in the front there, they could see what we're going to do. We have to go back just a little bit more. What's the matter, scared of ghosts?"

"I ain't ascaired of no ghost," Benjamin said.

The boys followed Lydia's pale figure deeper and deeper, darker and darker, into the cave.

That was the whole point of the older girl's strategy: she intended to lead them down deep into the dark, then flit way leaving them to find their own way out. She had played this game before with other boys and thought it great -- after all, Pan is the god of fun and games, and somebody has to be his goat.

Feeling her way to the rock ledge she recognized as her turn-around point, she began to pout, confusing the boys more.

"I don't want you to watch," she said toying with the bronze pin fastening on her robe.

"We won't," they said in course.

"You'd peek," she accused. "I'll tell you what. Marcus, you go behind that rock, the one that looks like a kneeling camel. Flavius, you go on along the path. No more than ten paces, mind you. Ben, you stay right here. I'm going to go over there behind that clump of cave fern and take something off. When I'm ready, I'll come out and come to each of you in turn. Be real quiet and no peeking. I'm nervous about this already."

The three boys separated.

They were real still.

They were real quiet.

Nobody peeked.

Ben could hear the girl moving around in the darkness.

He thought he could hear her breathe.

Ben felt something soft and smooth press against his arm. The aroma of oleander flowers floated softly in the darkness.

"Wow! She picked me first," he thought.

He opened his arms to receive his visitor and drew the warm flesh close to his own.

Hot moist breath pulsated against his neck.

"Do you want me," someone whispered.

Ben nodded rapidly.

"Do you really want me," the voice asked.

"Yes! Yes, you know I want you," Ben cried. He felt a soft tongue nuzzling and probing his ear -- deeper and deeper, probing for his very brain.

Ben shuttered groping in the dark for some familiar texture of flesh. "Do you think we should? I don't want to hurt you," he whispered.

"Don't you worry about hurting me, little boy. Don't listen to anyone but me. Hush. Not another word. Ever," Tock softly cackled in the dark.

Lydia sat on a rock outside the cave combing her hair and laughing at the clumsy sounds the boys made scrambling out. When Marcus and Flavius broke out into full sunlight, she tossed a pebble in their direction.

"What's the matter, Get lonely in there," she teased.

"You cheated. That's not fair," Flavius yelled.

"Tough. What are you going to do about it," she said.

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"We'll show you!" Marcus yelled. And the three began a chase in and out among the strewn boulders in front of the cave until at last they collapsed exhausted and breathless on a grassy bank. Lydia dipped the hem of her tunic into a pool of water trapped in a shallow hollow atop a rock and pressed it to her sweaty forehead. Marcus and Flavius scooped up handfuls of water and drank greedily.

"Where's Ben?" Flavius asked idly stirring the water.

"Bet he's still waiting in the dark with his horn up, dumber than you guys," Lydia said.

"Probably playing with himself," Marcus said.

"And wishing they hadn't clipped his foreskin. He's going to need every inch he can get," Lydia laughed.

"Hey, Ben! Come on Out!" Flavius shouted. "She tricked us! Come home free!"

No sound came from the cave.

Marcus walked back just inside the entrance. "Hey, Heb. Everybody in. I'm the only one she let do it."

"Liar!" Lydia screamed. "You never touched me and you never will," she shouted.

"Wanta bet!"

And the chase began again. Up and down ravine sides, splashing across little brooks, round and round trees -- and back to the cave entrance.

"Ben," Flavius yelled. "Time to head home. Come on out."

Nothing.

The afternoon sun sank lower in the west. Long slanting beams probed further back into the cavern

illuminating places which never saw light except for two hours on late summer afternoons.

The three children ventured back into the cave. Skirting the pool. Calling Ben's name. Growing apprehensive.

Marcus saw him first.

On a ledge in the cavern wall high above the dark pool of Pan, Benjamin stood silently gazing down at the water. He did not move. When they called, he did not appear to hear them.

"What's the matter with him?" Lydia whispered.

"Bet the sissy got scared out of his wits," Marcus said. "Hey, Ben. Nothing to be scared of. It was only a joke. Come on down."

"Don't be a baby. Come on down from there," Flavius called.

Ben took no notice of his friends. He only stared off into space.

"He's froze up there. We'd better get help," Lydia said. "You two stay and keep an eye on him in case he falls. I'll run get his dad. Look, we were down her playing. Got that. Playing. If anybody tells, I'll... You better not tell! You'd just better not."

She turned and ran.

She ran from the cave entrance, along the bank of the pool, and across a wooden bridge that crossed the infant Jordan. She picked her way over the shale fallen from the cliff's heights in ages past, then panted up the southern slope of Hermon's spur.

An exhausting climb. But she did not pause for breath. She ran as though a demon snapped at her heels. Racing through the closest city gate, she pounded to the Jewish quarter where Ben's father worked in a foundry.

RATS!

"Sir! Sir. come quick," she panted. "Ben's down in Pan's cave and he won't answer. There's something wrong with him."

"God, help us," Ezra said dropping a ladle of molten bronze right on top of the sand mold where he had been pouring the two matching parts of an ornate door hinge.

Stripping off his leather apron, he yelled to the foreman and the other two molders still in the shop that late, "Help! My boy's trapped down in the cave. Help me rescue him. Help. Hurry."

The slender Roman girl and the four burly Jewish men dashed back down the path to the cave.

Marcus and Flavius met them at the entrance. Flavius was crying.

"He's still up there and he won't come down," Marcus said. "He acts like he can't hear us and he won't say anything."

"What the hell were you kids doing down here. You know you ain't supposed to be down here. There's rock falls and snakes. I'll swear," the foreman grumbled.

"Stay out here. We don't need any more kids to get hurt in there," Ezra said as he and the other men entered the cave picking their way and stumbling over rocks on the littered cavern floor.

"Look, there he is. How the hell did he get way up there," the foreman said. "We gonna need ropes to get him down and some lamps to see by if it gets much darker. Sun's setting. Obed, go tell them kids out there to run get rope and lamps from the shop."

"Ben," Ezra called, "Ben, can you hear me. Don't be afraid. Hang on. I'll get you down. Hang on, I'm coming. Hold tight."

Ezra worked his way toward the cave wall. The cold of the cave after the heat of the foundry and the

run down the mountain caused goosebumps to rise on his sweaty back, shoulders and arms.

Reaching the side wall of the cave, the father groped here and there on the surface for some toehold he could use to climb up to the ledge his son stood on. When he found it, the irregularity in the stone wall proved too narrow to afford him purchase. He unlaced his sandals and inched along the crevice barefooted. He faced the wall and groped above his head with calloused fingers, pulling and straining and feeling his way up the unyielding stone. The men below shouted useless directions and encouragement.

Thirty feet up, the ledge widened enough so the man could turn his face from the wall to look up at his son. Ben appeared unconcerned with his father's progress.

"Son? Ben? What are you doing here? What's the matter? Reach over this way. Take my hand. Try not to look down."

Benjamin turned slowly, then spit at his father's outstretched hand.

"Ben!"

The boy scooted sidewise along the ledge, stuck his tongue out at his shocked father, then deliberately stepped off into empty air.

The falling boy's tunic caught on a projection of rock for a moment twisting him in the air. His head, elbow, hip, knee -- banged against the wall as he bounced down the hard rock from spur to spur.

He did not make a sound as he tumbled. Nor when he smashed into the dark water.

His body disappeared beneath the pool and the water swirled from some mighty subterranean force swallowing him.

Without hesitation, Ezra leaped from the rock ledge to save his son. In a flat clean dive, he arched far

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out from the stone wall and plunged into Pan's pool. Forging through the water with powerful strokes, he swam toward the place where he'd seen his son sink.

Ezra dove deep beneath the cold stagnant water groping frantically for the boy. Lack of air forced him to the surface. He gasped then dove again. And again. And again.

"For God's sake! He's drowning. Help me," he shouted breaking the surface.

"To the right more. He's more to your right!" someone shouted from the dark poolside.

The father moved right and dove again. His hand brushed hair in the water and he clung to it. Kicking toward the surface, he pulled the boy up after him.

Ben twisted and kicked and clawed. He wrapped his legs around his father's. He gouged his father's eyes. He bit.

"Help! He's got me," Ezra screamed as the foreman and Obed swam to join the thrashing. "Stop struggling, Ben; you'll drown us both."

The three men pulled the little boy up on the poolside where without making a single sound, he hit and clawed and scratched and bit.

The three men tried to restrain him without hurting him.

The ten-year-old, small for his age, boy frazzled them.

When helpers arrived with lamps and rope, they had to use the rope to bind Ben hand and foot. Even then, he fought them all the way up the mountain back into the city.

Ezra and Sarah called a Greek doctor to see their son. The former slave picked and probed at the boy,

looking in his ears, forcing his mouth open with a stick and peering down his throat, examining his urine, palpating his liver, asking questions. Ben struggled and writhed and snapped at the doctor's ankles as the man edged out of reach around the boy's straw pallet.

Motioning the worried parents outside the hut, the doctor made his pronouncement.

"A mad dog has bitten him sometime in the past few weeks, I'm afraid he has rabies. Or perhaps, he has inhaled bad air and malarial humors have settled in his brain. On the other hand, this could be the early stages of encephalitis or perhaps the final stages of syphilis. I'll need to run some tests to be sure. Sometimes polio strikes like this or... Or -- well, never mind."

"Or what, Doctor," Sarah said wringing her hands as though she had not already heard enough bad news, "We want to know everything."

"Well, perhaps it is not a disease at all; perhaps the god has claimed your son as his own."

"Never!" Ezra snapped. "My son is a good boy. He keeps the Sabbath. He'd have no traffic with heathen gods -- no disrespect intended, Doctor -- Ben's as smart as can be. He makes good grades in school. He's tops in his class. He helps me in the shop. He reads the Torah and is just about ready for his manhood ceremony. Wouldn't surprise me if he grows up to be a rabbi or gets a good government job, Maybe steward in a rich house. It can't be Pan. Decent people like us aren't subject to the superstitions of the heathen."

The physician sighed.

Why is it people will call in expert medical help then deny the expert's diagnosis?

"Yes. Yes, I know you folks are Jews," the doctor said. "Perhaps, if it comforts you, think of it as just rabies. There's little difference in the outcome. But there are some therapeutic steps you can take: I want

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you to keep him tied and don't let him bite anyone. Keep him quiet and I want you to dose him down good with witchbane and oil -- fish, not olive. We'll know more in a few hours. Now, about my bill..."

The foreman had let Ezra off work for the time it took to see the doctor but he had to go back as soon as the doctor left, leaving Benjamin still tied and snapping at his mother's hand when she tried to bathe his head with a cool damp cloth.

Thus, Ezra was working at the foundry, a few hundred yards down the street from his home, when Ben snapped his ropes and broke free.

Heat shimmered in the air above the three huge charcoal pits where the molders melted bronze or sometimes even iron. Vast piles of slag -- waste metal fused with burned charcoal and sand into glassy sharp-edged rock-like chunks -- surrounded the work yard. A bricked-in spring formed a small pool of dirty water, where hot metal pieces could be dipped for tempering; a vat of oil stood beside that for tempering finer tools which would need to hold a sharp edge.

In a lean-to shed in back, four old slaves polished finished metal products on sparking grindstones. A more substantial shed at the front of the yard housed the foreman's desk cluttered with papyrus rolls containing the business's financial records. Another shed to the side housed the pattern shop where two Syrian artists shaped wooden or clay patterns in the form of whatever needed to be made of metal.

Today's job was a huge bronze bell destined to hang in the hilltop fort near Abila to call Roman soldiers to muster.

Ezra muscled the two halves of the wooden bell pattern into place in two identical large wooden boxes called a flasks. His helper shoveled fine sand into the hollow insides of the wooden bell halves while Ezra

inserted small cone-shaped cores made of sand and glue at strategic places in the wooden form.

High above the workers, cruising unseen on the thermal created by the furnaces, Longdong, Gaylord and Stud, watched the dims sweat.

"Is that all he's going to do; pester little boys. I could do better than that," Longdong said.

"Can he hear us while he's in the dim?" Gaylord said.

"I've never actually been inside one. I don't know. But we'd better be quiet just in case he can," Stud said.

Like vultures waiting in the sky for some sick beast to die, the three circled on silent, near motionless, wings.

Once the wooden patterns were wedged in place with the sand cores, Ezra and his apprentice, packed the heavy wooden flasks with damp sand using heavy mallets to tamp the sand tight over the wood bell patterns.

That done, they called other workmen over to help them separate the two flasks and turn them over. Heaving together, they lifted the wooden patterns free and removed the patterns and cores. This left the exact imprint of the bell inverted in the sand. Ezra cut gates and risers into the sand of the flask; the gates formed holes where the molten metal would be poured into the hollow mold, the risers formed holes which allowed the liquid metal to flow all the way around the bell shape and out the other side. When the metal cooled, the gates and risers would be cut off and their scars polished smooth.

Ezra dusted the inside of the mold with talc to glaze the metal's surface, gave the mold one final check for imperfections, then called the other men to help him gently move the two flasks together again using pins to line the halves up exactly.

RATS!

Now came the most exacting and dangerous part of the process.

While Ezra had been preparing the molds, the furnace tenders had been feeding bronze ingots into heavy ceramic pots blazing red in the midst of the charcoal fires. Four slaves pumped frantically at the huge leather bellows that forced air over the coals. The metal smoked, then glowed, then pooled, ran and melted in the pots.

A lattice work of stubby posts, timbers, chains and pulleys filled the air above the workyard. The workers swung a metal hook over the flames and latched into the clasps of the first melting pot. The men threw their weight against the chains lifting the sizzling red potful of metal free from its bed in the charcoal. One man guided, while every free worker in the yard strained at the chains.

The crew moved the steaming metal over the empty flasks.

Ezra tilted the pot with a long pole tipping it gently so that the liquid metal could pour from the lip slowly enough for him to skim off the slag to keep the bell free from impurities. The metal needed to be poured fast enough to keep it flowing into every hollow space inside the mold, but slowly enough to keep it from clogging in some narrow place and ruining the pour.

As soon as one pot of metal emptied, the crew raced for another; if one layer of metal had a chance to cool before the next was poured in hot, the two would not fuse into a single piece.

"This is getting boring," Stud said.

"Industrious little vermin. Like dung beetles in a warm pile," Longdong said.

"Dims don't have any idea what hot is -- not until they fade to black," Gaylord said. "Speaking of which,

that old slave in the pattern shop. Don't look at him too close. He's a flicker now but he's thinking about going bright on us. See if you can't take his mind off that. Remind him of his granddaughter's boyfriend, that ought to keep him from thinking about What's-His-Name."

"There. That worked for now," Stud said. "But if we don't keep an eye on him, he's going to be eternally lost."

"Don't you just hate it when they flare bright. I remember an old dim whore once who... Well, well, well. What have we here? Here comes Tock riding on his dim; let's see what happens now."

At Ezra's home, Ben snapped his ropes, shoved his mother aside and lumbered out into the street. Without a sound, he paused and sniffed the air. An animal seeking prey. He began running toward the foundry.

A block down the street, he knocked over a little girl herding a flock of geese to market. He kicked the child then charged through the squawking flock of birds stirring up a cloud of gray feathers.

Entering the workyard, the silent boy spied the crew straining at the chains. A pot of steaming liquid death bobbed in the air above their heads.

Benjamin grinned.

He crouched down on all fours and started creeping toward the sweating men.

Weaving in and out among barrels.

Moving closer.

Staying low.

Stalking.

RATS!

In the finishing shed, Omar shifted the flat bronze oval to his left hand. His arthritis was cramping his right but he had to polish his daily quota or there would be no supper. He grasped the mirror blank by its vine-ornamented handle and held it up to the light.

The old man ignored the ordered confusion of the metal pour; his gnarled fingers would be no good on the chains. His hands circled and circled in his routine work, done so long that he performed it without paying attention. He thought about his own problems.

I hope she doesn't fool around and get pregnant, he thought picking up another hand full of grit and rubbing it on the surface of the oval, scrubbing it in with a thick leather glove. Once polished to a gleaming finish, the hand mirror would grace some lady's dressing table where she could brush her hair, apply ointment to her eyes and indulge her vanity.

She's so pretty and so smart except when it comes to boys, Omar thought. *But how can you tell a young girl about the traps of life. He has no trade. He has no ambition. He has no honor. I wish...*

The old slave rinsed the muddy grit off the mirror and lifted it to the light once more checking for imperfections or irregularities on the shiny surface.

A low shadow moved on the polished bronze.

The old slave, still clutching the mirror, turned from his workbench. A person, silent, menacing, sinister, evil, crept up behind the preoccupied work crew.

"Danger! Danger!" Omar screamed just as Ben launched his attack.

The boy leaped clawing and biting onto the naked back of a man right in the middle of the chain-pulling crew. The workman shrieked in surprise and let go of the chain reaching back over his head to pry off his small attacker. His action knocked away the hands of the man behind him.

The men remaining could not hang onto the pot of 800 pounds of boiling metal in the air.

"Ease it down! Ease it down," the foreman screamed. But as the weight of the swinging pot tugged the work crew toward it, the men let go and ran for safety.

The ceramic pot smashed into the ground showering the workers with glowing droplets. The rim of the pot hit a corner of the wooden flask and cracked. Scalding metal poured from the pot casting up smoke and clouds of steam from the ground. Searing metal droplets splattered the flask and the leather-booted feet of men. Rivulets of red hot metal seemed to chase men through the dust, filling in footprints almost before a man's foot left his track.

Like actors high stepping in a comic frantic dance the workmen ran screaming on smoking feet toward the bricked-in tempering spring. Strong men cried as they stood crowded shoulder to sweaty shoulder huddled together in the little puddle. Their tears cut tracks of white down their smoke-grimed dirty faces.

They looked back in horror at Ben.

"Don't do it, Son! Don't do it," Ezra screamed from his place in the crowd.

Ben had let go of the man he'd first attacked and was now walking slowly, purposely, deliberately toward the pool of scalding metal puddled at the broken pot.

He skirted the edge of the red pulsing puddle and climbed to the top of the big wooden flask where he stood amid the swirling steam and smoke.

Above the pool of liquid metal, Benjamin poised to dive.

"For God's sake. Stop," old Omar shouted, hobbling forward from the polishing shed. "For God's sake, little boy, don't jump."

Tock froze.

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Maddened at the old man, he turned his steed and glared venom at the interfering old fool scurrying across the work yard towards him.

Omar hurried forward with his gnarled hands outstretched pleading. He still clutched the bronze mirror he had been polishing. "Don't move! Don't move. I'll help you down," he shouted.

The metal on the ground was beginning to set; a red and black crust smoked over the liquid heart of smaller puddles. The bigger pools still quivered and jelled, then moved and flowed again from internal heat.

Ezra and the wok crew moved cautiously out of the water and edged toward where Omar confronted Ben atop the flask. The old man stood to one side below the boy with his arms outstretched. "Come this way. Come this way, little boy. Take my hand. I'll help you down."

Ben glared down at him with a soundless snarl.

Ezra and the work crew surrounded the pile of metal, charred wood, sand, slag and rubble where Ben perched, still poised to dive into the glowing mass at his feet.

A military police patrol, Unit XII of the Roman Occupational Peacekeepers, known locally as the Bulls of Bashan, burst into the work yard. The commotion at the foundry had drawn a crowd and the patrol, ever alert to civil disturbance, had responded immediately.

"Out of the way, slave. I'll take charge here," shouted the officer.

"What's the matter with you people? Can't you even whip a little boy causing trouble?" He stomped up to the place Omar had stood and commanded, "Get down from there right now, boy."

Without a word, Ben clenched his hand into a fist and slammed the Roman on top of the helmet.

The Roman staggered back dazed.

His men drew swords. Some faced Ben on his smoking mountain; most faced the crowd of civilian workmen, slaves and bystanders.

With the violent act accomplished, the boy's face grew calm. He surveyed the tense scene with a pleased smirk on his face.

Ezra pushed to the forefront and called to the scowling officer, "Thank you, Sir. Thank you for rescuing my little boy. We just didn't know what to do. The doctor says he has rabies."

The Romans dropped back a step. Quick glances darted from man to man.

Shaking his ringing head and taking in the size of the little boy who poled him -- and thinking of how a report on this incident would read --the officer said, "The kid's sick? Why don't you people get him down from there then? He could get hurt. Move back men. Let these citizens get their child."

"I'll distract him." Omar said. "Grab him from behind".

Omar began moving the mirror in his hand so its surface caught the sun and reflected the light directly into Ben's eyes.

The boy twisted his head back and forth dodging the light but the slave moved the bronze mirror to keep the beam full on his face.

"It's not rabies; it's brain fever. Stupid bulls" Ezra whispered to his friends. "Help me get Ben down."

The work crew moved into position as Omar played the mirror in Ben's eyes.

"Now!" the foreman yelled.

All the men grabbed at once.

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At the first touch, Ben sprang into a frenzy. He threw burly men right and left. He kicked. He prodded and shoved and wrestled before finally succumbing and being subdued beneath the pile of workers who sweated and strained and hopped to avoid his snapping jaws, his clawing, scratching nails -- and the clumps of hot metal underfoot. They finally lashed him down, arms and ankles, and stood in a panting circle.

"Child care Jewish style," muttered one of the observing policemen.

Dipping a wing to catch the current, Gaylord yawned. "A tacky display. Amusing but tacky."

"Better watch what you say. Are you sure he can't hear you while inside a dim?" Stud asked.

They gazed down far below at Tock trussed up on the ground.

Tock looked up. He winked.

The crowd of people watched the boy to see what would happen next.

Omar knelt in the dust and patted Ben on the soldier. His gnarled hand wiped grime from the boy's silent scowling face.

"Thanks for your help, old timer," Ezra said.

"It's so hard when it's a child suffering," Omar said. "I hear there's a traveling rabbi at Capernaum who can..."

"Yeah! I've heard about that guy," the Roman officer interrupted. "What's his name? One of the Centurions over there in Capernaum has this valuable slave that got real sick, took him to What's-his-name, and presto! Good as ever. You could sell him as brand new now. You take your kid over to Capernaum. That guy can fix him up in no time... Well, it looks as though you people have got things under control here..."

"Sir, I can't thank you and your brave men enough for rescuing my little boy," Ezra said. "If you'll give me the name of your commander, I'll write him a ..."

"Now. Now, none of that. Just doing our job. Keeping peace and order is what we Romans are here for." the officer said. "Hope your kid... Well, you know."

The Romans formed up and marched briskly away.

"Filthy, pig-eating..." Ezra said.

"Hush. They might hear," Omar said.

The foreman picked his way through the mess in the workyard to where Ezra and Omar tended Ben. He twisted his leather apron in his hands and cleared his throat. "Look, Ezra, I'm sorry about your son and you're a good craftsman but... I'm afraid I have to let you go. Yesterday the water. Today, the fire. Who knows what tomorrow. Omar will help you tote the boy home. But you stay there for a couple of days or a week until he... Well, stay away for as long as it takes. Then come see me. The boss doesn't want you back. It's gonna cost over a thousand dracmas just to get that bronze cut back up small enough to melt again. And the order date on that bell don't cut the shop any slack... Well, you understand. You're fired until... then we'll see," he said.

Omar carried Ben's feet; Ezra, his soldiers.

People stood well aside as they moved down the street back towards Ezra's home.

"About that traveling rabbi from Capernaum," Omar said. "I hear tell that him and his friends is moved from there and is headed up river. They was camped over towards Lake Merom. They may be coming right here to Caesarea Philippi."

"Greek doctors. Witchbane. Fish oil. What good is some itinerate rabbi going to do? I don't believe he can help. I'm afraid it's hopeless. Just hopeless," Ezra said.

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After eight days of enduring their son's violence, fits and suicide attempts, Ezra and Sarah carried Ben to meet the rabbi.

Sarah cut a hole in the center of a blanket for the boy's head to fit through. They fought him into it and wound leather thongs around the outside of the restraining cocoon. They bundled Benjamin onto a protesting donkey and strapped him down.

Curious neighbors followed.

On the rolling plain between Mount Hermon and Lake Merom's marsh, they met a crowd of people traveling north from Capernaum.

They asked about the rabbi.

"Sorry," a fierce black bearded man said, "But the Rabbi is off in a conference and can't be disturbed. However, I'm his assistant and I'll be glad to cast out your son's unclean spirit."

Ezra and Sarah glanced back and forth at each other, their eyes flashing the silent semaphore of the long married. Sarah shrugged and Ezra said, "We really wanted to see the rabbi; when will he be back?"

"Should be here tomorrow or the next day; you can never tell when he'll show up. He's off up the mountain with his cadre. Praying, you know. However, he keeps a competent well-trained staff. Either I or any of the other nine assistants here have full authority to ... Well, there's just nothing we can't handle. Oh, Bartholomew, come give me a hand with these folks please; their little boy has an imp we need to chase off."

Tock chuckled in anticipation.

Only one road leads from Caesarea Philippi to Mount Hermon. It passes through vine-clad hills stocked with mulberry, apricot and fig trees. It crosses grain

fields studded with pear trees and oak coppice, and delves through rocky ravines cloaked with dwarf shrubs.

Intermittent ridges of snow, lying along turfy bands, decorate the upper slopes of the mountain; gravelly slopes and broad snow patches alternate right up to the summit.

Of Mount Hermon's three peaks, the northern and southern peaks rise to 11,000 feet above sea level; the western peak, separated from the others by a narrow valley reaches 9,400 feet.

Every evening, viewed from that western summit, a glorious panorama spreads out below Hermon on all sides. To the north, the cedar forests of Lebanon lie so close that the pungent smell of the trees wafts up the mountain. The Mediterranean Sea sparkles to the west as the sun seemingly lowers itself into the blue waters. The sunset turns the shadow of Mount Hermon into a pale steel-colored shade; and that long pyramidal shadow slides down the to the eastern foot of the mountain and creeps across a great plain till it covers Damascus 70 miles to the east.

To the south, the Sea of Galilee was lit up with a delicate greenish-yellow hue between its dim walls of dun colored hills.

From the flat plateau at the summit of Mount Hermon a visitor can look down the Jordan valley, over Galilee and Samaria to the Dead Sea and on to Jerusalem.

In olden days beacon-fires burned on Hermon's flat western summit to signal Jerusalem; now a rapid post system took its place and the level stone platform where the signal fires used to burn stands deserted, silent, windswept, cold.

Four men stood on that platform looking southeast toward Jerusalem where even from this distance a gold gilt pinnacle of the Temple caught and reflected the fading sun and glittered like a tiny star

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back dropped against the purple mountains of Moab even further to the south.

The Rabbi pointed at that distant golden spark and said "There the Son of man must suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and priests and scribes, be slain -- and be raised the third day.

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross every day and follow me," he said. "What is a man advantaged if he gain the whole world and lose himself or be cast away?"

His three closest friends exchanged puzzled glances. What in the world was he talking about?

The Rabbi often talked about mystical things like this when he was troubled. His friends had grown accustomed to this habit and paid scant attention.

One, James, opened his sack and broke out supper: dried fish steak filets, pita bread, fresh figs, olives and cheese. Cephus collected an armload of gnarled branches and built a fire, piling up rocks as a windbreak; John gathered thick clumps of green rock moss and lichen and piled it up as a makeshift bed. From the Rabbi's mood, it was obvious this was going to be another all night affair. They had seen him like this before.

As the sun sank lower and lower into the Mediterranean, the land around the mountain's base turned darker and darker but light still bathed the summit. The sunset clouds above the mountain rouged from orange to red against patches of pale blue.

At last, full of good supper, wearied by the climb up the mountain, warmed by the snug bed and crackling fire, the Rabbi's assistants drew their robes tight around them and prepared to doze while the Rabbi retired to a boulder off to the side to pray like he did every night.

As he prayed, slanting rays of sunlight touched him. The fashion of his countenance was altered and his raiment became glistening white. His robe, tunic, sash and cloak became shining, exceeding white, as snow, so as no fuller on earth can whiten them.

The assistants propped up in bed on their elbows; they had never seen anything like this before.

Something remarkable was going on. The unusual was happening right before their eyes:

Contrails.

Two of them.

Two lines of white steam high in the air streaking straight as two arrows in parallel flight high above the Judean desert moved from the south due north.

The two white lines in the sky were aerodynamic condensation trails caused by saturated air being cooled as it passed over the surfaces of warm, rapidly moving objects and creating water vapor.

The Rabbi, intent on his prayers, did not appear to notice this phenomena but his friends certainly did. They sat up staring -- too amazed to feel frightened -- as the white lines in the sky raced toward Mount Hermon.

At first, all the assistants could see was the majestic boil of water vapor scribing lines in the sky -- and those lines moved straight this way. Then, at the point of each line, a black dot could be discerned moving ever closer. Those two black dots in the sky suddenly defined themselves as men!

Human beings moving through air as smoothly as a ship cuts through water or a child slides across a sheet of winter ice.

None other than Moses and Elijah stepped from the air onto the mountain top!

They stopped with such control that their halting did not even raise a puff of dust. The Rabbi stepped

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forward to meet the prophets and they embraced, greeting each other gladly as familiar friends.

Shreds of conversation drifted from the glowing party to the stunned assistants. The dazzling trio talked about, "the way he must take and the end he must fulfill in Jerusalem".

"It is inevitable that the Son of man should suffer, be utterly repudiated at Jerusalem," someone said.

"He must suffer many things and be rejected of the elders and of the chief priests and scribes and be killed and after three days rise again," said another voice.

Utterly flustered at what was going on, Cephus blurted, "Master, it is good for us to be here. We're going to pitch three tents, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elias..."

He didn't know what he was saying.

Things got stranger yet!

A cloud, a luminous cloud, a cloud uplifted by the sun's last rays, a cloud filled with light, revealing, yet concealing the heavenly visitants -- This cloud overshadowed them and a voice came out of the cloud saying, "This is my beloved Son. He pleases me. Listen to him."

Then suddenly there was no voice, no cloud, no glowing clothes, no heavenly visitors on the mountain.

The disciples saw one person only.

"Tell no man what you have seen here", he said, "Not yet".

"Behold, we go up to Jerusalem and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests and unto the scribes and they shall condemn him to death and shall deliver him to the Gentiles and they shall mock him and shall scourge him and shall spit upon him and

shall kill him -- and the third day, he shall rise again," he said.

How could anyone sleep after that?

The party started slowly back down the slope of Hermon to where the other assistants waited camping in a field with a crowd of other people including Ezra, Sarah and Benjamin -- with Tock still astride his soul.

And of what they had seen and heard on the mountain, Cephus, James and John never breathed a word -- not in those days.

After the tranquility of the mountain top, the scene at the foot of Mount Hermon seethed with boiling chaos.

The Rabbi's trip from Capernaum the week before had drawn a crowd of seekers; some sought spiritual enlightenment, others simply sought thrills. In addition to the people from Capernaum, a large group had come out of Caesarea Philippi. These joined a sizable contingent of people who followed the Rabbi all over the country side on a regular basis.

This latter group -- including his inner circle of assistants -- had pitched tents in an orchard of pear trees to the side of the Mount Hermon/Caesarea Philippi road. Travelers in the early days usually carried tents, a heritage of their Bedouin ancestry, to save the expense of staying in inns, which were not to be found except at main intersections anyhow. The more affluent among the travelers sported carpeted pavilions, Bedouin tents of several rooms, capped by colored banners; the poorer people draped blankets over tree branches and tied them down to break the wind and provide a little privacy.

A number of vendors from the city also had set up tents in the orchard. Knowledge that the crowds would be hungry had attracted these businessmen; various

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hawkers yelled the virtues of their products from their tent doors. The aroma of fish frying in olive oil permeated the air around the camp.

Women strolled through the milling crowd selling sugarfigs and other candied fruit from baskets balanced on their heads. Two jugglers tossed handfuls of colored disks back and forth while a third gathered up coins the crowds threw in appreciation. Legless beggars -- army veterans mutilated in some forgotten war -- crawled about seeking alms. Children darted about among the legs of the adults chasing round and round in a game of screaming tag. Clumps of gray bearded old men clustered at tent doors sipping spiced wine, munching hot pita bread and discussing Roman taxes, annoying wives, ungrateful children, sports and theology.

Permanent followers of the Rabbi circulated in the crowd giving blessings to sick and crippled pilgrims, answering questions, accepting donations, settling disputes and telling interested folks about the Rabbi's exploits.

They were followed by gaggles of scribes, religious writers, who jotted notes with iron pens on wax-covered wooden tablets. These reporters pushed into every conversation and shouted their own questions drowning out the voices of seekers in the crowd.

"What about that demon boy last night?" some shouted. "Why couldn't you cure him?"

"What about the money you collect in the baskets? That's not tax free is it?" shouted others.

"What's the real story about those pigs in Gennesaret? Is it true that you people butchered them and ate the forbidden meat?"

"Why does the Rabbi advocate tearing down the Temple and rebuilding it; that doesn't make sense?"

"Is it true that this supposed demon boy travels with your troop all the time? I heard that your Rabbi put on this same show in Bethsaida last month -- blind shills seeing, lame walking, deaf hearing, demons fleeing. How come the trick didn't work last night?"

Crowd noised drowned out the flustered replies as the harried assistants tried to answer this volley of questions.

Far above this carnival scene unseen by the dims, brights and flickers alike, Longdong, Gaylord and Stud circled relishing the discomfort of the assistants. The three demons envied Tock for the way he had thwarted the prayers, incantations and rituals of the frustrated men, yet that same envy made them want to see their rival from Capernaum get his comeuppance.

These conflicting emotions peppered their conversation as they surveyed the crowd, hovering on the thermal created by the field full of white tents.

"I almost croaked when Tock made the little boy grab that fat one's beard," Gaylord said. "Big oaf didn't expect the strength we have when we get a toehold. If it had been me riding the boy, I'd have twisted that religious prig's head off -- made him look like John the Baptist's twin brother."

"I liked it when the kid clawed his dear mother's robe," Longdong said. "Old Bartholomew's eyes almost popped out when he saw that flash of tit; couldn't keep his mind on his whine for What's-His-Name to exorcise Tock. I've noticed that a lot of pious frauds step so high that they stumble over tits all the time."

The thermal weakened as the morning sun grew hotter and the air stiller; the three demons had to flap energetically just to maintain altitude. Scalding sweat dripped from their armpits, so they maneuvered east a bit so that the drops would fall to pollute a stone cistern where most of the crowd drew water that day.

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"I thought Tock had had it when that nerd Thaddaeus anointed the boy with oil and laid hands on him. If I hadn't reminded Thad about that soldier who shoved him at the festival last year, I think he would have cast Tock out on his ass. Tock owes me ... Ut-Oh, get ready for the grand finale; here comes Ol' What's-His-Name's bright-eyed boy. You can bet our side is going to nail this one too."

The crowd surged forward when they spotted the Rabbi and his three friends walking down the slope of the ridge. A group of assistants ran toward him. People shouted one thing and then another.

Ezra had been watching the slope all morning hoping against hope that the main man might be able to do something his assistants had failed to do. He raced ahead of the mob, outrunning even the fleetest assistant and threw himself at the Rabbi's feet clutching the hem of his robe.

"Lord, have mercy on my son for he is a lunatic and sore vexed," Ezra panted out of breath. "He has a dumb spirit and it's tearing him up. He foams at the mouth. His jaws lock, he gnashes his teeth, he can't eat and he's pinning away. His teeth grind till they crack. Then he freezes ridged."

"Look," Ezra cried, "We brought him to your assistants. We begged them but they couldn't do anything for him. Can you? He's our only child."

The rabbi sighed.

His shoulders sagged., "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you?," he said.

The assistant's looked a bit sheepish at this remark and backed off a bit.

"Bring the boy to me," the Rabbi said.

Two of the assistants helped Sarah bustle Benjamin to the forefront. They began loosening the thongs from around his blanket cocoon. Benjamin looked at the Rabbi and as soon as his hands were loose he began to tear gnashes in his own face and wallowed on the ground rolling over and over, foaming at the mouth.

The crowd backed away to watch from a safe distance.

"How long has this been going on?" asked the Rabbi.

"He's just a little boy," Ezra said. "Sometimes the thing inside him throws him into fire or into deep water like it's trying to burn him or drown him..."

"If you can do anything," Ezra sobbed, "Have compassion on us and help us, please. Please..."

"If I can do anything," the Rabbi mused, "Anything can be done by the person who believes. All things are possible to him that believeth.

Straightway the father of the child cried out and said with tears, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!

The Rabbi glanced around, seeming for the first time to notice the thickening crowd of curious bystanders.

Speaking softly, compellingly, he rebuked the foul spirit. "Toxic spirit, dumb and deaf, I Am the one who commands thee. Come out! Enter him no more!"

Tock locked eyes with the Rabbi.

In the demon's sight the man glowed white hot. Light, glaring light unseen by the crowd but all too visible to the demon, streamed from him.

What chance has any darkness against any light?

Tock unhooked both talons from the boy's skull and swung them up to shield his own eyes. The violent

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motion knocked the little boy sprawling. Tock screamed and screamed as the light seared his eyes; he could not look on that face and live. The heat of the light of the world scorched Tock's wings; even if he had a high place to launch from, he would not have been able to fly.

Even his scales felt suddenly sunburned, suddenly tender.

To escape that awful light, Tock scuttered along on his belly in the dust of the ground, slithering through the unseeing crowd, fleeing for the darkness of Pan's cave. As he escaped, he yelped with his tail stinger tucked up between his legs like a stray dog kicked for foraging in a garbage heap.

No one in the crowd saw or heard the demon; all eyes were on the boy.

He twisted on the ground, snapping, foaming, contorting. Benjamin arched his back so much that at first he balanced with both the top of his head and the soles of his feet touching the ground. He began kicking in spastic circles pivoting on his head in the dust. His eyes squeezed so tight shut that drops of blood appeared on his face. Then his body locked ridged and he collapsed in a motionless, twisted heap. Totally limp. Bloodless. Pale.

Sarah began wailing.

"He's dead!"

"Did you see that?"

"My God," people whispered.

The Rabbi knelt down and took the boy's hand. He lifted him up and delivered him to Ezra and Sarah.

"Mommie, I'm hungry. Can I have some sugarfigs. Just one please," Benjamin said

The crowd were all amazed at the mighty power of God and while they were still stunned with wonder, the Rabbi said, "Let these sayings sink down into your ears: for the son of man shall yet be delivered into the hands of men."

But no one understood what he was talking about.

After the turmoil had quieted down a bit, the assistants drew the Rabbi aside and asked, "Why couldn't we do that? Why couldn't we cast the toxic spirit out?"

"Because of your unbelief," he said. "The truth is, if ye have faith even if it's as little as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, remove hence to yonder place, and it shall remove. Nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit usually, this kind of demon goeth out only by prayer and fasting".

The Rabbi told them to break camp; they would be marching directly from Mount Hermon to Jerusalem.

As they were packing things up for the trip that afternoon, some of the assistants began arguing about which one of them should be the top man in Jerusalem; they fully expected their Rabbi would be crowned king when they reached the capitol.

The Rabbi overheard the argument and called Benjamin, who had been playing leapfrog with some other boys, over to him.

The assistants and the crowd fell silent. What would the Rabbi do to the boy this time? To everyone's surprise, the Rabbi hefted Ben onto his knee and began speaking about how his followers needed to become childlike, trusting as children.

" Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were cast into the sea," the Rabbi said. "Into hell! Into the fire that never

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shall be quenched where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched!"

He turned from the crowd and began speaking privately with Sarah, suggesting that she might want to cook Ben some fresh chicken soup when she got him home, and to make him go back to school, and to not play in caves.

As soon as the disciples were ready, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Gaylord, Stud and Longdong were waiting at the cave mouth when Tock tried to sneak in. They clapped him on the back, swacking his sunburn, in mock good-natured greetings.

"What's the matter, feel a little... Light-headed," Stud teased.

"Out of my way, you cretins" snarled Tock, escaping their mauling and diving into the dark pool.

Not even the swamp ooze and slime of decayed vegetation at the deep bottom of the pit cooled his burning scales. Not even the sunless quiet of the cave's depths screened out the laughter, teasing and taunts of his competitors. Not even his direct encounter with light had brightened his outlook.

Tock's hatred seethed.

Bursting from the depths and thrashing to the surface of the water, Tock howled, bared his fangs and rushed at the three. He twisted Stud's tail, bit Longdong's neck and gouged Gaylord's face.

The trio, the august Caesarea Philippi Authority, the dignified CPAs, ran screeching and cursing from his fury. He chased them to the mouth of the cave.

"I'm gonna tell! I'm gonna tell the CCs," Gaylord shouted.

"Capernaum Council's got no say in this," Tock said. "That rabbi cheated; I wasn't expecting him to love that little boy. He doesn't fight fair. Look, I'm going to take this up with the JayCees; the Jerusalem Council has been squelching brights longer than any of the rest of us. The JayCees have experience with this sort of thing".

"You can't go to Jerusalem, you idiot," Longdong said. "Your wings are singed. It will take months to shed that skin and grow your next."

Tock gathered his shredded dignity and stamped out of the cave.

"There's the road, right down there," he said. "If I have to, I'm going to walk to Jerusalem! I'm gonna put out that guy's light!"

Tock stomped down the road beginning his journey mumbling.

Stud, Gaylord and Longdong watched him go.

"Looser!" Stud yelled after him.

"Failure!" shouted Longdong.

"On you a millstone necklace is going to look good. Most becoming even," Gaylord called.

Tock didn't even look back.

"I'm gonna see that Son of What'zit crucified! Nail his ass to a cross!" he grumbled, "Then we'll see just how bright he is!"

RATS!



THE HAND OF THE ALMIGHTY SMITES A SEA GULL

More real life around our house

**by
John Cowart**

The car ahead of us sideswiped a sea gull.

Stunned, the big gray and white bird with the long curved beak spiraled to the side of busy Lem Turner road. It fluttered and squawked at the evening rush hour traffic speeding past, rushing into downtown Jacksonville.

"Look, Daddy, it's hurt," cried Eve, my pre-teen daughter, from the rear seat. "Stop. Let's help it," she said, her voice sounding anguished with deep Christian compassion.

What do I know about doctoring sea gulls? I ignored her and kept driving.

Donald, my teenaged son, beside me in the front seat, had been memorizing Bible verses at Sunday School; he quoted Scripture at me. "The righteous man regardeth the life of his beast," he said.

That's from Proverbs or Exodus, I think.

"God knows every sparrow that falls -- that means sea gulls too doesn't it, Dad," one of the kids said. How come my kids only remember the Bible verses that inconvenience me?

I kept driving.

Patricia, my youngest daughter, slept sprawled across her side of the back seat. I'd taken the kids out to the Jacksonville Zoo all day and I was hot and tired. I wanted to get home and take a nap too. I'd had just about all the family togetherness I could stand for one day.

But as I passed by on the other side of the injured bird in the road, I dimly recalled some preacher or the other from the past saying, "God has no hands but your hands to help those in need."

Sure. Is the Creator of the Universe helpless? If He wanted me to help that bird, He'd have made me a veterinarian, wouldn't He?

All sorts of excuses blossomed in my mind. But no vet was on the spot, we were.

Ok. Ok. I understand, I thought. No hands but mine. God can't get along without my help. Besides, what example am I setting for the kids?

I circled the block and cruised back to where the wounded sea gull flapped beside the road snapping at passing cars.

How do you catch an angry sea gull?

Can sea gulls bite people?

We were about to find out.

Eve crept in from its right side. Donald crept in from the left. I stood in front of the bird to block its escape. One...Two...Three -- the Cowarts lunged.

The sea gull also lunged.

Somebody -- I won't say who -- flinched.

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Hey, it was a big bird rushing right at me.

Naturally, the gull got away.

Terrified, the huge white bird ran flapping out into six lanes of rush hour traffic. A blue Toyota van ran right over the top of it! Miraculously the bird appeared to be hurt no worse than it was at first. It scurried to the far side of the highway.

The unrelenting Cowarts, intent on helping, dodged traffic and reached the other side of the road too. We were on a mission from God.

We herded the bird into a corner of a chain link fence, grabbed it and carried it back to our car.

Success! Wouldn't God be just tickled pink over the hand we were giving Him in helping His poor wounded creature?

Maybe so. But sea gulls are ungrateful birds.

This one expressed his (or her) opinion of our help by snapping at us with that wicked beak, squawking loudly, and by doing that other thing sea gulls do best. Fortunately we were foresighted enough to wrap the bird in a plastic grocery bag so the car didn't get messed up.

Now that the gull was safe, we decided to free it down near the Ribault River Bridge. But ... after we had already let it go, we reconsidered. Maybe the bird might be better off in our own back yard for a day or two.

So we caught the bird again and put it back into the grocery bag.

This did not make the sea gull happy.

Once home, we released the bird in the back yard. Then...

See, we have these three cats.

But this bird had tail feathers longer than our biggest cat. Surely the size of the bird and that wicked pecking beak would intimidate ...

Ha! Stupid cats. All three of them stalked the huge sea gull round and round our backyard. The orange kitten bravely pounced on its back and the sea gull whacked it with a wing to send it reeling. The other cats licked their lips and crouched waiting their chance to attack.

We had to save it from those vile cats, didn't we?

God has no hands but our's to help, so once again the Cowart family herded the sea gull to a corner of a fence. The bird poked its head through the wire -- and got stuck.

Before we could free it, Sheba, our black lab, charged out of the house and immediately decided this flapping intruder was the bugler we keep her to guard us against. She galloped up to the sea gull, grabbed it in her mouth and ran as the cats loped after their stolen prey.

My youngest daughter snagged Sheba's tail and tugged the dog to a screeching halt. She pried Sheba's mouth open and freed the bird.

Maybe God has no hands but our's. Maybe He does need our help in doing things to help the helpless. Perhaps He does use Christians for His work...

But God's sea gull did not feel welcome in the Cowart household. Perhaps we should take it back to the river and let God take care of it Himself.

Again we captured the bird. Again we stuffed it in the grocery bag. Again we loaded it in the car. Again we drove to the river. Again, we freed the bird...

About that time, Skunk, a toothless old stray dog that has roamed our neighborhood for years, saw us at the dock. The friendly stray noticed that we were doing something interesting with a grocery bag. Food? He ran

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over. He saw the sea gull. He pounced on it and began gumming feathers with wag tail joy.

Donald quickly shooed Skunk away and nudged the sea gull out into the water. It paddled rapidly away to join a raft of other sea gulls floating on the Ribault River. Apparently nothing had been injured more than the bird's dignity.

God must really care for sea gulls.

We had seen this poor terrified bird run over by a Toyota, captured by giant humans, stuffed into a plastic bag, stalked by cats, tangled in a fence, mouthed by a black lab, driven all over creation and pounced on by a stray -- all in the name of the Cowart's "helping" God, serving Him, trying to be His hands on earth. Odd, isn't it?

God does indeed protect His creatures. But often it seems that He has to protect them from the hands of those intent on helping Him.

But doesn't God need our help? After all, we are the children of God, aren't we?

Yes, we are. But I suspect that the term "children of God" might well be translated ""The Four-Year-Olds of God".

Ever have a four-year-old "help" you paint a wall, bake a cake, or wash the car? You let your children give you a hand at things in order to help them grow, not because you need their hands to get the job done.

I suspect that God gives us the privilege of serving Him not for what it does for Him, or even for what our bungling efforts may do to help others, but for what helping does for us.

Of course God has hands of His own; you can recognize them by the nail scars. His mighty hand is in the shaking of an earthquake, the twisting of a whirlwind, the roaring of thunder, the hatching of an

egg, the opening of a flower, the crashing of breakers. The Scripture says His mighty hand is over all His works...

God is not feeble and helpless. Certainly He can manage to get along without us. The Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth!

Yet, sometimes He does allow you and me the privilege of helping, of serving, of acting as His agents, of being His hands.

What a signal honor we have!

What a considerate God we worship!



THE FIG FACTOR

A true-life love story for Valentine's Day — or any day

by
John Cowart

The monster craves Fig Newtons.

Nothing else satisfies him.

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Yes, a monster lurks inside me. When I get upset, he bangs around just inside my left eyebrow, battering emotions, ripping giant dreams up by the roots and smashing hopes against the walls of my skull.

When he tires of his rampage, he sits brooding on my optic nerve munching manhole covers wishing that they were Fig Newtons. Only Fig Newtons can soothe the savage beast in my mind and in my marriage.

Why? Where did this craving for Fig Newtons come from?

When I was a boy, payday for my father fell on Fridays and every Friday night after my father cashed his check, he bought groceries for the coming week on his way home from work.

We lived for Fridays.

We may have eaten beans without bacon on Thursdays, but we always knew that everything would be all right come Friday night. Daddy would come home with two big sacks of groceries and prosperity would make its weekly return.

Sometimes he even managed to wrap his strong arms around three heavy bags at the same time. And carrying this enormous load of good things, he trudged the eight dusty blocks from the grocery store bringing us food and security. Dirty and sweaty from his day's work at the foundry, he would appear at the end of our street like a glorious, dusty walking cornucopia.

My little brother and I watched for him and rushed to help carry the heavy bags that final block. And every Friday, sticking out the top of one of the bags, garnished with stalks of celery and cushioned by rolls of toilet paper, protruded a family-sized package of Fig Newtons.

To me, Fig Newtons came to represent security.

The sight of the package spelled comfort. The smell of the freshly opened cookies still envelopes me with a sense of well-being. The taste of Fig Newtons assures me that no matter what's wrong with my world, "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." Even a lingering seed stuck between my teeth tells me that I am safe and prosperous.

Fig Newtons make me feel loved.

Remember that when I tell you that after a few years of marriage I made a strange and shocking discovery about my young wife.

At the time, we were having a rough go of things. I was out of work. The baby screamed with colic every night. Ginny's period was late. And Southern Bell had disconnected our phone.

I loved my wife and wanted to do something to ease her worries and burdens. I wanted to comfort and reassure her. I took 79 cents out of our last worldly dollar and bought her a box of Fig Newtons.

She stood at the kitchen sink scouring pans when I came in.

"What's in the bag," she asked.

"A token of my undying love, esteem and affection," I replied with a grin of self-satisfaction. "A gift calculated to bring joy into your humdrum existence. Accept my gift and I'll take you away from all this."

She dried her hands with a dish towel and answered, "I'll go away with you if you'll promise that we'll never again dine by candlelight."

"Why not?" I answered, "Candlelight is supposed to be so romantic."

"It is. But the light bill came today, and if it isn't paid within five days..."

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"Never fear, Honey. Open your present and don't worry, be happy -- at least for now," I said.

She tore open the bag and the smile faded from her face. "Oh John," she said, "I can't stand Fig Newtons -- the seeds get in my teeth and drive me crazy. You didn't spend our last dollar on this, did you?"

It's a terrible thing to see a monster cringe but that's what I saw when she said those words. The blasphemous thought, "she can't stand Fig Newtons" ricocheted around my brain. Like an alarmed frantic bird trapped on a screen porch, that thought fluttered past my frontal lobe and the Monster snatched it by its long neck and jerked it down. He stripped off the feathers as the bird squawked, "She rejects my Fig Newtons. She rejects my offering of love, assurance and security. She rejects me!"

In bed later that night, Ginny asked me to scratch her back. But I refused, still angry at her.. Furthermore, scratching someone's back to me conjures up an image of shoddy business dealings -- you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. Another image back scratching brings to my mind is hairy orangutans in a cage grooming each other for fleas.



So we lay apart in bed in an uneasy, hostile silence while inside me my monster kept muttering,

"You ought to have known it would never work out. Half all marriages end in divorce. Her family doesn't like you. You can't please everybody; hell, you can't please anybody. You can't please her. Her family..."

Suddenly, my monster pricked up his ears and leaped to his feet shouting to my brain, "Her family! Remember what you saw at her family's that day!"

Indeed I remembered. It was Christmas time when we visited Ginny's parents. Her father came home from a sour contract negotiation clearly upset. As soon as he walked in the door, he stripped his coat, tie and shirt, and strolled into the kitchen in his T-shirt. Ginny's mother hugged him, and as they stood there talking over the problems of the day, she kept her arms around him scratching his back.

The startling revelation of this memory made me bolt upright in bed.

Then I asked my wife a question I'd never asked her before, a question next in importance to the marriage proposal itself:

"Ginny," I asked, "What are the things that make you feel loved?"

She thought for a while and then replied in a whisper, "To have my back scratched. When I was a little girl, I saw that when either Mom or Dad was troubled, the other would scratch the troubled one's back as they talked things over. I suppose I equate having my back scratched with being loved."

That's how we discovered the "fig factor" in our marriage.

As Fig Newtons are to me, so back scratching is to her.

RATS!



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We may be one flesh as the Bible says but we are different people with different tastes. The things that make me feel cared for and loved are different from the things that make her feel that way. Having her back scratched gives my wife the same sense of security and well-being that fig Newtons give me -- But I would never have guessed that if I had not asked her, "What makes you feel loved?".

But answering such a question is harder than asking it. When it was Ginny's turn to ask me what made me feel loved that night in bed, I felt a great reluctance to reveal my emotional ties to Fig Newtons. It seemed such a foolish thing (a grown man hung up on Fig Newtons) and I feared ridicule even from the one person in this world whom I most love and trust. But the intimacy of her revelation called for one in return from me. So I hesitantly admitted to having such a vulnerability -- I told her how I felt about Fig Newtons.

She didn't laugh.

She understood all too well and started apologizing for having refused my gift of cookies just a few hours before. I too had a lot of apologizing to do for shrugging her off that evening and all the countless times she had wanted me to scratch her back.

As we snuggled in the tender darkness, we discovered four things about what we came to call the "fig factor" in our marriage:

First, there are certain things, actions or expressions that convey a connotation of security and love to each person.

Next, that for each of us these things are different.

Then, we discovered we felt reluctant to talk about these things.

Finally, we realized that the only way to learn about your beloved's "figs" is to deliberately seek it out and ask about it -- specifically to ask, "What makes you feel loved?"

The more we talked, the more we realized we weren't to take blame for our insensitivities.

Lovers are not mind readers.

I had been hurt when Ginny refused my gift of cookies, but she had no idea of what I was really offering when I extended that bag to her.

Unless I take the trouble to ask my partner, "What makes you feel loved?" how can I express love which the other person will recognize as love? Sometimes a partner will drop hints about what represents love and security to them. But their hints aren't always picked up. That's what happened to Ginny and me. There were times when it angered me that Ginny wanted her back scratched. Once I even snapped, "If you're so itchy, why don't you take a bath?"

I didn't know that her itch was actually a craving for attention and love. And then, just that evening, instead of offering her her own kind of "Fig Newtons", I had offered mine. When they were rejected, I wondered how she could be so heartless as not to respond to my love.

Over the years, my wife and I have found that we each have many different "figs". They vary in the degree of comfort they communicate and they change from time to time as new things develop between us.. It

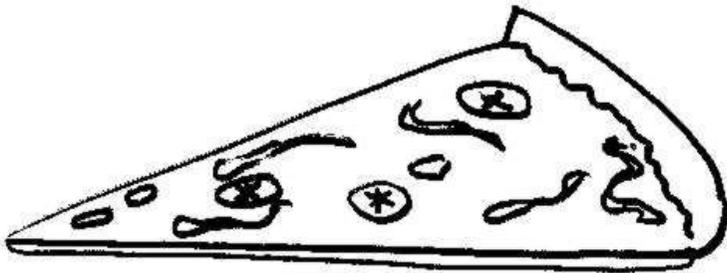
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may be something as varied as my taking her out to dinner or her starching and ironing my shirts the way I like them.

It is through such actions as these that we say, "I love you" in a way that the other person understands.

By asking your partner what it is that he or she likes, and then going all out to satisfy that need, you too can get your loving message across.

Ginny and I still regard the night we discovered the "fig factor" as the second most important night of our marriage. On that night I learned to scratch her back -- and that next morning we had Fig Newtons for breakfast.



I GET THESE URGES OR HOW TO TELL GOD FROM PIZZA

*Some thoughts about Divine guidance
by
John Cowart*

Sometimes I get these urges.

Sometimes in the middle of the night, an urge will wake me.

You know what I mean?

Well, maybe you don't. I'd better explain.

Urges, strong feelings that I want to do something, that I ought to do a certain thing, that I NEED to do it!

Does that make it clearer? No? Maybe a specific example will help:

Once about 3 a.m., I woke up suddenly knowing that my uncle and aunt were in grave danger!

I don't know how I knew this, I just did.

I woke my wife and told her. I felt that God had warned me in a dream about my uncle's danger. We prayed for their protection and decided that I'd better drive over to their house right now and rescue them. I threw on my clothes and drove rapidly across town to their home where I found...

Everybody safe and well and sound asleep!

Odd, isn't it?

What kind of mind game was God playing with me to mislead me like that? Or perhaps, God was not leading me at all? Maybe this urge had nothing to do with God's guidance. Maybe it was the result of the pizza and chocolate ice cream I'd eaten that evening.

Yet there have been other times when I felt the same sort of urge but it did seem as things worked out that God may have been prompting me.

Once when I drove an over-the-road truck, I felt God would have me turn north off the main route across Ohio. No reason given. I debated it a while then started north away from the Interstate. Drove a few miles. Nothing happened. Decided this was dumb and pulled into a truck stop for supper before heading back to where I belonged.

RATS!

While I was eating another driver walked up to my table, "Look, Buddy," he said, "I've got to talk to somebody. Could I sit here and talk to you?"

He had been driving along a different road, crying over his family problems as he drove, when he felt an urge to leave his route and come to the intersection where we meet. Neither of us even knew there was a truck stop on that road.

He left that place as a Christian with hope. He planned to go back to his wife. He said our conversation had helped.

I suspect the urges to turn off the road which the other driver and I both felt were indeed urges from God.

In both of these incidents from years ago the urges I experienced felt exactly the same.

In the first case, maybe the urge I thought had come from God really came from the pizza; in the second case, truck stops are where trucks stop, nothing miraculous about drivers meeting there.

How do you tell the difference between God's guidance and undigested pizza? Does He really guide us nowadays and how?

Here are a few guidelines I find helpful in trying to follow God's guidance:

First, I acknowledge that God has priority. The Creator certainly has the right to direct and expect obedience from his created beings. He not only made us but he redeemed us with his own blood. What other boss can say that? He has double right to direct us.

Second, I believe that he has given me life much as an art teacher might give a canvas to a student artist and told me to paint my own picture on it. I am responsible for what goes in the picture though he's always available for consultation and correction.

Third, he has posted a few absolute laws on the studio wall concerning how I am to work. For instance, I'm forbidden to dip my brush in the next guy's paint jar. If I get an urge to do anything which I know is morally wrong -- contrary to the clearly posted rules -- then I know for sure that is not in accord with the Master's will.

Fourth, I believe that the Bible is God's word and that principals I discover when I read it regularly guide me in what to do in specific situations in my marriage, my business, my recreation, and my life in general.

Now the Bible is a book; it is not a lucky charm. Opening it at random and pointing to a verse to live today by makes as little sense as picking six random numbers to bet your money on -- and it produces just as few winners.

Fifth, I listen carefully to the counsel of other people. God can indeed speak through your husband, boss, mother-in-law, children or pastor.

When my wife says, "John, that's the dumbest thing you've ever thought of", it surprises me how often she really does speak with the very voice of God.

Like any earthly father, our heavenly Father sometimes tell his children to go outside and play. It's fine with him if you choose to play football, basketball or duck-duck-goose. He just wants us to have fun. I suspect that most of the career decisions we agonize over fall into this category

God also guides us by giving us clear-cut duties; there needs be no special revelation to tell you to take care of your aging parents, to pay your bills, to feed the hungry, to do your job faithfully, to tend your children, to treat your employees generously, to pray for government officials, to feed and water the dog -- such things are givens.

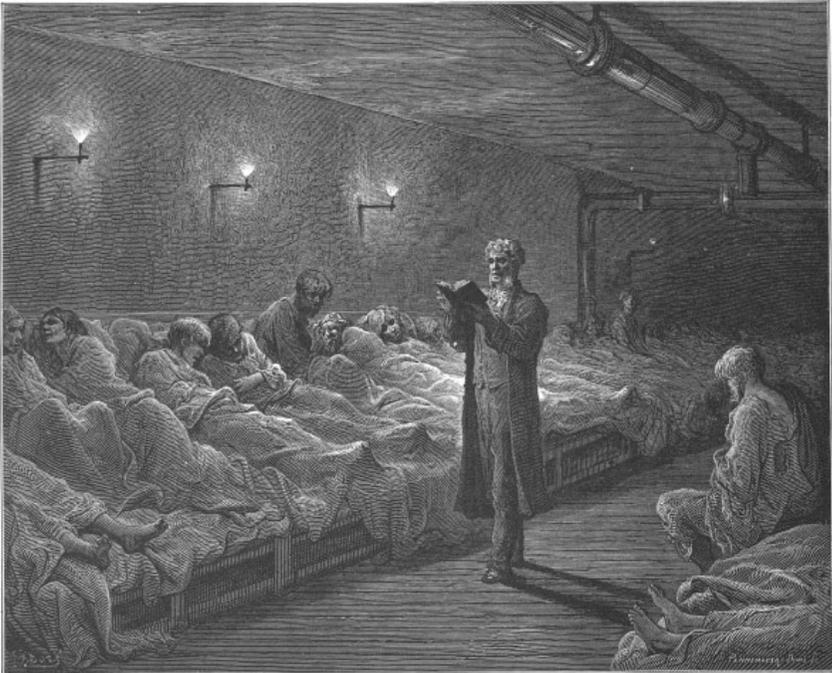
God guides us through circumstances; through opening doors, through closing doors, through dreams in the night, through light in the day.

RATS!

Occasionally, rarely perhaps, I think he even sends urges -- but watch those carefully unless your much more spiritually attuned than I am. It would be a shame to mistake curdling pizza for divine guidance.

The best thing to know about God's guidance is that he loves you and you are sure to like where He's guiding you to!

That's fundamental.



SCRIPTURE READER IN A NIGHT REFUGE

Scripture Reading in a Night Refuge by Gustave Dore, 1872
Or
My poor family endures my leading them in devotions

WHERE TWO OR THREE...

An Essay for Thanksgiving and every meal
by John Cowart

Family altar!

Once, the picture that sprang into my mind at those words was that of an Old Testament patriarch cutting open a squirming goat on a pile of smoking stones while the patriarch's numerous offspring knelt in devout adoration like plaster shepherds in a nativity scene.

Now the words "family altar" -- that's a time of worship as a family in your own home --bring to mind a rich, warm, fun-filled, pleasant experience with my wife and children.

It wasn't always like that at our house.

When we began a family altar, I expected my five children (then ages 2 months to 19 years) to be still and reverent.

Not a chance!

They wiggled, squirmed, kicked each other under the table, argued over who was to pray first, and acted like energetic, healthy children, I tried to force them into a reverent demeanor and only achieved sullen sulking. Perhaps children did not need the same kind of concentration that we adults need in order to absorb devotional material. When I realized that my stern insistence on silence created only tension and resentment, I relaxed letting them color and such during devotions. And amazingly they thrived in this more casual atmosphere.

Another feature I needed to back down on was strictly scheduling the time for our devotions. I thought that we should have them every night without fail. But one Saturday, Donald, aged 6, observed, "No use having prayer tonight. Jesus is probably watching the Muppet Show."

We skipped devotions to watch the Muppets.

RATS!

Since then, if we happen to miss a night, it's no tragedy. The fact is that we have grown to enjoy our devotions so much that we hate to miss this time together. I view that as a mark of success, and here are some of the things that have contributed to that success:

First off, the only way to start family devotions is to start.

You can establish a tradition quickly.

For instance, if you watch one television program for three weeks and then try to switch to another channel the fourth week, your children will protest, "But we ALWAYS watch that program!" The same principle holds true for a family altar; it also quickly becomes a habit once you start. The best time for us is after supper before anyone leaves the table. Chose a time and start.

Every member of our family takes part, no one is strictly audience. Each of us has a turn picking a song, reading the Bible, holding the baby, or leading the prayers. Our toddler has the privileged responsibility of bringing the Bible from the desk to the table. The best remedy for boredom in devotions is active participation.

Variety is another key ingredient to successful family devotions. While the basic structure of our devotions remains consistent, we introduce many changes into that structure. Occasionally we walk to a nearby park after supper and hold our devotions seated on the grass.

Sometimes we use devotional time for a family conference where we discuss burning practical issues such as conservation of toilet tissue, cleaning of bedrooms, or cost-of-living adjustments in allowances.

Occasionally we vary the format of our devotional time by having a question night. Each person answers three suitable Bible questions for the reward of a special dessert. The questions range from "Who built the Ark?"

for our smallest child to "Explain the meaning of celebrating communion."

Sometimes we reverse roles, and each person gets to ask me questions. My most common answer is "I don't know." But question nights give all of us a chance to think, to express ourselves, to communicate.

Although this concept may offend devotional purists, at least once a month we have "Joke Night". After a brief prayer, each member of the family gets to tell three jokes. If nothing else, this practice teaches parents the virtue of patience. Eve, aged 4, has told "Why did the chicken cross the road?" 87 consecutive times. Laughter and joy belong at every family's table; fun makes the more serious elements of devotion even more special.

We have found that portions of Scripture filled with action are best suited to our needs. The secret of making children want to hear more is keeping the passage short.

Your family will read an amazing amount of Scripture if you consistently cover a short passage each night. We prefer to read all the way through complete books, but other families may like to skip around. Also we prefer to read from the Living Bible but learn our memory work from the King James Version.

Since we started devotions our entire family -- even Eve -- has more or less painlessly memorized the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, and Psalm 100; now we are working on the Ten Commandments. Keep it fun and pressure-free, and do only a little at a time every night.

Our children consider singing the most important feature of our devotions. Every night each person gets to pick one song for all of us to sing. Although Virginia and I encourage the more "meaty" hymns, we sing Christmas carols all year long and Sunday School motion songs are also nightly fare.

RATS!

Our prayers are complex and varied, but sometimes we fall into a rut. Recently I realized that we had been praying for a lot of sick friends when I asked Donald to pray for someone and he questioned, "Why pray for him? He's not sick." I don't want the kids to grow up thinking that you only pray when someone's sick, so we began emphasizing prayer for missions and thanksgiving.

I feel that it is important that each member of our family hear me pray for and give thanks for him or her by name. The only time I recall hearing my own father pray for me was the day I left home for college; that was a wonderful experience and I covet that same feeling for my children.

One recurring problem in our family prayers that we haven't decided what to do about revolves around -- "Lisa".

Lisa is the imaginary playmate of our four-year-old daughter. During prayer request time she solemnly informs us that we need to pray for "Lisa" because she's going into the hospital dying from cancer or she going to Africa as a missionary or she's pregnant! I'm not sure if praying for imaginary people is acceptable -- but we do it.

Come to think of it, I suspect a lot of the "real" troubles we all worry over in prayer are just as imaginary as Lisa.

Often appeals for donations and newsletters arrive in our mail from evangelical missionary organizations. When these come in, we read portions of them at devotions, pass the pictures around the table and use this matter as a springboard for discussion and prayer. then we post the brochures on the refrigerator door as a constant reminder to care.

For us, a more successful missionary endeavor has involved trying to follow our Lord's instruction in Luke 14:12-14

"When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbors... But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind".

We occasionally pick up hitchhikers, derelicts and others and invite them into our home for supper with us.

Because of this practice some great saints of God as well as some fascinating sinners have graced our table and joined in our devotions. Our visitors have enriched our meals, bringing us many blessings and opportunities for witness. Our children have not only met some truly magnificent saints who were in need, but have also seen the results of drug addiction and alcoholism firsthand at our own table. I hope they have also seen a small amount of the love of Christ lived as well as talked about in their own home.

According to the bumper sticker, "The family that prays together, stays together." Maybe so. But such a family also may have some real dog-and-cat fights at times.

Like all normal adults, my wife and I occasionally become angry with each other. It teaches me a tough lesson when I have to say, "Son, would you lead devotions tonight; I'm too mad to pray."

It's an experience in love to hear our little Jennifer pray, "Help Mama and Daddy not to be so grumpy."

Such experiences humble us in our own home.

They should.

But while they teach us humility, they also emphasize that Christ is in our everyday life and problems.

Every devotional time we have -- whether praying for missions or enjoying Joke Night -- removes the

RATS!

concept of family altar away from a quaint old-fashioned practice and reinforces its practical value to our family as we struggle to live as Christians in the modern world.

The above was a word picture of our family altar back in 1980.

Now that all our children have grown and gone to establish homes of their own, Ginny and I still maintain the practice of family altar we started over 25 years ago. Now it's not as elaborate as it used to be; it's just a matter of Scripture reading and prayer for us after supper most evenings. Much calmer than when the children were home.

That's ok.

But the prayer time I get the most out of, the one I look forward to, comes each morning before work.

Before we dress for the day, Ginny cuddles in my lap in an overstuffed chair, big enough to hold us both.. We pet and I hold her and stroke her hair. I give thanks for her and pray for her safety and for her to have as smooth a day as possible. We each pray silently as we kiss. It's often the highpoint of a hectic day.



Ruins of Nero's Paedagogium in Rome

THE UGLIEST PICTURE IN THE WORLD

Thoughts on the odd Easter picture on my office wall
by
John Cowart

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the Dearest and
Best
For a world of lost sinners was slain...
Oh, that old rugged cross so despised by the
world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above,
To bear it to dark Calvary.

Visitors to my office say the picture of Jesus above my desk is gross, obscene, disgusting, shocking, filthy, even blasphemous.

I treasure it.

To me it is the most meaningful religious picture I have ever seen. Archaeologists discovered the original on a wall in Rome.

After the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64, the Emperor Nero built a new palace which he named Domus Aurea, "The Golden House" on Palatine Hill

RATS!

northeast of the Coliseum site where some say Christians, accused of setting the fire, were fed to the lions.

The Roman writer Suetonius described Nero's magnificent palace:



"Its vestibule was large enough to contain a colossal statue of the Emperor a hundred and twenty feet high; and it was so extensive that it had a triple colonnade a mile long. There was a pond too, like a sea, surrounded with buildings to represent cities, besides tracts of country, varied by tilled fields, vineyards, pastures and woods, with great numbers of wild and domestic animals. In the rest of the house, all parts were overlaid with gold and adorned with gems and mother-of-pearl."

When Nero saw his new palace he said, "Good! Now at last I can live like a human being"!

On Palatine Hill close to "The Golden House" Nero also constructed a building called the Paedagogium. It housed imperial offices as well a school for servants and barracks rooms where palace guards lived while on duty.

The soldiers often scratched rough pictures and slogans, called graffiti, into the plaster walls of their barracks. In 1857, in the fourth room on the left of the entrance to the Paedagogium archaeologists discovered a number of these graffiti.

One of these pictures bears the inscription, "Alexamenos worships his God".

This graffito, now housed in Rome's Museo Kircheriano at the Collegion Romano, is the earliest known portrait of the Crucifixion, the earliest known picture of Christ.

It's a cartoon.

Archaeologists say it was drawn within 30 years of Christ's Resurrection.

The picture shows a small man, Alexamenos, praying with one arm extended toward our Savior suffering on the cross.

The cross appears to be a Tau Cross, one shaped like a capital T, with a title board on top.

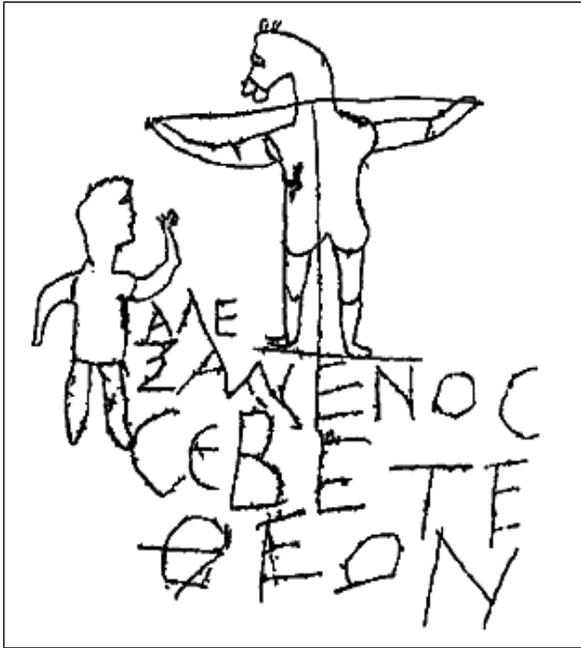
Our Lord's feet rest on a small shelf or crossbar, his body is taut, his arms stretch out on the hard wood of the cross with the nails fastening his hands visible.

In this crude picture, scratched on the barracks wall by some pagan soldier, Jesus has the body of a crucified man -- but the head of a Jackass!

RATS!



A photo of the Alexamenos graffiti



For clarity, here is a line drawing of the graffiti

Although this mocking picture offends modern Christian sensitivities, it would hold no shock for the writers of the Bible; they knew the cross as an emblem of shame.

The book of Hebrews speaks of "crucifying the Son of God... and subjecting him to **public disgrace**". It says " Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... endured the cross, scorning its **shame**".

Peter said, "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you; for the spirit of glory and of God rests on you: on their part **he is evil spoken of**, but on your part he is glorified."

Paul told the Galatians, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by **becoming a curse for us**, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree".

He told the people of Corinth, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing... Christ crucified: a **stumbling block** to Jews and **foolishness** to Gentiles".

RATS!

Shame! Disgrace! Foolishness! Stumbling block! Curse! -- these are the words Bible writers associated with crucifixion.

The Romans reserved crucifixion as a form of execution for runaway slaves, rebels, child molesters, thieves who knocked down old ladies, abusers of their parents -- the lowest criminal scum.

The Roman senator Marcus Tullius Cicero, a pagan, wrote, "Let even the name 'cross' be kept away not only from the bodies of the citizens of Rome but also from their thought, sight and hearing... It is a grave offense even to bind a Roman citizen, a crime to flog him, almost the act of parricide to put him to death: What shall I then call crucifying him? Language worthy of such an enormity -- It is impossible to find!"

Is it any wonder that the pagan soldier associated crucifixion with repugnance and ridicule and so drew his picture of Christ on the cross with the head of an ass?

Pagans often made such an association. Tertullian mentions another such picture of the God of the Christians -- this one shows a man with an ass's head; he wears a toga and carries a book.

Minucius Felix said, "Audio eos turpissime pecudis caput asini... venerari -- I hear they worship the very filthiest beast with the head of an ass".

The pagan word for the earliest Christians was Asinarii, which can be politely translated to mean "belonging to an ass".

Everyone -- Hebrew, Christian and pagan -- knew that crucifixion was a filthy disgusting ignominious way to die.

. So naturally, the pagan artist -- who wanted to tease his fellow soldier, to show repugnance and ridicule -- drew that picture of Alexamenos praying to Christ crucified.

Jesus himself linked the cross with utter degradation coming before resurrection:

He told his disciples, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. **They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him.** On the third day he will rise again."

Handed over. Mocked. Insulted. Spit on. Flogged -- Crucified.

Yes, Jesus knew what he was getting into; on the Mount of Transfiguration he said, "The Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life".

Then he continued: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory".

Suffering...rejection... torture... shame.

Who was Jesus to take such abuse? And why? Why, knowing what lay ahead, did he deliberately go to Jerusalem and crucifixion?

Who was this who was crucified?

Today many people seem to get hung up on the question Who Killed Jesus?

Might as well ask, Who Poisoned Socrates?

Such an esoteric question matters only to the very learned - or the very ignorant.

If Jesus is indeed the Lord of Life who rose from the dead, then why ask who killed him? After all the

RATS!

Scripture says he is the Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world.

The question that matters to everybody is, Who Is It That Was Crucified?

Why does that matter to everyone?

Because Jesus once said that a time is coming when all the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live! "A time is coming," he said, "When all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned".

Is that the truth?

I mean, if Jesus was just innocent victim of man's inhumanity to man that's too bad, but that's the way it goes.

Tough luck.

But what if he isn't just another dead guy?

What if he were something else altogether?

The author of Hebrews said, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son of God is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

The Apostle John said, "At the beginning God expressed himself. That personal expression, that word, was with God and was God, and he existed with God from the beginning. All creation took place through him, and none took place without him... He came into the world -- the world he had created -- and the world failed to recognize him. He came into his own creation, and

his own people would not accept him...So the word of God became a human being and lived among us."

Paul stated, "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form!"

What?

The owner of all things? The Creator of the Universe? The shine of God's glory? The exact replica of God? The sustainer of all things? The personal expression of God. The fullness of the Deity!

The Ancient of Days. The Lord of Hosts. The Prince of Peace. Wonderful Counselor. King of kings and Lord of lords. Light of lights. Very God of Very God. The owner of all things. The Creator of the Universe. The shine of God's glory. The exact replica of God. The sustainer of all things. The personal expression of God. The fullness of the Deity! -- These are the terms church and Scripture use in speaking of Jesus.

But isn't he honored today mostly for being a great teacher?

Certainly.

But what was it he taught?

"I am the light of the world," Jesus said.

"I am the door," Jesus said.

"I am the bread of life," Jesus said.

"I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus said.

"I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus said.

He said that he saw Satan fall from heaven before earth's creation. He said he existed before Abraham. He said that he had the authority to forgive sin. He said he was Lord of the Sabbath. He said that he and the Father are one and the same...

The Ancient of Days. The Lord of Hosts. The Prince of Peace. The Wonderful Counselor. King of kings

RATS!

and Lord of lords. Light of lights. Very God of Very God, begotten not made...

The night before Jesus was crucified, Caiaphas, the high priest, asked him:

"I charge you under oath by the Living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God."

"Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied, "But I say to all of you: In the future, you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Now, when Jesus walked around saying he was God, the Mighty One, the light of the world -- stuff like that -- Was he telling lies? Was he crazy? Was he telling the truth? Are these the only three possibilities?

We know that Jesus is the Son of God because of the things he said and because of the things he did.

So, what did he do?

Jesus once withered a fig tree. Jesus calmed a storm. Jesus walked on water. Jesus gave sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He fed the hungry, cured the sick, taught the ignorant, confused the proud -- whatever was wrong, Jesus made it right.

So, what did we do?

One of us betrayed him. One of us smashed a thorny crown on his head. One of us whipped him. One of us whacked him on the head with a stick. One of us stripped him naked. One of us held his arm down while another hammered a nail through his hand -- We crucified him.

And then, while he hung on the cross in agony, we mocked him:

"He 'saved' others but he can't save himself," one said.

"If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross," shouted another.

"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself," mocked one.

If you're such a Hot Shot, why don't you do something, they teased.

So Jesus did something...

He forgave them.

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," he said.

Yes indeed, the cross demonstrates God's forgiveness and love as well as Man's cruelty and shame.

Writing to the Philippians the Apostle Paul explained what had happened at Calvary:

"He, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal, but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as mortal man. And having become man, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, even to the extent of dying, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal."

Why?

Why did all this awful stuff happen?

Why did he suffer all this mockery, this humiliation, this shameful treatment?

If Jesus really was the Lord God Almighty come in the flesh and if he really had the power to call legions of angels to his rescue, why did he stay on the cross?

He'd have to be crazy to put up with all this if he didn't have to!

That's right!

You hit the nail on the head.

RATS!

God is crazy about us.

He endured all this for love of you and me.

Paul told the Romans why the Lord Christ endured the shame and mockery of the cross: "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

But how could mere men kill the Almighty God, the Prince and Source of All Life?

The God we pray to, The High and Holy One Who Inhabits Eternity, Who Dwells between the cherubim, Who has His throne in the heavens and the earth as his footstool, Who holds the entire universe, small as a hazel nut, in the hollow of His hand, The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Bright and Morning Star, Emmanuel, God with us -- Jesus -- somehow lowered himself, emptied himself, reduced himself to enter the world he had created:

Remember what Paul said? "He, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal, but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as mortal man. And having become man, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, even to the extent of dying, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal."

In the early days of computer technology, the machinery for a mainframe filled a whole floor in a building; then came the microprocessors with microchips so small that the same power can be found in a laptop... Well, God's love motivated him to sort of micro-process himself, to condensed himself down so he could squeeze into this world to get to where the problem was -- that's us.

In his essay "*The Grand Miracle*" C.S. Lewis uses the analogy of a diver to illustrate the idea of God's

entering the world to save sinners -- what theologians call the Incarnation:

“ One has the picture of a diver, stripping off garment after garment, making himself naked, then flashing for a moment in the air, and then down through the green, and warm, and sunlit water into the pitch black, cold freezing water, down into the mud and slime, then up again in the green and warm and sunlit water, and then at last out into the sunshine, holding in his hand the dripping thing he went down to get”.

Down. Down. Down to the very bottom to get us -- that's the Incarnation; then up, up, up, back to where he came from -- that's the Resurrection!

"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father".

Yet all the shame, degradation, filth and mockery we subjected him to -- like unruly, spoiled, vicious brats pounding on a sofa cushion -- hardly left a dent, except for the nail prints still in his hands when he arose.

So, do you understand why I treasure the picture above my desk? Why I see such glowing beauty in the awful thing?



You see, God has no shame.

For love, there's virtually nothing he won't do.

He loves us and He wants you and me for himself, for his kingdom...

And he'll go to any lengths to get us, to make us princes and princesses in that kingdom.

RATS!

Computer Links Related To the
Alexamenos graffiti:

http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/alex_graffito.htm

http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/2_ch06.htm

http://www.ukans.edu/history/index/europe/ancient_rome/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Italy/Lazio/Roma/Rome/.Texts/Lanciani/LANARD/5*.html



THERE IS HOPE FOR CAVEMEN

Some thoughts for our daily grind when things turn nasty
by
John Cowart

The Holy Bible says quite a lot about cavemen

By definition a caveman is a person who lives in a cave.

The purpose of this article is to show from the Scripture that there is hope for cavemen.

This hope needs to be demonstrated because to be a caveman is a terribly depressing state for anyone.

Caves are dark, full of shadows, and inhabited by bats, roaches, lizards and other vermin. No one should have to live in a cave, but for a caveman this dreary habitation represents his final refuge from a hostile world. While caves make wonderful places to explore on an adventurous vacation, they are sad depressing refuges from trouble - not a luxury resort but a last resort.

At some time or another most of us want to crawl into a hole and pull it in after us. Troubles get so overwhelming that we yearn to withdraw from other human society and hide in a cave.

Few of us actually do this, but occasionally the Scriptures relate the story of a real caveman - a man who hides in caves to escape some horrible circumstance of the outside world.

NASTY BUSINESS: THE FIRST CAVEMAN IN THE BIBLE

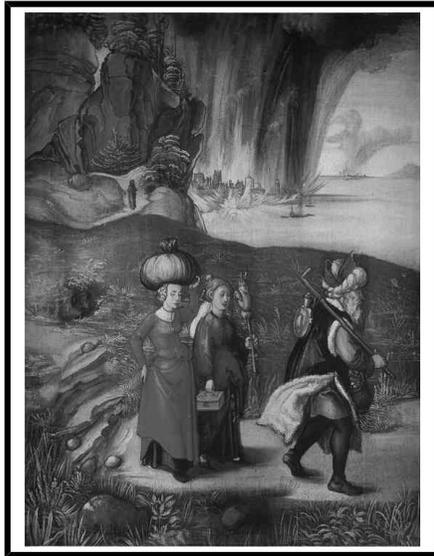
For instance, the first caveman mentioned in Scripture was named Lot. His sad, sordid story is told in the first book of the Bible:

Lot and his two grown daughters survived one of the greatest catastrophes in biblical history. Lot's wife (remember her?) did not survive. Hardly anyone did.

RATS!

“The Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and He overthrew these cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground... Lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace”.

Overnight Lot degenerated from being a prosperous, respected city leader to becoming a homeless refugee.



In 1498 Albrecht Durer painted Lot's escape.

The three shell-shocked, dazed survivors stumbled through the desert seeking a fall-out shelter. “And Lot went up... and dwelt in the mountain, and his two daughters with him... and he dwelt in a cave, he and his two daughters”.

Now the story gets sordid.

Perhaps the trio suffered post-traumatic stress syndrome, perhaps they felt that desperate circumstances call for desperate measures, perhaps they just gave up hope. Who knows? At any rate, there in the cave they got drunk. The Bible says that Lot was too drunk to perceive anything going on; he didn't know

what he was doing - but he managed to do it anyhow. He got both of his own daughters pregnant.



Lot & daughters in the cave, painted by Metsys (1509-1575)

“Thus were both the daughters of Lot with child by their father. And the firstborn bare a son, and called his name Moab: the same is the father of the Moabites unto this day. And the younger, she also bare a son, and called his name Ben-am’mi; the same is father of the children of Ammon unto this day”.

Thus in while dwelling in a mountain cave, a caveman and two cavewomen originated the Moabites and Ammonites, enemies of God’s people all through biblical history.

RATS!



In 1530, Dutch painter Lucas Van Leyden portrayed daily life in Lot's cave.

Looks as though we can write Lot off, doesn't it? Here he is; a homeless bum living in a squalid cave, laying around drunk, diddling his daughters in nightly threesomes.

A depressing sight.

But oddly enough, the Scripture does not write off Lot, or anyone like him, as a loser.

Quite the contrary.

In Deuteronomy Moses said, "The Lord said to me, Distress not the Moabites, neither contend with them in battle... because I have given (the land of) Ar unto the children of Lot... And when thou comest nigh over against the children of Ammon, distress them not, nor meddle with them... because I have given (a land) unto the children of Lot for a possession".

Here God is standing up for the descendents of drunken Lot's incestuous shenanigans in the cave.

And when the Son of God wanted to illustrate conditions surrounding his own coming in glory at the end of the age, Jesus chose Lot as his example:

“As it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone from Heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed”.

In Peter’s second letter he too uses Lot as an example of righteousness!

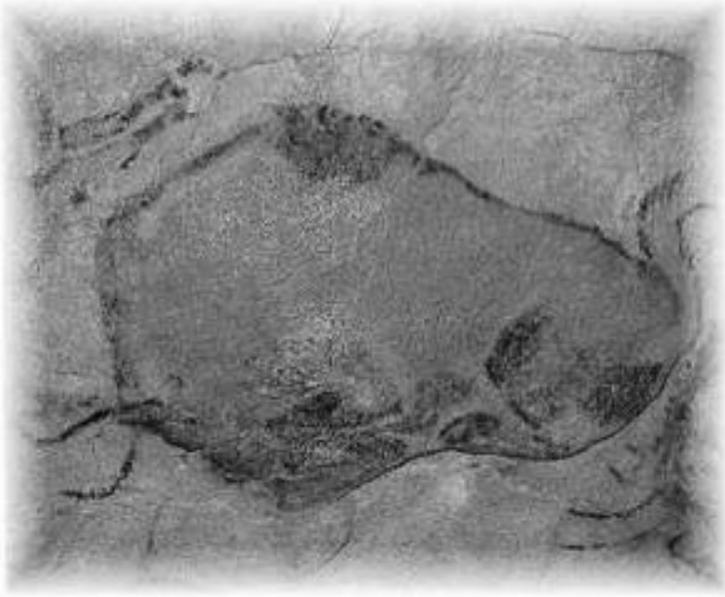
God “turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; and delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds); The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished”.

Notice the terms Peter uses to describe Lot - “just Lot... righteous man... righteous soul... godly”

My point here is that the Bible teaches that God does not condemn us on the basis of isolated incidents we have done, no matter how squalid; He judges us all, even when we sometimes act like troglodytes, on the overall tone of our lives.

In other words, Lot’s story shows that there is hope for cavemen.

RATS!



A PLACE TO HIDE

The Bible tells of many people who, in times of trouble, became cave dwellers; here are three incidences:

“And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and **caves**, and strong holds”. (Judges 6:2)

“When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait, (for the people were distressed,) then the people did hide themselves in **caves**, and in thickets, and in rocks, and in high places, and in pits” (I Samuel 13:6).

“Now Obadiah feared the LORD greatly: For it was so, when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the LORD, that Obadiah took an hundred prophets, and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water” - (I Kings 18:3)

But hiding in a cave didn't always help.

A GORY STORY

Five heathen kings allied themselves to fight against Joshua and the children of Israel. They marched off to war but when the battle turned against them, the five deserted their troops in the field and hid in a cave at a place called Makkedah.

But, tough luck, some Israeli soldiers saw them go into the cave.

They told Joshua, who said, “Roll great stones upon the mouth of the cave, and set men by it for to keep them:”.

He ordered his troops to leave the kings in the cave and keep fighting the heathen. He said, “Pursue after your enemies, and smite the hindmost of them; suffer them not to enter into their cities: for the LORD your God hath delivered them into your hand”.

“And it came to pass, when Joshua and the children of Israel had made an end of slaying them with a very great slaughter, till they were consumed, that the rest which remained of them entered into fenced cities...

RATS!



Then Joshua said, “Open the mouth of the cave, and bring out those five kings unto me out of the cave”...

The Bible then says, “And it came to pass, when they brought out those kings unto Joshua, that Joshua called for all the men of Israel, and said unto the captains of the men of war which went with him, Come near, put your feet upon the necks of these kings.

And they came near, and put their feet upon the necks of them.

“And Joshua said unto them, Fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and of good courage: for thus shall the LORD do to all your enemies against whom ye fight”.

“And afterward Joshua smote them, and slew them, and hanged them on five trees: and they were hanging upon the trees until the evening.

“And it came to pass at the time of the going down of the sun, that Joshua commanded, and they took

them down off the trees, and cast them into the cave wherein they had been hid, and laid great stones in the cave's mouth, which remain until this very day”.



Stomp their heads, smite 'em, slay 'em, hang 'em, and throw 'em in a hole.

In those days, that was what they called meaningful dialog.

FROM WINNER TO CAVEMAN

Another caveman the Bible tells about was the prophet Elijah.

Oddly enough, while Lot fell into the cave of depression after a great catastrophe, Elijah ended up in the cave after a great triumph. He'd just seen God in a blaze of glory use him to defeat 400 devotees of Baal but immediately afterwards he felt so utterly down that he despaired.

Yes, this is the same man who later on would be taken visibly into Heaven in a chariot of fire drawn by flaming horses but first he spent some time dwelling in a cave. Elijah was a man of great victories and of great depressions. And the Scripture describes him as “a man subject to like passions as we are”.

A day or so after the victory over Baal worshipers, when wicked queen Jezebel threatened to kill him, Elijah

RATS!

fell into a state of near suicidal depression and ran for cover. Enough is enough, he said.

“He himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers”.

The Bible says that an angel touched him twice and encouraged him to travel onward to Mount Horeb: “And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there”.



In this cave the prophet sulked.

He spoke of being isolated, alone, fearful; he questioned the value of his life and ministry.

From the mouth of his cave he saw a whirlwind in the desert. He felt an earthquake. He saw a forest fire

And the Lord was not in the whirlwind, the earthquake or the fire.

But after the fire came a still small voice, a delicate whispering as of the breeze among leaves.

Twice, while the caveman prophet sulked, the Word of the Lord came to him and both times asked the same question:

“What doest thou here, Elijah”?

Yes indeed, why would God’s man be a caveman?

THE CAVEMAN KING

Among the most renowned of all biblical cavemen was King David.

Although he was the slayer of the giant, the sweet psalmist of Israel, the king of the nation, and a man after God’s own heart, David was also a caveman.

On several occasions troubles forced David to live in a cave – where he was miserable.

The Hebrew superscription to Psalm 142 reads, “Maschil of David; a prayer when he was in the cave”. The Psalm reveals how depressing it is to be confined to a cave; this written prayer reveals David’s feelings as he complains to God about his troubles:

Psalm 142

I cried unto the LORD with my voice;
with my voice unto the LORD did I make my
supplication.

I poured out my complaint before Him;

I shewed before Him my trouble

When my spirit was overwhelmed within me,
then Thou knewest my path.

In the way wherein I walked have they privily laid
a snare for me.

I looked on my right hand, and beheld,

but there was no man that would know me:

RATS!

Refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul.
I cried unto Thee, O LORD:
I said, Thou art my refuge
and my portion in the land of the living.
Attend unto my cry; for I am brought very low:
deliver me from my persecutors; for they are
stronger than I.
Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise Thy
name:
the righteous shall compass me about;
for Thou shalt deal bountifully with me.

David's spirit is overwhelmed.

He is brought very low.

He says, "refuge failed me".

He expresses his depression and feeling of rejection saying, "there was no man that would know me... no man would care for my soul".

David says that it's no fun to be a caveman.

Over the centuries many men of God have known exactly how David felt. Jeremiah was familiar with this state of mind. David Brainerd, a man of God who was a key to the Great Revival of the early 1700s, seems morose and melancholy in his journal. Adoniram Judson, missionary to Burma, actually dug his own grave and sat staring into it for hours each day meditating on how his body would decompose and be eaten by worms.

Yes, many great men of God have know depression and have learned, like David, how to handle it to God's glory. There is hope for those confined in the cave of depression.

David's depression as expressed in Psalm 142, was real - but how did he get to be a caveman?

He was the youngest of eight brothers. Having seven big brothers to boss him around must have made for a depressing childhood, but he survived that trauma. His brothers joined King Saul's army fighting the Philistines.

When David arrived at the battle (I Samuel 17) and offered to fight the giant Goliath, his oldest brother belittled him in front of all the soldiers accusing him of being vain and haughty.

And David said, "What have I done now"!

Then, as now, family squabbles and tensions were depressing.

After David killed the giant, envy and jealousy consumed King Saul.

To escape Saul's wrath, David, the Hero of Israel, and his wife, Michal, devised a plan.

While David crept out a rear window of his home, Michal placed a dummy made out of an image and a goat-hair pillow in the bed and told the soldiers that her husband was deathly ill.

After escaping from Saul, David fled to the court of Achish, King of Gath. There David pretended to be mentally unbalanced, letting the spittle drool down his beard and scratching himself against the doorposts.

It gets worse.

From Gath David went to live in a cave named Adullam, where he wrote Psalm 142.

RATS!



A cave at Adullam where David may have lived and written Psalm 142.

Thus the “man after God’s own heart” became a caveman.

In Adullam Cave David had valid reasons for his state of depression. Trouble frustrated his personal plans and ambitions. Michal – the same wife who’d helped him escape – separated and re-married another man. Whereas he’d once been a rising young man prominent in the king’s court, now his prospects were nil.

No wonder his Psalm from the cave contains distressing words: “I cried... my complaint... my supplication... my trouble”.

Perplexing thoughts haunt the caveman. He wonders, What did I do wrong? Where did I miss God’s sill? I tried to be a good guy but look where it got me. No man wants to know me. I’m abandoned. Betrayed. Deserted. Alone. No man cares.

Psalm 142 reminds me of the old nursery rhyme:

Nobody loves me
Everybody hates me
I think I'll go out in the garden
and eat worms!

Depressing circumstances confront everyone of us at some point in our experience: sickness, job loss, impotency, bereavement, personality clashes, financial setbacks, petty quarrels, frustrated plans, and a host of many similar things are the common lot of mankind.

At some time of another, we can all identify with David's words from his cave. And, like him, we too can honestly complain to our Heavenly Father and tell Him where it hurts and how we feel about the way things are going.

In times of depression, sulking in our personal caves, we are tempted to self-pity and lethargy. We stare at the shadows on the wall and listen to our own morose thoughts like bats and spiders and lizards skidder about in our minds. We feel worthless, alone, deserted and lost. We can't pinpoint where we went wrong, and we don't know which way to go from here.

We feel like David did.

Yes, David felt overwhelmed in his cave and yet his Psalm, although it details the symptoms of depression, reveals a brilliant ray of hope for cavemen:

"When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, **then** Thou knewest my path"!

When your spirit is overwhelmed in the cave of depression **then** the Lord Jesus knows where you are and how you feel. He knows what it is to be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

He knows exactly what it's like in a cave because just "as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the son of Man be three days and three nights *in the heart of the earth*"!

RATS!

Jesus knows what a cave looks like from the inside.

He was buried in one.

He was tortured to death for us. He was crucified, dead and buried. Because of His love for us, He became familiar with death and burial in the heart of the earth. When your spirit is overwhelmed within you, **then** Jesus knows where you are and how you feel.

He also knows how you got into the cave.

SOME PATHS INTO CAVES

We are neither hunters nor gatherers. We are accountants.



Jesus knows the path which led you into this particular cave. That path to depression may be physical; much of David Brainerd's melancholy may be linked to his tuberculosis. He even coughed up blood whenever he preached. Yet God used him mightily. God created our bodies; He came into our world in a human body. He understands physical limitations and afflictions.

Natural circumstances can lead into the cave of depression. Shortly before Adoniram Judson started meditating daily before his open grave, his dearly-loved

wife had died. Jesus understands circumstances which can make you weep – He did.

Sin mingles depression with guilt. Sin will not only cause depression but compound it. Sin and depression fuel each other's fires. But even cavemen are responsible before God for their actions and choices. While Lot was understandably upset over the destruction of his wife and his property, his depression did not excuse his sin. Lot, although he is described as a righteous man, chose to get drunk and commit incest in his cave. He used his cave experience as an occasion for sin and his actions compounded evil -- resulting in his fathering the nations of the Ammonites and Moabites.

David was also deprived of wife, position and property. He also was forced to live in a cave. But he did not allow his depressing circumstances to lead him into sin. Although tempted to seek vengeance against Saul, David chose not to sin.

But, sin and depression do not have to be related.

If sin causes your depression, no one knows that cause better than you. You also know that Jesus is the world's foremost expert on forgiving sin. So there is no need or excuse to continue the cycle of sin and depression. His help is available for the asking.

Sometimes we fall into depression for no reason apparent to us. Something triggers a response to an incident which happened so long ago that you've forgotten what it was, but your emotions still react with a vague, unreasonable aura of depression permeating your life.

What a bummer!

You're depressed and you don't know why.

But, even if you don't know the path leading you into depression, Jesus does. Trust Him.

RATS!

Not only does Jesus know how you feel, where you are, and how you got there; but He also know where to go from there.

Jesus knows what it's like to emerge victorious from a cave. The burial cave He rested in was borrowed and He returned it to its owner in good condition - hardly used. He even folded up the burial linens when He left.

GOD HAS A DEFINITE PURPOSE FOR CAVEMEN.

All the circumstances of your life in the past have prepared you to be God's person in this cave - and the cave experience will prepare you to be His man in the future.

"David... escaped to the cave Adullam; and when his brethren and all his father's house heard it, they went down thither to him" (I Samuel 22:1).

Yes, God used David's cave dwelling experience to affect a reconciliation within his own family. The tensions between David and his brothers were healed in the cave. You can let God use the depressing circumstances you face to heal the petty resentments and bad feelings which exist in your family.

"And everyone that was in distress, and everyone that was in debt, and everyone that was discontented, gathered themselves to him and he became captain over them..." (I Samuel 22:2).



In 1658 French painter Claude Lorraine imagined discontented people flocking to David's cave.

Because of his own experiences David had empathy with other depressed men - other cavemen. They knew he understood their problems because for a time he also lived as a caveman.

While he was playing the harp in King Saul's court, David contacted other bright, successful, up-and-coming young men. While he was in that depressing cave, he met another class of people - those in distress, in debt, and discontent...

And God used these very people as the nucleus of the army which supported David as King of Israel!

All the time David was overwhelmed in the cave, God was drawing these distressed people to him. God had promised David a crown and He used the depressing cave experience to bring His promise to pass.

So... So, God has placed you in a cave. So, your spirit is overwhelmed within you. Then Jesus knows your path. He knows where you are. He knows how you got there. And He knows where to go from here.

No matter how dark your cave, no matter how distressing your circumstances. How depressed you

RATS!

feel, how bleak your outlook, Jesus knows and understands -- and cares.

His hand is upon you.

He has not abandoned you.

He offers hope - even for cavemen.



After a photograph of a painting found on the wall of a cave near Afazia, Ohio, the location of the entrance to which is no longer known



A political cartoon from 1919

THANKSGIVING AT THE LITTLE END OF THE HORN

*Yes, this is where I lived for the longest time
—John Cowart*

The Thanksgiving holiday confuses those of us who live at the little end of the horn.

One of the symbols of the season is a cornucopia - the horn of plenty - with grapes, figs, wheat and all the ingredients for a lavish feast pouring forth in prosperity.

However, at the little end of the horn is nothing but a blunt point of wicker. Hardly a single grape seed can squeeze out there. And at times all of us feel as though we live at that end.

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Sometimes, it seems we pour our energy, talents and money – our very life force – into the big end of life's horn while we are forced to subsist on a trickle from the little end.

But even the poor are expected to be thankful. We look at unpaid bills, the children's tattered shoes, the wife's fading best dress and we wonder what there is to be thankful for. It seems like hypocrisy to sing hymns about joyful thanksgiving when you worry that tomorrow the city will cut off your lights.

The traditional image of Thanksgiving presented to us makes no provision for folks at the little end of the horn. We feel intimidated into working up a feeling of thanksgiving. We are urged to look on those worse off than we are and be thankful we are not is as bad a shape. That reeks of a sour grapes attitude. Can I really believe that someone else's toothache hurts as bad as mine? My troubles may not be as desperate as someone else's, but they are mine.

How can I honestly give thanks when the circumstances of my life dictate despair?

How can I joyfully sing about all the crops being safely gathered in when the only crop I gather comes from the food stamp office?

How can you relish the glory of God while confined to a drab nursing home, while waiting to see if the biopsy is malignant, or while dividing your paycheck among creditors?

How can you be thankful when you feel lost, confused and frustrated?

Is God reasonable to call for praises and thanksgivings from the poor and needy?

Yes, He is.

There are three elements involved in giving thanks: external, internal and eternal. And these three

elements reach even to the little end of the horn. Even there, Christ offers good news.

The external element in thanksgiving involves things outside of you - your job, your family, your car, your home - anything you have or don't have. These things change constantly. Their value to you fluctuates. Their relationship to you shifts all the time.

Yet, most thanksgiving occurs on this external level.

We give thanks - or complain - depending on our current state of affairs relating to these externals. The worm in this particular apple is that no one has every external thing ordered exactly to his own liking. No one can depend on the externals of life to motivate his thanksgiving.

Those who today are thankful for their new car, tomorrow will complain because they can't afford gas for it. Those who are feasting will grumble because they have to wash dishes.

The internal element in thanksgiving is based on things within you - your emotions and feelings. These also constantly change and are almost impossible to control.

For instance, sometimes I adore my wife no matter what she says or does or spends. Some other times nothing she does could possibly please me because I'm determined to be grumpy no matter what.

Often internal feelings are influenced by the secretions of tiny glands. Although you are responsible before God for how you choose to express your feelings, those feelings may depend on how much bile your liver produces at any given moment. Some chemical imbalance within the body can exercise more control over feelings than conscious thought does. Therefore, your feeling of well being - or of hopelessness - may not truly reflect your actual state of affairs.

RATS!

We all know of times when we expected to feel happy, but really felt nothing at all. And we have all felt depressed for no reason we could pinpoint. Because of the changing nature of internal factors, we find it impossible to “work up” gratitude toward God without feeling like hypocrites.

Neither external things nor internal feelings form a solid basis for being thankful. But, in requiring thanksgiving from us, God takes into account both our internal and external circumstances.

He does not ask for something we cannot give.

The book of Psalms -- although filled with hymns of thanksgiving-- reveals the author’s distress over internal and external factors.

One writer complains about the cruelty of his external enemies and prays, “Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth” (Ps 58:6).

In another place he reveals his internal distress saying, “I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly: I go mourning all the day long” (Psalm 38:6).

But even with these internal and external stresses the Psalmist still finds a solid basis for offering thanks to God.

God knows our frustrations and exasperations. There truly is a place where we can pour out our complaints before the Lord. We can certainly tell our Father where it hurts.

The Scriptures contain no nonsense about trying to be thankful for things you are not thankful for. But they do reveal a solid basis for thanksgiving founded on a third element regardless of our state concerning the other two.

The third element involved in giving thanks is eternal.

On this level, the factors calling for out thanksgiving depend neither on external circumstances nor on internal feelings, but rather on the unchanging character of God.

Because of the eternal factors involved, thanksgiving is obligatory for all believers regardless of which end of the horn we call home. It is reasonable for God to expect thanksgiving and praise from even the poorest, neediest, sickest, most miserable person.

“Give thanks unto the Lord for He is good”. (Psalm 118:1)

God is good.

More than any preceding generation, our generation questions this declaration. Tiny nibbling mice of doubt gnaw away at this foundation stone in the mind of everyone experiencing troubles.

If God is good, then why retarded children? Why war? Why cancer? Why are my children rebelling? Why am I so frustrated in what I want from life?

Is God really good?

Occasionally we have something bad happen which, with the passage of time, works out okay. Then we are elated and testify about how “All things work together for good”. But our very elation and testimony proves that we basically believe this working out for good is an exception to the way things normally go.

God is good. In spite of our doubts and lack of faith, God is good. His nature is good. His purpose is good. His actions are good. The things He gives are good, and the things He withholds are also good.

The catch in this is that good often hurts.

Once the doctor admitted me to the hospital. They probed and punched and drew my blood. They gave me a bitter cup to drink and took pictures. They strapped me to a machine which tilted and wobbled this way and

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that. They would give me nothing to eat, not even a slice of dry toast.

Even though my overall treatment made me uncomfortable, humiliated and afraid; even though I was hungry, confined and apprehensive; even though I did not like what I was going through - it was still reasonable for me to be thankful for what was happening to me.

They were saving my life.

The very tribulation I endured called for thanksgiving since it worked for my good.

Christ is not a common doctor; He is the Great Physician. He gives us the full treatment. He is good and He insists on working for your good. So don't be surprised if His treatment causes you pain, discomfort, indignity or humiliation. Healing usually hurts.

When you live at the little end of the horn, when you are subjected to hunger, to anxiety, to tribulation, to a bitter cup, even then be thankful for God is good.

He is on your side no matter what is happening to you. He cares about you. He likes you. Believe that he is good and that He acts for your good...

And be thankful.

The anticipation of Heaven is another factor involved in the eternal element of thanksgiving. In our day this factor has fallen into disrepute. Scoffers have mocked and Heaven now embarrasses us. The taunt Pie-In-The-Sky-By-And-By intimidates us and we cover our shame by dismissing Heaven and dwelling on the blessings of God now in this life.

We don't talk about Heaven very much, except for vague references to a better place made at funerals.

We don't think about Heaven very much.

We don't believe very much.

We grieve like the world grieves saying, “Poor John. Looks so natural. At least he’s at rest now”.

Nonsense!

Poor John is the latest guest of honor at the biggest celebration this universe has ever seen. It’s like Christmas morning for Poor John. The presents are spread out in lavish array around the Tree Of Life. And, although Poor John may have spent an anxious Christmas Eve wondering if there really would be any presents, now he’s wide-eyed with wonder...

And he has no regrets that our Father didn’t let him open his gifts early.

God has gifts, wonders, delights unimaginable stored up for His children. The Scripture says, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him” (I Corinthians 2:9).

“Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Psalm 16:11).

His treasures can’t break, rust or be stolen. He has a place for you. He has a plan for good and not for evil to give you a future and a hope!

Can you imagine anyone in Heaven complaining about what they lacked on earth?

Pie in the sky by and by?

Well, yes.

That’s the only pie there is.

If you’re at the little end of the horn at the moment, why not anticipate Heaven and be thankful for “verily, there is a reward for the righteous” (Psalm 58:11).

Viewing your present circumstances in the light of anticipating God’s eternal Heaven helps earthly things fall into place. For instance, if your biggest worry now is

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cancer, remember that those malignant cells will eat up everything they can and then they will starve from lack of food – You will outlast them.

You will live forever.

You will spend all eternity somewhere.

We are offered eternal life in Jesus Christ, God's Son. And that life in Him not only goes on forever but it has a quality that makes you glad it does.

Another eternal element in thanksgiving at the little end of the horn is that we know that the present order of things is not based on reality. The True and Righteous Judge is going to straighten things out. "For He cometh to judge the earth: with righteous shall he judge the world and the people with equity" (Psalm 98:9).

Why strain and struggle to get to the head of the line?

The Scripture declares that when He sets things in their true order the last shall be first; the least, greatest; and the greatest, servant of all.

Should we sulk and demand our rights and chafe under ill-treatment as though a servant ought to be greater than his master?

Our Lord Jesus Christ lived at the little end of the horn.

He was a guest at other men's banquets. He did not own the boat he preached from. He did not own the donkey he rode into Jerusalem. The cross He died on was not his possession; it was the property of the Roman government.

Even the tomb where He was buried was borrowed from a wealthy man.

Jesus returned it in good condition after only three days use.

Jesus is the Lord of Glory; and we, His followers, can expect no better lot in this world than our Lord received. We can not reasonably expect to take our proper place in the scheme of things until He does.

Therefore, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who being in the form of God... made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Himself the form of a servant" (Philippians 2: 5-7).

If we live at the little end of the horn, then let's be thankful that we live where Christ lived.

Serve Christ and your brother right where you are, when you can, with what you have

The day is coming when Christ will stand the horn - the whole order of things in this present world - on end and shake it. You are in the right place for His abundant blessing. He once said, "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the Kingdom of God".

Was He lying?

At the little end of the horn there are eternal reasons to be thankful....

That's fundamental.

RATS!



THE PARTY AT THE END OF THE WORLD

A Rabid Fundamentalist Column

by
John Cowart

Welcome! Welcome, welcome.

You are hereby invited to the most splendid, lavish, super-duper, joyous PARTY in the history of the universe!

Really truly, I am not exaggerating.

Many people say this event is the absolute end!

Six months before he died, publisher Malcolm Forbes gave a birthday party for himself. He invited 700 celebrities to his palace in Tangier, Morocco, to celebrate and he spent \$2,000,000 on baubles for his guests.

The Forbes party was OK (some guests complained about their accommodations) but it was a paltry affair compared to the one you are invited to attend.



Where you have been invited there are guaranteed to be no complaints whatsoever. There will also be no hunger, no thirst, no tears, no death.

Celebrities will be there in abundance. You will associate with some kings and queens, popes and presidents, Olympic athletes, movie stars, businessmen, saints...

Everyone is invited to celebrate; there will be former pimps and prostitutes, winos and drug addicts, thieves...

RATS!

And, oh yes, some churchgoers will also swell the ranks, but you plan to come anyhow.

Rejoicing multitudes will flock in from east and west and north and south, from every tribe and tongue and kindred and nation; a more cosmopolitan crowd has never before assembled.

The apostle John got a sneak preview of the festivities and reported on the crowds: "And the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands," he said in Revelation 5.

Unfortunately, some people will not make the party. They were invited, but chose to make another commitment.



Saint Paul said that transportation, better than limousine service, will be provided for everyone on the guest list; in fact, our host personally is coming to pick us up:

"The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout... and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the lord," Paul said.

Yes, early arrivals at the party -- those people you love who have already died -- will come with Christ to welcome you.

Picture it. The sky peels away to reveal Glory. Graves pop open and restored people leap up for joy to meet Christ. The sea gives up its dead (My kids always ask: what if you drown and get eaten by sharks? If that happens to me, I'll leap furthest fastest! Besides, who created jaws in the first place?)

And the living will hop right out of their bodies and rush to hug Jesus. The whole creation -- a happy dog welcoming its master home -- will quiver with pleasure at his coming again.

Imagine this world as a Christmas present wrapped in blue oceans, green forests and purple mountains. It's splendid. We love it.

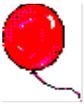
But what we see are merely the wrappings and when Christmas morning comes, the wrappings get ripped apart. The real gift inside comes to light and the pretty paper, wonderful as it was, is of no concern to anybody but the trashmen.

As a fundamentalist Christian, I believe the Bible teaches a brief summary of what we can expect as the party starts:



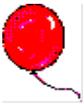
Jesus promised to return.

"In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you," he said in John 14. "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again."



He is returning for our benefit.

"I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also," he said.



No one knows when he will return.

"Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only," he said in Matthew 24.

RATS!



We are to be ready.

"Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the son of man cometh," Jesus said.



His return will be the best thing ever to happen to us:

"Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him," (I Corinthians 2:9).

There's a place saved for you at the table.



You are
welcomed.

You are
treasured.

You are invited.

You are loved.

Yes, the world
will end. Did you
think it wouldn't?

But never mind that; good things are in store for us.

Wonderful things.

Remember that what a caterpillar might call the end of the world, God calls a butterfly.

Oh yes, one other thing about God's party -- RSVP.

Whosoever will may come, but we really should respond to his invitation right now.

That's fundamental.

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