

STORIES OF THE SAINTS



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Cover Photograph: Venetia Rahal

INTRODUCTION

As an advocate for the elderly, and volunteer at Glendale Gardens Nursing Home, I am often asked to walk along beside residents that need extra support in their final journey on the road home. Sometimes it is simply for added attention, but more often than not, it is due to being without family.

Regardless of the circumstances, there has never been an instance but what the writer received a bountiful supply of blessings for having known the individual. Thus, it has been during this walk that the following twelve magnificent stories have unfolded, usually, right in the vision of the writer; accounts that have been chosen so, as readers, you can receive the benefit from the significant happenings that took place.

However, one overpowering reason for choosing these particular stories was to offer encouragement to all God's children for facing their own passing; something that all of us have to experience, or as a support for those that are having to endure the loss of a friend or loved one.

Folks, one of the most frequent comments from those being left behind is, "I don't know what to do or say!" First, please know that you are in the company of the majority of people due to the lack of comfort in dealing with the subject of death. Not only is it an emotional loss, but also a time that feels so final. Then accompanying the situation is the suffering of the individual that many times is so overwhelming to observe.

Consequently, when death finally arrives, adding to the stress is the funeral itself; followed by the settling of the estate. Having just been through the death of my mother, the writer can certainly identify with many of these stressors.

Given all these comments, the one that many of you are unfamiliar with is what happens prior to the final approach toward home for the one passing. Ladies and gentlemen, one thing you can always count on from the individual dying is his/her prior knowledge that time is of the essence; meaning, somehow, the old folks simply are very aware the end is in sight; a truism based on their remarks or actions that lead up to the departure itself.

Thus, having been approached by so many prior to their final decline with worries about not being ready, or feelings that past actions will cause God to not allow them into heaven, were responsible for this collection called, "Stories of the Saints". After communicating with many old folks regarding their concerns, it can be summarized that the catalyst for their fears stems directly back to their religious teachings. Instead of hearing sermons and discussions about God's grace, the focus was based around judgement, sin, and eternal punishment in the fires of hell. FEAR! Thus, the end result is a sense of terror when death knocks at their door.

Therefore, this collection has been written with the hope that the accounts recorded will add comfort to those feeling concerned about their eternal wellbeing. Additionally, in the process of reading it to someone, you, too, will be blessed. Since the number 12 is so significant in Scripture, keeping it to twelve accounts seemed appropriate. May God bless you is my prayer.

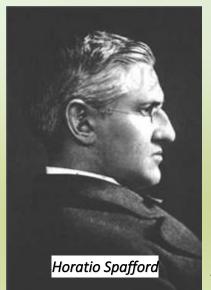
SETTING THE STAGE

Dear Readers,

Before you begin reading the inspiring accounts of the elderly people in this collection, it is critical to prepare yourself, or the individual to whom you are reading, by focusing your entire being on what will be transpiring. Given the fact that the world in which we live has so many distractions that interfere with our ability to concentrate, it has been found that music is a wonderful tool for assisting us in this process; especially given the fact that it works on several areas of the brain. Since it impacts each individual differently, it has been determined that not only does it support focus, but also allows us to receive tremendous emotional benefits, as well.

Therefore, the writer has carefully chosen the beautiful old cherished hymn, "It is Well with My Soul" in order to enhance the impact for all that read or listen to these inspiring accounts of each saint.

Ladies and gentlemen, prior to listening to the video of this beautiful hymn performed by a group called "Noteworthy", through becoming familiar with the history behind the song, the beautiful strains of the piece will take on even more meaning; one that will be a symbol of faith in the Creator that is unequaled. Here now that story.



This hymn was written after traumatic events in Horatio Spafford's life. The first was the death of his son at the age of two and the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which ruined him financially (he had been a successful lawyer and had invested significantly in property in the area of Chicago that was extensively damaged by the great fire). His business interests were further hit by the economic downturn of 1873, at which time he had planned to travel to Europe with his family on the SS Ville du Havre. In a late change of plans, he sent the family ahead while he was delayed on business concerning zoning problems following the Great Chicago Fire. While crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the ship sank rapidly after a collision with a sea vessel, the Loch Earn, and all four of Spafford's daughters died. His wife Anna survived and sent him the now famous telegram, "Saved alone ...". Shortly

afterwards, as Spafford traveled to meet his grieving wife, he was inspired to write these words as his ship passed near where his daughters had died. Philip Bliss, composer, called his tune Ville du Havre, from the name of the stricken vessel.

Spafford's Words

When peace like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Refrain
It is well, (it is well),
With my soul, (with my soul)
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, Let this blest assurance control, That Christ has regarded my helpless estate, And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

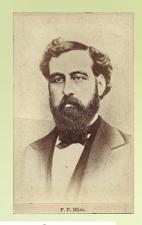
My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin, not in part but the whole, Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live: If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life,
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait, The sky, not the grave, is our goal; Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord! Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul.

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll; The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend, A song in the night, oh my soul

(Wikipedia)



Composer Philip Bliss

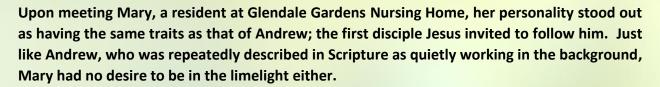


For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.

ON THE WINGS OF GLORY

MARY'S STORY

Are not all angels ministering
spirits sent to serve those who
will inherit salvation?
Hebrews 1: 14



Thus, if one was not observant of her behavior, it would have been easy to overlook all the enormous compassion she demonstrated to others. Even the resident tablemates were oblivious to her quiet gentle eyes contemplating their every action; noting the slump in their physical presence or an appearance of longing in their expressions.

In addition to the dedicated watchfulness she carried on toward the members of her community, it did not take her long to also size up the individuals in whom she placed her trust. Although she was an avid reader, she seemed to sense my approach and would softly whisper over her book, for my ears only, indicating ways in which the residents around her needed assistance. No one ever knew; just Mary and me!

Therefore, having been a longtime volunteer, Mary and I became friends and coconspirators in ministering to the needs of others. Interestingly, it was never possible for me to decipher the exact moment when I earned her trust...it simply evolved.

As an example, it was at a Christmas dinner when residents were encouraged to invite family members, that her compassion appeared in full bloom. She noticed her roommate missing and found her sitting slumped over and alone in her wheelchair beside her bed waiting.... waiting for family members that never intended to honor their reservations.

Thus, unbeknownst to another soul, she set her own wheelchair into motion with the destination being that of the serving tables where she knew I would be working. Wearing expressions of both worry and disgust, Mary was definitely on a mission to help her roommate. Without hesitation, I removed myself from the serving line and listened to her concern; a judgement from her that was accurate beyond measure.

As a result, it was discovered that her roommate's guests never had any intention of attending the dinner but had not bothered to inform their host. Although it was not important to them, it was of great significance to Mary; even though she had no one in attendance on her behalf.

After notifying the staff members of the situation, a new table was quickly set, followed by an invitation that went directly to both Mary and her roommate to join them in the festive celebration. Caring hearts had turned a time of brokenness into joyous laughter and fellowship; all brought on by one individual's compassionate nature.

Overtime, Mary just kept sharing her love with others; even though earning the reputation of being a bit standoffish; a label that was totally misplaced. Had they only noticed, they would have seen her sitting in her wheelchair outside departing residents rooms in a time of contemplation and prayer.

Therefore, upon arriving one day, I was greeted at the front entrance by resident and tablemate Murlene who had skipped lunch with the goal of informing me of Mary's declining health. With tears in her eyes, she told me that after sitting at her friend's bedside all morning, she was certain that Mary's time here on earth was short.

Without hesitation, I quickly departed to Mary's room and upon arrival asked, "Do you know who I am?" In a sweet, faint voice, I heard, ("Y shore"); meaning "sure."

Quickly realizing Mary could see me best if I stood at the foot of the left side of her bed, we proceeded to carry on a conversation. However, unlike her usual attentive style, she kept glancing out the window at the shrubs and appeared to be amused by something. Finally, not wanting to have me think she was being rude, she asked, "Can't you see them? Oh, can't you see them? They are having so much fun!"

Reacting to her remarks, I asked, "Are you watching the birds having fun in the bushes?" She replied, "No! Oh, no! There are about 15 angels fluttering around above the bushes. They have been there for two days. Can't you see them? Please tell me you can see them!"

In reply, I said, "No. Mary I cannot see them, but please understand that I believe you are telling me the truth. They are for your eyes only."

Noting her relaxed and peaceful state, I asked, "Would you mind describing them to me? I would love to know more about them. How tall are they? Do they have facial features? Do they have wings? Are they happy?"

Mary then answered, "They are about a foot tall, have facial features just like ours and all look different from one another. They have wings and fly, frolic, and are chasing each other all around. They are having so much fun. I can't keep my eyes off of them."

At the end of the time together, I was unclear if she would be there the following week for my usual Thursday time of volunteer work. It was obvious in my mind that the angels had arrived to carry her home.

However, the following Thursday, Murlene was waiting at the front entrance with the message that Mary was still present, but really in a fragile state.

After entering her room and repeating the usual greeting, she came to life and appeared to be incredibly happy to see me. However, this time, she asked, "Can you tell me how heaven will appear?" I told her that since no person had ever been there and returned to offer a description, I would have to rely on the Scripture from1 Corinthians 2: 9 that stated "However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" -- the things God has prepared for those who love him—"

Thus, standing in the usual position at the foot of her bed, I noticed an enormous change had taken place. Instead of looking out the window in amusement as she had earlier, she demonstrated the same behavior but never allowed her eyes to leave the room. Appearing totally intrigued and wearing a smile that lingered on her lips, her eyes followed a trail that moved over my left shoulder and above my head. However, quickly realizing I was not reacting, she once again asked, "Can't you see them? They are no longer outside my window but have moved to the foot of my bed. They are having so much fun flying all around you. Can't you feel them?"

Ladies and gentlemen, at that moment in time, I realized fully that I was standing on holy ground. Here I was a mere human being allowed by God to stand in this place of honor. Trying to keep my composure, but feeling totally overwhelmed, I answered her as I had the week before.

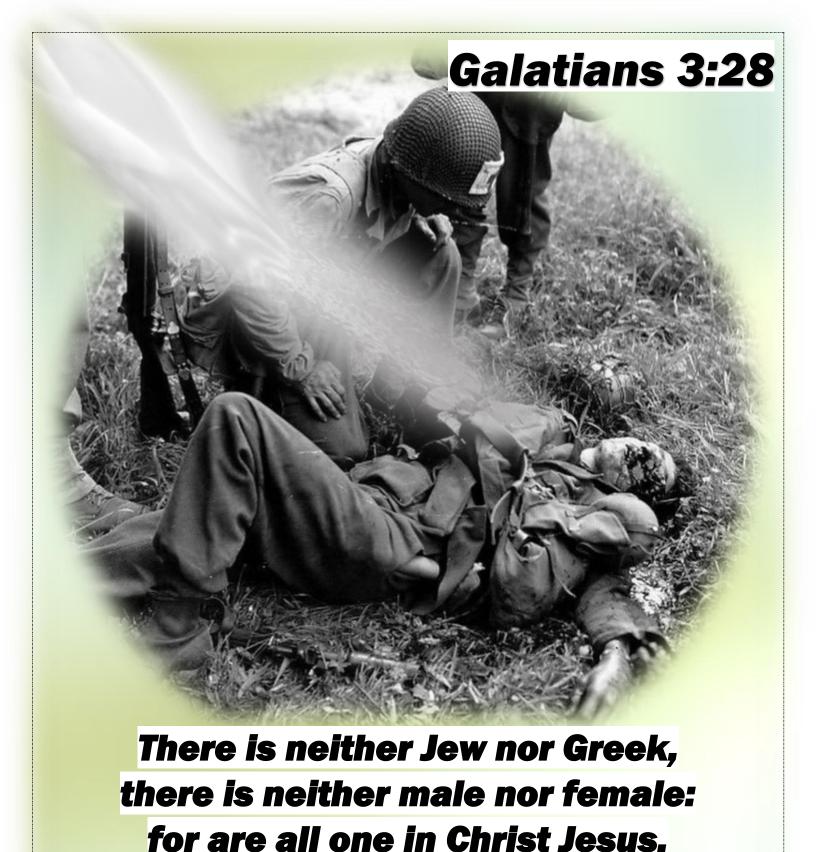
However, this time, I felt led to ask, "Mary, is there anything you would like to ask about your departure from earth? Have you made peace with the Lord? Have you received him as your Savior?" She replied, "I am ready. Will you say a prayer for my departure?"

Not only did I offer a prayer, but thanked God for allowing me to get to meet Mary. I also looked deeply into her eyes and told her what a joy it had been to be her friend.

Then, after leaving her room with tears streaming down my cheeks, I found it necessary to just stand outside her door and regain my composure. Ladies and gentlemen, it was during this time of solitude that I realized God had turned an ordinary nursing home room into an extraordinary thing of beauty. And...that is how much he loves his children.

That evening, I was informed that Mary had passed away. I BELIEVE WITH ALL MY HEART THAT MARY WENT TO HER ETERNAL HOME ON THE WINGS OF GLORY! The unseen real defined as faith, had become a reality. "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) Amen!







MIRACLES

Carl's Story



Mark 10:27

Jesus looked at them and said,
"With man this is impossible, but
not with God; all things are possible
with God."

Job 5:9

He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.

What Is A Miracle?

Ladies and gentlemen, have you ever asked a friend or stranger to define a miracle; a question that prompted an immediate response of, "Oh, those are events that happened In Bible times, not now!" Then, as you continued the discussion and encouraged those around to examine their beliefs at a deeper level, an application of miracles only to physical healings of the body might have come into play.

Perhaps, this belief stems from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition of a miracle as being, "an extraordinary event manifesting divine intervention in human affairs; the healing miracles described in the Gospels."

However, exploring variations on thoughts regarding miracles, St. Augustine viewed it from an approach that might invite us down a totally different path with the words, "Miracles are not contrary to nature but contrary to what we know about nature."

Certainly, when one views the wonderful gradation and harmony that exist in nature; whether it be the charming contrast of land and water, or that of the low sunken valleys and majestic snowcapped mountain tops, methinks there is absolutely no doubt but what the Great Creator is the wonderful Artesian of such beauty and drama; facts that add dimension to Augustine's thoughts above.

Then, when in just a fore night, it is possible for mere human eyes to visually witness the fact that the hardness of winter has relaxed, allowing the silent footsteps of spring to decorate bare twigs with young shoots contending in a race for becoming a shady canopy that will conceal an array of beautiful birds ready to break forth into a concert of musical notes that will calm the soul of those that walk beneath, while cooling him with a fluttering and rustling breeze, is there any doubt as to their origin?

Ladies and gentlemen, doesn't Psalm 104: 24-25- "How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. There is sea, vast and spacious, teaming with creatures beyond number-living things both large and small," describe the gift of creation beautifully? And to think... mere human beings have been appointed as caretakers for this remarkable gift from God; our earthly home that we take for granted every day.

Yet, if we allow the mind to explore the mystery of our existence in this place of beauty, it is almost overwhelming to contemplate. Why are we here in this place at this moment in time on a planet called earth that is exactly the right size, shape, and weight to support human life, with the sun, moon, and stars placed and sized appropriately? Puzzling, isn't it?

Folks, as the writer researched and ruminated over the mystery of these lofty thoughts, a quote from the book written by Eric Metaxas titled, "Miracles", seemed to speak to these questions best with the words, "Our existence is an outrageous and astonishing miracle, one so startlingly and perhaps so disturbingly miraculous that it makes any miracle like the parting of the Red Sea pale in such insignificance that it almost becomes unworthy of our consideration, as though

it were something done easily by a small child, half-asleep. It is something to which the most truly human response is some combination of terror and wonder, of ancient awe and childhood joy."

Then, Metaxas continues by giving his own definition of a miracle with: "The Greek word for miracle is "simaios", which means "sign." Miracles are signs, and like all signs, they are never about themselves; they're about whatever they are pointing toward. Miracles point to something beyond themselves. But to what? To God himself. That's the point of miracles----to point us beyond our world to another world. They are clues that that other world is not in our imaginations but is actually out there, wherever "out there" actually is."

Given this definition, have you concluded that miracles may transpire in a variety of settings, in times of happiness and despair, and manifest in different ways to individuals? Although many people may have never received a miracle, the fact that God created them, is in itself, one to behold.

Consequently, after much deliberation on the subject, one thing that became abundantly clear to the writer was how simple it would be for God, out of love for his creation, to reach through the thin veil between heaven and earth and touch anyone or anything he formed. In other words, not only does he keep everything in working order but can touch the lives of his children when he desires.

Additionally, it is important to succinctly stress that, just because you have never received a miracle, certainly doesn't mean something is wrong. Since each person is equally loved by him, it is simply an indication that our thoughts are not his thoughts. In other words, there is no answer as to why some folks feel they've never received or identified a miracle that happened in their lives, while others excitedly recount theirs in great detail.

After exploring descriptions of miracles reported by man on this earth, one thing that needs to be addressed is the textures of such. Certainly, the misconception that miracles occur in beautiful settings with backdrops of ethereal music and lights all around, is actually man trying to place limitations on God's ability to intervene in human affairs. Instead, dungeons, darkness as black as ebony, bottomless pits of despair, times of desperation, and when guns of war blaze and fire unceasingly on the battlefield, are all examples of settings and places when individuals have reported miracles as having occurred in mysterious, mindboggling ways.

Dear reader, now that you are scratching your head in puzzlement as to the miraculous wonders of this world, and the depth of this subject, Carl's story that follows will prompt even greater mystery regarding this complicated topic; especially given the long-lasting impact, as well as the setting in which it occurred.

Carl's Story

One spring day at Glendale Gardens Nursing Home, this writer was asked as a volunteer to lead the residents in a devotional time; a gathering of about 35 people that usually had a love for

their Savior, and an immense desire to study his Word. Thus, looking out on the group, it was obvious from their sweet faces, they were eager to talk about the Lord. Some wore expressions of peace, while others sat quietly appearing to be full of expectation, just waiting to sing and pray together.

Thus, on this particular morning, given the wisdom they always displayed toward life in general, the writer decided to tackle the difficult subject of miracles as a way of tapping the wealth of information they would impart on the subject.

Therefore, as an introduction to the subject, the writer opened, first with prayer, followed by a series of short stories about miracles that had transpired in an array of settings to individuals of all ages; a topic that immediately stirred the interest of each one present. Some leaned forward in their wheelchairs, wearing expressions of anticipation in their eyes, while others never seemed to blink because of concentrating so intently.

Then, at the conclusion of each story, some would burst into praises of thanksgiving to God for intervening in the person's life, while others seemed thrilled beyond measure. Additionally, through the comments offered at the conclusion, it was apparent that some of these sweet old souls had such a strong belief in their Creator that it was obvious they had not placed limitations on what he could do in life.

Thus, having concluded this phase of devotional time, the writer then asked them to give a definition for the word miracle, and heard them exclaim:

- 1) The smile of a child
- 2) The birth of a child
- 3) The beauty of the earth
- 4) Every breath we take
- 5) The change of seasons
- 6) Healing of our bodies
- 7) The fact that I wake up every morning
- 8) The songs of birds
- 9) Food to eat during the depression
- 10) That I have lived this long
- 11) My family
- 12) My husband

At this point, these old folks were really turned on, and literally shouting out with such enthusiasm, that a sense of exhilaration in the room was so thick that one could almost dip it out with a spoon.

However, suddenly, amidst all this, entered a mournful sound of a deep painful wave of sobbing, resembling that of a giant tsunami, which suddenly rose above the joyful noises, bringing the celebration to an abrupt halt.

Consequently, instead of smiles and clapping, a silence of solemnness took its place, accompanied by grave, worried expressions all worn by those present. First, looking at one another to identify the source of the noise, the old folks began rotating their bodies, the most their physical condition would allow, wildly searching for the desperate soul in such agony.

Then, locating the individual, all eyes suddenly focused on a thin man, named Carl, sitting in a corner all alone whose body was bent in half, shaking uncontrollably, as harsh raw sobs erupted from him with such intensity that all present recognized his soul was, without doubt, in a total state of brokenness.

Huddled together in shock, and totally paralyzed, what occurred from one sweet little old resident in this depth of trauma, was truly a gift from God. Displaying great compassion and faith, she began to utter a soft prayer to the Lord on behalf of her fellow resident, Carl. Continuing this behavior, in spite of the loud moans and waves of sorrow that accompanied the flow from her lips, she just kept on keeping on.

As a result, the moaning suddenly stopped, and Carl began his story that had occurred when he was serving as a medic in the army as a young man; an age when he was without the foundation or experience necessary to face the nightmare of his life; one that was still so vivid that the memories and suffering oozed from his soul with an intense, raw pain, even now, during this his winter season of life; a burden he had been carrying his entire adult life; one that was engraved in his heart and could never be erased.

Folks, as tear filled words began awkwardly to come from his lips, all wheelchairs were facing toward him, whose occupants sat wearing such expressions of support and compassion, that it felt as if his fellow residents had physically wrapped him in a blanket of their love.

However, appearing to still be on the field of battle, totally removed from this moment in time, all present could see that he was about to relive an instance in his life when God bestowed on the most unlikely people, and in the midst of hell on earth, a miracle that pointed directly toward Him.

Setting the stage for his own story, Carl began by telling how awful the horrors of war were to all those involved; so much that many soldiers were so traumatized that they either were unable to ever recount the happenings, or worse yet, lost their minds without hope of ever recovering. He recounted witnessing young boys arrive with great enthusiasm, and turn into old men after just one scrimmage in battle; to the point of being almost unrecognizable in appearance. They not only wore haggard expressions but moved as if the world had just been placed on their shoulders; looking straight ahead through empty eyes without light.

Carl then went on to describe how important, yet extremely perilous, the job of a medic was because of having to literally take care of the wounded as they were falling at his feet; all occurring in the midst of fighting. He saw bodies shot to pieces, while others lost limbs that flew through the air; all while he kept running in a frantic effort to tend to those the best he

could. He stated no other words could describe the scene but that of being in a "living hell" without end.

Then, taking a deep quivering breath, he told of kneeling to attend to the needs of a solider that obviously had little time to live, due to having been shot so many times that his body was raw and bloody. Then, upon closer scrutiny, to his shock, Carl realized that he was looking into the disfigured face of someone he was supposed to hate; that of a young blond German soldier whose eyes were filled with terror; those belonging to the ENEMY!

After a quick assessment of the young fellow's condition, it was evident he had only moments before taking his last breath. So, being an individual of great faith, Carl placed his hand on the young man and prayed for God to take him safely home. As he prayed, the young German soldier's eyes never left those belonging to Carl; a pose that continued until the wounded man took his final breath. Just imagine, folks, the fear filled eyes of one that was alive and healthy, were peering into the fear filled eyes of one that was dying; a situation when God reached through the veil toward two people and provided a miracle that demonstrated how to love all fellowmen; a miraculous instance that pointed both to the love of the Father for all creatures great and small; those from all corners of the earth, no matter their race, skin color, or lineage. He was asking a young soldier named Carl to "Love God with all his heart soul and mind, and to love his German neighbor as himself." Have you heard those words somewhere before... perhaps in Scripture?

At this point, Carl peered out toward his fellow residents and said, "On that day, there on the battlefield, two soldiers that were supposed to be enemies to one another, both recognized they were brothers in Christ; in spite of the fact that they both spoke different languages. From me he sought courage, and in me he placed his trust; a bond that can never be broken; all because my enemy also belonged to the great Creator. He loved my enemy equally. On that day, as the young German soldier died in my arms, it was evident that God had bestowed on both his children, a miracle that taught us about our Lord's true character."

As Carl's voice became only a whisper, one sweet resident raised her arms above her head, and with tears running down her cheeks, broke into shouts of joy and praise to the Lord. We then sang the old hymn, "Amazing Grace", as an ending to a very inspiring and unforgettable devotional time together.

Dear readers, the following Scripture will add credence to Carl's touching story of a miracle that was bestowed on him during the darkest of hours, and shared equally with the most inconceivable individual imaginable; that being a person labeled as "the enemy".

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles.... (Proverbs 24:17)

Folks, the best closing as to the belief in miracles comes from "Desire of the Everlasting Hills" by Thomas Cahill:

"In the final analysis, the modern problem with miracles is little different from what the ancient one would have been. If one believes in a God who heals, then healing in itself---whether of the quotidian (occurring every day) kind or of an uncommon and spectacular sort---will hardly seem inconceivable or out of reach."

He then continues with, "As LarFarge, son of the American painter said it best with the words, "For those who believe in God, no explanation is necessary. For those who do not, no explanation is possible."

In closing, dear child, if you are reading or hearing these words, and do not believe in God, it is the writer's greatest hope that you will bow your head and say, "Lord, please erase my unbelief." Amen!



(Christ Healing the Sick 1813, by Washington Allston, commons.wikimedia.org)



Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care.



THE DUO

Karen & Dottie's Story

Matthew 12: 48-50

He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"

Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." It is during the freshness of the evening, when the colorful landscape appears so perfect in fragrance and form, that the Great Creator seems to beckon his children to observe his handiwork; a time when each icy green blade of grass looks like it has been painted with such liquid greenness that it will last for all eternity.

Yet, Isaiah 40:8 sets us straight with the words, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever"; a message that doesn't appear to strike a chord with man until he suddenly finds himself residing in the winter season of life.

Thus, having reached the point when the rear-view mirror shows only a landscape of distant memories, a decision must be made regarding the road to be traveled the rest of the way home. Will it be to journey down the highway of regrets, spewing anger and bitterness daily, or coming to the realization that the passing of one life makes room for another?

Certainly, the book for all ages titled, "The Giving Tree", written and illustrated by Shel Silverstein, demonstrates this so poignantly that one could label it as a parable; meaning that it leaves you puzzling over various ways it applies to all of us today. Although described as a touching interpretation of the gift of giving and a serene acceptance of another's capacity to love in return, it also vividly shows the seasons of life; when finally, the cold winter winds suddenly materialize and the things that used to matter are replaced with a prayer for daily manna from the Father; a time when layers have been stripped, needs are simple, and clarity reins.

You see, in the story, a little boy has bonded with a tree and is so connected that it actually records his development from childhood forward; either through interactions or carvings such as a heart containing his own name and that of a girlfriend. Then, as time goes on, the tree is left behind due to the little boy sprouting wings and flying far away from his nest called home. Yet, the tree stands firm, remembers, and waits.

However, the emotional ending to the story is when the personage of an old man, once that of the little boy, feels led to connect again to his friend the tree. However, rather than the tall stately tree coming into view as remembered, he is warmly welcomed by an old rugged stump; all that remains of the tree's former glory. Thus, both realizing their needs are few these days, on the last page, the visual image the reader sees is that of the old man quietly sitting on the stump as both thoroughly enjoy one another's company; a final dramatic ending that shows how we all return to our simplistic roots where we were cherished, understood, and unconditionally loved.

Ladies and gentlemen, the old folks that are in need of assistance with their daily care and find themselves as residents in a nursing home, can easily identify with the final scene in the story just summarized. You see, upon arrival to the facility, physical issues brought on by the aging process are responsible for quickly stripping away their independence with such force that a time of grieving is automatically a part of the adjustment process for each individual.

As a volunteer with the elderly at a nursing home, it is truly astounding to hear many of the residents expressing a desperate longing to return to their days of yore; so much that adjusting to the stage in life where they now find themselves, seems to present a hardship so grave that deep grief sets in for some.

On the other hand, there are those that are realistic and still possess an optimism that is truly remarkable; so much that staff and fellow residents are drawn to them like magnets. Although they are clearly cognizant of the assistance they require regarding their daily care, they find ways everyday to make people laugh. In addition, they are acutely aware of each caretaker's needs and offer encouragement in facing the challenges incurred; a description of the duo you are about to meet. Somehow, both Karen and Dottie, like all residents, navigated the rough waters of old age when arriving, but miraculously found their footing on solid ground. Folks, it is now time to hear the amazing story of two friends that figured out the important things in life, and in the process, impacted many hearts in an enormous manner.

Karen & Dottie's Story

Although the writer can tell you little about the former lives of the two fascinating ladies whose names were Karen and Dottie, their departure from this earth was one of a kind; with an extraordinary ending that will present to you, dear reader, more questions than answers.

First, meet Karen; a nurse by profession who still, in her winter season of life, demonstrated the traits of being able to easily identify the needs of others; even though she was struggling physically with her own daily challenges.

Consequently, since she looked outward, rather than inward, it was a common occurrence to see her perusing her fellow residents in a manner that only a nurse would have used when being responsible for the care of patients; to the extent that it was easy for the onlooker to draw a visual image of the checklist recorded in her mind. Having been an outstanding healthcare professional, it was a conditioned process for her to understand the suffering each resident faced due to the physical decline of their body.

Therefore, when she spotted an individual that needed special attention, Karen would park her wheelchair right beside the person, and simply offer her company and wonderful sense of humor as comfort. Having not the ability to use the medical supplies she once handled so efficiently, the only thing she had remaining to give was her presence. Folks, even if the resident was unaware of her surroundings, this beautiful lady named Karen would simply wile away many long moments at the person's side; a behavior that was repeated with one resident after another, thus, when one passed away, she quickly found another downtrodden soul to comfort.

Additionally, the relationship Karen had formed with Nurse Cindy was extraordinary, to say the least. Knowing the disease with which she dwelt, having a nursing background, she oversaw

each test result with expert efficiency; meaning she fully understood its progression, along with what awaited her in the future. Yet, as her condition worsened, no complaining or negative words crossed her lips. Instead, Nurse Cindy and Karen conducted themselves admirably, always sweetly interacting with professionalism and humor; behavior that resembled the connection between the tree and the little boy in the story above.

Another trait everyone loved about Karen was the teasing manner she displayed toward others. Whether staff members, or volunteers, when either strolled by her wheelchair, it was a common occurrence to feel a soft tiny pinch from her fingers; her way of saying, "I love you"; behavior always accompanied by her dancing eyes; perhaps a way of dealing with the fact she was almost deaf, and incapable of carrying on a back and forth conversation with others.

Yes, folks, strong willed Karen was one of a kind, a former nurse that any patient would have welcomed in his/her life. Everyone fortunate enough to make her acquaintance would have been absolutely certain this fine lady would have gone to extremes to make each patient feel important, special, and truly loved. Using her compassionate heart, professional manner, and love for her fellow man, not a stone would have been left unturned on her watch.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32) is a great Scripture that depicted Karen's behavior.

And now, dear readers, it is time to meet the other half of the duo; a lady named Dottie who was born with a will that matched that of her roommate Karen's in equal portions. You see, when Dottie entered a room pushing her own wheelchair, her bubbly personality filled every space. Laughter, sparkling eyes, and a big smile were associated with her grandiose presence; all accompaniments to jokes or retorts she contributed to the activities. Simply stated, gregarious Dottie was the life of the party. She never took herself seriously, and would poke fun at her inability to accomplish a task, but would try it anyway. Case in point was singing in the nursing home choir. It was during the first practice session that she called the volunteer over and stated while wearing a mischievous expression, "Kid, I can't sing worth a darn but I am going to do it anyway." Then, she would bellow out with her alto voice, singing notes that were totally off tune; all the while laughing hardily.

Consequently, when later asked to be the model for the front cover of a collection called "Gramme Rocks" that is now on devotionalembers.com, her acceptance was immediate. Then when in front of the camera, she smiled, cut up, batted her eyes, and found extraordinary mannerisms that caused photographers to laugh uncontrollably. Dottie so thoroughly enjoyed the experience that when spotting a camera within her vicinity, she would break into a show stopping pose that would entertain all those in her presence. Even when she wasn't feeling well physically, the sparkling eyes and sense of humor never left her being. No matter the day, the love she shared for others was always visible.

Dottie Posing



Clash of Wills

Certainly, by now, you have drawn a visual image of these two strong willed people that formed the duo of Karen & Dottie; one that would pose trouble on "the old river front" when learning to be roommates. Folks, just think about one room with only a curtain in between; a thin partition that separated these two unbelievable characters.

Given what you have read, are you picturing the dark storm clouds that quickly filled the space above both beds? Have you covered your ears to block out the thunder? Are you shielding your eyes to avoid seeing two compassionate hearts be replaced with fiery anger? If so, you are getting the picture. Simply stated, these two clashed like gigantic cymbals.

Consequently, at first, the staff spent a great deal of time settling disagreements and counseling two lovely ladies that knew better but were simply dealing with the consequences of getting old and needing the assistance of others to survive each day. Not fun! Immensely challenging! Independence gone! My way or the highway! This is my room, not yours!

However, given time, along with wisdom, common sense replaced accusations and harsh words, and were substituted with enlightenment and an appreciation for one another's uniqueness.

Folks, given the fact that both ladies' next of kin lived in other states, perhaps, acted as the motivation for negotiating. In other words, when you find yourself literally, "between a rock and a hard place", it is time to bargain, and cast the sin call "pride" into the nearest receptacle. Otherwise, seconds will become hours of chaos, accompanied by a miserable existence.

Consequently, cool heads prevailed to the point that disagreements became a thing of the past, and peace caused storm clouds to float away just like the morning mist. Instead of unkind words, glares, and hissing being the rule of thumb, laughter suddenly began to travel from their room, winding its way down the corridor.

In fact, the duo became known for sitting side by side in their wheelchairs like two little sparrows, holding hands, as they enjoyed their favorite TV shows together. Folks, these two ladies had bonded and become so close that their hearts beat as one; that of soul mates for all eternity. Two hearts literally had fused so completely that looking after each other's needs became as natural to them as breathing.

Then, as the aging process continued its usual course; resulting in their physical bodies breaking down at a rapid pace, they both were acutely cognizant that separation from one another was a given reality that must be accepted. Thus, the hard conversation of dealing with the act of dying, prompted them to sit quietly one evening discussing the gravity of the future together.

Thus, after solemnly contemplating their circumstances, they made a covenant with one another that caused all who knew them to be absolutely baffled. Ladies and gentlemen, this duo, so well-known for strength and courage in facing life, had promised one another that when it came time for the good Lord to call them home, "THEY SIMPLY WOULD GO TOGETHER"!

Upon hearing the news of their bazaar decision, the staff and friends that so intimately knew them, were not only mystified, but also at a loss for words. What was one to say? Did they know something that was only their secret? Had they received a vision from the Holy Spirit? Everyone was so baffled; they were rendered speechless.

Then, one Thursday, when the writer arrived to volunteer, Nurse Cindy, with salty tears running down her face, delivered the sad news that Karen had just flown home on the wings of glory; and... that her soulmate, Dottie, was expected to follow at any moment.

Folks, after hearing about the remaining little sparrow named Dottie's passing labeled as eminent, staff members from all over the facility began their journey toward her bedside. One after another hugged and kissed their dear sweet friend good-by; a total team approach led by the administrator, Keith, who chose to sit at her bedside for two hours as a demonstration of compassion and tender love.

Then, a mere four days after Karen's passing, the writer received a call informing her that Dottie's breathing was extremely labored; a notification that prompted her to rush to the nursing home to say a last farewell. Thus, softly touching Dottie's forehead, and whispering, "Sweet friend, you are going to soon see Jesus", she squinted her eyelids and gently smiled. Finally, after saying a departing prayer of thanksgiving to God for the blessing of getting to know his wonderful child, the writer quietly and reverently left the room.

Ladies and gentlemen, exactly four days after her friend Karen entered the gates of heaven, Dottie was received in the arms of Jesus. Can you only imagine the rejoicing that ensued? Two little sparrows that learned to love each other unconditionally, were now at home in glory land. God had provided their every need; from beginning to end. Halleluiah!

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (Matthew 6:26)



As closure to Karen & Dottie's story, the writer invites you to return to the devotionalembers.com home page and open the hymnal filled with beautiful songs performed by organist Brad Jent, and scroll down to his glorious arrangement of "His Eye Is on A Sparrow". (#7) Open it and allow its magnificent strains to fill the space all around as praise to the Master for feeding his two sparrows with manna from his gentle hand each and every day. Raise your voice in jubilation by singing the lyrics on the following page as a way of praising the Father for never taking his eyes off his children; meaning you, dear one.

HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW

Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come,

Why should my heart be lonely, and long for heaven and home,

When <u>Jesus</u> is my portion? My <u>constant</u> friend is He:

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

(Chorus)

I sing because I'm happy,

I sing because I'm free,

For His eye is on the sparrow,

And I know He watches me.

"Let not your heart be troubled," His tender word I hear,

And <u>resting</u> on His goodness, I lose my <u>doubts</u> and fears;

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me;

His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.

(Chorus)

Whenever I am tempted, whenever clouds arise, When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies, I draw the <u>closer</u> to Him, from care He sets me free; His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me; His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me. (Chorus)

Matthew 5: 14-16

"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.



LIFE IS GOOD

Mike's Story



1 Samuel 17: 4-7

"A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span. [a] 5 He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels [b]; 6 on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. 7 His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. [c] His shield bearer went ahead of him." [NIV]

Do you recall hearing the story of David and Goliath as a small child and the excitement you felt as the battle between a young man and a giant-sized seasoned warrior began to unfold? Given the fact that the top of your own head only reached the waist of the adults that surrounded you at that age, when analyzing in your young mind the description of Goliath in Scripture, it had to make goose bumps form all over your body.

Folks, although soldiers in King Saul's army were known to be tough, they all stood with feet paralyzed and almost unable to breathe when Goliath strutted out in front, shouting and taunting them from across the way. Scripture even describes King Saul, a very tall man, quaking in his sandals as his mind was flooded with fear at the prospect of going up against the giant. Hearing the following words from 1 Samuel 17: 8-11 "Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. 9 If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." 10 Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." 11 On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified," will allow you to internalize the depth of the challenge and emotions the army of Israel experienced at the time.

Folks, are you developing a photograph in your mind of how the soldiers in both armies appeared as they faced one another? Even from a distance, the body language of Israel's opponent had to speak as loudly as their braggart's words. In contrast, totally disillusioned, King Saul and his generals must have been at a loss for a battle plan in the situation. Clearly, they were out of options.

Then, adding insult to injury, a small ruddy faced shepherd boy named David looked up at Saul saying, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."

Consequently, as Goliath and his army watched these happenings unfold, are you conjuring up images and actions that would probably be written as a script for a comic book? Then, adding insult to injury, when they saw David swallowed up by the large tunic they dressed him in, along with the sword fastened on his body that was probably hanging heavily on the ground, they were without doubt bent over in raucous laughter. Ladies and gentlemen, at this point, David in all likelihood resembled the writer when she dressed up in her Aunt Dollie's dresses and shoes as a little girl. Certainly, the image in photographs showed wads of material dragging the ground, and tiny ankles protruding out of high heeled shoes that were impossible to walk in.

Yet, in spite of the humorous image we might have drawn in our minds regarding the appearance of this ridiculous scene in Scripture, it was a matter of life or death for Saul's army; so drastic that it meant being free or slaves of the enemy. However, when God is on your side, absolutely nothing is impossible.

Just think, the little shepherd boy that had spent so many hours alone in only the company of his sheep and a harp, unbeknownst to even his own brothers had fallen hopelessly in love with his Heavenly Father. Are you able to imagine the possible conversations (Prayers) they enjoyed with one another, as well as how special the music David played for only God's ears were to both of them?

Thus, given this background, are you concluding where David's courage and faith of the assurance that God would be on his side emanated from over the course of time? Not only did it allow the young shepherd boy to pick up the gauntlet, but also have the courage to block out the horrific mocking from the enemy and handle the knowledge that even his own people thought him a lunatic.

However, if you read on in Scripture, the victory David experienced over Goliath because he first placed his faith in God, and then chose to be himself by not wearing the trappings of a solider, resulted in felling a giant with only the sling shot he was so familiar with as a shepherd.

Folks, at this juncture, you might be wondering what the story of David and Goliath has to do with that of a person that journeyed through life on earth during our time. Thus, if your interest has been peaked at this point, you are going to thoroughly enjoy Mike's story titled, "Life Is Good". Read on!

Mike's Story

Let's begin Mike's story by pretending to view a photo of a first-grade class where all the students are lined up according to size; meaning those that are taller are always seen peering with ease over the heads of the "little duffs" that inevitably have to wait until last to take their positions in the front row. Now folks, if you happen to be a little fellow that has been created using a very tiny mold, this can be a rough situation, indeed.

Then, as time goes on and the calendar's pages turn at an alarming rate of speed, most of the students in the picture are told by their family members, "You are growing just like a weed. In a single month, your pants that were perfect when purchased, make you look like you have been wading in high water."

Unfortunately, these age-old remarks that have been spoken repeatedly by mothers over the years were never heard by the ears of a little boy named Mike. Since he was physically small from the beginning, and weighed only 115 lbs. as a senior, you can imagine how he measured in comparison to classmates his own age. However, in spite of his small stature, his clothes wore out at the same rate of those that towered over him due to his active nature; so energetic and quick that his movements were like "white lightening" resulting in the deterioration of the fabric.

Still, most individuals of this size would have succumbed to the pressure of cruel remarks that children can throw around; words that can cut so deeply that it would be impossible for even the most secure adult to endure the hardship.

Also, given his size in relationship to his peers, one would suspect that he was quiet in nature and extremely subdued. However, due to his magnetic personality, it was just the opposite for little Mike. When this tiny guy walked into a room, his charisma and individuality literally filled every space with such drama that people of all ages and genders were drawn to him; all due to the compassion, gentleness, and love he displayed toward his fellowman.

Consequently, these personality traits emerged when, as only a young boy, he served on the school patrol; a position that allowed him to use his desire to impact others in a big way. One such story that came to light regarding this very thing was when he spotted a young classmate that had physical challenges brought on by the disease called polio. After watching others bully the boy by shoving him to the ground repeatedly, Mike stepped up to the plate and loaded his friend on his back; carrying him to and from school every day; a behavior that sent a clear message to his classmates that their cruel actions were to cease immediately.

Ladies and gentlemen, draw a picture in your mind of Mike with his much larger friend draped over his shoulders; so out of proportion that the boy's legs that were in braces dragged along the ground behind the two. Are you imagining the expression on Mike's face of determination as he huffed and puffed his way under the weight of this burden every day? Does it give you a feel as to how he felt about the downtrodden folks that were being treated unfairly by the Goliaths of society? And...that was just the beginning.

Friends, considering this amount of compassion and love for his fellowman, are you able to imagine the path set before him by his Maker at this early point in his life? Given this level of determination and courage to stand up in the face of injustice, are you able to bring to mind the number of Goliaths Mike would slay during his journey on earth? Since this little guy never knew a stranger, you will be thrilled to hear about the hearts God would use him to touch.

Thus, when Mike reached junior high school, his "can do" attitude motivated him to try out for the team in football, basketball, and any sport that caught his attention. Even though all the team players were taller and bigger than he, it did not bother him one iota. What this little guy lacked in size was overcome with speed. Trying to catch Mike was like chasing a speeding bullet. This approach plus the fact that he gave 110% every time in every game, made life good in his mind.

With this behavior as your focus, you will chuckle at a time after entering high school that this little ball of energy was brought to a complete halt when spotting a young lady named Barbara that took his breath away; so much that he confidently proclaimed to all his friends that he was going to marry her.

However, considering him to be a "nerd", her strong reaction was one of enormous discouragement; an interpretation that most people would have clearly understood as a negative response. Not Mike! He set his eye on this future wife and never wavered.

Therefore, following graduation he made it his business to suddenly appear in the midst of a trip Barbara took with her sorority and convinced the chaperone to allow him to take the love of his life to the movies; a date that brought about an October wedding. Strangely enough, having not enough finances to purchase an engagement ring, Mike presented his bride to be with one that had belonged to his grandmother; a person, unbeknownst to both of them, had been an individual that played an enormous role as a mentor in Barbara's life during her earlier years; thus, making this piece of jewelry priceless in the eyes of his bride.

Then, in order to make a living as the breadwinner of the family, Mike chose to become a fireman; a job that, in spite of all the hazards associated with smoke and fires, became a lifetime career. Thus, in his usual manner, the approach he applied in saving lives was a winner and commanded respect from his fellow firemen and the entire community.

Later, as fatherhood approached, resulting in three daughters, his commitment to making sure Barbara could be a full-time mother propelled him into action on a search for supplementing his salary; meaning in addition to being a fireman, he worked at least a total of 3 or 4 jobs.

As a father, Mike taught his girls, Cindy, Amy, and Shelly to always respect their mother; so much that he would never allow them to refer to her using the word, "she". She was to be called by "mother" and nothing else.

However, as a disciplinarian, he felt his children should never be struck as a method of punishment. Instead, parents could mold their children's behavior through words and being role models as guides. Thus, all their mother had to say when one of them misbehaved was, "Although I am not happy with your behavior, think how disappointed your father will be to hear about it." This would make all three daughters break into tears.

Once when daughter Cindy broke a cardinal rule of never fighting with others, the offense was so serious that it was decided that Mike would have to spank her as a reminder to never do it again. However, after entering her bedroom and seeing her little face, he could not follow through with physical punishment. Instead, he said to her, "When I hit the bed beside you, yell out, "Daddy don't! Daddy don't!" Mother Barbara heard the commotion and assumed the opposite of what transpired; learning the truth some years later.

As a stay-at-home mom, Barbara would not only take care of the three girls, but spoil her busy husband, as well. He had some funny quirks about how he wanted his lunch to be prepared daily. Only red starburst jelly beans, all seeds out of watermelon, and mayonnaise spread on both sides of the bread, all the way to the boundary lines, meat separate, with the smooth side of the bread at the top; allowing him to eat the sandwich with wrapper still on, made up the list of directions for daily lunch preparation.

Yet, in spite of the busyness of life as a father, the level of energy displayed in childhood carried over into adult life allowing Mike to complete a 24-hour shift at the fire department, come

home in the morning, shower, and go paint all day long; followed by playing two softball games at night at the local park. Busy father! Busy times!

Yet, throughout his day, lives were touched by gestures of kindness to everyone he met. Without fail, the departing goodbye from Mike's lips to each new acquaintance would be, "It has truly been a privilege and an honor to meet you." Just like Jesus, when he met an individual, that particular person was the very center of his world. His entire focus was on the heart of the individual from beginning to end; thus, touching deeply to the core. This little guy's hands were extended to each child of God as a way of helping them fight off the Goliath being faced at the time. Thus, these huge acts of compassion for others, caused total strangers to be friends forever. It happened so frequently, that it was not possible to recall all the names, prompting him to greet each one with, "Hi, buddy."

Then, as the years passed, fighting fire after fire with the only equipment available at the time, resulted in Mike inhaling smoke that was laden with dangerous toxic chemicals. Unlike now, more modern breathing equipment that would keep the fumes from penetrating simply was not available; resulting in a physician issuing the diagnosis of "esophageal cancer" to Mike and his beloved Barbara.

Thus, when all test results revealed a gloomy prognosis, at best, it was obvious to the family that the Goliath being faced was equal or larger than the one recorded in Scripture. How does a tiny guy that has stated, "Life is Good" to so many people hold up under this kind of battle and still proclaim the joy of living to those he has encouraged along the way; not to mention new faces he would now encounter on this rocky mountain trail?

Yet, against all odds, that is exactly what transpired in Mike's final chapter of life. He would go to ballpark after ballpark and play or watch; all the while growing physically smaller and smaller. Instead of drawing inward and feeling sorry for himself, his inner spirit appeared to grow larger by the minute; so much so that even when walking into the ballpark with tubes protruding from his body, people would gravitate to him from all fields throughout the facility.

Once when speaking with a man that had dislocated his shoulder and wore all types of protective equipment to prevent injury and promote healing, Mike noted the challenge and called his name saying, "Look at it this way. It could be raining." Knowing what Mike was dealing with, the guy could only laugh.

Later, when asked by an individual, "Mike, as much as you have done for others, do you ever wonder, (WHY ME)?" Not missing a beat, Mike retorted, "Why not me?"

Then, after sharing a room with a team mate that was filled with annoying crickets, and winning the tournament, Mike played a trick on the guy that still is talked about. Later on, at home when expecting an enormous ring as a winner, the team mate opened just the right size and shape of package that was shipped to him filled with only dead crickets. I will let you determine the name of the prankster. If you said, Mike, you figured out the culprit.

Unfortunately, as the Goliath Mike faced ravaged his body, his physical appearance was described by many as a "bag of bones." Strangely, people that dreaded to enter the presence of an individual so diminished and gaunt in color, upon leaving his home or hospital room, would comment how wonderful and uplifted in spirit they felt due to Mike's positive attitude and remarkable disposition. As per his usual behavior, he centered on each heart and offered words of wisdom and encouragement. The background music they always heard when visiting him, was his favorite song, "Can You Only Imagine; whose lyrics describe what it will be like in heaven with Jesus. Given the words, it was obvious Mike was a child of God and loved his Savior with all his heart, mind, and soul. Simply stated, he was not afraid to die because of his enormous faith in God. He knew eternal life meant that he would be a child of the King. In fact, his faith was so evident that after a pastor met him for the first time, he exited his room stating that he would never forget what it was like to be in the presence of this little guy that had a belief in Jesus so big that not the fiercest Goliath could win the battle called fear and doubt.

One special moment that demonstrated his lack of fear, faith, and humor in the face of the gravest battle of his life took place outside a restaurant where his softball friends were dining. Unable to eat due to the nausea associated with chemo therapy, rather than spoil the experience for others, he quietly went outside and was sitting alone. Noting his friend, Myrna, approaching, he smiled at her and asked, "Do you know what I have been thinking about? I have been sitting here picking out the softball team I will be playing with in heaven. I am not afraid because I am going to see God. Can you only imagine?"

Then, out of the blue one-day with his favorite song playing, little Mike looked into the love of his life's eyes and stated, "You know that I am dying; a declaration that caused her to break into tears. As he rapidly declined, not wanting to leave his side, an exhausted Barbara was convinced by her friends to at least take a brief respite.

Thus, in God's good and perfect time, on July 11 at 8:30 am, as a gentle breeze blew the curtains in time to the rhythm of his favorite song, "Can You Only Imagine", and birds filled the air with notes of grandeur, the two friends standing guard suddenly witnessed beams of light stream through the window over the person of little Mike and then flow back out the window toward heaven. Waking Barbara, a friend that was not a Believer excitedly proclaimed, "Barbara, Mike's gone! You could actually see him go!"

Later, at Mike's celebration of life, fire trucks arrived with ladders fully extended to honor one of their own that had traveled down the pathway of life never meeting a stranger; a shepherd that touched so many hearts that it took hours for the receiving line to diminish and so many reprints of the program that a funeral home staff member was kept busy just trying to meet the demand.

Can you only imagine how many people around the world's lives were touched by a little shepherd that loudly proclaimed, "Life Is Good? Don't worry about dying. You are going to

heaven to meet your Lord and Savior"; a message delivered even when overpowered by physical weakness so much that his body barely moved; all the while appearing like he was going to a picnic. Beyond a shadow of doubt, life on earth had truly been good for Mike; so much that his message of hope climbed mountains, forded streams, and crossed oceans, as he witnessed for Jesus on a worldwide scale; all while wearing a smile as bright as the morning star.

GIVING

God gives us joy that we may give;
He gives us joy that we may share;
Sometimes He gives us loads to lift
That we may learn to bear.
For life is gladder when we give,
And love is sweeter when we share,
And heavy loads rest lightly too
When we have learned to bear.
Author Unknown





Psalm 23

A Psalm of David

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

The makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Teven though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

"You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

"Surely" goodness and mercy" shall follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell" in the house of the Lord
forever.

AMEN

(Mike's Favorite)



Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no account of wrongs....

1 Corinthians 4: 3-5

WITHOUT LOVE--

Miss Mary's Story

John 13: 34-35

"A new command I give you:

Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

As the seasons of our lives have arrived and departed on time, adorned with their usual colors and textures, it is easy to allow the words to the Scripture about loving one another to become so familiar that, although cherished as a favorite, the meaning and difficulty of application have become lost somewhere in the recesses of our minds. Thus, rather than spending time on contemplating their true meaning, and acting on it as a commandment in our lives, we simply skim over it as something timeless and sweet to quote.

However, if we allow the words from our Lord to sink deeply into the very fiber of our being, the sweetness suddenly changes to an unfamiliar, and perhaps, foreign taste; one like we have never experienced; prompting a moment of reflection that is the most challenging of the time we have been on earth because of being required to answer the hard questions, "Do I really love others the way Jesus has commanded? Or.... have I built a comfortable fence around my belief in Christ by using the scriptures from the Bible as an old familiar blanket that protects me from the outside world that is filled to the brim with chaos and hardship? Do I pick and choose the scriptures that only support my point of view? After all, recognizing this would require change, followed by action. And.... it just might cause my faith in God to be threatened. So, better keep things status quo and do what I have always been taught. And... life goes on as usual."

Certainly, as Christians, we believe that, out of love, God came to dwell among us as Jesus our Messiah and died as a sacrifice for our sin; a gift that is totally free if we truly believe and repent. Furthermore, that same opportunity of receiving grace is extended to all without exception; meaning every human being inhibiting the planet God so miraculously created.

However, the writer believes this is only the beginning of our walk with the Lord. What follows is realizing the requirements as set forth by our Savior. In other words, what is necessary to be a citizen in the kingdom of God as specified by Jesus when he walked on this earth as the Son of Man?

Folks, the difficulties and responsibilities Christ's followers face on this earthly journey were described in detail by him as he delivered the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, Chapters 5, 6, 7) using sentences like, "The meek shall inherit the earth." What? Not the rich and powerful? Oh dear! That upsets society's rules, doesn't it?

Furthermore, go to the parables, the short stories Jesus told in the Bible, and view them according to their purpose and structure. Allow yourself to dig deeply in a time of exploration even if it means an enormous amount of squirming and thinking because of having more questions than answers. A barometer for you to use for determining whether you have allowed the parable to hit the mark is to evaluate the closure experienced. In your mind, did it suggest that you need to go beyond the accepted and usual understanding as taught by your elders or family members? In other words, are you uncomfortable and possibly even troubled? Have you been made so uneasy that extended contemplation is required; meaning, are your thoughts filled with questions as to how you are conducting yourself in the world you call home? Example: In the story of the Good Samaritan, have you placed yourself in the role of the victim, and asked "if" someone you consider as your enemy happened to be the individual that was depicted in the story as having saved **YOU**, in all reality, would **YOU** allow him/her to assist YOU? How high, deep, and wide is this wall of prejudice in your heart? Are you squirming yet? Are you clinging to the former understanding of that parable as ingrained in you by society and religious teachings? Are you asking if Jesus really meant for people that are kingdom citizens to be of the right attitude toward others in his creation; even though the individual saving you might be a refugee, former criminal, or covered in a different skin color; and...above all, be from the wrong tribe?

In order to answer this question, the following scripture from Deuteronomy 10:18 (one of the books of the Torah that Jesus as a Jew followed) will get you started on your journey: "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing."

Ladies and gentlemen, at this point, you are probably asking what this has to do with a special friend lovingly called by the writer as "Miss Mary". In reply, this writer will tell you that it means absolutely everything! Prior to writing her story titled, "Without Love, You're Just A Ball in High Grass", having spent hours recording her journey of life and inner most feelings, being of the right attitude was critical for both parties in the project. Unless we wore one another's sandals, our time together would lack understanding, compassion, and be filled with only empty platitudes. Thus, if the words were to truly take on meaning, then love and trust would be the critical components in allowing our hearts to beat as one.

Thus, when either of us felt pain or suffering, it would be immediately recognized by the other simply through the act of searching body language; behavior that would become a habit out of learning to love deeply. Suddenly, the pain and anguish the other one felt would truly become personal and immediately claimed; thus, penetrating to the very core of the being.

Dear readers, although you have already immensely enjoyed Miss Mary's story titled, "Without Love You're Just A Ball In High Grass," found on www.devotionalembers.com, what will now unfold is the final chapter of her life; the last moments of her earthly walk; a precious time when you will discover how a kingdom member crossed the Jordan and entered the eternal city of God displaying courage, faith, and assurance.

In addition, it is critical for you to know the words the writer penned below were written from a first-hand account of Miss Mary's departure. Her guardian and the writer had the wonderful honor of being at her side every step of the way; a time when it felt as if the setting sun was signaling that the precious moments spent with her were quickly being relabeled as yesterday, yet, as bittersweet as this message felt to us, simultaneously arriving in our hearts was the awareness that this sweet, kind, child of God was becoming transformed into a new-born, containing the seeds of life, fully alive within her, for all eternity.

Prelude to Miss Mary's Story

Before Miss Mary's story unfolds, it is important to set the stage as to the chasm society had already established between two unlikely friends because of the great divide mankind had created due to the ugly monster called segregation; a situation brought on through the narrow mindedness as applied to color of skin determining the worth of a person. In Mary's words, she always proudly proclaimed herself as being an "IBW"; meaning Indian, Black, and White regarding race.

Since the writer, on the other hand, had really never thought about, or been exposed to such, she simply regarded herself as a country girl, preacher's kid, and a member of a small rural community that still had its own class system; one that you either escaped or learned to navigate throughout your earthly journey. In this environment, the definition of segregation simply was applied according to the unwritten rules of a different nature. First, preachers' kids were labeled as PKs, and those having to ride the big yellow school buses were considered below the "townies"; a system of classification that was understood and followed without exception or discussion.

Given this, isn't it fascinating that with backgrounds as just described, through the hand of our marvelous God, a perfect storm for a unique, solid, friendship was included as a part of his master plan?

Consequently, sitting at the feet of the wise and wonderful lady loving called, "Miss Mary" would, not only be a learning process for both, but also serve as a time of enlightenment; one that would expand our understanding of the rough and rugged road of the downtrodden in this

world; governances established by the minds of mere man out of a desire to control others through insecurities or prejudices of their own.

On one hand, having always been thrust into the role of a survivor since birth, the writer's, soon to be dear friend, would learn that some folks are colorblind and willing to extend love and kindness; a process that was foreign to an individual that had always been branded, as well as thrust into the role of a "GIVER". While, simultaneously, the writer being a person that had never been exposed to the pain and suffering based on skin color, would not only gain a new perspective, but one that would penetrate to the very core of the soul when identifying the pain and suffering inflicted on a member of God's creation.

Thus, through the marvelous guidance of the Spirit, at the conclusion of the time spent in communion, two children of God developed such a unique relationship, it served as a model that is now available for a worldwide audience to use as a tool for reaching out to others.

And... now, dear reader, let us begin.

Miss Mary's Story

Even after hearing the powerful alto voice belonging to Miss Mary winding its way down the corridor at Glendale Gardens Nursing home communicating to God in an incredibly tender and intimate prayer, it was truly a surprise to later discover that the individual delivering these words, then in her late 80s, had lost both parents at age three and was left without a place to call home. Given this auspicious launch, how was it humanly possible for an individual to deliver such a magnanimous prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord?

Yet, that is exactly how Miss Mary's life began due to no one wanting to take care of such a young child. Although her older sister and two brothers had been taken in by others and quickly departed, no comforting arms had scooped this little tike up in a display of love and compassion. Instead, she was left with a stand-in until authorities could decide her fate.

However, when mere humans are unable to step up to the plate and go the extra mile, the Great Creator has already swung into action in a way that is unique and bizarrely magnificent. Thus, one weekend, as the landlady of the dwelling that Miss Mary's family had just vacated, was visiting friends in St. Louis, the Holy Spirit spoke to her in a way that was so powerful it literally propelled her into immediate action. After hearing the commanding voice of the Holy Spirit say, "Go back and get your baby girl", she resolutely drove her car to the city of Springfield like a maniac. Then, upon arrival, she sought out the three-year-old little girl she recalled so vividly, addressed her with open arms exclaiming, "Come to your mama"; an invitation that was as binding as the covenant between God and Abraham in the Old Testament.

Therefore, instead of the dark cloud that had formed above Miss Mary's head increasing in intensity, the winds of change swept away the gloom, allowing the sunshine of hope to light the path toward a bright tomorrow; one that would provide an atmosphere for a broken heart to be healed and filled with an unending love for her fellowman that would last a life time.

Folks, this is a wonderful example that the composition of a family may not necessarily be biological; but instead resemble that of the disciples Jesus called to follow him; a group possessing an array of personalities filled with love for their Lord.

Thus, from this point in Miss Mary's life, forward, one of the principles her new mother immediately engrained was to respect all God's children; regardless of race or color. In fact, it was well known by everyone, that the welcome mat at the front door where Miss Mary resided was extended to people from all walks of life, without question. There was always extra food prepared at every meal just for this purpose. Thus, Miss Mary recalled fondly the array of faces that graced their dining room table, and especially at holiday time. Additionally, it was a deeply conditioned principle that if a lack of respect was ever shown to one of God's children by anyone in attendance, including a young Miss Mary, an automatic reprimand would be the result.

Ladies and gentlemen, the incredible thing about the teaching above was the fact that this was the basic foundation established in Miss Mary's life at a time when segregation was alive and well in society; with rules and regulations so strong that she had to attend a school for people of her color, be limited to playing in one park, allowed to only sit in the balcony at one theater out of sight, and not be given the opportunity of becoming a physician even though she was valedictorian of her class. Folks, when listening to the examples of pain and suffering inflicted by society on my dear friend as she walked the path of her earthly journey, the tears of sorrow flowed uncontrollably down the writer's face. You see, even though she was in her 80s at the time of this conversation, to observe her watery eyes as a result of the sorrow that still overpowered her because of the cruelty she had endured, caused the writer to intensely wear her suffering.

However, if you think for an instant that Miss Mary wallowed in her misery, my friend, you will be totally left behind. After taking just a moment to regain her composure, a smile unfolded that encompassed her entire face as she recounted the following story describing an incident that demonstrated how she handled the ignorance of society regarding prejudice due to skin color.

Thus, the following poignant example that shows how much she had internalized her adoptive mother's teachings transpired after she had married and opened her own BQ restaurant. After having used what, she labeled as her inborn taste bud to create mouthwatering recipes, she had a gentleman with snow white skin to sheepishly enter her establishment one day and carefully ask, "Do you serve people of my skin color?" Thus, answering without hesitation, Miss Mary being Miss Mary, wasted no time by replying, "I'll tell you what! Why don't you put a paper bag over your head and touch the skin on your arm and then mine to see if there is any difference in feel. Of course, you foolish man, sit yourself down!"

Then later, after the book launch, "Without Love, You're Just A Ball in High Grass", Miss Mary and the writer were invited by the NAACP as special guests for the purpose of presenting to

her the "Woman of Honor Award"; a wonderful surprise having been organized without her knowledge. Thus, upon arrival to the banquet room that was filled with many African American faces, Miss Mary asked the writer to kneel in front of her wheelchair for the soul purpose of pointing her long finger right at the writer's nose while asking, "Do you feel out of place because of the color of your pale skin?" (All the while wearing a mischievous grin) However, having learned from the best teacher sitting right in front of her, the writer fired right back, "Why don't you put a bag over your head and touch your skin and then mine and see if there is any difference in feel." Then, just seconds later, while in a fit of laughter, she loudly proclaimed, "ALL RIGHT, GIRL!"

Additionally, to substantiate the point that she lived her life "loving her neighbor as herself", all you had to do was to enjoy the photographs of the children's faces that papered the walls of her nursing home room to note they came from an array of nationalities. Folks, these little children had such an enormous place in Miss Mary's heart that taking guests on a tour of her wall and recounting the stories of each literally caused her to glow from head to foot. In fact, she helped so many children that a day was named for her by the Boys and Girls Club; a time of great celebration.

Later, dear readers, even after she moved to the nursing home and had limited use of her body, she still would roll that wheelchair up and down the hallway using the only hand that worked, going in and out of rooms offering encouragement to both residents and staff members alike; all because she loved her neighbor as herself.

Finally, when her health began to quickly fail; creating a situation that required hospital care, even in a state of severe physical decline, she prompted laughter from everyone she met; regardless of age or gender; all because the river of love that ran from her soul never went dry.

Thus, given her sharp decline when one evening the writer's phone rang with the voice on the other end announcing the grave state of health Miss Mary was in, it was obvious the sun was now setting on a life well lived; one that, although far from perfect, had been an example of how people are supposed to behave as members residing in God's kingdom.

Therefore, as the writer and guardian kept a close bedside vigil offering comfort by singing hymns, stroking the crown of her head, and repeating old familiar Bible verses, what unfolded was beyond description. You see, Miss Mary had touched so many lives, that as news spread throughout the community of her impending death, great numbers of people from all races and colors began to gather just outside her door, quietly waiting to say their own goodbye to this special lady that had continuously been there at just the right time. First, staff members entered, delivering hugs, kisses, and expressions of thanks for providing courage to face the hardships that were too challenging to bear alone. Some would kneel, place their head sweetly on her chest and state, "Because of you, I can now make it."

Then, after the wave of staff members had departed, people from the surrounding community proceeded to form a line that went from her bed all the way down the corridor waiting quietly

to say farewell. Ladies and gentlemen, this went on all day, and lasted until 10:30 pm; the final to arrive being the owner of the restaurant she had built from scratch as a newly married lady. Entering the room with his Bible in hand and smelling of smoky barbeque, it seemed to offer an appropriate ending that, although unplanned, closed the curtain with grace and dignity on a special child of God's life.

Finally, as the lights in her room dimmed, signaling the approaching night, the writer placed her hands on both sides of Miss Mary's face and softly spoke the following words, "All your friends have departed, my dear lady, you can now fly away home." And... that is exactly what transpired. Within a very short period of time, her spirit left her body and soared toward her heavenly home; thus, having crossed the mighty Jordan, the celestial city that she frequently described came into view.

Later, it was an honor for the writer to be welcomed among those that had gathered to celebrate a life well lived; one that still serves as a model for loving your neighbor as yourself. And... knowing the humor regarding our unique relationship that Miss Mary always valued and used as a way of making the writer laugh, had she been present, her big brown eyes would have made one sweep around the group before doubling over in a fit of laughter. Using her quick mind for the purpose of calculating that the writer's face was in the minority regarding color of sin, it was extremely challenging to keep from smiling broadly due to Miss Mary's words, "ALL RIGHT GIRL", playing loudly in the air like a broken record throughout the service.

How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

(Psalm 119: 103)



See you later, dear friend.



The Necklace

2 Samuel 22:29

For You are my lamp, O
LORD; And the LORD
illumines my darkness.



THE NECKLACE

Samuel's Story



Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live,

Romans 14:8

For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.



("Jesus Healing the Sick" painted by Tissot)

In preparation for the story of Samuel, a man the writer met while ministering to the elderly at a local nursing home, let us first concentrate a bit on the enormous compassion our Savior demonstrated when encountering the downtrodden in the world.

During this time in history when the Roman Empire ruled with an enormously heavy hand, along with the deeply ingrained caste system well in place, it was thought that nearly 90% of the population struggled to survive on a daily basis. Given these conditions, what Jesus witnessed as he walked the highways and byways along the dusty, rugged trails had to be truly astounding and appalling; to say the least. Although our Lord had the mission of delivering the good news regarding the arrival of the kingdom of God to all creation, the reality of this abject poverty had to be truly overwhelming to his compassionate heart. Just think how difficult it was for him to announce his message of hope to an audience that was hungry, ill, and filled with thoughts of only surviving another moment in time.

Thus, given the weakened physical condition of many suffering from various disease states, the atmosphere would have reeked with foul odors, accompanied by an array of incessant voices crying out along the side of the road. Witnessing constantly those suffering from ulcers and putrefying sores must have always been in the path of Christ. The horrifying moans constantly uttered by them as they endured the agony of existing under the monstrous evil of oppression

must have been ever present no matter the road Jesus chose to travel. There would simply have been no escape from being exposed to the plight of mankind during this point in time.

Yet, dear readers, Scripture clearly states that not once did our Lord show any sign of distaste or disgust, but instead viewed each person with a heart full of compassion and pity. The act of associating with people such as this that were labeled as "unclean and untouchable", automatically set him apart, as well as placed his own life in grave danger because of breaking the law that regarded individuals in this state as being punished by God. Simply stated, his actions flew in the face of the established rules that governed his own Jewish people by failing to ignore them; laws he chose to break every moment of his earthly life; all because he came to fulfill the law, not destroy it. Not flinching or looking down on their plight in life, without hesitation, he gently touched one right after the other; healing and offering sustenance.

Today, some might utter the words, "Yeah! Yeah! That was then and this is now! What does this old Bible story of Jesus and the poor have to do with me?" Well, my friend, it has everything to do with all of us now and forever.

You see, if you read the stories in the Bible with the attitude of asking why the writers felt they were important enough to record, perhaps it will motivate you to ascertain various ways they apply to your life today. Even though we are centuries removed from when these words were written, are not the poor and downtrodden still among us? Was not Jesus trying to model the example of how we should love our neighbor as ourselves? Folks, all you have to do to see if this fits in your world today is to research the statistics on poverty in your community. In so doing, you may, like the writer, be surprised and appalled after viewing a poverty map to discover how many around your comfortable home are daily scrambling to earn enough money to survive.

Then, after exploring this area, there is no doubt you will be either prompted to consider the situation in depth and go into immediate action as to exploring possible solutions, or choose to ignore the facts and go right on with your busy schedule. As followers of Christ, the Scripture: "Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me," (Matthew 16: 24) should be paramount in your mind. Perhaps, it even means not only contributing financially to an outreach program, but actually, physically touching the individuals in question; a behavior that is not always comfortable for even those possessing great compassion.

Perhaps, Charles Spurgeon, in his book, "Morning by Morning", says it best with this statement, "If we truly love Christ, we shall care for those who are loved by him. Those who are dear to him will be dear to us. Let us then look upon it not as a duty but a privilege to relieve the poor of the Lord's flock---remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." Surely this assurance is sweet enough, and this motive strong enough to lead us to help others with a willing hand and

a loving heart---recollecting that all we do for his people is graciously accepted by Christ as done to himself."

One word of caution from the writer regarding a pledge to carry out a plan in touching the downtrodden: "Easier said than done." Read on, dear one, and you will see what I mean. And--above all, understand it is all right to admit your fear and weakness; a circumstance lived out by the person recording these words. Additionally, it is important to remember that taking up the cross of Christ does not mean you will carry it alone, unless, you forget to cry out to the one to whom it belongs.

Samuel's Story

Let us begin the story of Samuel by stating that the one in this situation that knew him best, and at all, was God; a fact that was out of the norm for the writer and those responsible for this type of care. After all, the healthcare staff attending to nursing home residents usually were provided with at least a bit of background information; but, unfortunately, not in the case of Samuel. Thus, given this setting, it is perfectly understandable that what is about to unfold was the perfect storm for blowing overhead dark clouds of discomfort, fear, angst, and helplessness for all those trying to make things better for this sweet creature belonging to God.

You see, just days prior to the writer's usual Thursday visit to the nursing home, Samuel had been found by the authorities, living in an old vehicle, critically ill and trying to survive during an extremely hot summer when the heat gauge consistently had hovered around 105 degrees for three long months. Given these weather conditions, are you able to bring to mind how hot the interior of a vehicle gets as the intense rays of the sun pour down on it for hours?

Certainly, at this point, if the visual imagery of how much suffering one endures inside a car that feels like it has been consumed by the flames of hell, then expanding it with the knowledge that the individual was struggling to walk, spoke in whispers, and was in an emaciated condition physically, will allow you to draw a shocking photograph of how dire his circumstances had become by the time help arrived. However, having painted in your mind an image of his appearance, does not even come close to describing the trauma he endured in real time; meaning it is impossible for the writer to conger up words that will allow you to internalize the direness of reality as it existed for him.

Samuel And the Writer Meet

Over the course of several years, walking beside departing nursing home residents without family members, or simply to offer extra support until their passing, had been the usual assignments given to the writer. Therefore, it was an established fact that being in the company of those dying was simply part of life's cycle for the elderly; a time that was so dramatic that caregivers often felt the presence of the Lord in an enormous way: moments when the Scripture, "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints," literally came

to fruition. Without doubt, everyone coming in contact with a dying resident always treated the process with great reverence and respect.

Therefore, on this particular Thursday, it was not alarming to be asked to take a special case of a resident whose passing was labeled as eminent; meaning it didn't seem out of the norm. However, having been presented with the above information, along with the fact that he was extremely afraid, gave the writer immediate pause for concern.

Thus, before entering Samuel's room, feelings of distress and a severe lack of courage filled the writer's heart and caused a cloud of doubt and weakness to be overpowering; to the point of becoming incapacitated; so much that she stood paralyzed in the doorway.

However, as a result of being raised by a father that always taught his children to finish the race set before them, the solution came to mind that it was time to go quickly to the Comforter and ask for consolation; thus, prompting the cry from the writer's heart to be, "Please help me. I cannot do this alone. I don't know what to say or do. My well is dry. Come Holy Spirit. Be the wind beneath my wings."

Then, dragging one leaded foot in front of the other, the writer resolutely approached the drawn curtain that surrounded Samuel's bed. Dear friends, the two tiny fearful brown eyes that peered at her from the gaunt, gray, boney face prompted the beating of the writer's heart to hammer within her chest like loud drums of war. Quickly analyzing his physical being as that of a mere shadow beneath the covers, the only words that would accurately describe his condition would be the appearance of a refugee arriving via a stretcher off a dilapidated boat; meaning he simply resembled a bag of bones held together by thin, dry, wrinkled skin.

However, after this rapid assessment, along with the desire to offer support, the writer pasted a comforting smile on her face the best she could, and reluctantly made her way around the foot of the bed.

Then, miracle of miracles, Samuel smiled weakly, stretched forth a hand that was too big for his body, and patted the mattress, indicating he wanted the writer to sit down beside him. Thus, cautiously lowering herself to the spot he designated, she stated, "I don't want to touch you in a way to cause you pain." As a response, he slightly smiled and put her hand in his; a reaction that was startling beyond measure, and one that promptly propelled her into the painting by Tissot above; meaning totally out of her comfort zone without a bail out ramp. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the writer's mouth was like cotton; making speech impossible. Thus, after a bit of shallow breathing, Samuel and the writer just sat in a time of strained silence; moments that seemed to stretch out like a highway without end.

Folks, at this point, it is important for the writer to admit that this sweet child of God named Samuel, who had merely moments to live, was in the process of teaching a lesson to the writer that would last a lifetime. In short, the comforter suddenly was being comforted by the

downtrodden, and used in a big way by the Lord. Not only was the writer being tested by her Father, but purified by the fire of the true meaning of taking up the cross of the Savior.

Thus, as the two unlikely strangers quietly learned to sit comfortably together as children of the Creator, Samuel's eyes suddenly centered on the cross necklace the writer always wore; a gaze that seemed to claim his undivided attention. Therefore, over a period of several somber moments, he intently studied its shape; literally never blinking. Then slowly, he would peer into the eyes of the writer, linger for a moment, and immediately resume his focus on the cross. Back and forth his focus traveled, from the cross to the writer's eyes; obviously his way of expressing a desire to explore the topic of Jesus.

Noting this, the writer placed her fingers around the cross and asked, "Samuel, do you know the significance of the cross I am wearing around my neck?" In reply, he simply nodded affirmatively with his head. Then, the writer followed with, "Have you repented of your sin and asked Jesus to be the Savior of your life?" Again, in response, he weakly smiled, followed by the affirmative nod; meaning yes it had been accomplished.

Then, being totally guided by the Spirit, the writer remarked, "Given the fact you have received Christ as your Savior, I have wonderful news for you." Hearing this, Samuel's eyes intently searched her own, anxiously waiting to hear the message about to be delivered from the writer's lips.

Continuing forward, the writer stated, "First, Samuel, the Bible states that God will never leave you or forsake you; meaning, even though you are here in this room alone, Jesus will be right at your side, both day and night. Second, because you have indicated dedicating your life to Christ by first believing in him and then repenting of your sin, Scripture assures you that your name is written in the Lamb's book of life. Also, since the Great Promise Keeper never fails to deliver on his covenant, after taking your last breath of earthly air, your very next one will be with Jesus in heaven. And...Oh, what a sight that is in store for you! It is so incredibly beautiful that Scripture reads in 2 Corinthians 2:9, "However, as it is written: What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" ---the things God has prepared for those who love him."

And...Scripture goes on to assure all his children with these beautiful words from Romans 8: 38-39:

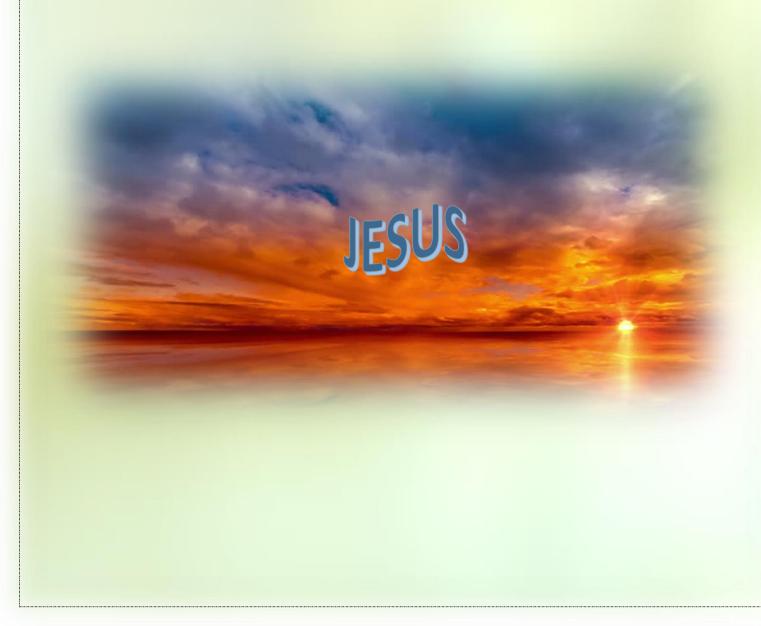
"No in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord..."

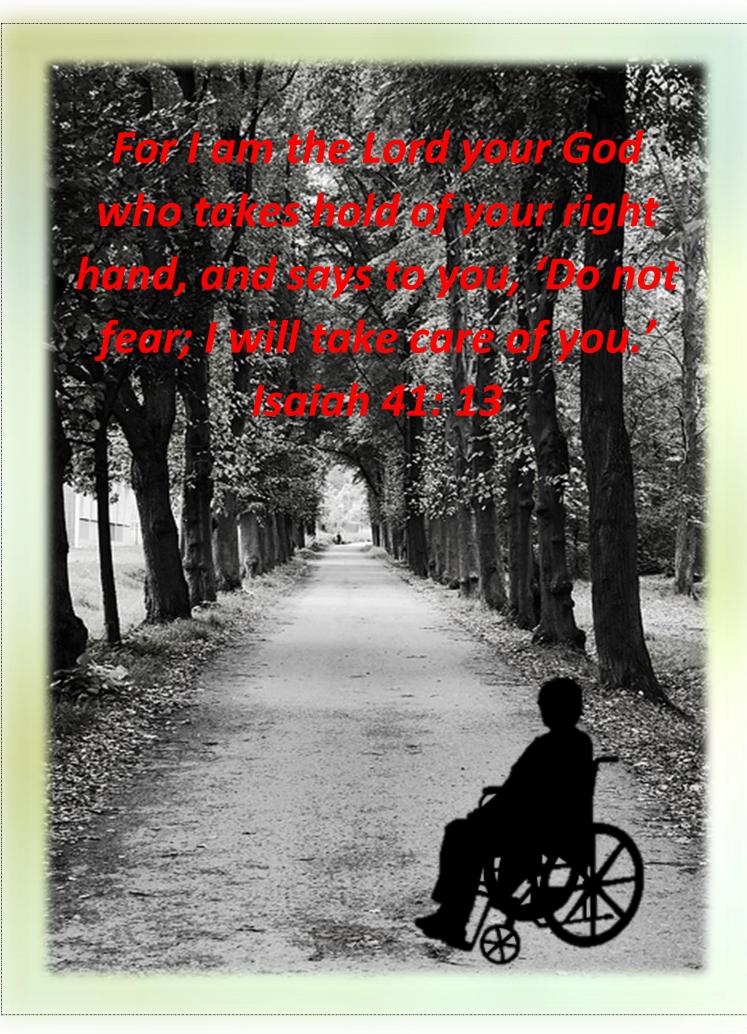
After listening to the two Scriptures being quoted, he seemed to project a totally different demeaner, just as if a miracle had occurred within his heart. Then before leaving, the writer first prayed for peace to descend over his entire being, waved sweetly at him, and floated out

of the room feeling blessed from inside out by our magnificent God. Shortly after, word was delivered to the writer that Samuel's earthly journey was no more.

Thanks be to the Lord for the honor of having met such a wonderful child of God, who, when had little time left on his earthly journey, courageously assumed the role of a comforter to an individual that so desperately needed his strength and wisdom.

Ladies and gentlemen, isn't it an incredible miracle how God brought together two total strangers in a situation that served as a blessing for both? Additionally, it provided a powerful example that the mere mind of man is incapable of understanding the thoughts of the Almighty. However, since then, one seed that has grown and produced much fruit in the writer's ministry is that, on this day in an ordinary nursing home room, both Samuel and the writer had carried the cross of Christ together while residing on holy ground. Amen.







COURAGEOUS



COMPASSIONATE



Sarah's Story

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliver; my God is my rock, in whom I will take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. Psalm 18: 2

Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

Isaiah 46: 4

Introduction

Sometimes in life, as mere humans, we are faced with puzzlements that simply have remained such from the beginning of time; meaning, answers have never been surmised by even those that fall under the category labeled as master minds. Certainly, there are folks that are so disturbed or fascinated by a given mystery that they have dedicated a lifetime of study and contemplation to the field without solutions or answers.

Given a situation of this type, rather than admit the mystery is not solvable, they will arrive at a theory that, unfortunately, becomes accepted over time as fact. While on the other hand, there are many that are willing to admit that some things are simply out of their range of understanding and confess openly the only one possessing a "master mind" is the Master himself; our Creator.

Certainly, the Scripture from John 9: 1-12 sheds light on how Jesus handled his disciples' questions about this very thing after they observed a man that had been blind since birth when they asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" His answer to them, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world," lets them know who is not at fault, and refocuses them on the business at hand. Do you suppose he is also delivering the message that the subject is above their mental capacity as human beings to understand, thus, is classified as one of his miracles?

Unfortunately, even today, the manner in which many members of the human race view an individual such as the man born with the physical challenge of blindness since birth as just described, results in the person feeling additional pain brought on by exclusion rather than inclusion from others; an attitude that prompts the mortal with the issue to assume the role of an outsider.

Ladies and gentlemen, the desire by people to create outsiders is not an uncommon happening, but, unfortunately, behavior that is intentional due to a need by those doing the ostracizing. Victims of being an outsider can be those living in a certain geographical area, country, or born wearing the wrong color of skin, members practicing an unacceptable religious belief or chosen denomination, being too old or young, male or female, individuals struggling with physical, emotional, or psychological issues, different lifestyle choices, and those dealing with various types of disease states; all man-made classifications that do not speak well of God's creation.

In order to better understand the motives that prompt the need in people to create outsiders, the following quote by Melinda Gates from her book, "The Moment of Lift", gets right to the heart of the matter with the following words:

"Overcoming the need to create outsiders is our greatest challenge as human beings. It is the key to ending deep inequality. We stigmatize and send to the margins people who trigger in us the feelings we want to avoid. This is why there are so many old and weak and sick and poor people on the margins of society. We tend to push out the people who have qualities we're most afraid we will find in ourselves---and sometimes we falsely ascribe qualities we disown to certain groups, then push those groups out as a way of denying those traits in ourselves. This is what drives dominant groups to push different racial and religious groups to the margins.

And we're often not honest about what's happening. If we're on the inside and see someone on the outside, we often say to ourselves, "I'm not in that situation because I'm different. But that's just pride talking. We could easily be that person. We have all things inside us. We just don't like to confess what we have in common with outsiders because it's too humbling. It suggests that maybe success and failure aren't entirely fair. And if you know you got the better deal, then you have to be humble, and it hurts to give up your sense of superiority and say, "I'm no better than others." So instead we invent excuses for our need to exclude. We say it's about merit or tradition when it's really just protecting our privilege and our pride."

Friends, the poignant words written by Melinda Gates hits the nail right on the head as it relates throughout all generations of mankind since the beginning of time. All it takes to realize this basic truism is to view the advertisements that show stylish human beings dressed to the nines and in perfect physical condition; a system built on getting people to spend money on materialistic things that will make their lives perfect! And...we feed their approach by responding in kind.

Additionally, if you want to witness a group of people in society that have been sent to the margins, just walk with the writer down the hallways of a nursing home and observe how many old folks have been left without support from family or the community at large. When searching for the answer as to why this happens, some common responses are, "I am too busy dealing with my own problems", or, "I don't know what to say or do with them." Have you ever arrived at the conclusion that those dealing with the aging process are no longer considered of value by people living in the outside community? Or.... I can't face the fact that I will either die or grow old just like them? So, rather than honor them, I will simply ignore the problem, and go into complete denial.

Another way to think about the impact on the human race of continuing to label others as outsiders, is to focus on the soul; the inner life that exists within every individual, and has since the beginning of time. Simply stated, we all have what many call a soul; the deep permanent part of us that integrates all of our different pieces into a single person; the critical area that needs to be connected directly to God so that nourishment takes place.

Certainly, as human beings that exclude others, causing them to be pushed to the margins of society, not only impacts their soul, but also damages our own in the process. Since it is a basic need for everyone to matter and be counted, failure to correct this human behavior unleashes havoc generation after generation. In the book titled, "Soul Keeping", written by John Ortberg, the author centers on this by quoting Dallas Willard with the following statement: "We are built to count, as water is made to run downhill. We are placed in a specific context to count in ways no one else does. That is our destiny."

At this point, you may be wondering how this topic relates to Sarah's Story that follows. Ladies and gentlemen, when you read the account of her life, not only will you feel privileged to have met her acquaintance, if only from a distance through print, but also be cognizant of how poignant Jesus' words in the story about the blind man above are to the world in which you now live. Since her struggle to "count" encompassed her entire journey on this earth, it will perhaps penetrate some areas of your heart that have been isolated for a very long time; thus, inviting feelings to surface in a way that serve as a healing balm to your own soul. Hear now, Sarah's Story.

Sarah's Story

One day, while serving as a volunteer at a local nursing home, a resident named Sarah stopped right in front of the writer in her motorized wheelchair and stated in a very quiet voice, "Could we be friends? I have been watching you from afar for some time and have arrived at the conclusion that you can be trusted. So, what do you think about spending some time together every Thursday?"

As the activity director looked on, she was absolutely startled that Sarah had worked up the courage to approach a total stranger. After all, the usual behavior that this resident demonstrated was that of being extremely reclusive; constantly staying in her room and attending very few activities. Actually, the only time she joined others was at mealtime, and even then, seldom interacted with the residents.

Based on this description of Sarah's habits, it could also be stated that just certain members of the staff were the only ones with whom she communicated; behavior that prompted her to be labeled as unpleasant and stuck-up.

Therefore, being fully cognizant of this resident's reputation with the others, the writer immediately accepted the proposition; a relationship that was to last until Sarah's earthly journey ended.

As a result, on the first day designated as the official time for getting together, Sarah was so excited that she parked her wheelchair in the large lobby that allowed a direct view of the front entrance.

Thus, the moment she saw the writer enter, she began waving and rolling down the hallway, wearing a smile that met her ears. Not holding back, she began chattering about everything she liked; ranging from food, books, animals, to her favorite TV programs.

Having noted her wide range of interests, it was obvious this lady possessed great intelligence, and was starved for conversation. Also, she not only eagerly shared information about herself, but also made a great effort to learn about the writer.

Therefore, it was during this first meeting that Sarah shared the fact that she had been observing the writer's behavior for a very long time; actions that were her way of determining if the person under her microscope could be trusted. Actually, it had taken considerable time for her to make the decision, followed by the courage to take action.

Yes, folks, by now you have noted the fact that Sarah had an extremely low trust level when it came to people; so extreme that she simply had cocooned herself into a fenced in world with very thick walls.

At this point, you might be trying to solve the mystery of what happened to bring on such deliberate behavior. So, let us start from the beginning. First, it is important to let you know that Sarah had been born with a disease that caused great hardship to, not only herself, but also her parents. Given the fact she needed constant care, the question on the minds of her family members were all built around whether or not Sarah would ever have any type of independence; especially given the fact that she simply did not fit into society's norms.

Thus, even when she finally reached school age, special permission for attending had to be granted by a local near-by institution. Being small in stature at first, the instructors would carry Sarah up the fifteen stairs that went for three floors. Otherwise, she would be stuck trying to maneuver the hard climb all alone; a situation that placed her at risk of falling. Unfortunately, as her little body began filling out, she became too heavy for the instructors to carry any longer. Therefore, she was left on her own to solve the enormous problem; a dilemma that prompted her to crawl up three sets of fifteen stairs in order to reach the third-floor classrooms.

Folks, picture in your minds how she appeared as she crawled on her own up each step; a slow process that caused her to be late for every class. Then, imagine how it felt to always disrupt the classroom, all alone, with just her old trusty walker for support. All eyes were centered on her physical presence, wearing expressions of disgust. At this early age, do you think society had already pushed this sweet child to the margins?

Then, after having formed a close bond with the writer, Sarah dared to share the fact that when earning awards due to being so intelligent, most times they were held back, with the reason for such behavior being, "A person in your physical condition, does not qualify for such prestigious awards."

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the words you just read are not playing tricks on you. Educated adults actually believed that individuals with special physical needs could not possibly be intelligent; ignorance that caused Sarah to have to watch others be presented with the awards she had earned.

Furthermore, not only did this bias toward people with special physical needs exist at school, but permeated the outside community, as well. Thus, once when Sarah fell when entering a movie theater, an older man walked up to her and proceeded to call her a dog. Then, shouting in a very angry voice, "You are lying on the rug like a dog. Get up and start barking." He ended his rude behavior by kicking her as hard as he could with his booted foot.

Therefore, when she was finally able to move into her own duplex, the relief she felt was immense. This meant she would no longer be a burden to her parents; a situation that had been unpleasant in many aspects. Even though she still needed special assistance in some ways, this was classified by her as one of the best times of her life due to the sense of a new found freedom. She would excitedly describe the shenanigans of her pet cats, the beautiful flowers she grew, the precious stump in her front yard, and even a special male friend who would take her places.

Unfortunately, over time, the disease ravaged her body to the point that daily care was no longer possible, a decline that caused her to frequently fall; a happening that required constant phone calls to 911 for assistance; so much that service was finally declined. Thus, after choosing a nursing home, she had to sell her dearly loved duplex; another situation that proved to be filled with, "more of the same" treatment that made up the pattern of her life; all due to an auctioneer that chose to play by his own set of rules. Joining the ranks of bullies that pushed those he considered to be broken to the fringes, the auctioneer treated her so badly that others had to intercede on Sarah's behalf.

However, in spite of this enormous change in her life, and all the past hardships endured, her favorite saying was, "Please understand everyone. I did not come here to die. I came here to live."

Consequently, as the writer and Sarah became the best of friends, it was amazing to not only observe how extremely intelligent she was, but to also feel her trust level grow. An example of this growth was to hear her describe the favorite foods she could not any longer enjoy because of her inability to handle silverware. She would exclaim, "If only I could have a salad with balsamic dressing, a tuna fish sandwich, and mocha-chocolate ice cream.

Thus, one day, the writer asked, "Sarah, if I get permission to take you into the small room beside the dining room, the one without windows, will you allow me make your dreams come true? It would be my pleasure to treat you to those favorite foods you long to enjoy once more."

Consequently, after taking a full week to work up the courage to say yes, she finally agreed to the special time together. Have you solved the mystery as to why this was a challenge for Sarah? If not, try placing yourself in her position having only the ability to use a spoon, maneuvered by two fingers. How is it possible to eat slick lettuce leaves with this limited physical ability? Getting the picture?

Therefore, when the big day arrived, the writer prepared the room in advance by making available coverings for Sarah's clothing and the floor beneath her wheelchair, plus, an ample supply of wipes. Consequently, when she watched the lids be removed and her favorite food come into view, it was like observing the brightest star in the night sky; all due to the glow she wore on her face.

Then, not holding back, she dug into the salad with her fingers and enjoyed it to the very last bite. Her entire body relaxed because she knew, beyond a shadow of doubt, that she was in the presence of someone that made her feel like she "<u>COUNTED</u>". She felt comfortable wearing oil on her fingers, chin, and clothing. And.... licking the bottom of the bowl without restraint.

Consequently, over time, as the days made up years, and Sarah's hungry mind was fed with an array of books, accompanied by lively discussions, her confidence grew to the point that she was prompted to venture into forbidden territory by attending activities and becoming the writer's editor. There was absolutely no area she left unexplored. When she felt disenfranchised, disappointed, or sad, she expressed those feelings with a voice of her own; behavior that soon caused her to be labeled as "very smart". She made new friends and advocated for their rights, as well. Folks, this gal that was so timid and withdrawn actually became the most vocal at the resident council meetings; so much that she became adamant

about the facility setting a time, once a month, where all the residents that had passed, be honored; a happening that is still scheduled monthly and named, "The Sarah Jones Memorial Service".

Therefore, as the seasons came and went, Sarah enjoyed her new found freedom with great gusto. If she received a cake or box of candy, her usual practice was to motor down the hallway in her wheelchair offering to share a piece with staff and residents. Also, if a resident without family support was due to celebrate a birthday, she would notify the writer so that a special cake could be brought in as a surprise for the individual. Ladies and gentlemen, Sarah was absolutely driven to be a blessing to others.

However, the disease with which she was born eventually took its toll, causing her time on earth to reach its conclusion; sooner, rather than later. Thus, as she quietly reclined in her bed, word spread rapidly among the staff and residents that Sarah's condition had worsened; prompting a constant flow of people approaching her room to bid a final adieu.

Also, it was during this time when, Connie, an individual who was born with the same disease that Sarah had endured, entered the room in her motorized wheelchair, that new light was shed on how very abstract it is for others to truly understand the depth of despair and challenges some people face in life. Having endured all the feelings of exclusion cruelly inflicted by human beings to those having special needs, these two people had established a bond that was unmatched for all times. Backing her wheelchair as close to Sarah's bed as possible, her friend, Connie, reached for her hand and began speaking softly in a way that sounded like they had written their own language. Folks, for hours and hours, these two friends held hands; all the way to the finish line! Sarah's friend would pause every once in a while, and say, "It's all right. Jesus is here. It's not going to hurt. You will be perfect in heaven. Just relax, smile, and be at peace. I love you but God loves you more. I'll see you when I get there." These sweet words were spoken with such grace that tears were running down the cheeks unabashedly of all gathered around Sarah's bed.

Ladies and gentleman, on the road home, God used the most unexpected people to fall into step beside one of his own that was in need. Lessons were learned that would never be forgotten. Lives were touched in ways that counted. Above all, a person that had lived on the margins of society all her life, found her voice, made friends, and taught others the true meaning of love. But, most of all, throughout the journey with this sweet friend, the blessings received by the writer were much greater than those she could ever supply to Sarah; all because the writer learned to view the world through the eyes of an individual that had spent

her life on the margins of society; a place that was manmade out of pride, and the need to feel superior.

As a conclusion to Sarah's story, let us once again revisit the disciples' question to Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" His answer to them, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned."

As we close Sarah's story, I am sure many of you feel like the writer, and are at a loss as to why she was born this way. Some people blame God for her circumstances. If he knew ahead of her birth what her journey would be like, why did he not intercede?

Others, actually take the position of not believing in God because he did not save a person from circumstances or horrible plights in life by crying out, "There cannot possibly be a God, or he would not want someone he created to be in this awful state.

Additionally, some folks stop believing, praying, and feel such anger that their own health suffers as a result. Hope disappears and bitterness grows like a malignant cancer, thus, starving their needy soul from God's love.

On the other hand, before departing this world, Sarah wanted to have the last word on the subject. After all, she was the one that had to endure the affliction all her life. Since having lived in a twisted, deformed body that caused numerous people to either lash out at her in anger, or look away in disgust, Sarah had to come to grips with her own intense anger, ugly bitterness, and dark depression, or die a slow, tormented death of the soul. Given this horrible thorn in her flesh that was embedded in every fiber of her being, Sarah felt she had earned the right to have the last say.

Therefore, she wanted to impart to you, that God was always present in her journey; meaning, he never left her side, and encouraged her to cry out to him in anger, anguish, or sorrow, anytime, night or day. He never failed to pick her up and carry her when her will to live ceased. Above all, she did not want you to be mad at him because of her suffering. She wanted you to love him as much as she had all her life. And...even as much as she loved him, it could never equal the bountiful love he poured into her heart. Her final words to you were, "Sometimes, we have more questions than answers, and are at a loss as to even what questions to ask. Don't worry, he always knows."

Read below, her favorite poem.



I Saw Two Clouds at Morning

by John Gardiner Brainard

I saw two clouds at morning,
Tinged by the rising sun,
And in the dawn, they floated on,
And mingled into one;
I thought that morning cloud was blest,
It moved so sweetly to the west.

I saw two summer currents
Flow smoothly to their meeting,
And join their course, with silent force,
In peace each other greeting;
Calm was their course through banks of green,
While dimpling eddies played between.

Such be your gentle motion,
Till life's last pulse shall beat;
Like summer's beam, and summer's stream,
Float on, in joy, to meet
A calmer sea, where storms shall cease,
A purer sky, where all is peace.





HE IS IN MY ARMS

Anthony's Story

The Lord lifts up the humble and downtrodden... Psalm 147: 6



In a perfect world, God's commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself", if followed, would definitely change the landscape of society that currently includes many individuals that are in the category of being labeled as downtrodden. Certainly, given this utopian environment, the challenge of nursing home residents being left without family support would cease to exist.

Unfortunately, since this is currently only a dream at best, often times this volunteer is asked to walk beside residents lacking contact from family members until their earthly life comes to a close. Thus, before Anthony's story of a journey between two strangers begins, it is important to become acutely aware of exactly how high and thick the wall of self-protection has been built in the hearts of people that are simply trying to survive in a cruel world with manmade rules.

Hence, Anthony's story will not only stress the dire plight faced by the downtrodden in this world, but also show how the Almighty views their importance as members of his creation. Above all, it is the writer's greatest hope that lessons are learned and positive action taken on behalf of those finding themselves in the same situation as Anthony.

Anthony's Story

This special man's heartwarming story began after the nursing home activity director quickly noted Anthony's lack of visitors and the enormous number of hours each day he spent in bed. Therefore, out of concern for his mental state of mind, he immediately requested the writer to accept the enormous challenge of walking beside Anthony for the duration of his life. Prior preparation regarding his state of mind set the stage for facing a man that, although very lonely, would strongly resist interacting with a stranger.

Therefore, feeling a "wee" bit nervous, this volunteer gingerly entered Anthony's room discovering a very large bedridden man peering back through direct, piercing, enormous brown eyes. Thus, when his greeting of, "What do YOU want" loudly vibrated off the empty walls, it resulted in the volunteer literally shaking in her shoes and redefining the word "CHALLENGE". In no uncertain terms, he sent the message that he did not intend to cooperate with anyone. Support? No way! Be gone! Off with you! And...don't come back!

Having deeply internalized Anthony's message of rejection the week before, when Thursday's volunteer day rolled around once again, needless to say, this writer had an abundance of trepidation regarding the scheduled visit with him. In fact, an absurd visualization of the wolf in the story "Little Red Riding Hood" moved into a place of prominence in the writer's brain. The words, "All the better to eat you with, my dear," suddenly became a reality.

Consequently, after forcing two reluctant feet down the hallway toward his room, the writer found herself standing out of sight beside his door talking out loud to herself using words of encouragement as to why it was important to face the large, abrasive personality waiting to devour all visitors. Thus, after a deep breath of fresh air, an entrance was made! Folks, not only was Anthony's response the same as the previous week but was even delivered in a more ominous manner. Given the abrasive tone of this resident, the writer's shoes probably left tracks on the floor that appeared not only deep but also glowed with the appearance of white lightning. Oh, how proud of himself he must have felt! Are you picturing his sinister smile at this point?

Considering the two overpowering meetings above, are you placing bets on the writer's actions for the following scheduled visit with Anthony? Don't be so quick to judge this old girl! After all, having neglected to tell you that her father's favorite comment to his children was, "I did not raise any quitters" will come into play! That parental teaching, plus being endowed by the Creator with an overabundance of tenacity must be considered as a part of the equation.

So, on Thursday the following week, finding herself in the same position outside Anthony's door in deep contemplation as to all possible options, she surprised herself by stating out loud, "I have nothing to lose. If he kicks me out this time, three strikes, the game is over. Get creative. Do the unusual and take him off guard!"

For that reason, this writer made a grand entrance into his room by breaking into a soft shoe dance from his door all the way until she reached his bedside. Stopping with a grand gesture of hands held high in the air, she quickly noted a tiny smile playfully tickling his left lower lip. GOT YOU! And...that was the beginning of a wonderful friendship between two very unlikely characters.

Ladies and gentlemen, the description of Anthony you just read above was totally inaccurate. The individual that roared like a lion turned out to be that of a sweet, gentle little lamb. He had a tender heart and loving spirit that will always be a part of this writer's life. He absolutely

adored classical music because of having heard the city orchestra at his school during his 6th grade year; feelings that would stay with him for his entire life.

Over time, he described living in the "projects", low income housing for the poor, as being extremely dangerous; causing him to develop his loud and dangerous demeanor as a weapon against the enemy. However, in spite of this upbringing, he never voiced a complaint against his parents or circumstance.

In fact, Anthony would smile great big as he told about being a young boy and riding the rails to watch his "St. Louis Cardinals" play ball. Then, with his voice becoming more dramatic, he would relay that on one particular night, the game had gone into extra innings causing him to miss the last train to his connection toward home. Realizing he was in trouble, his words were, "Being a sissy, I stood there and cried like a baby." Then, his expression became animated as he revisited the story of a large pink Cadillac pulling up and hearing the voice of his hero, Stan Musial, ask if he could drive him to his missed connection. What a night for a little boy! And...the result of that incident propelled him to become a security guard for those Cardinals as his career. Out of pride for his successful career, the one possession he kept in the drawer of his bedside table was the badge he used to wear proudly on the left shoulder of his uniform each and every day.

Folks, getting to know this intelligent man allowed the writer to explore a wide range of topics; such as hundreds of insects and animals that made their home in Missouri, as well as a thorough understanding of the cities where lightning strikes the most frequently. When he listened to stories penned by the writer, his tender emotions would cause his eyes to be filled with tears.

Then, when Christmas rolled around one year, the activity director and writer conspired together regarding the decorating of Anthony's bare walls. Thus, as a very Merry Christmas celebration for him, Santa, the writer and activity director entered his room singing and rejoicing while weighted down with an abundance of gifts. Without his knowledge, the badge he had worn as a security guard had been removed from his room and returned after having been mounted on red velvet and framed for hanging on his wall. Later, it was such a treat to watch him direct the nursing home staff member as to the exact location the other purchased decorations were to be placed.

Over the course of being together on many Thursdays, the writer told him a story about her father using a very unique way of telling his daughters to behave themselves. As each teenage girl left for an activity, he would smile and say, "Keep your nose clean and your socks pulled up!" In short, that meant think before you act.

After hearing the tale, Anthony laughed heartily at the strange humor and would mention it at the end of our time together each week. Therefore, since he loved this expression so much, before departing his room, the writer would say, "Keep your nose clean"and Anthony would reply, "And my socks pulled up!"

Unfortunately, as time passed, it was obvious that Anthony's health was rapidly declining. Although he tried to be his usual sweet self and participate in a meaningful conversation, he would drift off into sleep. Not wanting to leave him alone, the writer would simply sit by his bed as a way of just being present in case he awakened.

Then, one Thursday upon entering his room, it was obvious to the writer that it would be our last shared moments together as friends in his life on earth. Letting her know she was recognized, he softly murmured, "Hi friend!" Thus, as a way of comforting him, the writer sang softly, prayed quietly and began a hushed exit, fully cognizant it would be the final curtain call of his earthly life.

However, before reaching the door, a faint whisper flowed from his parched lips through the air delivering the words, "Keep your nose clean...... (Pause) Yes folks, this departing saint had reversed the procedure we usually followed. It was his way of saying goodbye until we meet again in heaven.

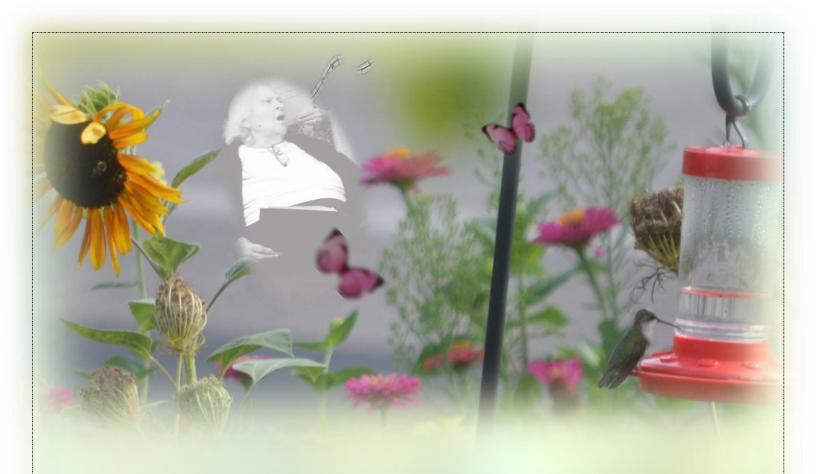
Thus, with salty tears streaming down the writer's face, she called out in a quivery voice, "I will! I promise! I will!" And....so it was!

A few days later, when a celebration of his life occurred at a small chapel close by that was attended by friends and family members, the last words spoken by a family member still haunts the writer today. The remark was made that Anthony was always relegated to the position of being "LAST" throughout his life. And...he seemed to like it.

Ladies and gentlemen, those words caused the writer to recall the story in Scripture when Jesus turned the tables of the money changers over in the Temple out of righteous indignation. Fighting the desire to follow suit required tremendous will power. After all, can you think of any human being that wants to always be "LAST?" Oh, how this writer's heart was breaking for her friend.

Then, fighting hard to keep composure, a quick exit was made for the parking lot; a safe place for emotions to erupt. Thus, while resting her head on the car steering wheel, experiencing intense feelings of rage and turmoil, a voice from the Unseen Real (Holy Spirit) whispered, "The last will be first, and the first will be last. I have Anthony now in my arms."

Folks, the voice was so clear that the writer looked toward the passenger seat fully expecting to find someone there. All anger was defused and replaced by feelings of peace. Hearing the sweet voice of God offered assurance that the downtrodden are truly precious to the Lord. The Almighty had bestowed blessed assurance that Anthony would never be alone, lonely, or "LAST" again. He would be "FIRST" for all eternity. Amen!



1 Peter 1:8-9

"Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

THE JOY OF GOD'S LOVE

VIOLA'S STORY

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved—

Ephesians 2:4-5

It is thought that often what moves us most is some reminiscence of a far-off memory of childhood when the joy unspeakable that flooded our soul was that of spending time with family members at special celebrations, or snuggling sweetly on the lap of a grandmother while being held by her well-worn arms, totally wrapped in a state of rapture resulting from the warmth of her unparalleled love that radiated to the very core of our being.

Thus, when facing difficult circumstances as adults in our prime, we might pose the question, "If it were possible to return to those precious memories of childhood, would our current feelings of turmoil and staleness be refreshed to their original state of happiness? If only......then things would work out!"

However, as the winter season of life is upon us, an internalization of the fact occurs that not only are there cycles in all nature, including that of man, but more importantly that if rebirth is to occur it always has been preceded by the death of a seed. Thus, when the reflection in the mirror is that of a face distinctly showing the wrinkles of time, the Scripture from John

12:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit," offers clarity to the aging process.

In other words, rebirth first began for those giving their lives to Christ and dying to self; an acceptance of God's grace and forgiveness with the reward being that of eternal life. However, having committed our lives to Christ, it is imperative to internalize the fact that, as His children, our journey will not be carefree, but during times of turmoil His wisdom and courage will be offered through our Counselor, the Holy Spirit.

Then, when we see the reflection of our face that has become mature in appearance, rather than feeling despair that we are now old, it should be a wonderful sign of wonder and great anticipation for all those having faith in God's promise of eternal life. Above all, assurance that the Father's presence will be with us from the beginning of life until our last breath should produce joy unspeakable within our hearts and minds. Folks, just like the seed, our physical temple must die before the rebirth into our new and perfect body becomes a reality.

Consequently, each of us has the free choice at this point on our earthly journey of spending the remaining moments displaying emotions of bitterness and regret, and earning the label of being "old and crotchety", or looking toward the future with assurance that the Almighty's plan for our resurrection will mirror the same path set before us by that of our Savior, following His death on the cross. Therefore, by sowing seeds on our journey of life that will multiple and produce fruit, they must be rich in joy and love for our Savior.

Ladies and gentlemen, it was due to observing the behavior of Viola, a sweet resident in the nursing home, whose actions served as an inspiration for the above words that you are now getting ready to read her story. And...the only one about someone still living.

One day, during a concert of hymns performed for the residents, this writer's attention was drawn to the face of this lovely lady because of the joy that seemed to exude from her entire countenance. She was not only singing with gusto, but wore an accompanying smile that reached all the way to her eyes. Although wheelchair bound, she appeared to be elevated as if transported toward heaven.

Feeling drawn toward her, the writer was mesmerized by the angelic sound of her voice as the beautiful notes to the hymn she was so thoroughly enjoying filled the air all around. However, the most notable part of her behavior was simply that she was in the moment so much that it was obvious she was giving glory to God through song.

Then, after watching this unfold, it became apparent to everyone in her presence that this was her usual behavior when she took part in anything pretraining to God. Viola appeared so "crazy in love" with her Lord that the writer felt led to hear how this all came about.

Although most people would say, "She must have experienced a very happy life, or be almost perfect in her actions," they will soon find out this was not the case. Others might contribute,

"If she had to deal with the sorrows I have dwelt with on my journey, she wouldn't be acting like that", will soon discover this way of thinking does not apply either.

Folks, hear now Viola's story and learn how she faced the pain, sorrow, and adversities of life with such great faith that it will touch your own heart to its very core. Above all, her story of joy and trust in her Heavenly Father has been so strong that it has carried her through times of pain possessing the ability to survive with such grace that it is almost unimaginable.

Viola's Story

Viola had a firm foundation of faith in God that was established by a long line of family members that reached deep throughout generations of relatives; meaning even her grandfather had been a minister. Given the fact that both her mother and father were spiritual people, morning prayer and evening Bible study were considered the most important part of each day; habits that, in Viola's mind, provided the foundation for facing hardships and life's disappointments.

Since her father was a traveling salesman and sold products from house to house, he incorporated his belief in God by witnessing to others along the way. Given his need to be away from home, Viola's mother had to assume the role of raising a family that consisted of two boys and three girls; Viola being the oldest.

Unfortunately, however, Viola's mother died when the youngest child of the family was only seven days old; leaving a father to raise the five children ranging in ages of seven days to seven years. Then, as the remaining family members were in the process of bearing an almost insurmountable grief of losing a wife and mother, two grandparents passed away within 6 weeks of each other.

Ladies and gentlemen, are you feeling the burden Viola's father was faced with at this point in life? Given the reality in his mind that the five hungry mouths had to be fed, he knew it was imperative that he resume his work as a salesman as soon as possible. Thus, he hired local housekeepers to care for the sweet little children he cherished so much; a job that required the individual to reside in the home that was located out in the country. Given the task at hand, most housekeepers lasted only a short period of time; causing the family to go through 37 different employees over a period of time. Although a lot of the housework fell on Viola's little shoulders, it still did not prevent the high turnover of staff.

Thus, in an effort to improve the situation, Viola's father became involved in the lumber industry that caused the family to move all the way across country to the state of Oregon. Given the fact that movement was a requirement for her father's career path, it was a natural thing to hear the words, "Kiddies, it is time to move again." Additionally, it also meant that for 2 ½ years, while in Oregon, the younger children had to be placed in a local childcare institution during the week because of the amount of care they required. However, every weekend, her father would bring them home to celebrate the sabbath with the family.

In addition to all the adjustments within the home, are you picturing the number of times the children had to enroll in different schools? When Viola looks back at all the changes they were required to endure, the one thing that anchored them was their father's teaching that all people were from God and were to be treated with equal respect. Therefore, disagreements among themselves or with classmates were simply not a part of their way of life.

Finally, when Viola's father remarried, it was to a woman she recalls as being a wonderful mother to the children; a situation that provided the stability the family needed so badly.

Since obtaining an education was considered extremely important in the mind of Viola's father, her progress in school was exemplary and, thus, was encouraged by him to become a teacher. Although Viola had her heart set on nursing as a career, she followed her father's wishes and agreed to try it for at least one year. However, at the conclusion of a year, the passion she felt in her heart for becoming a nurse never wavered; prompting her to enroll in nursing school immediately.

Thus, feeling on top of the world, Viola entered nurses' training with her usual enthusiasm and took to it like a duck to water. Unfortunately, as she studied, the vision in one eye became an issue; so much that her left eye ball protruded to the point of touching her glasses. Wasting no time, her father took her to Mayo Clinic for an appointment with the best optometrist available to receive the news that a malignant growth was located in the optic nerve that required immediate surgery. Not only was the entire optic nerve removed, but the following prognosis that accompanied it was even more startling: "I HAVE DONE EVERYTHING I KNOW TO DO AS A PHYSICIAN. UNLESS A HIGHER POWER INTERCEDES, IN 6 WEEKS, YOUR DAUGHTER WILL BE BLIND IN BOTH EYES AND HAS ONLY 6 MONTHS TO LIVE."

At this point, Viola's father elected to keep the diagnosis to himself and encouraged his daughter to continue her training as a nurse. However, being aware of the probability that Viola would probably not be graduating with the others at the prearranged date, the hospital conducted the ceremony earlier than usual just so she could participate.

Ladies and gentlemen, the diagnosis delivered to Viola over 68 years ago that never became a reality, propelled this sweet resident of a nursing home, now in the winter season of her life, to fall so deeply in love with her Heavenly Father that she constantly proclaims, "God must have something left for me to do." Fully cognizant that she is here on earth for her Creator's purpose and His pleasure, the joy she exudes fills the entire room when she enters.

Then, wearing a mischievous grin, she concluded this experience in life by recounting the expressions on the faces of the nurses that attended a class reunion many years later when seeing her enter the room. One finally commented, "Is it you, Viola? I thought you were dead!"

At this point, given the fact that Viola had to endure this type of pain and suffering which left her blind in one eye for the remainder of her life, some thought the rest of her journey would

be smooth sailing. Since God had healed her of a disease that, in the minds of mere humans, was fatal, only good things waited to unfold ahead. However, this was not to be the case.

Although Viola moved forward with her career and became an incredibly successful surgical nurse, she would have to face the disappointing reality that a husband she thought would be kind, physically abused every member of her little family; meaning herself and the two sweet children. After realizing the situation was not going to improve, Viola courageously protected her children by facing the world as a single parent; a move that was not considered proper at the time because society expected women to stay in the home, regardless of the circumstances. In spite of this tragedy, Viola eventually married a man that was both a wonderful husband and father to her children; an individual they both viewed as dad.

Today, as this beautiful lady looks back at her life, she will tell you God's fingerprints are all over it. First, the fact that she is still here lets her know that something wonderful will occur within the time she has left on this earth. She will look at you with intense determination and say, "Death? Am I afraid of dying? No! The fact that I am here now, right this very minute; alive since 1950 with the diagnosis I was given? Afraid? Why should I be afraid to die when God is on my side? I belong to him. Am I perfect? Oh, no. I still make my share of mistakes. But...through faith, joy and singing, I must continue to show others I am in His daily care."

As a farewell to all of you, Viola wanted to send the following message:

"Can you earn your way to heaven?"

"How can you say you are not going to make it if you have put your faith in God? There is no way God is going to tap you on the shoulder and say, "Well, I guess you have done pretty good so I will let you come in." No, you have to accept him as your Savior and be so in love with him that you want to spend your life working for him. Being led by God is so much more satisfying than trying to figure out things for yourself. Trying to save yourself doesn't work! Since Christ is our great arbitrator, we don't have to worry. We are human and make mistakes. But because he died on the cross in our place, if we accept that and ask for forgiveness, we belong to Him. No matter how much Satan keeps grabbing at you, trying to get you off course, don't be fooled by him. Keep holding on to the hand of God. Although our God is a loving God and wants you to believe in Him, he will never force you. He gave you freewill to accept Him or not.

God is a just God and has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you. So, believe that it means not only every day of your earthly life, but also when you go before the throne of judgement. If you are centered on Christ, you have nothing to worry about. Just because you are unable to see him with your eyes, doesn't indicate his absence. He is more alive and present than the things you can touch, feel, and see in the world. However, all those things will be eventually gone, but not our Father.

The yearning in our heart is really what makes us live. We all have a longing for God; thus, it is just a matter of filling the space with Him, rather than the things of this world that can never be satisfying."

Viola's words about the winter season of life:

"Now that I am in the winter season of life, when I go to sleep each night and wake up each morning, my perspective is totally different. My main prayer is Lord, keep me this day. But if you are through with me, then I am ready to go. However, if there is still something left for me to do, show me what it is. And...invariably, he will put something in front of me. Or else, I will hear Him say, "Wait! We will talk it over."

After saying this, Viola laughed and said, "A lot of people say to me, "You talk to God?" I say, "Absolutely, how do you think I got this far?"

"Sometimes, they ask me what heaven will be like. Christ has told us what it will be like in Scripture. So, if we believe in Him, then, we also believe in God. If we have those two entities combined....and they are combined.... what else do we need? If I say I have God in my heart is one thing, but if I live as if I have God in my heart, then I am showing the world that I have something that they need and I can show them how to get it. There is only one place you can go where you can obtain this feeling of contentment. Heaven means total contentment to me. I can't see heaven visually in my mind. If I look forward to being there in any capacity at all, it would be the joy of being reunited with the loved ones that have gone on before me. Since I am the only one of the 5 children still alive, God has something for me to do. We must all release the things of this world that try to sway our mind as it relates to our last moments in our earthly journey. We must keep our faith and fight the good fight Christ has in store for us until we no longer breathe. When I breathe my last breath of earthly air, I believe there will be a peace that passes all understanding. My spirit will immediately go back to God as my Creator. There is no other way for it to go as long as I am in His care. I believe He will be there right with me and take me home on the wings of glory. It is important for all of us to realize how much God loves us. Talk to him through prayer. As my papa always said, "That is your telephone to God."

Viola's Prayer for You

"Dear and all wise heavenly father,

I thank you that you have given me the privilege to internalize that all the years you have been on the throne, and that regardless of age or condition, we are never too old to open our hearts to you. I just ask that you be with each and every one that hears this message. Help them understand that without you nothing is possible, but with you in our hearts and minds there is nothing that is impossible because you give us the strength and knowledge to portray your love and mercy to all those, we come in contact with in life. I thank you for that! In Jesus' name. Amen!"



Proverbs 4:23

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.



PURITY OF HEART

Ruby's Story



Philippians 4:8

*Whatever is true

*Whatever is noble

*Whatever is right

*Whatever is pure

*Whatever is lovely

*Whatever is admirable

If anything is excellent or praiseworthy—
Think about such things.

Introduction

The word "heart" is used 105 times in 98 verses in the New Testament, and 725 instances in the King James version of the Old Testament; signaling it to be the emotional, spiritual, and mental center of a person. Therefore, when we speak of the heart in this manner, it must be considered as the epicenter of man's inner most being.

Consequently, in Matthew 6: 21, the purpose for Jesus boldly stating, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also", was made abundantly clear to individuals then, as well as today.

Adding to this focus, read out loud the Scripture from Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses resulting in salvation."

Yet, as we read on in Scripture that our hearts are wicked, and that we are born with a natural predisposition towards sin, our mere human minds become puzzled, don't they? Scratching our heads, we probably ask, "How in the world am I to remedy this situation, especially, given the state of the human condition?" Have you ever met a seemingly perfect individual that always demonstrates total purity, where malice and guile are absent? This writer certainly has not. Thus, if you have observed someone good-naturedly interacting with another person in an incredibly pure manner, you might have even heard him/her labeled as a "goody two shoes"; cruel words from another, perhaps brought on by feelings of one's own inadequacy.

Yet, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exclaims, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." However, since his children are innately sinful, how can this be? Afterall, God is holy and without sin; so much that the children of Israel dared not even call him by name.

However, when our Lord refers to the importance of purity of heart within his children, he is speaking about those, although still sinful, whose sins have been forgiven through repentance, followed by a renewal on the inside; all because he now lives within their heart. In other words, the transformation from inside that is occurring due to the presence of Jesus in the lives of each person; allows one to conclude that purification is only possible through Christ, not from the actions of a single human being. Without God, nothing is possible.

At this point, although we still are imperfect beyond measure as mere humans, it does mean that after making a commitment to Christ, he is then firmly established as Lord of our lives. Given this action, you might declare, "Now I am home free. I am all set! Isn't that right?" Read on friends and see what is expected from members residing in the kingdom of God.

Although, for certain your name is now written in the Lambs Book of Life for all eternity, in addition, as his followers, we should be so in love with him that we allow him to become our Shepherd every moment in time; meaning, we listen to his still small voice for guidance and encouragement. This new relationship, if cultivated through reading Scripture and prayer, will motivate us to become so in love with him that others will see his reflection through, not only

our countenance, but also our behavior. Simply stated, a closer walk with Jesus will truly cause him to be our One and Only! The thought of life without him will be horrifying; just like sheep minus a shepherd; without his rod and staff, the journey of life would be impossible. On the other hand, through his guidance, the road home will be within our site always and forever.

Then, no matter the circumstances we must endure in this life, our Lord will be right beside us the entire way. Sometimes, we might avoid pitfalls through his guidance, while in other instances, be given the strength and courage to face even the most difficult of challenges.

Ruby's Story

Ladies and gentlemen, it was under the most difficult of circumstances for one of God's truly precious children that the story belonging to Ruby that you will now read, began and ended. Given the fact that she had been bedridden for a long period of time, it is the only image of her the writer will ever possess.

Also, since she was still so mentally astute, and having to spend such long hours alone, totally confined to her room, the writer was assigned to walk beside her the rest of the road home; meaning until her earthly journey was no more.

Since she spent every hour, both waking and sleeping in bed, one would imagine her heart to be filled with bitterness and anger. However, in the case of God's child, Ruby, it was just the opposite; so much so, that both staff and strangers gravitated to her bedside like bees to honey. Due to her sweet countenance, young and old alike desired her company.

Perhaps, if you refer back to her picture above on the second page, you will immediately solve the mystery as to her popularity. Note the peaceful, kind, welcoming eyes; all due to being totally saturated by the love that poured continuously from her heart.

Certainly, a case that proved this to be true was when a young man named Preston, still in elementary school, met her out of the clear blue one day, and was so smitten that he was convinced that she would thoroughly enjoy hearing him read his all-time favorite book.

Therefore, in preparation for this event, he not only repeatedly practiced reading his chosen book, but also carefully selected his wardrobe. Thus, prior to the big day, he proudly modeled his chosen garments for his grandmother that consisted of his favorite jeans, shirt, cap, and his grandfather's tie, (that totally clashed and reached his knees), all just for his new friend.

Consequently, when the date rolled around, feeling great confidence that he was well prepared and dressed to the nines, he entered Miss Ruby's room with great pomp and circumstance, calling out, "Hello Miss Ruby, I could not wait to see you. I have my favorite story here under my arm that I know you will want to hear!"

In response, her face absolutely glowed with delight upon seeing this young fellow; a little guy that immediately was saturated by the bountiful love that streamed tenderly from her heart.



Ladies and gentlemen, these two children of God, though generations removed, were so well suited for one another that they fit just like a glove. Having taught all ages of children in a one room school, this offered the opportunity for Ruby, the retired teacher, to use skills she had honed so well earlier on in life. On the other hand, the little boy she was meeting for the first time, was hungry for love due to difficult circumstances he was having to endure, and was like a sponge waiting for the moisture of her affection.

Therefore, as Preston read his story that centered on a pony, Miss Ruby asked him to imitate the sound the animal made; a request that caused him to look at her with a totally blank expression. Thus, immediately realizing this little boy had not been around horses, she began to whinny just like a horse; a reaction that caused the room to be filled with laughter; behavior that prompted bystanders to playfully follow suit. At this point, are you imagining the sounds coming out of Miss Ruby's room? Folks, in just a few moments spent together, these two special people formed an everlasting bond. In short, they both gave and received equally; behavior that served as a poignant example of the love that flowed from this great lady's heart; truly a reflection of Jesus at work in her life.

Let the photograph speak to your heart.



Now that you have an idea of Miss Ruby's personality and the impact, she had on everyone she met, even though bedridden, you are now able to ascertain why people enjoyed her company so much. Certainly, the writer can attest to the fact that not once did Miss Ruby wear any expression on her face other than a smile; an amazing happening given the fact that she was enduring so much physical pain.

No matter, this was a child of God who was absolutely unstoppable when it came to impacting her fellowman. Not allowing her limitations to get in her way, when the writer invited her to be interviewed by the local newspaper, she replied with a resounding, "Yes!" It did not bother her one bit to speak and be photographed as a bedridden nursing home resident. Thus, as you might imagine, the interviewer and photographer fell immediately in love with her.

In addition, when the writer asked if she would serve as a model for a book that was in the works called "In Gramme's Shoes"; a project that meant a young artist would need to be in her company for a large amount of time, with great eagerness, she consented.

Therefore, over time, it was interesting to note that Miss Ruby's walk with God that had begun at a very early age, now served as the firm foundation she would use for climbing the final mountain of her earthly life; all the while, holding to his unchanging hand. Given this intimate relationship, it is no wonder she handled her life experiences with such grace and humor.

One example of this was, as a young woman, having obtained her teaching degree from the University of Central Missouri, then called a teacher's college, she taught in a one room school located in a rural area; a position that required flexibility on her part. Therefore, the stories she told about her time with the students would sometimes cause the two of us to laugh until tears rolled down our cheeks; especially when she recounted the unique gift a young man brought to her that caused the entire box that held it to rock and roll in her hands. You see, he loved Miss Ruby so much that he bestowed on her his favorite pet; that being an enormous black snake. Hiding her fear, she accepted the gift with such grace that he left, raring his shoulders back and wearing a big grin that met his eyes.

Then, over time, having discovered that Miss Ruby and the writer were both alumni from the same university, a unique surprise was prepared just for her. Journeying to the university, the writer met with the staff regarding this special student, now in her 90's, that had graduated with a teaching certificate many years prior, and invited them to assist in a planned celebration.

As a result, one day, a large package arrived to the nursing home addressed to Miss Ruby that sent her into a state of awe and wonder. Spotting the return address as that of her old alma mater, her mouth dropped open and her eyes absolutely sparkled with excitement. Beneath the wrapping paper, she found a personal letter addressed to her along with an assortment of memorabilia; all treasures that she examined carefully for a very long time. Folks, as the writer looked on through watery eyes, her greatest wish was that other people in the extended community could witness this special happening. In doing so, the importance of reaching out to the elderly through community service would be paramount in their priorities.

Another thing that came to light during the relationship between the writer and Miss Ruby was how much she had done in the community as a mother, grandmother, and citizen. Having adopted her son when he was only 3 days old, her role as a mother always took special preference in her life. Unable to have biological children of her own, he was more priceless than gold to this sweet lady. When she spoke about him, the love that shone on her face made it glow with a radiant brilliance; a reaction that let the world know how much she adored this gift from God. As they enjoyed one another's company, it felt as though you could literally physically touch the adoration with your fingers, they each exuded.

Then, just prior to Christmas one year, it was obvious that Miss Ruby's time on earth was quickly reaching its conclusion. Now in her nineties, her physical body was simply wearing out;

so much that it was difficult for those attending her to witness the suffering she endured every moment of her existence. Thus, although the wonderful team from hospice tenderly and professionally met her every need, many of those that loved her began praying for God to take her home.

Unfortunately, Miss Ruby just seemed to linger endlessly; never displaying any signs of anxiety, but appearing to simply be patiently waiting... waiting... waiting. Concerned for her friend, the writer would spend many hours at her side reading Scripture, praying, and singing her favorite hymns as a way of showing support.

Then, one day, after leaving her company, and totally overcome with sadness, the writer pulled her car over to the side of the road, placed her head on the steering wheel, and loudly pleaded with God. Filled with unbearable sorrow that Miss Ruby was in such a state of suffering, the writer cried out, "Why? Why? Why? She has been a faithful follower of yours all her life. Why are you not taking her home? When will it all end? Her physical body is literally rotting away!"

Thus, having reached her office just a few minutes after this intense conversation with God, and sorting through the mail on her desk, the writer opened a Christmas card that felt like a hot potato. You see, the words that appeared to jump off the card into the writer's face read, "BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD!" Startled, the writer jumped up and dropped the card as if it had burned her skin. In the writer's mind, God was saying, "Back off. It is impossible for you to think like your Creator. You don't have any idea what is going on. Be quiet!"

As a result of this conversation, the writer apologized to God through prayer and assured him she had learned her lesson.

Consequently, just a few days later, the writer learned that a family member was immensely struggling with Miss Ruby's departure. Fully cognizant of the challenge, out of love, Miss Ruby was willing to suffer as long as needed; all the while trusting in God to handle the issue. And... that is what happened. She waited patiently, hour after hour, trusting her Great Promise Keeper to handle it in his own way.

Thus, in God's good and perfect time, Miss Ruby departed to her heavenly home and joined the saints around the throne.



"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

A SPECIAL BOOK DEDICATED TO MISS RUBY THAT YOU WILL ENJOY CAN BE FOUND ON WWW.DEVOTIONALEMBERS.COM, TITLED:

"IN GRAMME'S SHOES"





And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

1 Peter 5: 10



STRONG FIRM & STEADFAST

Bea's Story



By the grace of God, I am who I am, but by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No. I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

1 Corinthians 15: 10

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—NIV

Ephesians 2:8



Comprehension of Grace

Were it not for God's grace, the spiritual journey we travel on the road home would be not only unimaginable, but impossible for each and everyone of us; a concept that few contemplate during the waking hours of their moments in time. Instead, the frenzy of daily living gets in the way, surrounding ones being with noisy chaos and disharmony; a situation created because of mere human decisions impeding one's own progress through failing to cease the hurried state we choose to exist in throughout our lives; all brought on by an effort to comply with endless schedules and checklists designed by our own pen.

Yet, when an unexpected happening rears its ugly face, or the aging of the body brings us to an abrupt halt, forcing us into a time of aloneness, the sound of our own heart's rhythm suddenly reverberates like that of an enormous beating drum; one that never ceases; a noisy cadence that loudly calls us into a time of reality when we view our journey through the lenses of powerful magnification; a process that forces us to recognize that life according to "self" is useless, hopeless, and fruitless; a state of being that prompts remarks such as, "Is this truly what life is all about? What's the real purpose of man's existence? How is it possible to make it through another day? Why is the spirit willing but the body weak?"

Consequently, when we once again try to figure out the answers on our own without arriving at possible conclusions, guilt and feelings of failure that root themselves deeply in our minds, soon send us down a pathway called "materialistic treats"; that being a process of filling the starving soul with "paying myself" vacations or fancy clothes and cars. Then, shortly after, when the giant empty void shows up again within sheer moments, a vicious pattern of "trying to make myself feel better" quickly is established.

As a result, later when in the process of dealing with the stark reality called, "disease of the soul", the question, "Am I the only one feeling this lost and hopeless", erupts from our trembling liips.

Folks, please know the question just asked is as old as time; meaning each one of us has lessons to learn and difficulty understanding the purpose of life, all because we cannot let go of the wheel that is gripped so tightly by our own human hands. Thus, the result is that of a starving soul that only God can nourish.

Furthermore, when we search Scripture for people that shared the same dilemma as just described, we soon learn that, not only are we in good company, but each one lived a different story on their road home. Remember Peter, who denied knowing Jesus three times, Thomas, who needed proof that Jesus had risen, David, that morally allowed his values to drastically slip when it came to women, Joseph, who bragged to his brothers about the coat of many colors given to him by his father, Abraham, that pawned his wife off as being his sister? Oh, yes! Human beings that allowed self-gratification to get in the way of God's plan for their lives are scattered throughout the pages of Holy Script. Yet, in the end, they repented and allowed their Father to provide nourishment for their soul; a need brought on by their own self will; a part

of the human body that has an extremely limited scope. Instead of allowing God to nourish their soul, they had reversed the process; thus, grasping hopelessly at the wind.

Ladies and gentlemen, the bottom line for all of us is to realize without God's wonderful grace, we are all lost and without direction in our lives. On the other hand, simply recognizing each of us will have a different, unique story that we live on the road home, allows not only our own to unfold as it should but that of others as well. It will prompt each of us to accept the fact that we all arrive at our final destination from different directions and rates of speed.

Above all, internalizing the reality that the path to our destination is filled with hardship, rocky terrain, deep valleys, and high mountains should motivate each of us to grasp the hands of our fellowmen withholding judgement and offering encouragement, instead.

Thus, as you read the words that follow about a saint named Bea who is now at home with Jesus, you will receive inspiration from the fact that, although suffering from the same sinful nature which we all deal with every moment of our existence, her love for the Savior always served as an example of how to navigate the stormy waters of life. Although Bea's handsome physical appearance dictated the career path she would choose, and overtime, aged just like that of all her fellow residents, it was the special place that Jesus filled in her soul that helped her face the darkest of hours with an assurance that never waned; a decision that allowed her inner being to be nourished by her Creator, along with a faith that remained strong, firm, and steadfast until her last breath of earthly air.

Having now completed this introduction, dear readers, you are invited to read Bea's Story and allow yourself to, not only enjoy her one-of-a-kind personality, like that of no person you have ever met, but simitaneously discover your mind being transported into a world filled with laughter, sass, tenacity, and plain old southern grit; the stuff that formed the personage of a lady who possessed an aura that literally filled every room she entered; an individual labeled by residents and caretakers, alike, as having left in her wake, an enormous void that has yet to be occupied; all this occuring while leaning on a cane she affectionally named, "Mabel."



Bea's Story

Anyone that arrived at Glendale Gardens Nursing Home would always depart wearing a smile prompted by the memory of having met a special resident named Bea; a lady that drew almost everyone's attention due to a quick wit that acted as a tonic to not only staff, but to her fellow residents, as well. Never missing a beat, her dancing blue eyes signaled to all present that she was fully aware of each and everyone that entered her sphere; thus, to such a degree that all staff members breezing into her room, did so at their own risk; meaning more than likely they were going to be the receipient of a "prank by Bea"; a situation that prompted them to cautiously enter her presence with rotating eyeballs.

As a result, sounds of laughter would loudly spill out into the hallway, accompanied by a soft southern accent; a combination that served as a camouflage as to what was about to unfold. After all, given that smooth southern drawl, only syrup coated charm would be the result. Right? No way! Just the opposite was true. Stay tuned and find out.

A Life Well Lived

Certainly, if you believe that a personality described by others being "as big as life itself", must be the result of a firm foundation built during childhood, you are on the right track as it applied to Bea.

Martha Bea, known to the residents and staff simply as "Bea", was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi among people who knew what enjoying the important things of life was all about. Her smile immensely broadened when telling about living on a farm with her loving parents and only brother, Douglas, in a three-bedroom home that was simple, yet comfortable. Flowers were planted in a beautiful array of colors all over the yard that provided fragrant bouquets for the family members' enjoyment. The space was bordered all around with large fields of cotton; a crop that provided a living for members of the community.

Her father worked long hours as a cotton gin manager, while her mother ran the household; along with the care of an enormous garden. People from the community were hired to till the garden in preparation for growing an array of vegetables; such as tomatoes, squash, carrots, peppers, potatoes, and an abundance of BLACK-EYED PEAS. Bea recalled with great drama how she assisted her mother in canning 500 quarts of vegetables in one season from their garden; a big job indeed! However, she was allowed ample time to enjoy playing with her paper dolls. Then, on Sunday, Bea's mother escorted the children to the local Baptist Church which built a strong faith that remained firm throughout her life.

Since Bea's mother had the reputation as an outstanding cook, Bea was expected to follow suit. After all, southern girls were supposed to acquire this skill at a very early age. Although Bea received ample instruction from her mother on how to prepare recipes, she never reached the same level of enthusiasm for concocting culinary dishes. In fact, she wrinkled her nose and stated, "I always hated to cook!"

Bea's face was known to light up when she recalled traveling to her grandparent's home for holidays and special occasions. There was nothing like the bonds that were formed during this time in her life. The family would gather around the table that was loaded with an assortment of favorite southern dishes, such as ham, black-eyed peas, cornbread, and delicious cakes and pies.

Bea and her brother, Douglas, attended grades 1-8 in a school that was located only three miles from their home. They would then complete their education traveling to the high school for grades 9-12. Bea recalls wearing beautiful clothes made by her mother, who was a wonderful seamstress. Due to her mother's talent, no one ever suspected they were handmade. She was very proud to wear the gorgeous gowns her mother sewed for the school dances; an activity that Bea dearly loved. Oh, how she cherished attending dances!

Unfortunately, when Bea was only 15, the unexpected death of her father brought on a great amount of grief to the family. It also caused the sad little family of three to move into town so her mother could take on the responsibility of making a living. Due to her mother's reputation for her delicious culinary creations, she was hired immediately as a manager at the local country club where she received enormous accolades from the members.

Bea furthered her education by attending Old Miss for two years where she was appreciated for her charming personality and good looks. In fact, she was recognized for her southern beauty, not only by her classmates, but by the judges in the Mississippi pageant. As a result, Martha Bea received the great honor of Miss Mississippi, an outstanding achievement for a young girl. However, when she told you about the honor, she would make light of it and say that all it required was to stomp around in a pretty gown her mother made for the big occasion. She described the gown as being made of heavy cotton lace with a long waist, accompanied by a flared hooped skirt. A matching long stole set the creation off to perfection. After winning the pageant, Bea was required to travel to different cities making appearances on behalf of the state of Mississippi.

As an additional benefit of being blessed with grace, looks and southern charm, Bea caught the eye of clothing manufacturers and was invited to model an array of garments throughout the country; especially New York. Casual attire was the type of clothing she loved to model the most.

However, in just a short while, Bea's desire to travel to different places all over the country drew her attention toward becoming a flight attendant; a wish that required a change in career. As a result, she accepted a position as a flight attendant with American Airlines and flew all over the country. Even as a flight attendant, she was noticed by a skin care company and was hired to be a model for their line.

Consequently, it was while she was charming the travelers on one of the flights that she caught the eye of her future husband, Thomas; an engineer who was required to move frequently from one location to another. He was so smitten by the blond beauty with the sparkling blue

eyes that he found himself arranging his schedule to coordinate with Bea's itinerary, which soon prompted wedding bells to ring.

Two children, Tommy and Bea Bea, were born to this union which caused Bea to become a mother and housewife. Since her husband was transferred often, Bea and the two children were required to adjust constantly. Frequently, Bea would proudly tell you the names of her children and grandchildren; her life's greatest achievement. Above all, she wanted them to be good Christians and show kindness and manners to all God's creation.

Later in life, Bea lived in California where she became a real estate agent; selling exclusive properties. When dealing with this type of real estate, your sales are less in number because of a narrow customer base, but much higher in dollars. She recalled this career as very rewarding. However, the Springfield, Missouri area called her because of a desire to be closer to her son, Tommy.

Then, as time passed, health issues made it necessary for Bea to enter a nursing home where assistance could be offered for her daily living. Thus, it was at this time that her cane named "Mabel" entered the picture.

Although most residents needed canes or a walker to assure easy mobility, none of them would even come close to the one Bea used; meaning the character named Mabel attached to the handle literally made folks think she had a life of her own.

Folks, given the fact that Bea used it to keep ill-mannered people in line, perhaps the only thing missing was the ability for the facial expression to take on a menacing appearance when needed.

Given the fact that Bea literally detested a demonstration of improper etiquette from anyone, no matter the age, Mabel was used frequently to rein in individuals outside the boundary line of "polite society according to Bea's rule book." In fact, the one thing that would make her southern charm turn from syrupy sweetness into lemon juice was someone acting out. Not hesitating to set the individual straight, her behavior would border on rudeness. She would loudly proclaim, "Did their mama not teach them any better? Obviously not, so I will!"

Therefore, using Mable as her disciplinary rod, she was known to actually poke even the men in the arm or back when disgusted with their actions. One resident in particular was the frequent target of Mabel's wrath due to the fact that his desire to show off a bit collided strongly with Bea's mama's teaching. Added to his list of improprieties was when he chose to act out in front of others by demonstrating his dancing ability; a poor choice on his part; especially given the fact that his awkward feet simply lacked agility. Thus, to Bea, having the reputation of being a graceful dancer, allowed his movements to absolutely send her into orbit; so much that Mabel actually took on a voice of her own in addition to taps on the shoulder. Yet, when all was said and done, this gentleman in question cried like a baby at Bea's passing;

behavior that caused some residents to wonder if he viewed her heart in a different manner, while at the same time extending to her the gift of grace.

Also, given the fact that Bea dined at a four top with three other male residents, it was soon discovered by the staff that no nonsense occurred from any of them. As long as the three fellows were in "Queen Bea's" presence, proper etiquette was going to be followed. Otherwise, a conversation transpired that was laced with a southern accent, but far from sweet and kind. With Mabel resting on the arm of Bea's chair, perhaps the culprit/s in question knew better than to cross the line. Instead, they would carry on conversations in a civilized manner, and actually enjoy one another's company.

Another occasion that occurred on Bea's birthday demonstrated to all present the depth of love she had in her heart for little children. Unbeknownst to her, a special luncheon celebration was planned that would hit her hot button of adoration for the younger generation.

Thus, having been privy to the fact that her special day would be celebrated; she was given the ability to plan her guest list along with the menu as follows:

fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, rolls, iced tea, and cake. As a favor for attendees, a large Georgia peach served as a touch of southern charm. However, the biggest surprise that occurred was just prior to the cutting of the cake when a young man named Preston walked in dressed as "The Cat in The Hat." Not only did he sing the birthday song to high heaven but also read the story that matched his attire to the group; an act that prompted Bea to not only supply him with kisses but extend an invitation to partake of the full menu. Accepting her offer, he proceeded to gobble down the delicious fare as Bea sat with her arm around him. Since his enjoyment of the food took precedent over acceptable table manners, "Queen Bea" let it pass, at least this time.

Another activity that demonstrated the competitive spirit that Bea possessed was when she enjoyed the game of Bocce ball during a social time with the other residents. Not only did she have a desire to win, but wore a disgusted expression that was obvious to all present causing them to remain silent when she missed the mark. View the two photos below for evidence of this fact.



Bea being coached before throwing Bocce ball.



Look at Bea's expression! She did not like her performance.

Over time, as the seasons arrived and departed, allowing Bea to make acquaintance after acquaintance, it seemed to be a rhythm that would last forever. It was unimaginable to picture life at Glendale Gardens without Martha Bea; lovingly known as Bea. Trying to visualize the tall southern lady that leaned on "Mabel" for support as she gracefully placed one foot in front of the other, properly walking as she was taught during her career as a model, being absent was not even a thought for those that held her in such high regard. Yet, time marches on for all of God's children. As Scripture states, "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to break down and a time to build..." (Ecclesiastes 3: 1-3)

Consequently, one Easter just as the writer's family had finished dinner, a loud, frantic knock sounded at the front door; a gesture that harshly signaled someone was in dire need. Quickly responding, the writer found herself peering into the troubled eyes of Bea's grandson who delivered the news that she had collapsed at the dining room table. Since her son was the writer's next-door neighbor, it appeared that God had begun the orchestration of her final approach to heaven. Having established a close relationship with Bea over the years, it seemed only fitting that the first step of her final journey would be launched in this manner.

Thus, spotting Bea lying on the floor in obvious pain, the writer sat down and placed her sweet friend's head on her lap and spoke soothing words in her ear. Given her visual expression, it was obvious that she identified the familiar voice, and somehow received a bit of comfort. Then, in just a matter of minutes, the writer and Bea's son, Tommy, drove together to the hospital; a situation that was to be the beginning of the end for this dear saint; an unfortunate happening that prompted a gathering of family members to proclaim final words of love.

Thus, after many tests and examinations, attending physicians made the determination the best place for Bea to spend her final moments should be among all those that so dearly loved this special lady; meaning the nursing home; a development that caused news to spread like wildfire that she had returned; an action that drew both staff and residents from all over the facility to her bedside.

In fact, the behavior of a staff member that had grown to deeply love Bea, has been forever imprinted on the writer's brain; all due to the humble way she offered comfort just shortly before Bea's departure. Even though she had little children of her own to care for at home, she still put forth the effort of setting her alarm an hour earlier than usual for the purpose of spending time with her dear friend before clocking in. Possessing the premonition that Bea's time was almost finished on this earth, she stretched out beside her friend and gently held her in an embrace for an hour; a behavior that still causes the writer's eyes to mist over. Folks, are you clearly getting the image of this caring person's arms that held a departing saint as belonging to Christ? She had heard the voice of the Spirit and followed in kind. "The King will reply, Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25: 40) Sound familiar?

Additionally, the same evening, after having concluded an extremely busy day, and anticipating how wonderful a restful night of sleep would feel, the writer was also drawn into the situation. Although prepared to greet the evening shadows and retire, God had other ideas in mind. As a result, just as the writer was ready to turn the lights out, instructions were delivered through her mind as clearly as if being face to face with another person saying, "Go! Go, now! Bea will not be here tomorrow!"

Ladies and gentlemen, given the dramatic manner in which this message was delivered, it prompted the writer to go into immediate action. Quickly dressing, she drove resolutely toward the nursing home, all the while whispering a prayer for her dear friend. Having been a volunteer with the elderly for a long while, it is easy to reason that, in cases such as this, time is of the essence. As Samuel demonstrated in Scripture how to respond after hearing a voice in the night with the words, "Speak, your servant is listening;" so should we all.

Therefore, after arriving at Bea's bedside, it was obvious that her time on earth was quickly drawing to a close. Although her eyes were shut, when she heard the writer singing "Amazing Grace", she responded with, "That is so pretty." Spending time with this departing saint was pure joy due to the fact that her desire was to be forever with Jesus. Since the celestial shores of heaven were in her sight, leaving her side was joy unspeakable and full of glory.

Finally, as the clock beside her bed continued to tick the moments away, her daughter released her by calmly announcing it was time for her to depart, and all would be well. Then, having completed the path God had set before her, Bea was held sweetly in the arms of her dear Savior on the rest of the road home. The angels were singing and saints rejoicing as a child of God entered into her eternal home. The Great Promise Keeper had never failed to be there for his

child; a home-grown country girl that hailed from Clarksdale, Mississippi and touched lives everywhere she traveled; all because she delivered the message of Christ with southern charm, laced with grit and sass. Without doubt, the belief that one day her Father would say, "Son, go bring my children home", kept her footing strong, firm, and steadfast.



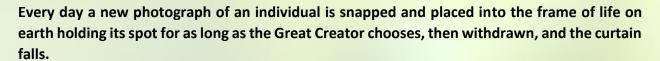
Since friends that believe in Jesus never have to say goodbye, we will see you later, dear one.





Payton's Story

I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Philippians 3:14



Yet, even though the winter season for many has reached its conclusion, the seeds they have planted during the course of their journey will take root; causing hope for their fellowmen to begin anew. Thus, even when the sun goes down on their countenance, there will be a long afterglow that sheds light on the path others will follow.

Dear readers, as these stories of the saints come to an end, it seemed only natural to use as a benediction, the race finished by a wonderful person very close to the writer's heart; that of her earthly father, Payton.

Not only was it a life well lived, but one that demonstrated to friends and family the importance of holding to God's unchanging hand each and every day. Having lived by this principle for the majority of his life, not only was a road map created for others, but a model of humility established for internalizing the fact that life is not about any of us.

Instead, it is about falling in love with the Lord and walking with Him in the stillness, solitude, and wilderness of this time on earth fully expecting that at journeys end, He will light the first star to guide each one of us home.

Payton's Story

Having grown up along with twelve other brothers and sisters, a young man named Payton certainly knew the meaning of hard work and sharing with those in need. Certainly, his close-knit family that counted on one another for survival, did so because of the values taught by, not only the parents, but also from a loving grandmother who resided in their all too snug living quarters. In fact, each evening she was known to have sat in her old rocking chair reading the Bible to the siblings gathered around her feet.

However, in spite of the lack of finances, and no books available at home, every member of the family attended the nearby one room school and became successful adults. In order to continually strengthen reading skills and enlarge their vocabulary, the newspapers used as a covering for their walls were read at night as a group at bedtime. Folks, since it was imperative to use every resource available for survival, there simply was never anything that could be labeled as "extravagance". However, in spite of this deficit, at reunions held later, recounting the wonderful celebrations enjoyed throughout childhood at the old home place called 'the house in the holler" prompted much laughter and fun. From time to time, the words, "How can you miss something you have never had in your life?" were heard.

Therefore, in God's good and perfect time, the values planted in the heart of a young Payton by his mother and grandmother came to fruition. Thus, grandmother, never missing anything with her sharp mind and vision, fastened her eyes on the all familiar gait of a young Payton approaching from across a large field one day and suddenly was prompted to break into praise and singing to the Lord. Then, as he came within earshot, she exclaimed, "Say, you look better!" This wise old gal was rejoicing because her prayers had been answered regarding the path grandson Payton would travel for the remainder of his life; that being a minister for over 60 years in God's service.

Consequently, as a young evangelist, so poor he had neither a car nor a horse, Payton walked from one revival to another on foot. Without the finances to replace his worn shoes lacking soles, he would tie gunny sacks to his legs with twine and keep marching for the Lord. Many nights were spent under a tree with fallen leaves as his mattress. His nutritional sustenance often came from honey combs, berries and wild game. If he was lucky, a kind farmer would show mercy and invite him for a meal. Rain or shine, this servant was on fire for the Savior.

Thus, in spite of numerous physical hardships, he walked mile after mile delivering Spirit filled sermons that saved the lost; followed by baptizing services in local streams or ponds. No matter how exhausted, when this young preacher delivered messages, they were classified as that old-time religion that caused people to shout and sing praises to God without restraint; raising the rafters and shaking the ground like thunder.

Then, later when he married and three little girls made their entrance into his life, he not only served as a pastor for a local church, but also traveled the remainder of each Sunday filling in for places that lacked a minister. In addition to the usual duties, he remarkably conducted hundreds of funerals over the years held in several surrounding counties.

Folks, not only was he a wonderful father that bestowed unconditional love to his family members, but also generously gave to people everywhere. Case in point was a story relayed to his girls by a man that attended his funeral regarding a family in need that lived way off the beaten track. Receiving a call at 3:00 am that the family provider had been killed in a tractor accident, Payton immediately realized that the man's family would be without food. Thus, he rousted a local grocery store owner out of bed so he could do some shopping. The gentleman

telling the story indicated witnessing Payton approaching the family's front door with a large supply of bags full of groceries paid for out of his own meager salary.

Another special friend of his spoke of how Payton was able to finish the race set before him by his Creator due to his close relationship with God. Unbeknownst to even his own family, it was disclosed that every morning, without fail, he would journey to the woods where he would kneel beside an old familiar stump that served as an altar and spend time in communion with the Lord.

Unfortunately, this wonderful father and faithful servant of God was stricken with the ugly disease called Alzheimer's; a disfunction of the brain that resulted in him being a nursing home resident for nine years.

Folks, it was during these years that nurses reported being startled by a behavior that left them flabbergasted beyond measure. They noted that, even though Payton's mind was failing, he was able to determine the exact moment when a fellow resident on his wing was departing this earth. Then, just like clockwork, Payton would appear at the person's door offering his own pillow as a way of comforting the departing soul. You see, at this point in the winter season of his life, having always been at the bedside of others implanted in his long-term memory, the only thing he had left to give was his pillow. Can you imagine the impact on the staff members?

Then, one evening just prior to Christmas, the family members were summoned to his hospital bed with the news that Payton's earthly journey was promptly reaching its conclusion. Quickly arriving to be at his side, no family member expected to be recognized by him. After all, the disease had caused him to stop showing any signs of knowing the people he loved a long time prior to this announcement.

Then, miraculously sensing that the last child had arrive, catching everyone off guard, this loving father, Payton, suddenly opened his eyes, and studied each family member that encircled his bed. After soaking in the faces surrounding him, he then centered on each child, called her by the beginning letter of her name, sweetly followed by the word...." LOVE." (Cah...Love) Thus, after hearing his wife assure him that she would be fine, he peered out the window wearing a peaceful expression as his eyes took on an ethereal translucent blue color.

Hence, cognizant of this change, his family along with a wonderful nun, joined hands and sang his favorite hymn, "Amazing Grace". Ladies and gentlemen, at this moment in time, the entire room appeared to be literally overflowing with the Holy Spirit. In fact, the atmosphere was so thick with the holiness of the moment, that those left behind had the sensation of being lifted to the ceiling. Euphoric to the point of acting giddy, the surviving family members were light of heart and care free.

After this all had unfolded, Payton then bowed his own head and closed his eyes, signaling he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. Halleluiah! Amen!

EPILOGUE

In the introduction of Payton's Story, the writer indicated that the glow from one's life has the ability to extend to others that have either witnessed righteous actions or have been a part of the actual events that unfolded.

Given the fact that this writer was honored to have been a child under a wonderful father's care throughout her formidable years, it seemed only right that you know the rest of the story.

After Payton had taken his last breath in the presence of his family, Sister Alice, the wonderful nun that acted as a comforter, was so filled with joy at what she had just been a part of that she proceeded to literally dance around the room, embracing each relative.

Consequently, when she enfolded this writer in her arms, she pierced her very soul with the words, "Who was this man? Who was this man? Oh, what a legacy he leaves behind." Folks, over time, the words that precious nun delivered caused the writer to go on a journey of discernment as to their meaning for her life. And...the results? Payton's youngest daughter began her career as a writer of devotionals for the elderly.

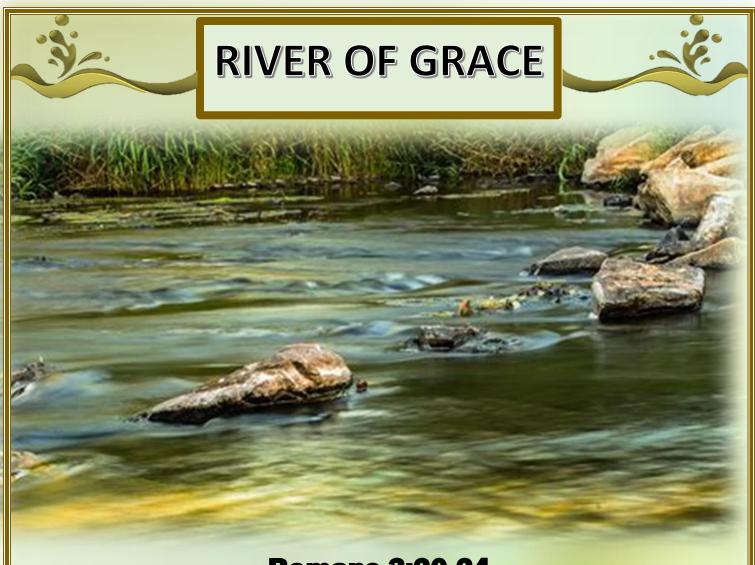
Subsequently, it was after the first collection found on devotionalembers.com called "The Psalms of Ascent" was completed that a message was delivered to the writer in the form of a vision that occurred one Sunday morning at church.

Having penned the last word in this particular collection late Saturday night, the writer sent a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord for being with her throughout the entire process. Then, recognizing the gift of storytelling her earthly father had handed down, the words to God that followed were, "If it be your will, is it possible for you to let my dad know about what has just happened? He would be so thrilled to realize that I, too, am fighting the good fight."

Then, on the following morning at church while sitting in the balcony looking down at the choir, the pianist began playing one of Payton's favorite songs, "I'd Rather Have Jesus". Listening intently, a vision suddenly appeared of my father sitting to the left of the pulpit just as he had in his little country church throughout my childhood. His face glowed with a heavenly light that transformed the space all around him into a beautiful radiance. Those familiar blue eyes that always danced with love indicated that, although he had once been my dad, he was now a child of God. Then, the air all around the writer's person took on the aroma of his favorite cologne.

Ladies and gentlemen, this writer was so overwhelmed that tears began to flow unabashedly down her face. Here sat a child of God, so loved by Him that he answered a prayer in such a manner that it will serve as motivation for finishing the race and keeping the faith for all eternity. Amen.





Romans 3:20-24

For by works of the Law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the Law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it — the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

CRACE CRACE COD'S CRACE

Alone in the stillness and solitude of one's own thoughts when all pretentions are long past, resulting in the simplification of our existence with its only companion being that of reflection, the disposal of the superfluous allows the mind to see things as they really are; just like a mental scrapbook filled with grand and beautiful images walking in tandem with dark regrets of the past.

Thus, during the winter season of life, what most moves us is some reminiscence of a far-off memory when right prevailed and all was well with the soul. Yet, as delicious as this might sound, the reality of bad decisions and less than exemplary actions displayed toward mankind soon deaden these feelings of joy and replaces them with thoughts of hopelessness regarding the afterlife.

Instead of being proud of "a life well lived", worry and dread take the lead with such discordant drumming that emotions of peace soon are replaced by sensations of failure; behavior that assures a ticket to nowhere prompting the question to repeat itself like a broken record playing the lyrics: "Why would the Creator want a person like me that has sinned throughout life to ever be with Him in heaven? I am not worthy to even be in His presence. It is absolutely hopeless! In this, my winter season of life, after my last earthly breath, only darkness will welcome me."

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a frequent happening to walk into a resident's room and find him/her staring out the window into space, wearing such a distressed sad expression that it haunts one for days on end.

Although the individual possesses a thorough understanding of Scripture learned by attending church from childhood forward, and can be a part of discussions during devotional time with the group, when alone and engrossed in deep contemplation, it is a totally different

situation. Instead of leaning on the Sword of the Spirit (Bible Scripture) to prevent the voices of the dark spiritual world from launching an allout attack, feelings of shame, discouragement, and even hopelessness soon root out all God's blessings and assurances of His wonderful and glorious gift of grace.

Consequently, it is imperative to take a closer look at God's grace in order to internalize its depth of meaning so that we all might view death of the earthly body as a time of celebration of light rather than fear, darkness, despondence and dread.

Grace Defined

Generation after generation of believers have endlessly debated and discussed the definition of God's grace, and even gone to the extent of breaking it down into categories as it applies to forgiveness. Yet, at the end of the day, "the concept of the crazy wonderful gift of our Lord's grace" still even now remains a mystery to the human mind; so much that the mere brains of man will grapple with it until entering into the heavenly kingdom.

Thus, although many individuals can quickly recite from memory John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" without hesitation, totally overlook its abstract significance as it applies to the true meaning of life.

In order to substantiate this truism, just float down "God's River of Grace" for a bit and let the miracle and mystery of its waters soak all the way into your heart and soul.

Folks, think of a normal busy day in September when the enemy purposely flew planes into New York City buildings; causing chaos, loss of life, and turmoil forever in the hearts of innocent, unsuspecting souls that were simply going about their business. Then, recount the "River of Grace" whose waters flowed in all directions, seeping into the hidden crevices of the darkest places. Survivors appeared from out of the

rubble showing enormous courage and shared countless stories about lives willingly sacrificed because of loving their neighbors as themselves. Additionally, the "Water of Grace" moisturized parched, dry praying lips and washed away tears streaming down the faces of man all over the world; providing a trickle and then an outpouring of hope.

Those same "Waters of Grace" could also be witnessed when the clouds above a once calm ocean caused tidal waves to rush ashore swallowing dwellings and carving a wall of destruction for miles around. Yet, in the aftermath, small boats and even a solitary kayak carrying strangers from afar could be seen floating from house to house calling out, "Just checking! Is anybody there? We are here to help. Reach for our hand!"

No matter the terrain, "God's River of Grace" found its way to mankind throughout all generations on earth; even if it required the removal of mountains, stone by stone. Think of a howling, angry wind that swept away homes; leaving death and destruction in its wake. Picture people frantically searching for "home sweet home" and finding only a slab of concrete in its spot. Lives lost! No food or shelter! God's children left standing in rubble!

Yet, amidst all of this appeared the "Water of Grace". Then, what was perceived as only a distance sound, turned into the noise of supply trucks, shovels, and nourishment being carried in the arms of first one, two, and three or more individuals that soon multiplied into God's mighty army; all because they loved their neighbors as themselves.

Yes, folks, these were times of disaster when heaven and earth were moved to reach out and the flood of grace poured in tirelessly without end. No matter who suffered, it washed its way into the places that were hard and rigid, tearing down walls that separated us from one another.

Thus, no matter the situation; whether death, disaster, illness, or destruction, God's "River of Grace" is more powerful than all of these put together. Why? The love that flows from this stream never seeks attention but is simply always there; just quietly completing its course without danger of ever becoming low or running dry.

Sweet child of God, having read just a few examples that depict how precious the grace is that flows from your Creator's hand, this writer implores you to take a moment, in a time of solitude or in the company of a friend, and look back on your earthly journey with the purpose of identifying the moments when you felt the cool liquid from the "River of Grace's" gentle touch. Was it while grieving the loss of a loved one? During the Depression? When being given the diagnosis of a disease? Childhood? Teenage years? Adulthood? It may be when you found yourself exclaiming, "I can't believe I was able to get through that time!" Well, the writer has news for you! "You" did not get through that time by yourself. The precious "River of God's Grace" had seeped into every fiber of your being; imparting the necessary wisdom and strength for what you faced. You see, without our Savior, we are but helpless human beings, unable to live for one second on our own.

After processing the numerous times when it was truly a wonder that you even survived a situation, have you thought about the ways God blesses each one of us without our knowledge? Instead, simply out of love, He is quietly always there encouraging and cajoling us to move forward; one small step at a time.

Friend, by now, have you finally comprehended with all the saints the breadth, length, depth, and height of God's love for you? Our Lord has his eyes on you during your wakefulness and while you sleep, and will never leave your side.

So, rather than recounting the number of times you have sinned and fallen short of his glory during your earthly journey, the writer implores you to center on the moisture from the "River of Grace" that has caressed every fiber of your being along the way. Let none of us allow the dark powers of the night to get our mind off course. Keep your thoughts on that Bright and Morning Star just waiting to illuminate a path for your feet to safely travel toward Him every moment of your life.

Then, as your body responds to the aging process with wrinkles, aches and pains, face it with the blessed assurance that you are worthy of being in God's presence. Remove from your mind the thought that you

are unclean and lack righteousness. Since Jesus died on the cross in your place, if you truly believe and have asked him to come into your life, then your name is written in "The Lamb's Book of Life."

Then, after you have departed for your heavenly home, the same "River of Grace" that saturated you throughout your sojourn will totally wash away the flaws in your earthly body and soul and you will be cleansed, purified and made perfect; all because of a Heavenly Father whose love never fails. Grace! Grace! Amazing Grace!

Until that departure, it is important for all God's believers, no matter what age, to internalize the meaning of the words spoken by our Savior when he said, "Follow me".

In doing so, we must all ingrain in our very fiber that to take up His cross and follow means a focus on the unseen world, rather than the seen world; an understanding based on exactly what is required when making that commitment as a disciple.

Folks, the grace you just read about that Christ has extended to us all our lives came at a very costly price; that of a Father that gave His only Son to die on the cross for our sins.

Therefore, it is more than just attending church, reading your Bible, and praying. In addition to these behaviors, it means becoming a humble disciple of Christ; a decision that requires loving God first, your neighbor second, and yourself third; all while accepting the definition that your neighbor is defined as all God's creation, no matter the color of skin, race, or gender.

Thus, it literally means to follow Jesus' words, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey ever thing I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."

Ladies and gentlemen, let us not cheapen God's gift of grace by accepting behavioral standards modeled by those living in the real

world. Instead, let us follow the teachings of Jesus and serve as a reflection of the behavior that is required of those choosing to walk in His light. Does this mean we should be pious and think we are favored and live a perfect life? No! It means the standards chosen for living under His care will be costly; that of facing many obstacles and hard decisions while on this journey called life. Above all, let us always live a life that sends the message that the gift of grace was paid for with unimaginable suffering on the cross by God's only begotten Son.

Therefore, let us cherish it and treat it with great reverence; a gift from God so precious that it is not viewed as an unlimited source of forgiveness that allows us to sin at will, but instead, truly internalize and accept what it means to take up the cross of Christ and follow Him.

I Know Whom I have Believed

I know not why God's wondrous grace

To me He hath made known,

Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love

Redeemed me for His own.

Recommendation:

Do you recall in Scripture when Jesus sent his disciples out two by two? Why? Our Savior knew they would gather strength from one another. If you live in a nursing home, I implore you to follow the Lord's lead and invite a fellow resident to share a time of fellowship with the goal of supporting one another. Share your heart filled concerns and be bolstered up by "God's River of Grace". Then, reach out to others in the same way. If you need to be connected with a resident, ask the activity director or administrator to assist you in your search. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 reads, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up,

just as in fact you are doing." Read below, words from Saint Augustine (Confessions) that you may want to use as a prayer.

"The house of my soul is too narrow for you to come into me; let it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins; Restore it. There is much about it which must offend your eyes; I confess and know it. But who will cleanse it? Or, to whom shall I cry but to you?"

"Confessions"

Saint Augustine



Special Thanks

Did you listen to "It Is Well with My Soul" that was performed by Noteworthy from Schweitzer United Methodist Church? Just place your mouse on the designated button and sing along with the video.



Recording shot by Mason Scruggs,
Catholic High School at St. Joseph's
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