



ETERNAL PERSPECTIVES

*We fix our eyes not on what is seen,
but on what is unseen...*

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER • WINTER 2003

The Grace and Truth Paradox

by Randy Alcorn

What if we could reduce Christ's attributes to just two qualities that we could wrap our minds around? John 1:14 does exactly that. It describes him as "full of grace and truth."

To be Christlike is to be full of what He was full of: grace and truth.

Truth-oriented Christians love studying Scripture and theology. But sometimes they're quick to judge and slow to forgive. They may be strong on truth, weak on grace.

Grace-oriented Christians love forgiveness and freedom. But sometimes they neglect biblical study and see moral standards as "legalism." They're strong on grace, weak on truth.

Countless mistakes in marriage, parenting, and ministry boil down to failures to balance grace and truth. Sometimes we neglect both. Often we choose one over the other.

It reminds me of Moses, our Dalmatian. When one tennis ball's in his mouth, the other's on the floor. When he goes for the second ball, he drops the first. Large dogs can get two balls in their mouth. Not Moses. He manages to get two in his mouth only momentarily. Then one ball or the other spurts out onto the floor.

Similarly, our minds don't seem big enough to hold onto grace *and* truth at the same time. We go after the grace ball—

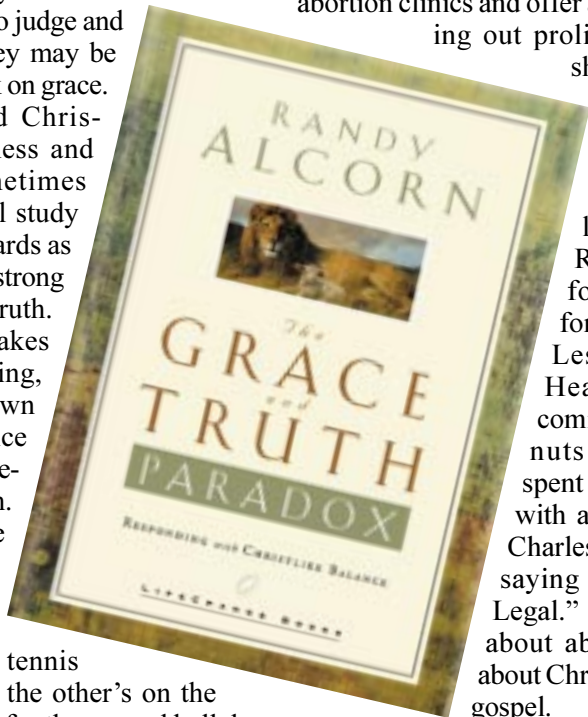
only to drop the truth ball to make room for it. We need to stretch our undersized minds to hold them both at once.

Finding the Balance

The church I used to pastor (and still attend) was picketed by thirty pro-abortion protestors. Why? Some of our people go to abortion clinics and offer alternatives, passing out pro-life literature and sharing the gospel when they can.

So one rainy Sunday morning, our church parking lot was invaded by Radical Women for Choice, Rock for Choice, and the Lesbian Avengers. Hearing they were coming, we set out donuts and coffee. I spent an hour and a half with a protestor named Charles, who held a sign saying "Keep Abortion Legal." We talked a little about abortion and a lot about Christ. I explained the gospel.

I liked Charles. But when you believe as I do—that abortion is killing children—it's a bit awkward serving coffee and holding an umbrella for someone waving a pro-abortion sign. Yet because of the opportunity to share Christ's grace, it seemed the right thing to do.



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It's not just truth that puts us in awkward situations. Grace does also. On that morning we were picketed, some street preachers showed up to take on the abortion activists with signs shouting hell and damnation. Their message contained truth but their approach lacked grace. One of the street preachers barged between my daughter and me and a few of the Lesbian Avengers, just as we finally had an opportunity to talk with them. The door of witnessing was slammed in our faces... by Christian brothers.

We tried to reason with the street preachers. (By the way, I believe there's definitely a place for street preaching.) After all, this was our church, and we didn't want them screaming at our guests—even if they were screaming truth. Most cooperated, but a few decided we were waffling on truth, and it was an abomination for us to offer donuts to people who needed rebuke.

The following Sunday, two street preachers picketed our church, scolding us for our "pathetic" attempts at donut and coffee evangelism.

In twenty-five years, our church has only been picketed twice—two weeks in a row! First, by radically liberal non-believers, for speaking truth. Second, by radically conservative believers, for showing grace.

That's how it is on this tightrope walk between truth and grace. When you stand for truth, you're held in contempt by some non-Christians (and even some Christians). When you offer grace, you're held in contempt by some Christians (and even some non-Christians). When you try to live by grace and truth, in some eyes you'll be too radical, in other eyes, not radical enough.

Grace-only folk don't understand why Jesus said, "Fear him who has the power to throw you into hell" (Luke 12:5). Truth-only folk don't understand why Jesus hung out with sinners, and why He hung on a cross for them.

Attempts to "soften" the gospel by minimizing truth keep people from Jesus. Attempts to "toughen" the gospel by minimizing grace keep people from Jesus.

Grace and truth are both necessary, but neither is sufficient.



Staying in the Saddle

"Amazing Grace" has been recorded more often, by more musicians, than any other song. When sung at the most secular event or pagan concert, a hush will fall on the audience. Eyes tear up. And not just the eyes of Christians.

Grace is what people long for, even those who don't know Jesus. *Especially* those who don't know Jesus.

"Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The world today is desperately hungry for grace and truth, because it's hungry for Jesus.

Martin Luther said that the devil doesn't care which side of the horse we fall off of—as long as we don't stay in the saddle. We need to mount the horse with one foot in the stirrup of truth, the other in the stirrup of grace.

Truth without grace breeds a self-righteous legalism. People become frightened deer caught in the headlights of

manmade rules. Long lists and long faces turn people from Christ.

Children who grow up with graceless truth are repelled by self-righteousness and attracted to the world's slickly marketed grace-substitutes, such as tolerance or moral relativism.

Properly understood, biblical truths are guardrails that protect us from plunging off the cliff. A smart traveler doesn't curse the guardrails. He doesn't whine, "That guardrail dented my fender!" He

looks over the cliff, sees demolished autos below, and is *grateful* for those guardrails.

The world's low standard, its disregard for truth, isn't grace. The illusory freedom only *feels* like grace to someone who's been pounded by graceless truth—beaten over the head with pieces of guardrails. But the guardrails of truth are

there not to punish, but protect us.

Getting Close to Home

I was raised in an unbelieving home. I came to Christ at fifteen. My mom became a Christian soon afterward. But my father was the most resistant person to the gospel I've ever known. He'd told me never to talk to him about that "religious stuff" again. At eighty-four, he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. One day he phoned, very upset.

"I'm in terrible pain. I've got a gun to my head. Sorry to leave you with a mess."

I begged him to hold on. I made the thirty-minute drive in twenty, jumped out of the car and pounded on the door. No answer.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door. On the floor I saw a rifle and a handgun. Calling out for my father, I turned the corner into his room, prepared



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for the worst. Eyes half closed, I bumped into him as he walked out. My heart racing, I rushed him to the hospital, where they scheduled him for surgery the next morning.

If we minimize grace, the world sees no hope for salvation. If we minimize truth, the world sees no need for salvation.

I arrived an hour before surgery, praying that in his despair, with no easy way out, my dad would turn to Christ. Standing by his bed, I opened my Bible to Romans. I began reading in chapter three. *"There is none righteous, no, not one...All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

Those weren't easy words to read. My tavern-owner father had always taken hot offense at being called a sinner. I wanted to gloss over this portion, moving quickly to the good news of

God's grace. But I forced myself to keep reading, verse after verse, about human sin. Why? Because I told myself, *If I really love Dad, I have to tell him the whole truth. If God's going to do a miracle of conversion here, that's His job. My job is to say what He says."*

We made it to Romans 6, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Then Romans 10, about being saved through confessing Jesus as our risen Lord.

Finally I looked Dad in the eyes and asked, "Have you ever confessed your sins and asked Jesus Christ to forgive you?"

"No," he said in a weak voice. He paused, then added, "But...I think it's about time I did."

I'll never forget that moment. The impossible took place right before my eyes: my father prayed aloud, confessed his sins, and placed his faith in Christ, just before they wheeled him into surgery. To me, dividing the Red Sea paled in comparison to this miracle.

The surgery was successful. God gave me five more precious years with

my dad. The day I held his hand as he died, with my brother and wife and daughters there, I knew I would see not only my mom, but my dad in heaven.

The *worst* thing I could have done to my father was what I was tempted to do—water down the truth. It would have made it easier on me for the moment. But withholding God's truth from my dad would have been withholding from him God's grace.

If we minimize grace, the world sees no hope for salvation. If we minimize truth, the world sees no need for salvation.

We need to examine ourselves. Correct ourselves. Balance ourselves. We who are truth-oriented need to go out of our way to affirm grace. We who are grace-oriented need to go out of our way to affirm truth.

"Hate the sin, but love the sinner." No one did either like Jesus.

Truth hates sin. Grace loves sinners.

Those full of grace and truth—those full of *Jesus*—do both.

Note: This article is an excerpt from Randy Alcorn's latest book, The Grace and Truth Paradox, due out in January, 2003.

Parental Alert

Note from Randy: I don't think I've ever put in Eternal Perspectives an excerpt from an advertisement, but this is an exception. I concur with the information and the warning to parents and kids going off to college. No matter what form it takes, we need to be training our young people, and helping them to make wise choices about college.

Are you a Christian parent? Is your teenager a Christian? Are they thinking like a Christian? Numerous studies by George Barna, George Gallop, Josh McDowell Ministries' and Nehemiah Institute reveal that the average "Christian" student in our church youth groups thinks and believes no different than non-churched teens.

57% could not even say that an objective standard of truth exists.

85% are likely to reason "just because it's wrong for you doesn't mean it's wrong for me."

Only 29% disagreed with the statement: "When it comes to matters of ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth."

Only 38% disagreed with the statement: "Nothing can be known for certain except the things that you experience in your life."

45% could

not disagree

with the statement:

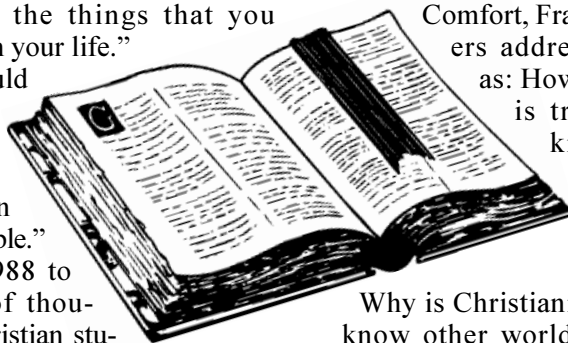
"Everything in life is negotiable."

From 1988 to

1996, out of thou-

sands of Christian students that were tested by this national ministry, 90% left high school either "at risk" or "easy prey" to humanistic, anti-Christian philosophies and ideas.

Is it any wonder that 55% of Christian students from Christian homes are denying their faith before they graduate from college? Will your teen deny the faith?



The Worldview Weekend will be held in nine states on a Friday night and a Saturday. We have a teen track that is designed with today's teen in mind. Our nationally known speakers such as Josh McDowell, Sean McDowell, Kerby Anderson, Jerry Johnston, Ray

Comfort, Frank Harber, and others address such questions as: How do we know there is truth? How do we know the Bible is true? How do I answer common objections to Christianity?

Why is Christianity truth? How do I know other world religions are not based on truth?

The Worldview Weekend is not a luxury but a necessity! Invest a weekend in the spiritual growth of your life and that of your teen.

For a free brochure or registration on the Worldview Weekend, visit www.worldviewweekend.com or call 1-888-326-4543.

In Light of Eternity—A Book Review

In *Light of Eternity* is an invaluable spiritual compass, pointing us homeward. When I sat down with this little book, I opened it expecting interesting, challenging, thought-provoking pages, and I found them. What I didn't expect was that I would close the book spellbound with heaven, full of anticipation about the place for which I was meant and the One who awaits me there.

"Home as a term for heaven is not simply a metaphor. It describes an actual, physical place—a place built by our bridegroom, a place we'll share with loved ones, a place of fond familiarity and comfort and refuge, a place of marvelous smells and tastes, fine food, and great conversation, of contemplation and interaction and expressing the gifts and passions God has given us. It will also be a place of unprecedented freedom and adventure."

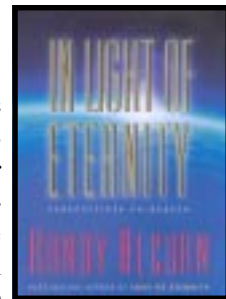
In this book, Randy Alcorn wipes the fog from our windows and shows us a picture of heaven that is not only vivid, enchanting, and detailed, but biblical as well. I was shocked at how specifically the Bible describes heaven, and how even a short consideration of that description spurred my heart onward in Christ.

Some might think a book on this topic would be inspirational, but somewhat impractical. On the contrary, I was struck for some time afterwards with weighty questions: Which world am I living for? Where are my treasures being invested? How can I use God's gifts to me to better glorify the King and position my soul towards the eternal tomorrow?

"This life is the headwaters out of which life in heaven flows. Eternity will hold for us what we've poured into it during our lives here. Your God-given resources of time, talents, and money and possessions are the lever, positioned on the fulcrum of this life, that moves the mountains of eternity."

This heaven-focused book provided me more earthly applications than I could handle—from what to teach my children and how to spend my money, to what to dream about as I lay my head down at night. And so I plan on picking it up again along with my Bible and looking again at a place I have glanced at too rarely. May this book's eternal focus become mine as well.

—A grateful Covenant Fellowship Church member,
Glen Mills, PA



Aggie Hurst: A Story of Eternal Perspective

Back in 1921, a missionary couple named David and Svea Flood went with their two-year-old son from Sweden to the heart of Africa—to what was then called the Belgian Congo. They met up with another young Scandinavian couple, the Ericksons, and the four of them sought God for direction. In those days of much tenderness and devotion and sacrifice, they felt led of the Lord to go out from the main mission station and take the gospel to a remote area.

This was a huge step of faith. At the village of N'dolera they were rebuffed by the chief, who would not let them enter his town for fear of alienating the local gods. The two couples opted to go half a mile up the slope and build their own mud huts.

They prayed for a spiritual breakthrough, but there was none. The only contact with the villagers was a young boy, who was allowed to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week. Svea Flood—a tiny woman of only four feet, eight inches tall—decided that if this was the only African she could talk to, she would try to lead the boy to Jesus. And in fact, she succeeded.

But there were no other encouragements. Meanwhile, malaria continued to strike one member of the little band after another. In time the Ericksons decided they had had enough suffering and left to return to the central mission station. David and Svea Flood remained near N'dolera to go on alone.

Then, of all things, Svea found herself pregnant in the middle of the primitive wilderness. When the time came for

her to give birth, the village chief softened enough to allow a midwife to help her. A little girl was born, whom they named Aina.

The delivery, however, was exhausting, and Svea Flood was already weak from bouts of malaria. The birth process was a heavy blow to her stamina. She lasted only another seventeen days.

Inside David Flood, something snapped in that moment. He dug a crude grave, buried his twenty-seven-year-old wife, and then took his children back down the mountain to the mission station. Giving his newborn daughter to the Ericksons, he snarled, "I'm going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife, and I obviously can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life." With that, he headed for the port, rejecting not only his calling, but God himself.

Within eight months both the Ericksons were stricken with a mysterious malady and died within days of each other. The baby was then turned over to some American missionaries, who adjusted her Swedish name to "Aggie" and eventually brought her back to the United States at age three.

This family loved the little girl and was afraid that if they tried to return to Africa, some legal obstacle might separate her from them. So they decided to stay in their home country and switch from missionary work to pastoral ministry. And that is how Aggie grew up in South Dakota. As a young woman, she attended North Central Bible college in Minneapolis. There she met and married a young man named Dewey Hurst.

"Never mention the name of God—because God took everything from me."

Years passed. The Hursts enjoyed a fruitful ministry. Aggie gave birth first to a daughter, then a son. In time her husband became president of a Christian college in the Seattle area, and Aggie was intrigued to find so much Scandinavian heritage there.

One day a Swedish religious magazine appeared in her mailbox. She had no idea who had sent it, and of course she couldn't read the words. But as she turned the pages, all of a sudden a photo stopped her cold. There in a primitive setting was a grave with a white cross—and on the cross were the words SVEA FLOOD.

Aggie jumped in her car and went straight to a college faculty member who, she knew, could translate the article. "What does this say?" she demanded.

The instructor summarized the story: It was about missionaries who had come to N'dolera long ago...the birth of a white baby...the death of the young mother...the one little African boy who had been led to Christ...and how, after the whites had all left, the boy had grown up and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village. The article said that gradually he won all his students to Christ...the children led their parents to Christ...even the chief had become a Christian. Today there were six hundred Christian believers in that one village...

All because of the sacrifice of David and Svea Flood.

For the Hursts' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, the college presented them with the gift of a vacation to Sweden. There Aggie sought to find her real father. An old man now, David Flood had remarried, fathered four more children, and generally dissipated his life with alcohol. He had recently suffered a stroke. Still bitter, he had one rule in his family: "Never mention the name of God—because God took everything from me."

After an emotional reunion with her half brothers and half sister, Aggie brought up the subject of seeing her father. The others hesitated. "You can talk to him," they replied, "even though he's very ill now. But you need to know that whenever he hears the name of God, he flies into a rage."

Aggie was not to be deterred. She walked into the squalid apartment, with liquor bottles everywhere, and approached the seventy-three-year-old man lying in a rumpled bed.

"Papa?" she said tentatively.

He turned and began to cry. "Aina," he said, "I never meant to give you away."

"It's all right Papa," she replied, taking him gently in her arms. "God took care of me."

The man instantly stiffened. The tears stopped.

"God forgot all of us. Our lives have been like this because of Him." He turned his face back to the wall.

Aggie stroked his face and then continued, undaunted.

"Papa, I've got a little story to tell you, and it's a true one. You didn't go to Africa in vain. Mama didn't die in vain. The little boy you won to the Lord grew up to win that whole village to Jesus Christ. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. Today there are six hundred African people serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God in your life..."

"Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you."

The old man turned back to look into his daughter's eyes. His body relaxed. He began to talk. And by the end of the afternoon, he had come back to the God he had resented for so many decades.

Over the next few days, father and daughter enjoyed warm moments together. Aggie and her husband soon had to return to America—and within a few weeks, David Flood had gone into eternity.

A few years later, the Hursts were attending a high-level evangelism conference in London, England, where a report was

given from the nation of Zaire (the former Belgian Congo). The superintendent of the national church, representing some 110,000 baptized believers, spoke eloquently of the gospel's spread in his nation. Aggie could not help going to ask him afterward if he had ever heard of David and Svea Flood.

"Yes, madam," the man replied in French, his words then being translated into English. "It was Svea Flood who led me to Jesus Christ. I was the boy who brought food to your parents before you were born. In fact, to this day your mother's grave

and her memory are honored by all of us."

He embraced her in a long, sobbing hug. Then he continued, "You must come to Africa to see, because your mother is the most famous person in our history."

In time that is exactly what Aggie Hurst and her husband did. They were welcomed by cheering throngs of villagers. She even met the man who had been hired by her father many years before to carry her back down the mountain in a hammock-cradle.

The most dramatic moment, of course, was when the pastor escorted Aggie to see her mother's white cross for herself. She knelt in the soil to pray and give thanks. Later that day, in the church, the pastor read from John 12:24: "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." He then followed with Psalm 126:5: "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy."

(An excerpt from *Aggie Hurst, Aggie: The Inspiring Story of A Girl Without A Country* [Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1986].)



A Mother's Heartache... A Longing for Heaven

The following letter is from a mother to her child whom she carried to term after being told the baby would not live outside the womb. Nevaeh was born July 29, 2002, and went home to Jesus a few hours after birth. (The mother's email address is Dearlu@attbi.com if you care to respond.)

Dearest Nevaeh,

Our time together is too quickly coming to an end. I'm going to miss you so much. You will never know me or the depth of my love for you here on earth. I am writing you this letter so that I will never forget a single part of your short little life within me. Because of you I will never be the same. You've already taught me so many things. Here is how you first touched my heart...

On February 1st, 2001, I miscarried your baby sister Bella Rose. I started longing for a baby like I never had before. Skyler and Emma had come to me so easily and even unexpectedly. I started to take better care of myself thinking that something I had done played a part in the loss of Bella. I wanted to be as healthy as possible for you.

I started praying for you when you were just a dream to me. I didn't want to lose you and was fearful of that before you were even a part of me.

On December 7th, 2001, I finally had a positive pregnancy test! What an excitement. Daddy and I decided that we would keep the news to ourselves for awhile. We told the family, but that was all. We wanted to wait and make sure that you were going to stay with us. We were too excited to wait long though, especially Dad. He started telling people weeks before we had agreed to! By 12 weeks everyone knew.

On December 13th I started feeling sick. I just started thanking Jesus for this positive sign. I was miserable, but I felt assured that everything was going to be okay. I knew it was all going to be worth it.

In February I came across your name for the first time. A girl named Amy

was at youth group for the first time. When she found out I was pregnant, she told me about the "coolest name" she had just heard. It was heaven spelled backwards... "Nevaeh." I thought that was neat, but not until much later did it have real meaning for me.

During the first three months I was pregnant I kept finding out about one friend after another who was pregnant too. What fun! At one point I counted 12 little friends you would have who would all be the same age as you. Everything was perfect. Now I just couldn't wait to find out if you were a girl or a boy.

That's all that was on my mind March 21st as we drove to see you for the first time by ultrasound. Your feet were what amazed me the most. So perfect.

Daddy and I just watched and waited as the technician took all of your measurements. When she turned the monitor off and started to leave, we reminded her that we wanted to know whether you were a boy or a girl. She assured us that the radiologist would be in soon and would let us know. We will never forget the words he spoke to us. He was the first to tell us that you would only live as long as you were inside me. We were sick with sadness. How could this be?

I'm so sorry that I ever even considered not carrying you to term. My doctor told me not to make a decision too quickly. I'm so thankful for her. I didn't think that I was strong enough to let myself go through the heartache of carrying you. As it turned out, Jesus decided to carry me. He let Daddy and I both know that carrying you was the only right thing to do and once we agreed to obey Him, He just took over. What a mess I would have been without Him.

It was so hard for me to let myself continue loving you at first. I'm so sorry for that too. I thought that it would hurt me more when it was time to let you go. I'm so glad I've fallen in love with you now. Every night I lay still and feel you kicking around inside of me. I want you so badly. I don't want to let you go. Daddy has fallen in love with you too. Every time he touches me you seem to move. He's not a crier, but I see his sadness. You are his baby girl.

I don't know why God has allowed all of this to happen. Some people are praying for a miracle. I hope for a miracle too. I also hope to see something wonderful come from this... anything. A friend is praying for whatever would glorify God's name the most. That's what I want too. I hope that it includes keeping you though.

We've chosen your middle name now. We couldn't decide between Desiree which means "longing" and Joy because of the incredible unexpected joy that we have had despite our sadness. Your Auntie said that we should use both.

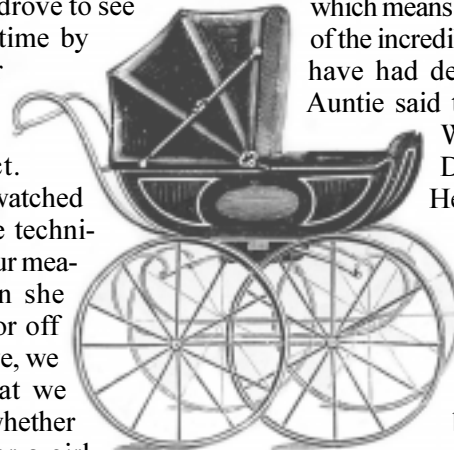
What a good idea. Nevaeh Desiree Joy. "Longing for Heaven" Joy.

Our family and friends have been so wonderful to us. They call us and visit us and take such good care of us. I wish they could know you, baby. I know they have a special love for you. I hope they get to meet you. That's my big prayer for me right now too. I want to hold you before you go and see Jesus. I want it so bad that I cry for it every night now.

Skyler and Emma know that you are going to heaven after you "come out of Mommy's tummy." Every time they pray, they ask Jesus to let you stay with us. I think I cry every time! We will help them to always remember you. You will always be their baby sister. They both kiss you and sing to you.

Now, sweet Nevaeh, I need to end this letter to you. I will write you again when I'm no longer holding you inside of me. You will be with Jesus though. Goodbye for now, sweet baby. I'll see you soon and then it will be forever.

With all my love, Mommy



Questions and Answers

By Randy Alcorn

“Why does God take some people to heaven so young—before it seems He should—and others when they are so old and in such pain, later than it seems He should have?” Jonathan

Jonathan,

Isaiah 55 says God’s thoughts are higher than ours. He has purposes we can’t comprehend. I have seen marriages healed and siblings become sold-out believers through the death of a child or teenager. As I write this, a friend is holding her eighteen-month-old son in her arms, waiting for him to breathe his last. She is praying over him, reading Psalms aloud, trying to comfort and prepare him—and herself—for what’s to come.

Who knows how many doctors, nurses, and patients are being profoundly impacted by this child’s ordeal? Who knows what family members may turn to Christ?

Little David’s life will be just as long as God knows is best. I can’t explain His purposes, and no explanation can or should remove a parent’s grief. But I do know God’s ways are best, and one day we will have a much clearer picture.

I have also seen older loved ones suffer who—for their sake—I wished God would take home sooner. But God has a purpose for them to their last moment of life. Once again, the impact on family members of a godly person’s facing disease and death can have effects we can’t measure. It can produce in them a Christ-likeness that couldn’t have been otherwise achieved.

Often God uses waning health and vitality not only to increase impact on others who benefit by caring for the elderly (my father and I gained a much closer relationship in his final years, when he needed my help), but by preparing the sick and elderly for heaven. It is easier

to let go of this world when there is no realistic hope that our health will improve, but only get worse. Now the whispers of heaven become glad shouts of invitation: “Come here, where all will be right—not *again*, but for the first time!”

As the blind relish the promise of sight, and the lame the promise of full mobility, the sick long for health, and the old long for the fresh vitality of youth.

As loved ones go through great difficulty, we too are weaned from desperately clinging to them. I would never consider taking measures to end my dying parents’ lives, because I would not dare play God. But in both cases I was able to say, “If this treatment might add two months to their lives but make that two months more miserable for them, please withhold it and do everything you can to make them comfortable.”

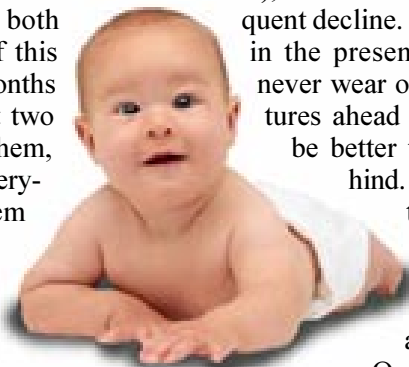
In stark contrast, many today seem eager to usher parents into eternity. I have heard people speak of their “inheritance” being wasted on care for their terminal parents. “Honor your father and mother” is a command we should take seriously. God enforces His commandments—the consequences of denying loving care for our parents will surely

be grave. Those who are motivated by greed and not wanting to bother caring for their parents need to repent. It is too easy to disguise as “mercy” hidden agendas that are selfish.

I would also add that there is great encouragement in the fact that for true believers death is not the end of a relationship, but only an interruption.

Our loved ones, as they age and weaken, have not passed their peak, as the world imagines. They have yet to reach their peak. And if a peak is ever reached in the next world (I doubt it will be), there will never be a subsequent decline. The thrill of being in the presence of Christ will never wear off, and the adventures ahead of us will always be better than the ones behind. Our God offers not the end of longing, but the continual fulfillment of it—infinite joy and gratitude to the One who did it all for us. Our believing loved ones, whether parents or children or spouses or friends, will be there to greet us, likely eager to show us some favorite places. For those who know the grace of Jesus, the ultimate reunion awaits us.

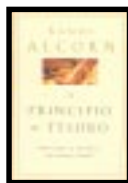
Randy



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Brothers

by Randy Alcorn



This is a short story in which I weave together various parts of my novel *Dominion*. It was published in *The Story Tellers' Collection II*.

The gray sky pressed down on two men, huddled close in the faint twilight.

Stoop-shouldered, leaning forward, Obadiah Abernathy stared off into empty space. He was ninety-two, son of a sharecropper, grandson of a Mississippi slave. His son Clarence, a 260-pound former college lineman, leaned over and looked into his father's eyes. They were moist and deep-welled, eyes that had seen more than any man should have to.

Obadiah shuffled toward the front porch, Clarence holding his hand. It still felt callused and leathery from picking cotton, milling grain, shoeing horses, and scrubbing floors. But now it was feather-light, a ghost of the hand that used to whip a baseball to first, grip a chopping maul for hours on end, and overpower young Clarence in arm wrestling.

"How you feelin', Daddy?" Clarence asked as they gingerly ascended the stairs to his brother Harley's front door.

"Bout a half bubble off level. When you gets to be my age, if you wakes up in the mornin' and nothin' hurts, it's a sure sign you're dead." He laughed with a delightful hiss that sounded like air escaping a balloon. "Been hard since Dani's passin'. Man shouldn't have to see his baby girl die. Lijah tell me that when he lost Bobby. Couldn't have made it without my sweet Jesus. No suh."

Two weeks after his sister's funeral Clarence could still hear the wailing. Nobody wept like black folk. They'd had centuries of practice.

A sports columnist for the *Trib*, Clarence had knocked on many doors. But the door in front of him now was the hardest. Clarence let his wife Geneva do the knocking.

"Here they are, *black* by popular demand!" Harley's face was framed by Malcolm-X-style glasses. A professor at Portland State, he often wore his suit and Black Muslim bow tie, but tonight had on a striking brown and yellow kente cloth.

While Harley hugged his daddy, Clarence brushed past him, to his sister Marny's embrace. Clarence followed her into the kitchen, lured by the smell of hamhocks. Geneva stepped into the kitchen, put down her sack, and poured in bacon grease. She'd threatened to stop this to keep the men from dying of heart attacks, but they'd said if she did, she might as well kill them outright.

Aunt Ida added greens to the hamhocks. Obadiah poked his head in beside Clarence, eyes closed, nostrils flaring, breathing in the aroma with conspicuous delight. Harley stood behind both of them, trying to lean in too.

The women turned and shot mocking looks, like queens to court jesters.

"You manfolks jus' get away, you hear me now?" Aunt Ida shooed them off as though they were stray cats. "Go discuss yo' politics and solve the world's problems so we can do what's important—fix dinner!"

After forty minutes of small talk, twenty decibels louder than any white family gathering, they sat down for the meal. Mama's dressing, loaded with onions and peppers and celery, sat at the table's center. Huge plates surrounded it—collard greens, mustard greens, turnip greens. Big bowls of macaroni and cheese, candied yams, butter beans, and crowder peas sat alongside hamhocks and turkey, the full bird. A heaping plate of Mississippi catfish raised Clarence's eyebrows, as did a bowl of succotash and a mess of cornbread and black-eyed peas.

There was fried chicken, fried okra, fried potatoes, deep fried pork chops, and fried green tomatoes. After Daddy said the blessing, Clarence took one slick, rubbery chitlin, for nostalgia's sake. Chitlins objected to being eaten, but some eye-watering Cajun pepper helped him get it down.

Nothing could bring Mama back for an evening like the smells and tastes on this table. And now they were reminders of Dani, too. His precious little sister, taken so suddenly, so violently. His neck bowed low under the weight of his thoughts.

Clarence dug into the comforting fried channel catfish and Baluxi shrimp. It was enough to get the Mudcat goin', to dredge up the deepest memories, sweet and sour, of Yazoo Basin, Black Prairie, the Bluff Hills, and the Flatwoods.

Mississippi. Dusty towns with overdressed old men sitting on porches, plucking their suspenders and pronouncing judgment on all that didn't suit them. Corn-whisky stills. Backwater towns where the women spent their school years looking for a man to marry, then spent the rest of their lives wondering why they'd married such a fool. Clarence envisioned the magnificent antebellum mansions about which whites were so proud and blacks so angry. He lived in Oregon now, but Mississippi was his home. Yet it never had been home and never could be.

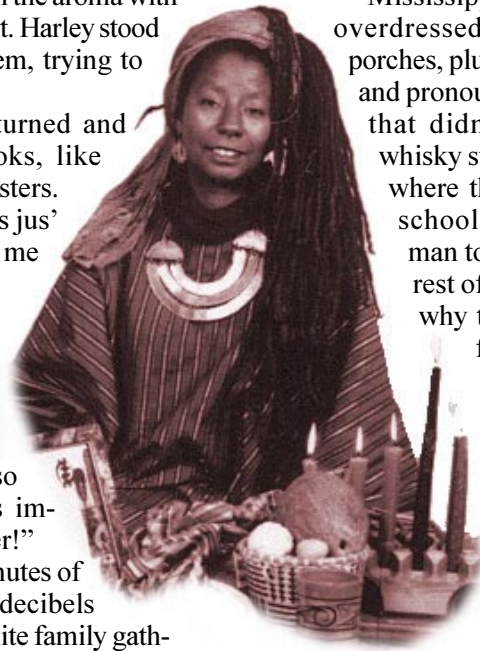
Clarence picked up cornbread and mixed it with his fingers into the collard greens. The salty, grease-soaked greens attracted stray crumbs. He licked his lips.

"This is livin', that's sure," Obadiah said.

"These are serious vittles, ladies," Clarence added.

"Just keep that pig meat on the other end of the table," Harley said. The air filled with a sudden but familiar tension.

"You always have to get that in somewhere, don't you brother?" Clarence ignored Geneva's pleading eyes. "This family isn't Muslim, and *pig meat* is as black as coal at midnight. So if you have all that black pride, just join in or be quiet. You know that deep-fried dish there you been eatin' from? Bet you thought it was



chicken, didn't you? Truth is we bought it just for you, at Bits o' Pig!"

"Just keep it goin', *brother*." Harley said the last word as if any black man off the street was more a brother to him than Clarence.

Harley's voice sounded to Clarence like an out-of-tune guitar. It didn't help that he was brilliant, one of the few people who could keep up with Clarence in an argument. The dinner continued in hushed tones before cautiously regaining its carefree mood.

"Let's go to the family room," Marny said. "Time for the menfolk to work off their dinner tellin' stories."

"Powerful good dinner, ladies, powerful good," Obadiah said. "Menfolk gotsta come up with some pretty big whoppers to match this!"

Soon the stories flowed like melting butter on steaming okra. Obadiah, sitting in a rocking chair, was in the thick of them, his stories a string of pearls without the string.

"You remember ol' Reverend Charo? Dat man had more points than a thornbush. Used to say from da pulpit in this big voice, 'Ain't no disgrace to be colored.' Then he'd pause and lean forward and wink at us and whisper, 'It's just awfully inconvenient.'" Obadiah laughed until his eyes watered. "Sundays, now they was sumpin'. Mama, she'd put wheat starch in my collar to glue down the threads. We'd walk four miles to Sunday school, rain or shine. And did we have fun? Ol' Lijah and me, we was always cookin' up mischief. Mama'd say, 'Don't let them boys tease your sisters at church.' Like askin' a couple o' Rottweilers to guard the barbecue!"

Clarence was warmed and stung by his father's love for his brother Elijah. Obadiah wanted Harley and Clarence to be that close, but they couldn't be in a room for an hour without tearing each other apart.

"Reverend Charo say, 'Remember yo' mama? How she used to hug you and tuck you in? But she gone now. Can't tuck you in no more.' He'd carry on, till

we was all sniffin' and sobbin'. He'd keep remindin' us of our grandmammies and all our kin that died till we was in a frenzy. Then he'd shout, 'But someday you goin' to see yo' mama again. Some day you goin' to heaven, if you loves Jesus. There she be—arms awide open, waitin' fo' you. How many o' you can't wait for that day?'"

Obadiah's hand shot up. "People, they be shoutin' and clappin', twitchin' and tremblin.' Now, chu'ches today, they don't preach 'bout heaven no mo'. Maybe nowadays we thinks this world's our home. Maybe that's whys we's in so much trouble."



Obadiah's eyes clouded. Was he thinking about Mama? Dani? Old times with Uncle Lijah? Low and quiet, he started singing, voice wobbly.

"I don't understand my struggles now, why I suffer and feel so bad. But one day, someday, he'll make it plain. Someday when I his face shall see, someday from tears I shall be free, yes, someday I'll understand."

It was awkward. Nobody knew quite what to do when Grandpa edged off into his other world.

"Tell us a story, Grampy," Keisha said. "Tell us about playin' in the Negro Leagues." Her sweet voice reeled in her great-grandpappy.

Obadiah smiled. "Shadow ball, folks called it." He laughed like a little boy, and the children laughed with him. "We was barnstormers. Played three games a day, travelin' by bus. Couldn't stay in most hotels. Wrong color. But lotsa folks

come to see us. They cheered us and wrote us up. Played every city. They'd hitch up the team to come see us. If they didn't have a buggy, they'd ride two to a mule. If they couldn't find a mule, they'd ride an armadilla."

Obadiah's eyes sparkled. "One year I'd be with the Kansas City Monarchs or the Indianapolis Clowns, next year the Birmingham Black Barons."

"Tell us about Cool Papa Bell, Grampy."

"You want fast? Only man who could hit himself with his own line drive. I watched Papa Bell run from first to third on a bunt. I saw him hit three inside-the-park homers in the same game.

His roommate swore Cool Papa Bell could flip off the light switch and be in bed before the room got dark."

Everybody laughed, revving up Obadiah's engines.

"Tell them about Ty Cobb," Harley said.

"Played against him in exhibition games. Cobb was an ol' sourpuss. You could put his face on a buffalo nickel and nobody'd notice the difference."

"What about Josh Gibson?"

Ty asked.

"You want a slugger? Josh hit more five-hundred-foot home runs than Ruth. Only man to hit a ball clean out of Yankee Stadium. One season Josh hit seventy-five home runs."

"If Gibson was playin' in the majors today," Harley said, "what do you think he'd hit?"

"Oh...," Obadiah paused. "Maybe .280, with thirty home runs."

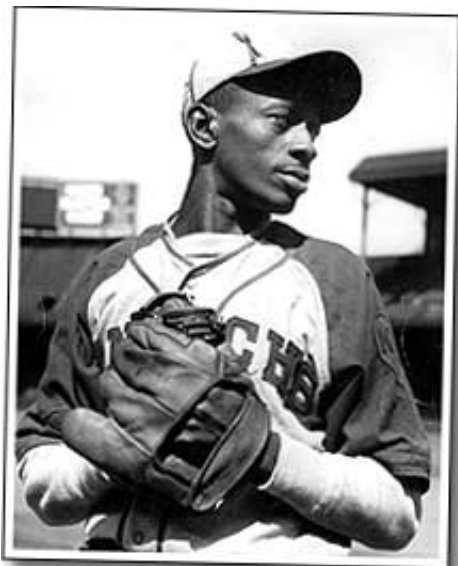
"That all?"

"Well, you has to understand...he'd be eighty-five years old!"

When the laughter stopped, Ty asked, "Was Josh Gibson the best?"

"No. No. *Satchel*." He grinned. "Satchel Paige." He nodded vigorously. "I's not just black as coal, chillens, I's *old* as coal! Played with Satch on two teams, and played against him more than I cares to remember. No man never pitched like Satchel. He'd go into a game sayin' he'd strike out the first nine men. Usually he did. First baseman didn't

touch the ball for three innings. Once we put a batboy out on first 'cause we knew he'd never have to do anything. Another time all us infielders sat down around second base and played poker till somebody finally got wood on the ball. It was the fourth inning. When I was with the Clowns, the catcher would sit in a rockin' chair. Ol' Satchel, he could pitch a greasy pork chop past a hungry coyote!"



Satchel Paige

Geneva passed out the sweet potato pie. Obadiah smiled broadly. He held it up under his nose. "Um, um, um." He placed it on his lap so his hands were free to talk.

"My son, the sportswriter," he looked at Clarence, "always told me he'd take me and his brother to Cooperstown one day, and we'd look at those pictures, and I'd show 'em Satch and Josh and Cool Papa. Even find ol' Obadiah Abernathy in some of them Shadow Ball pictures, I reckon."

Clarence squirmed. He'd promised his daddy they'd go to the Baseball Hall of Fame. He'd thought about it every year. But Cooperstown, New York, was on the other side of the country. There were always reasons not to go. And Harley was the biggest.

"We was sharecroppers in a bitty Mississippi town," Obadiah said, "so far down they had to pump in the sunshine. Lived in an ol' shotgun house. We chillens slept with each other, cuddlin' to stay warm."

"Yuck," Jonah said.

"No yuck about it, boy. Sometimes my nose so frozen, don't know what I'd done if brother Elijah hadn't been there to snuggle. They was hard days, but good ones." His eyes watered again. He looked up at the ceiling as if trying to peer beyond it. "I miss eatin' sowbelly and corn pone and slicin' up the catfish fresh out o' the river and sittin' on the porch those warm nights—Lijah and me and Daddy and Mama and the rest. We'd jus' watch the lightnin' bugs, lookin' magical, like somebody sprinkled livin' pixie dust in that ol' creek. We'd listen to those hound dogs bark and look up at those stars and see the face of God. True brothers, me and Elijah. Went through that Depression together. Couldn't find no work in Mississippi, so we rode the rails. We'd get off town to town, search for work all day. Most nights we was outside or on the rails. We'd find newspaper, lay it over us, curl up and put our arms around each other jus' to keep from freezin'—grabbin' on to life, like when we was little. We'd pray, quote the Good Book, talk and laugh the night away, just Jesus and me and Lijah, brothers through and through."

"I wish Uncle Elijah could come for Christmas," Clarence said.

"You and me both," Obadiah said. "Miss Lijah, surely I does."

"Where we meeting for Kwanzaa?" Harley asked.

"Don't know about Kwanzaa," Clarence said, "but *Christmas* is at our place, right Geneva?"

Harley shook his head. "You celebrate an independence day that didn't consider blacks worthy of independence. You celebrate a Thanksgiving of hoodlums who stole America from its natives. And you celebrate a Christmas about a white man's religion that oppressed your ancestors."

Clarence's eyes burned, but he held his tongue.

"I'm an African. That's why I celebrate Kwanzaa, not Christmas."

"Well, I got news for you," Clarence said. "Kwanzaa isn't from Africa. It was invented in Los Angeles, by Americans!"

"It was invented to commemorate what Africa is about. Which you've obviously forgotten."

"Our ancestors came from Africa. But we're Americans. If our kids are going to make it here, we've got to quit telling them they don't belong."

Harley put his hands up. "Now that the wood's all split, the water's drawn, the cotton's picked, and the rails reach coast to coast, now that the ditches are dug and there's just shoes left to be shined, *now* they tell us they'll give us a chance. Well, they've been liars all along and they're still lyin'! So excuse me if I don't join you in shufflin' for 'em, Tom!"

Clarence stood, shoulders tense, well aware his two-hundred-sixty pounds cast a formidable shadow. "To you anyone who makes a living outside of a government agency or a black studies department is an Uncle Tom." He ducked into the kitchen and slammed his fist on the counter. Right about now, he



knew, Dani would have come in, cooled him down, reminded him he and Harley were brothers.

Clarence breathed deeply and returned to the family room as his father said to Harley, “Nossah, son, that’s pop-pycock, pure and simple. Not all white people’s like that. Yeah, there’s racists—white *and* black. You raised in the garbage, you can’t help but stink. Some gots it so bad they’ll never change, and you just got to let ’em go. Like Pappy said, ‘Don’t never try to teach a pig to sing.’”

“What?” Geneva asked, laughing.

“It wastes your time, and it annoys the pig.”

“Daddy, I wish you’d come to the true faith of the black man,” Harley said.

Obadiah sucked in air and sat up straight. Every back in the room tensed. “Hear me, son, and hear me good.” The voice was clear and firm. “*I knows* the true faith of the black man, the brown man, the red man, the yellow man, the white man. *Every* man. It’s a faith in Jesus. He say, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no man comes to the Father but by me.’ The only train that’s goin’ to take you to the Promised Land is the glory train, and Jesus is the conductor. When he hears *that* whistle, ol’ Obadiah Abernathy’s gettin’ on board. I’m gonna make it to that Promised Land.” His thin voice started singing, “‘Git on board, little children, git on board. De gospel train’s a comin’, git on board.’”

Clarence looked down uneasily, but suddenly Daddy’s eyes cleared and he pressed his hands on the arms of the rocking chair, gazing at Harley.

“I won’t let you attack the faith that’s been the foundation for this family, for your mama and my mama and daddy, and their mamas and daddies before them. You hear your papa talkin’, Harley?”

“My name’s Ishmael Salid.”

“Don’t tell *me* what yo’ name is, boy!” Obadiah stood up with startling force, shaking his finger. Daddy looked like he was about to bring out a hickory switch, and Clarence relished it. “I’m the one that *gave* you yo’ name. Me and yo’ sweet mama. I love you, son, but you’ll always be Harley Abernathy. Somebody else can call you Elijah Mohammed or Kareem Abdul Jabbar or

Sister Souljah, but *I gave* you yo’ name and I’s gonna call you *Harley* till the day I die and then some. Nuttin’ you says gonna change that. You hear me, boy?”

“Yes, Daddy,” Harley said. “But when you’ve been emasculated by white Christians for four hundred years, you want to do something that affirms your *black* manhood. Islam is Afrocentric; Christianity is Eurocentric.”

“Baloney,” Clarence said. “Both of them started in the Middle East, and there were black Christians in Africa six centuries before Mohammed.”

Harley ignored Clarence. “Let me ask you one thing, Daddy. Those Mississippi cops nearly beat you to death for

**“The way I reads my Bible,
anybody who hates a man
for the color God made
him isn’t filled with God,
he’s filled with the devil.”**

bein’ black, didn’t they? And that place was full to the brim with Bible believin’ church people, wasn’t it? Does that tell you something? One of those crackers was a deacon in the Baptist church, remember? Now I want you to tell us all, Daddy, did you ever hear any white Christian church leader stand up and say to the community, to the black churches, to the newspaper, to anyone, ‘This is wrong. We’re sorry. We will no longer tolerate the lynchings, the beatings, the humiliation, the cruelty! We’ll kick the Klansmen out of our churches and help the oppressed and stand up for justice.’ Did you *ever* hear that from a white church leader? I want the whole family to hear your answer.”

Seventeen family members sat in breathless silence in the crowded living room, all of them looking at Obadiah. He sat silently for a long time, eyes down. Tears fell into his lap. Finally he looked up.

“No. I never did hear that. I wish to Jesus I would have.” He fought to gain control of his voice. “But that’s not God’s fault, son. And my faith’s in God, not men. Not white men, not black men. My faith’s

in a God who ain’t black or white, but who made both and died for both.”

Obadiah looked at Harley, then Clarence. “It grieves this ol’ man to see my sons fight. I don’t want my Ruby or my Dani lookin’ down here and havin’ to see it neither. You’re brothers—don’t that mean nothin’ to you? I’m old as dirt, but I ain’t mulch on the flowers yet. I gots me a third-grade education, but I seem to know some things you college graduates don’t. I’s still your daddy. Now I gots a few things to say, so shut up yo’ mouths and listen, both of you.”

Everyone sat wide-eyed and attentive. “Clarence, you should show more respect for your brother. Yeah, I disagrees with him too, but sarcasm and venom ain’t the way to convince him. I wish I heard more love in your voice, more kindness to your brother. Yo’ mama would want that. You knows the words of the gospel, boy. But I’s sorry to say, you’s missin’ the music.”

Clarence looked at the floor.

“Bein’ angry ’n bitter won’t bring your sister back neither. Truth be told, she wouldn’t *want* to come back. Now you, Harley,” Obadiah said. “You read Revelation, last three chaptas. Almighty ain’t gonna adjust his plans to fit your beliefs or Minister Farrakhan’s or nobody else’s. You better start changin’ your beliefs, ’cause the Almighty ain’t gonna change his.”

Little Keisha stared up at her grandfather. Catching her eye, his voice became gentler. “Now, the rest of you, hear this old man and hear me good. Not all my dogs is barkin’ anymore, but I can tell you what I knows, and I knows this—there’s bad Christians and there’s good Christians; there’s phony Christians and there’s real Christians. The devil can go to church once a week. Nothin’ to it. It’s livin’ it that counts, and the people that live it, those are the real Christians. The way I reads my Bible, anybody who hates a man for the color God made him isn’t filled with God, he’s filled with the devil. There’s real money and there’s counterfeit—don’t let the counterfeit stop you from believin’ there’s the real thing. People’s always gonna let you down.”

He’d been talking fast, but his speech slowed to a crawl. “But my Jesus, he won’t never lets you down. *Never*.

Yessir, my Lord tooks my daddy and mama, my Ruby and nephew Bobby and now my Dani, he tooks them all away from me, and Moses and all my brothers and sisters 'cept ol' Lijah, but he never *once* tooks away himself from Obadiah Abernathy, and that's the gospel truth."

A hush permeated the living room. Clarence and Harley, both ill at ease with the tears flowing down their father's cheeks, lowered their heads.

Geneva got up and collected dessert plates. The other women followed.

"Close to God, my Ruby was," Obadiah said to no one in particular. "And now she's in his backyard. When the chillens in bed, we sat on our porch counting cricket chirps and watchin' stars. Used to ring that ol' porch bell, Ruby did. Meant it was supertime, time to come home. Sometimes this ol' boy hears that bell a ringin'. Time to come home."

Obadiah tilted his head, then hummed. While Clarence and Harley squirmed, Daddy listened to the music no one else could hear. Obadiah looked boyish, as if running unrestrained through the meadows of childhood. Was he remembering childhood, Clarence wondered, or anticipating it?

"Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom over me," Obadiah suddenly sang. "And before I'll be a slave I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free. Git on board, little chillen', git on board. De gospel train, she's comin', git on board." His voice changed. "Amazin' grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."

Most of the family sang along. Harley picked up a newspaper from the coffee table and buried his nose in it.

"When we been dere ten thousand years, bright shinin' as da sun, we've no less days to sing God's praise, dan when we first begun." The tears poured down the old man's cheeks as he stared out the window.

Clarence followed his daddy's gaze.

He couldn't see anything outside but darkness.

* * * * *

Clarence rushed into the hospital room. His father looked so small lying on that bed, tethered to an oxygen tube.

"How are you, Daddy?"

"If I was a hoss, they'da shot me already." Obadiah chuckled feebly. "But I's still a man."

"You're the *best* man I've ever known."

"You should get around mo', son. Meet mo' people."

"I mean it, Daddy. You were always a hard one to disobey, but you've been everything I could ask for in a father. If I could be to my children and grandchildren what you've been to me..."



"Give 'em yo' *time*, son. No substitute for yo' time. Learn those younguns God's ways. Teach 'em who they is—chillens of the King. Some man treats 'em like a dog, he gonna have to face their Daddy, the King. Chillens grows up real quick. Don't miss the chances you got now. Won't get 'em again, boy. Won't get 'em again."

"I called Uncle Elijah this morning. Wanted me to tell you he's prayin' for you."

"Best brother a man could have, Lijah. Kept each other warm those cold nights. Had us some fine times, we did. Wish I could be home with 'im. Miss 'im terrible. A true brother. Wish you and Harley could..."

"I know." Clarence choked. "I'm sorry we never got to Cooperstown."

"It ain't too late."

Clarence looked at him, not sure what to say.

"I wants you to take Harley. You can do it. They gots ol' pictures. Look for me. Twenty-two years in Shadow Ball. Your ol' daddy's gots to be in some of them pictures!"

"But it's you I wanted to go with, Daddy."

"Don't worry none about me, son. I's goin' to the *real* Hall o' Fame." He laughed and looked at Clarence with soulful eyes, the light inside flickering in eternity's winds.

Harley walked in the door. He nodded at Clarence and stood on the opposite side of his father's bed.

"My boys." Obadiah smiled. "Brothers," he whispered. He lay still, closing his eyes. The brothers stood there, not looking at each other, both wondering if those eyes would open again. Three minutes later, they did.

"I hears that whistle blowin'," Obadiah said. "Train's a comin'. Folks a gatherin'." Eyes closed, he said,

"Who's dat walkin' beside me now?"

Tall as an oak. Where'd ya come from, big fella? These ol' legs don't feel so sore. Now who's dat up ahead? Whose face I see? O, my sweet Jesus. It's you. It's you!"

Obadiah grew quiet.

Clarence checked his pulse. Suddenly Daddy's eyes popped open, not blinking, but watering up, focused on something beyond the room.

"Who dat, now? Daddy? O *Daddy*, what you told me was true. And... Mama? Yes, me too, Mama. Me too. Terrible much." Silence again. "Moses! How are you, brother? How long's it been? But where's my Dani? There she is! O Dani, I hasn't stopped cryin' for you, little girl. And who's this one? Bobby, that you? Leukemia's gone now, ain't it? O sweet Jesus, sweet Jesus. I never knowed such joy. Thank you, my sweet Jesus."

Clarence and Harley stared, wide-eyed, as the tears streamed down their father's face. "He's hallucinating," Harley whispered. Clarence nodded, then moved over to Harley's side because his father's head was turned that way. The brothers stood shoulder to shoulder, leaning over their father, wanting to hear the fading voice.

"My, oh my, can't believe my eyes. Who's dat woman? Uncommon pretty, she is. Missed you terrible, Ruby. Got lonely jus' me and the fireflies, countin' cricket chirps and watchin' the stars all by ourselves."

Clarence looked at Harley. Was it possible...?

"Wait a minute there." Obadiah said, "Who dat behind you? *Lijah*? That you, brother?"

As Daddy shed more tears, Clarence and Harley let out their breaths at the same moment. The old man's body jolted.

"You all come out to get me, didn't you? I hears that ol' porch bell a ringin'. Time to come inside, ain't it? Gospel train's a comin'. Obadiah Abernathy's on board. Time to cross dat ol' Jordan. Time to..."

Obadiah's eyes grew big, but his pupils contracted as if seeing a bright light. Then his eyelids fell over them, like blinds suddenly tugged shut. He gasped air like it was his last breath.

Or his first.

Clarence and Harley looked at each other in disbelief. Only an instant before the empty shell in front of them had still contained a man.

"Oh...Daddy," Harley sobbed, taking off his glasses.

Clarence fell to his knees, laying his head on the bedspread. "We gonna miss

you, old man..." He choked out the words. "We gonna miss you terrible."

After ten minutes, Harley and Clarence helped each other out into the hall.

"Antsy?" Harley said. Clarence hadn't heard his brother call him that for twenty years. "Must have been the pain-killer or something. But for just a moment, I thought maybe Daddy was really...I don't know. Did you ...?"

"Yeah, I did. Up until he thought he saw Uncle Elijah. But I just talked to him a few hours ago. Lijah's still in Mississippi."

"One thing's for sure," Harley said, "Mississippi and heaven aren't the same place."

Clarence nodded and cleared his throat. "Harley?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you mind comin' to my house for a bit? I'd like to talk...if that's okay with you."

"Well, I got papers to grade and I need to tell my family about Daddy. But...yeah, I guess I could come by. Let me call home first."

When they got to Clarence's they sat in the living room, eight feet apart. Geneva brought coffee to Clarence and tea to Harley. The phone rang. Geneva answered. Both men listened.

Geneva put down the phone, face pale. "It was your cousin Jabo in Jackson.

I left him the message about Daddy half an hour ago. He called about Uncle Elijah."

"I'm sure Lijah's taking it hard," Clarence said. "They were so close." Harley nodded.

"It's not that," Geneva said.

"What?" Harley asked.

"Uncle Elijah passed away."

The two brothers stared at each other across the room.

"When?" Clarence's voice was hoarse.

"Four o'clock this afternoon, Mississippi time."

"That means he died..." Clarence stopped.

"An hour before Daddy." Harley put his hands on his face. Clarence did the same.

Clarence made the long walk across the living room and knelt next to his brother. He put his arms around him. They embraced for the first time in twenty years, the first time since Mama died. They hugged each other like two freezing men in a railroad car, hanging on to life.

Clarence could only think about going two places: One, to where his daddy and mama and Dani and Uncle Lijah were.

The other, to Cooperstown's Hall of Fame.

Randy Alcorn's Speaking Schedule... (in response to those who've asked)

January 23 & 24, 2003: Christian Stewardship Association Conference, Chicago, IL (Contact information: 317-244-4272 or www.stewardship.org)

April 11-15, 2003: Christian Writers Conference, Mt. Hermon Christian Conference Center, Mt. Hermon, CA (Contact information: 831-335-4466 or www.mounthermon.org/writers)

May 17-21, 2003: Expolit Miami (Spanish Christian literature convention), Miami, FL (Contact information: Marie Tamayo, 305-592-6136)

May 23-26, 2003: The JESUS Film Briefing, Leavenworth, WA (Contact information: 949-361-7575)



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Can Fiction Tell the Truth?

by Gladys Hunt

Imagination and truth go together in good literature. Because a story is “made up” does not necessarily mean it is not true. It means it is imaginative. Fiction is basically literature about imaginary people and events (and includes mysteries, fantasy, drama, science fiction, and more). The definition of fiction is to shape, to fashion, to feign. Feigning is imagining—making visible images for invisible things. Why should I read fiction if it is just made up? I read it because it helps me pay attention to life. Reading good fiction is not simply a frivolous activity for those who aren’t serious about life. I read because I *am* serious, and find that fiction says true things I might never hear any other way.

We struggle over a theology of imagination.

We find it hard to believe that imagination is God’s idea and that it is among the chief glories of human beings. Of all creation, human beings are the only creatures who have the ability to transcend the smallness of self and imagine something different than what they know. God is imaginative; we are made in his image.

Children are wonderfully imaginative; they are born that way. Bread crusts on highchair trays become trucks; dolls cry and need to be rocked. Imagination is to be encouraged, trained, developed, enjoyed. That is why we surround children with picture books that tell stories, and why we read to them about adventures in far places. Dr. Seuss lets them put their tongues and their imaginations around words that make up stories. Yet even before the advent of the book, people were drawing images in the sand and making up legends. Imagination is not only a human capacity; it is an awesome gift.

Imagination and truth-telling is an oxymoron to some people. Once, when I was giving a talk about children’s books, a mother told me that she never read anything to her children that was not literally true. Since animals do not talk, she would not allow books that give speech

or personality to animals. “I want my children to trust me,” she said, “and if I give them untrue stories, they will suspect that I don’t tell the truth about other more important issues.” I felt sorry for her children because she had so little understanding of the role of imagination in enjoying the world around us. Her view of truth was too narrow, so narrow that she would have to conclude that the Bible gives us untruths when it speaks of the stars “singing together” or trees “clapping their hands.”



Uneasiness about imagination leads to a narrow view of God and the gifts he has given men and women. In his book *Reversed Thunder*, Eugene Peterson writes, “Imagination opens things up so that we can grow into maturity—worship and adore, exclaim and honor, follow and trust. Explanation keeps our feet on the ground; imagination lifts our heads into the clouds. Explanation restricts and defines and holds down; imagination expands and lets loose.” Christians have a large investment in the invisible and for them imagination is essential, for it is only by means of the imagination that we can see the reality of the whole.

The Bible is a book of literature; it is a work of art. It is imaginative. It is an anthology containing poetry, adventure stories, mysteries, stories about heroes, heroines, and villains, and romantic love. Ten verses in Job extol the glory of the hippopotamus and thirty-five verses speak of the strength of the crocodile. Morning stars sing for joy, trees clap their hands, and the sunrise is likened to a bridegroom coming out of his tent. Its worlds are marked by beauty; its imagery illumines the text. God seems to have an awesome

regard for imagination and beauty in communicating truth.

“Does it make any difference,” writes Clyde Kilby, formerly a Wheaton College English professor, “that the Book we look upon as holy comes to us in literary form or abstract doctrine or systematic theology?” Christianity is the most literary religion in the world—a religion in which Word has special sanctity.

Everyone has been gifted with an imagination that longs to be fed. Some are more imaginative than others and are a special gift to all of us. Without imagination there would be no new hypotheses, inventions, or experiments. Albert Einstein himself said, “The gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge.” Nobody lives in a totally objective world, only in a world filtered by imagination. Imagination allows

us to soar and to wonder. Someone had to imagine everything that we take for granted, from a fork to an airplane.

How does imagination help us grasp truth? C. S. Lewis observed that a person can either have an experience or understand it, but never both at once. His theory was that only in a story do we have a possible solution to this dilemma. A story invites us to have, through our imaginations, a concrete experience of truth. Maybe that is why Jesus told stories. In a story I get to see my own experiences from a different angle and understand new truths about myself and the world.

Imagination can be tainted with evil or infused with good; whether it is good or evil depends on the heart of the person doing the “imagining.” In that sense, imagining is like all our other gifts to be used for good or ill. We don’t worship imagination; we simply recognize the capacity to imagine as a uniquely human and God-given gift. The right use of imagination in writing can make truth come alive and jump off the page.

Excerpted from Honey for a Woman’s Heart by Gladys Hunt, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, pp. 33-36

Letters to EPM

I just finished reading *The Ishbane Conspiracy* and had to write you. I am 42 and the mother of 3 teenagers. I have already lived through much of the warfare that is so well revealed in your book.

We have had many youth come and go through our doors (my husband and I are both teachers) and my concern for this generation keeps escalating to the point where I want to scream at parents to wake up...and to our churches too. I will certainly be promoting your book as it is an excellent tool to open our eyes to the enemy's plans for our precious children.

Thank you again for this timely book...I gave it to our eldest for her birthday. She began using a Ouija board in grade 7 and had some very rocky years. She also struggles with eating, so this book was very relevant to her. She said that the letters in the book from the demons helped her understand why she struggled with some of the thoughts and feelings that she still battles with. She loves the Lord but is still not totally free from the effects of her past. My husband and I are praying and believing that she will be soon.

I am praying the Lord will use me however He can to help other parents realize the dangers and the need to protect their children.

S. N., Canada

It is indeed with great pleasure that I am able to correspond to you. I am a mother of 3 and a pastor's wife. I am not a reader. I truly do not enjoy reading unless I come across something wonderful like what you have written. I thought it couldn't get better after reading *Lord Foulgrin's Letters* but after reading *Safely Home*, I literally sobbed for almost an hour. I just finished it moments ago. My husband and I support missions and have done so for years even before my husband became a pastor. He has a heart for missions, so does our congregation (about 30 members). I will never look at missions the same way again. You have opened my eyes to missions as well as heaven, I see it clearer than ever before.

P. B., Columbus, Ohio

My husband was given *Safely Home* last Christmas and we both devoured it. It was especially touching to me because my grandparents had been missionaries in China for 48 years. (My grandfather lost his sight in one eye because he was stoned for his beliefs.) Since then, we have read your other books, and I am now in the middle of *Edge of Eternity*. My thanks to you for constantly reminding me of seeing things in light of eternity. It has literally changed my perspective on life—how I see my family, my church, my role in this short life. Just last night I read a quote from your book *Edge* where Shad says, "The darkness doesn't need a little less darkness; what it needs is light." Thank you for shining the Light.

M. S.

I've gone through many trials where God has taught me to maintain an eternal perspective. Your writings on heaven have deeply impacted my life. As you know, the church has mostly misconceptions about heaven because Satan and his minions work to blaspheme God and His dwelling place. Your writings on heaven and the growing spiritual life are excellent and rooted in the scriptures.

Your books *Lord Foulgrin's Letters* and *The Ishbane Conspiracy* gave me a better understanding of demons' strategies to take us down. Also, I have discovered the joy of giving and discovered from your writings the doctrine of eternal rewards. I thank you for that so much in teaching me to store treasure in heaven and not on earth. Earlier, I asked you what you thought about me buying a Corvette. I thank you for giving me guidance in this area. I have found it is more blessed to give than receive. I could not understand how you as an author would give most of the money away but now I know why. Your articles on Christian living have also been a big help to me in walking the walk.

B. L.

I am sad to confirm what you wrote in your article "The Scandal of



Evangelical Dishonesty." I work as a staff person at a Christian college in Pennsylvania, and have taken classes at the college. Some of the things the professors teach and expose these students to is horrible for their faith. I have seen students come in as freshman ready to serve Jesus, and leave four years later, jaded and their faith destroyed or they are seriously questioning it.

A parent or student thinks there is some protection when a lot of times we show the same films on campus and bring in the same musical groups as a secular college would! The latest trendy speaker is taught, and Christ is just one of many choices. During chapels few even bring their Bibles. The Bible is seen as having mistakes in it!

Parents, encourage your children to be strong in their faith. Pray for them. Send them encouraging letters in the mail, not email. (You have never seen such sad faces as those students who go to the mailbox and there is nothing there.) Encourage them to get into life groups and do Bible study weekly with them.

R. S.

I've been working with a financial organization on distributing *The Treasure Principle* to everyone in their database. Over the last couple of months, we've sent out 200 books to various supporters in our state.

One affluent and well-known older businessman read the book and was convicted by God to up his giving from 50% to 90% of his income. We already know that this has resulted in one pledge of \$100,000 to a local ministry over the next three years. Only God knows how many other worthy ministries will receive much-needed financial assistance as a result of this experience...and the giver accrues all of the future reward and present joy of generous giving!

P. J., Mississippi

A. W. Tozer on Failure and Success . . .

One Test Today: Success

For we are not, as so many, peddling the word of God; but as of sincerity, but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.

—2 Corinthians 2:17

Much that passes for Christian life today is the brief bright effort of the severed branch to bring forth its fruit in its season. But the deep laws of life are against it. Preoccupation with appearances and a corresponding neglect of the out-of-sight root of the true spiritual life are prophetic signs which go unheeded. Immediate “results” are all that matter, quick proofs of present success without a thought of next week or next year. Religious pragmatism is running wild among the orthodox. Truth is whatever works. If it gets results it is good. There is but one test for the religious leader: success. Everything is forgiven him except failure.

A tree can weather almost any storm if its root is sound, but when the fig tree which our Lord cursed “dried up from the roots” it immediately “withered away.” A church that is soundly rooted cannot be destroyed, but nothing can save a church whose root is dried up. No stimulation, no advertising campaigns, no gifts of money and no beautiful edifice can bring back life to the rootless tree.

The Root of the Righteous, 4-5.

The Passion for Publicity

For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

—1 Thessalonians 2:5-6

If this is a fairly accurate view of things, what can we say then when Christian men vie with one another for place and position? What can we answer when we see them hungrily seeking for praise and honor? How can we excuse that passion for publicity which is so glaringly evident among Christian leaders? What about political ambition in Church circles? What about the fevered palm that is stretched out for more and bigger “love offerings”? What about the shameless egotism among Christians? How can we explain the gross man-worship that habitually blows up one and another popular leader to the size of a colossus? What about the obsequious hand-kissing of moneyed men by those purporting to be sound preachers of the gospel?

There is only one answer to these questions; it is simply that in these manifestations we see the world and nothing but the world. No passionate profession of love for ‘souls’ can change evil into good. These are the very sins that crucified Jesus.

The Pursuit of Man, 126.

True Greatness

Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave.

—Matthew 20:26-27

The essence of His teaching is that true greatness lies in character, not in ability or position. Men in their blindness have always thought that superior talents made a man great, and so the vast majority believe today. To be endowed with unusual abilities in the field of art or literature or music or statecraft, for instance, is thought to be in itself an evidence of greatness, and the man thus endowed is hailed as a great man. Christ taught, and by His life demonstrated, that greatness lies deeper...

While a few philosophers and religionists of pre-Christian times had seen the fallacy in man’s idea of greatness and had exposed it, it was Christ who located true greatness and showed how it could be attained. ‘Whoever will be great among you, let him be your servant; and whoever will be chief among you, let him be your slave.’ It is that simple and that easy—and that difficult.

Born After Midnight, 50.

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