

Mind Blowing

A Spiritual Odyssey

By

Grantley Morris

Profound truth dissolved in sheer entertainment
 for effortless absorption

See heaven, nature and spiritual truth through new eyes

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# Comments on this Book

Until I stumbled across *Mind Blowing* I considered Christian fiction to be spiritual baby-food – all mushy! I saw myself as a mature Christian, dining on strong spiritual meat, quite above reading anything as trivial as ‘Christian Fiction.’

The edition of *Mind Blowing* I came across began with the words, “I’d love your feedback.” Well, for that, I’d have to read it, wouldn’t I?

I did – and I haven’t been the same since.

As I read, my soul fed on rare, iridescent beauty. I have found nothing like it. I am not an imaginative person, and yet my spirit soared as I read magnificent descriptions, and ‘listened in’ on lofty and challenging dialog. My concepts of time, space, reality, and nature were stretched – especially nature!

I am left with a greatly increased love for, reverence for, and appreciation of, my awesome God.

Helen Hall

Early response:

I have already managed to bite two fingernails painfully to the nub. I am hooked and cannot wait to read more.

Later:

This book engendered a plethora of emotions in me. Could *Mind Blowing* possibly rival John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the book that has been translated into over two hundred languages and for generations was second only to the Bible in readership?

Nikki Johnson

One of the book’s surprises is being taken to Golgotha and allowed a glimpse of the cross from beyond a human perspective. A seasoned Christian comments:

The most riveting and convicting portrayal of the passion I have ever encountered.

Janet Congo MFT

Upon reading Mind Blowing, I thought Grantley Morris is a genius who writes the most exquisite prose I’ve ever known.

Excellent and highly variable sentence structure. Great technique.

Terrance J. Etalia

Amazing material! Dynamic and inspirational. What a gift for expressing the wonder of the gospel and biblical concepts in powerful and creative ways! Stunning! It impacted me greatly.

Ian Hutchinson

Wycliffe Bible Translators

WOW, you have such a talent with words! The way you describe the places you find yourself in is amazing and brings the scenes to life. As a writer myself I can appreciate talent when I see it! But more than this, you have really helped me ‘see’ the awesome majesty of God, and his overwhelming love toward us. What a passionate, kind, incredibly intelligent, stunning God we serve! And how did you think up so many adjectives and metaphors etc. to describe HIM, heaven and the angels? I am completely jealous! Your writing has really helped lift my faith levels, and I intend to look back at it whenever I feel a downward spiral coming on. I was especially moved over your description of the crucifixion scene. After having shared the beauty of heaven and the angels etc., and then to be faced with the reality of his death deeply stirred me and gave me such a deeper appreciation of all he has done for us.

When I come across such writing I hold it closely because it paints for me the mental pictures I so desperately need to see and new concepts I so desperately need to embrace. THANK YOU.

I do hope that you will share your novel with many others that they might be as blessed as I have been! Please don’t stop writing!

One other thought: reading it felt very much like reading a play that would be seen in the West End in London. It would hold its own against *A Midsummer Night’s Dream!*

 Jackie Butterworth

It’s riveting... a huge blessing!

Penny MacPherson

Spiritual Writing Coach

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# Introduction: Truth

I never write fiction. And here I am writing it.

I always considered life too short and spiritual reality too important to bother with fiction. To my astonishment, I have discovered that the shortness of life and the importance of spiritual reality are the very reasons why I *must* write fiction.

The words of the greatest ever Teacher are so power-packed with eternal truth that we rarely pause to consider that he often chose fiction to convey profound truth. For him, truth was too important not to craft stories that highlight spiritual reality. The Ten Virgins, The Runaway Son, The Lost Coin, The Talents, The Sower are but a few examples. More ancient spiritual heavyweights such as King David’s prophet, Nathan, likewise used fictitious stories as a powerful way of driving truth into human hearts.

My goal is to lead readers to deep truths so painlessly that it feels like mindless entertainment. I want to stretch minds beyond the bounds of current human knowledge, so that when we leave the realms of speculation and return to hard reality, we are more inspired than ever before to seek truth. It is in achieving these goals that fiction becomes the perfect medium.

To be gripping, my writing should seem convincing. To my horror, however, the first person to read the earliest draft of this book thought I must have had some of the experiences described. No matter how unintentional, I dare not be partner to any such deception. Truth is sacred.

I might sell more books if, rather than emphatically denying the fictitious nature of this work, I let readers think what they want. I might soar in some people’s estimation but, as everyone will eventually discover, only one Person’s opinion matters.

My purpose is not to relay personal experiences but to deepen your own personal experience. No matter how new or experienced you are, I am praying for the privilege of taking you on a thrilling vacation from which you will return not just refreshed but transformed.

Although written in the first person, the views expressed do not always reflect my own attitudes, but those of the character I am portraying.

To kindly allow me the privilege of channeling funds to them, certain organizations might, with my permission, be selling this book but this in no way implies their endorsement of the content of this book. I alone am responsible for that.

*How You Could Improve this Book*

The only way this book could be perfect is if God wrote it without me. So astonishing is God’s love for each of us, that like a doting father with his little child, he treasures our partnership in his critically important earthly missions, even though our contribution inevitably soils his perfection.

A further complication is that each of us is wondrously unique, with differing needs, tastes, opinions, abilities, and so on. So despite my longing for this book to be perfect for each reader, not even God could achieve this without making each copy unique. Nevertheless, you could help bring this book closer to the perfection I long for, by pointing out errors, any parts that bore you, parts that appeal to you and further suggestions for improvement. Your feedback gives me a larger sample to draw upon as a basis for knowing how to best meet the needs of the widest audience.

When you are ready, please send your evaluation to novel@net-burst.net

# ***Prologue***

I’ve been called obsessive. Maybe I’m just an unpracticed writer driven by a compulsion to share an experience so bizarre that nearly nine months later I’m still trying to come to terms with it. Whatever the cause, I’ve been staring at a blank screen, wrestling with where to start. Thankfully, the events seem as fresh in my mind as when they occurred.

At least it’s a screen in front of me, not paper. If this writer’s block bursts I’ll face mind-warping numbers of deletions and rewrites. I’m determined to make it a breeze for you, the reader, but to get there I’m in for more word battles than any sane person would ever volunteer for. I will be repeatedly needled to describe the inexpressible.

You don’t want to know about all my mundane years. I guess I’ll start at the point that shook my senses to such heightened awareness that it made me wonder if I had ever been fully alert until then.

# ***Chapter 1:*** The Endless Palace

*What the . . . ?* I spun around to see what terrors were lurking behind me. Unconvinced, I completed the 360 degrees at breakneck speed, my heart pounding. *What is this place? How . . . ?*

Every cell in my brain and body seemed to be straining for maximum output, readying me for whatever threat or challenge the next few seconds might bring. As extreme as my nervous tension was, my racing brain could not avoid the awareness that whatever this place was, it seemed to sparkle. It made the brightest sun-soaked, blue-skied day seem drab, and the crispest of mornings feel flat. The atmosphere seemed charged with something I can find no name for, and so clear it seemed as if I could see a thousand miles in any direction. It was as if my eyes were suddenly opened to the fact that everything I had ever seen before had been caked with a layer of grime. It would be wrong to imply it was glary but it was so pristine that it was like seeing something so white that you suddenly realize that what you had previously thought was brilliant white is a dirty cream. And somehow every other hue seemed equally pure and radiant.

The floor was fascinating but I was too on edge to study it. The sky was too bizarre to dare even think about. And there was something mind-numbingly disturbing: never before had I even imagined a place so terrifyingly empty. Every direction seemed to stretch out forever and yet nowhere was there anything, except the dead flat floor. To this day I still puzzle over how any place could look so enormous. Did it lack the curvature of an earth-sized planet? Could it even curve slightly upwards? My initial reaction – and this was soon confirmed – was that its gravity felt roughly earthlike.

You might think it ludicrous but in this overwhelming expanse I felt consumed by nothingness; swallowed up by a void so incomprehensibly vast that it sucked from me every illusion of dignity. I seemed stripped to total insignificance, like an infinitesimal fragment of dust lost in interstellar space, utterly undetectable by any consciousness other than my own. I had heard of the fear of open spaces. Now I understood it. And I wished I didn’t. To the core of my being it felt that even if this solitary speck of dust that was me were somehow chanced upon, it would be instantly dismissed as utterly devoid of interest or value.

The haunting silence and the stillness of the atmosphere somehow further intensified my aloneness. Despite it all, however, I continued on hyper-alert; my senses inexplicably driven by a heart-pounding sense of danger.

A noise startled me. My eyes darted in that direction. Two people were approaching. I panicked. Seized by some mindless compulsion to become invisible, I threw myself on the floor. Once there, I flattened myself even more, in a pathetically inadequate attempt to hide in a completely open space.

*Where did they come from?* I asked myself in alarm. Even though my 360-degree scan just moments before had been at panic speed, how could I have missed them?

A second look at those approaching exposed my error. ‘People’ was not the right word. Shock tore through my body. Though humanoid in appearance, they were giants. With the entire place being totally featureless, plus the light and atmosphere somehow manifesting unearthly clarity, distance perception was alarmingly close to impossible. Nevertheless, I felt sure these beings were monstrously huge.

In a frantic attempt to hide, I tried vainly to flatten my body still more, while thinking myself stupid for assuming a position from which it was most difficult to either flee or fight. But then again, what my eyes were now telling me indicated that if things turned nasty, either attempt at survival would be ludicrous. It was far more than size that set these lifeforms apart. They looked vastly superior to anything I had ever before laid eyes on. And they were heading straight for me.

*Trying to hide on an open floor is absurd!* I told myself, *I might as well stand and face my fate like a man.* I staggered to my feet, but as they drew closer this seemed a serious mistake.

One of the lifeforms heading toward me towered at least half a body length higher than any human I had ever seen, and was massively built. The other was even bigger. In their most literal meaning, words like stunning and breathtaking would almost seem adequate to describe the fearsome majesty of their appearance and mannerisms. But we cripple these words; squandering them on less emotionally shattering experiences than the one that was overwhelming me. I was not quite terrified – overawed would seem a better description of my reaction – and yet strength was draining from me as I might expect if I were staring at a vicious animal poised to pounce and tear me apart. It seemed more than an emotional reaction. It was as if these beings radiated some form of energy that threatened to sap the very life from me. It was like trying to stand chest-deep in a ferocious torrent that could drown me any moment.

I panicked. In the split second before I knew I would black out, I looked to God, as instinctively as a falling man would grab at something solid. I uttered no word – not even in my thoughts – nor did I consciously change my posture. No time. No need. I knew that God knew I was serious. Nothing else mattered. I felt abandoned. God seemed a universe away. So what? Anytime, anywhere, he is there.

As a frightened child clings to its mother, and a drowning man clings to a lifebuoy, I clung to God, my only hope. Instantly, it felt as if supernatural energy were pumping into me. The frantic, life-giving exchange transcends explanation, but seemed analogous to a battery being charged. Somehow I was drawing strength from the Infinite One. Before long I felt I might survive in the presence of these unnerving entities, but still I longed to find somewhere to hide from them. I was mystified but relieved that so far they seemed not to see me.

“O Chebon,” said the shorter one, “it’s been thirty earth-years, and the sight of that empty throne still breaks my heart.”

I was shocked to the core to hear this alien being speaking English. Now, months later, I’m rather proud of my reaction. When I first traveled overseas I could hardly believe I was really there because I could not hear the appropriate background music that the television set of my childhood had conditioned me to expect. Despite many Sci-Fi movies suggesting otherwise, hearing someone so obviously nonhuman speak English startled me as much as hearing a crocodile speak in a human voice.

I needed to drink in their every word. It was surely my best chance of discovering where I was and what was happening. But distractions were everywhere. Everything hitting my senses – even the air – differed from anything I had ever before experienced. I was captivated by their skin. I can only describe it as golden and glowing and yet it was real skin; nothing like flesh covered with stage paint. And rather than reflecting light, the glow somehow seemed to come from within these beings. Both of them had hair that was long and whitish and seemed too fluffy to be hair. When I dared glance at their eyes, I concluded that ‘fiery’ was the only way to describe Chebon’s. The eyes of the other were a mysterious pinky-silver that might almost be called peaceful if they were not so alien. They were garbed in . . . well I had to focus on what they were saying.

“The pain sears through each of us, Zyra,” replied Chebon.

*“Chebon” . . . “Zyra” . . . “earth-years” . . . What is going on . . . ?* My mind sped but the conversation continued.

“I didn’t think this whole dimension could be so . . .” the one who must have been called Zyra appeared to be struggling for the right word. “. . . Dismal,” he finally blurted. “I know we have so much to delight in, but the everlasting sun’s absence . . .”

*The “sun’s absence”?* My brain whirled. *It’s bright here! Come to think of it* – Not having recalled seeing a sun or suns, I quickly scanned the sky and failed to see any. Neither did I see any shadows. *Does this enormous area have some sort of artificial light source? No human technology could achieve that.*

Oblivious to my racing thoughts, the conversation continued. “We all miss him terribly, Zyra.”

*“Him”? Is this extraterrestrial calling the sun “him”?* My overloaded brain was trying to shoot off more questions per second than it has ever been capable of. *He was referring to the sun, wasn’t he? Does this mean he is assigning a personality to the sun? Is he more primitive than he looks? Should I be calling this being ‘he’ or ‘she’? Which sun? Earth’s sun? What “empty throne”?*

I will be merciful: in the rest of this account I will be more selective when quoting from the chaotic tangle of thoughts stampeding through my brain when I am stressed. That should spare you a headache, even if it gives the false impression that my mind is tidier than the mess on my desk as I type this.

Back to being thrown by hearing the sun referred to as ‘he’: I recalled that some non-English languages assign gender to inanimate objects. Could this be a feature of these aliens’ native tongue? Had I detected a significant linguistic clue? *Is he speaking English for my benefit? Why do they act as if I don’t exist? Am I invisible to them? How much danger am I in?* Showing no sign of easing up, the stream of bug-eyed thoughts continued to bolt in panic-stricken mayhem through the embarrassingly wide open spaces of my cranium.

The humanoids seemed to look through me and act in every way as if I did not exist. My immense relief at being ignored was strangely mingled with bewilderment, smeared with a hollow, hard-to-identify feeling. I found myself increasingly shocked as, in painful slow motion, the realization mounted that instead of wanting to celebrate surviving the most harrowing of encounters, the anticlimax somehow left me feeling let down; almost disappointed.

If, before their arrival, the vast, haunting emptiness felt alarmingly dehumanizing, being ignored felt disturbingly worse. Even if every millisecond languishing in that emptiness had seemed to be draining my very humanity, it was preferable to this. It was as though I no longer mattered. No, it was more soul-destroying; it was as though I ceased to exist. I think I could have handled being despised or spurned but this had me reeling. I was no longer a speck of dust. I was nothing.

Ironically, any hope of peace was further shattered by continually worrying over whether at any moment I would cease to be nothing. What if they suddenly discern my presence? Or what if they already know I’m here, and see me as trespassing lowlife to be dealt with as soon as they complete their conversation?

Were you to accuse me of taking conflicting emotions to new heights of insanity, I could scrounge embarrassingly little ammunition with which to defend myself.

Perhaps if I focused on what they were saying, I could distract myself from having to deal with the baffling muddle of emotions writhing inside of me.

“Earth! What’s so special about that tiny speck . . .” There seemed hurt and the slightest tinge of disgust in Zyra’s voice.

*At least they’ve heard of earth.*

As this giant spoke, my curiosity began to rise. There was something peculiar about their lip movements. In my effort to pick up their every word, I was trying – as much as I dare even look at these beings – to focus on their lips, but it was not helping my comprehension.

“Come now, Zyra, you –”

Suddenly there was a commotion. I looked around and hundreds, then thousands, of phenomenal lifeforms came pouring in. Where they came from, I had no idea. They had not been present a moment ago and there was nowhere for them to hide. This place had not even a ceiling.

Though I could not imagine any genetic similarity to humans, each new arrival was roughly humanoid in appearance and, by my quick assessment and untrained eye, they all seemed the same species as Chebon and Zyra. Each looked not just otherworldly, but terrifyingly supernormal. As time wore on I tuned in to minor variations between them in appearance and size. Each, however, in his unique way, looked stunningly majestic. Everything about them made words like dignified, stately, elegant, sophisticated and regal hide in shame of their inadequacy.

Should I be assigning them the male gender? They were certainly flat chested. And their physique left me quaking in the belief they would pulverize my bones with an innocent handshake. Even extending beyond the purely physical, they oozed strength and confidence. I’m almost inclined to say everything about them seemed formidable and domineering. And yet something about them makes me uncomfortable about applying the male pronoun. I couldn’t identify it precisely. There was a sort of softness – a slight aura of femininity – and physical beauty about them. They seemed to epitomize the best of both sexes and yet in another sense they seemed genderless. If calling any of these beings ‘he’ does not feel quite right, to refer to such a regal humanoid as ‘it’ would seem even farther off track.

As they came flooding in, my eyes absorbed so many never-before-encountered sights that to attempt an adequate description would take far too many pages. I will curtail myself rather than risk boring you in a vain effort to force words to do what only sight could achieve.

Everything about these mysterious lifeforms was fascinating. As individuals they were amazing, but as a group they were even more intriguing. For instance, it slowly dawned that although they all had what could be called white hair, there were slight differences in color such that I never noticed two with identical hair color. The hair of one had a slight pinkish tinge, another was slightly bluish, another slightly golden, and so on. And although I noticed dozens with, for example, a bluish tinge to their white hair, each was a slightly different shade of blue. I think it was the subtlety of the variation that particularly struck me. There was nothing gaudy. Every aspect of their appearance had such an aura of sophistication as to make everything human seem crude.

They seemed to radiate light. I cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that it was simply light bouncing off their shiny skin but my earlier guess that it was coming from within them still felt right. Whatever the cause, they were so dazzling that despite my natural inclination to stare wide-eyed in astonishment, I found myself snatching hasty glimpses of them and then looking elsewhere.

“It’s happened!” shouted several of the newcomers, as more continued to burst into this world from nowhere. In a moment of foolishness I unthinkingly jumped a few inches above the floor to try to see how far back the throng stretched. Thankfully, my rash action attracted no attention. I continued feeling not merely an inferior species but a nonentity. As unsettling as that was, it seemed that in the presence of these beings there must be a hundred worse scenarios than ceasing to exist.

My jump confirmed that there must have been hundreds of thousands by now and still more kept pouring in. They all seemed inexplicably [jubilant](https://www.powerthesaurus.org/jubilant/synonyms). They were by no means shoulder to shoulder but even at this density if they were to fill this vast area . . . I had no time to work out the math but the numbers would be astronomical.

In my attempt to see where they were all coming from I again tried to comprehend my surroundings. The entire sky – I guess that’s what I should call it – was indescribable. It would be oversimplification to say that from horizon to horizon it looked like a gigantic rainbow. It was slowly but continually moving and changing in intriguing ways. The floor was so magnificent that I felt I could spend eternity exploring it and keep finding new treasures.

The haunting emptiness of this place lifted as I slowly began a lengthy recovery from the shock of everything being so alien and the place filled with exuberant beings. To my bewilderment, it now not only seemed regal, there was a cozy, intimate feel about it.

“Yeeaaaaah!” shouted Zyra, jumping high – and I mean *high* – in the air. I wondered if the astounding height he achieved was a function of the gravity in this place but I was later to discover that my aerobatics were as unimpressive here as they had been on earth.

“Glory!” said Chebon. Everyone, it seemed, was clapping, cheering, jumping, dancing, or emitting a peculiar noise.

*“Glory”? Is that a religious term?* I was taken aback. A sudden brainstorm threatened to take down every power line in my brain. *These extraterrestrials couldn’t be angels, could they? What if I’m in heaven?*

I berated myself. When I get a brainwave it usually means I have waved goodbye to my brain. What I was seeing was disturbingly different from any conceptions of angels or heaven I have ever encountered.

Lateral thinking is claimed to sometimes prove productive, so I tried to be kind to the right-side of my brain by congratulating the poor thing for a highly creative interpretation. Deciding to be preemptive, I gently suggested to the weird side of my brain there was no need to overexert itself on any theories about fairies, goblins or gods. Sanity returned and I dismissed the wild notion.

On a positive note, I’m bursting to tell you about their astonishing clothing, but I dare not. It enhanced their beauty and dignity. Frankly, I’m scared to say more. I’ll risk revealing more later. Then you’ll understand my reticence.

“At last! After thirty long earth-years!” shouted a jubilant humanoid.

*What’s he talking about?* The more I looked at each speaker’s lips the more puzzled I became.

“It’s a new era!” proclaimed another.

At that, the entire throng burst into a thunderous roar that seemed many times louder than anything I have ever heard and yet, instead of hurting my ears, the sound ripped through my body, suggesting that much of the roar was at a very low pitch, perhaps even below my audible range. Whatever the explanation, as it thundered through my body, the effect was remarkable. It was as though there was so much energy in the sound that it energized my entire physical being. But beyond that, it generated within me an excitement unlike anything I have ever experienced. The throng by now had grown so vast as to seem endless. I could find no vantage point high enough to see an end to it. For all I knew there could have been billions there.

Somewhere amid all of this, it hit me even more that what had once seemed a dreadful emptiness now seemed not only regal and palatial but warm and vibrant. What a transformation the presence of these beings had created! While puzzling over this, the words ‘living architecture’ surfaced in my mind. I then recalled ancient references to people as living stones and leaders as pillars, but any relevance eluded me.

When the roar finally subsided, another of these gigantic beings spoke a few words. My mind, however, instead of concentrating on what was being said, was like a bull terrier with a bone, refusing to let go of a much less significant puzzle. The words I was hearing did not correspond to the movements of the speakers’ lips. Was I somehow listening to a translation? A problem with this hypothesis was each voice was unique and sounded as if it were coming from the direction of each person speaking. I began listening intently while each spoke, wondering if I could hear any foreign language in the background. I could detect nothing but English. My mind continued to writhe with countless questions.

“What an achievement!” declared the first alien, his lips continuing for two or three syllables after the sound had ceased. In a flash of stupidity, I touched my ears to check whether earphones had somehow appeared over my ears. Of course, they had not. I wondered if I were in some kind of sound shell. *Come on!* I scolded myself, *Concentrate on what they are saying!* Surely their conversation would give me more clues than my idle speculations.

Something whooshed skyward and then, as it were, silently exploded. I barely noticed it until what looked vaguely like highly colorful sparklers rained down. Whenever a ‘sparkler’ landed on members of the throng, their responses seemed to indicate immense enjoyment.

Then a ‘sparkler’ touched me. The impact was staggering. For a split-second, rapturous euphoria threatened total sensory overload. *This* ***has*** *to be heaven!* Please do not ask me how I leapt to this conclusion. The sensations were so stupendous that my mind apparently soared heavenward, leaving sanity way behind. My madness continued, *At last, after years of faithfully serving God, I’m going to sample some of my hard-earned heavenly reward. This is going to be astounding!*

I was readying myself to revel in otherworldly glories, when the most sickening blow hit my stomach. To my horror, the blow came with such devastating force that I was hurled like a football being kicked out of a stadium. I found myself hurtling out of the place with such giddying speed that the throng streaked below me in a rapidly shrinking blur. Mind-ripping terror tore through me in ever-escalating shockwaves. The thumping time-bomb in my chest was set to explode.

I blacked out.

# ***Chapter 2:*** The Mystical Forest

After who knows how long, I sluggishly struggled out of the netherworld of unconsciousness. Though too dazed and deflated to bother opening my eyes, I knew I was somewhere else. Whatever I was lying on felt different; as did the air. All sound of celebration had vanished. Instead, I could hear the sounds of nature. I was not in a hospital and had no interest in finding out more.

My mind shot back to when I had sensed for the first time ever that I was somewhere unlike earth. As the shock replayed through my body, I recalled that what had gripped me before I even spied a terrifying alien was feeling as if I had never before seen anything that was truly clean. Everything gleamed as if polished and sanitized to otherworldly standards and rendered unnaturally pure. My inadequate attempts to describe it will leave you bewildered as to why it so profoundly impacted me.

Nevertheless, I guess it was cowardice that drove my mind to lock on to that memory. What totally eclipsed that shock was the last thing I could remember. Any attempt to avoid obsessing over it quickly disintegrated. The moment I thought that alien world might actually be heaven and that I might deserve to be rewarded, I was booted out.

Every one of my senses had been subjected to such off-the-scale extremes that to have been shattered by some form of sensory meltdown made perfect sense. The timing of my undignified eviction, however, was disturbing. Despite longing to flee from the thought, I found myself unable to shake the worry that I am a spiritual failure who in disgrace has been cast out of what, by the remotest of chances, might have been heaven. A sickening fear gripped me.

I again lost consciousness. Maybe this time I just fell asleep due to physical or emotional exhaustion. I cannot be sure.

The soothing sound of running water caressed my slowly forming consciousness. Eventually I figured I had heard that sound the first time I had come to, but on that occasion it had barely registered in my befuddled mind.

*Where am I?* I moaned to myself.

I might as well have been trying to lever up concrete slabs but I forced open my eyelids. Light of initially unwelcome intensity razored in. As my protesting eyes adjusted, I gradually realized I was sprawled out, face down, on grass.

*I feel five hundred years old!*

I panicked. *Don’t be silly,* I rebuked myself. *That’s just a figure of speech.* The truth, however, is I had no idea how long I had been there.

I was not just physically drained but emotionally desecrated by my ordeal. I guess I was in shock. I continued lying where I had found myself, oscillating between trying to convince myself I was no older, and wondering how I could tell how much time had elapsed since being flung out of whatever that place was. I slowly fingered my beard, relieved to discover that it felt about its normal length. For one alarming moment I wondered about the possibility of suspended animation but the thought was too hot to hold. Normally, nothing so outlandish would ever enter my head. Nothing normal had happened for quite some time, however.

Trying to calm myself, I decided to revise my metaphor. *I feel like I’ve walked a thousand miles. No, better make that ‘swam.’* Not just my legs but every muscle ached.

My mind flooded like a sinking ship. Perplexing questions kept pouring in. *Who were those aliens? What were they celebrating – some sort of thirtieth anniversary? Was it somehow associated with the disappearance of one of their planet’s suns? Why did they talk as if earth has some significance to them? Were they planning to invade? How and why did I leave earth – some type of alien abduction? Will I ever get back to my beloved planet?* Then my mind began toying with the realization that never before had I ever referred to earth that way.

Sober reflection, however, suggests all these thoughts were but a frantic attempt to push from my mind one chilling question: had these events been terminated with me being eternally exiled from heaven?

Perhaps subconsciously hoping for new opportunities to avoid that terrifying thought, I looked up groggily. It seemed through my barely functioning senses that the atmosphere, light and general feel of the place were too pristine for shabby earth. My previous location was simply an astonishing sky and a seemingly endless floor that was so exquisite that it somehow had the feel of being an open palace. Now I was in a forest. In front of me was a massive, moss-covered, flowering tree unlike any I had ever seen or even imagined. It towered far too high for me to bother stretching to see its top and was obviously thousands of years old. (I was too dazed to have the sense to realize I had left the obvious back on earth. For all I knew, growth patterns could be utterly different in this place.) Brilliantly colored butterflies fluttered nearby. One landed on my arm and let me examine its markings, but my eyes were still blurry.

*What is this place? How did I get here? Have I been hurtling through space for countless thousands – perhaps millions – of miles? Nah! My body would have exploded!* Then I vaguely recalled having heard that is just an urban myth and that the human body can tolerate a vacuum. *But how could I have breathed? And what am I doing here anyhow?* I had no answers.

Eventually I tried to stagger to my feet. I was too woozy, however, and I flopped rather helplessly back on the ground. Then my eyes locked on to the most enormous spider I have ever encountered. It was chubby and at least three times bigger than my hand. What was particularly alarming was not merely that it was heading straight for me but that I had no desire to get out of its way.

My attention should have been riveted on that spider. Instead, it was hard to keep my thoughts from the awful way I had left that palace place. What should I call that exit? Sadistic? Random? Merciful? Undeserved? To have suffered it felt somehow shameful – almost as if I had been angrily evicted for some kind of disgusting offence. But why? Everything had seemed to be going well. Why had I suddenly decided I was in heaven, let alone concluded I was about to receive my heavenly reward? I smiled to myself. *I must have been delirious with pleasure.* Then the worry returned with devastating force. *Had I really been guilty of a grave offence back in that endless palace – pride maybe?*

My attention instantly reverted to that beast of a spider. *Is my punishment creeping toward me?*

If only I could say I was petrified. Instead, the closer this eight legged monster got, the more at ease I felt. Can you imagine a spider that seems to ooze compassion? Ridiculous, isn’t it! So you will understand this creepy-crawly no more than I did. Its colors and markings and its every movement were peculiarly soothing but I can give no adequate explanation as to why I felt so secure.

As it relentlessly crept closer I thought I could almost hear chirping, as if it were emitting reassuring sounds near the upper fringe of my audible range. Was this how it mesmerized its prey? I struggled to convince myself of this disturbingly real possibility but instead I found myself feeling even more relaxed. My defenses were being sabotaged by the irrational feeling that I could trust this creature with my life. Alarmingly, that was exactly what I was doing.

The spider took another step toward me. And another. And another. And still I did not move. It was as though I were immersed in some sort of warm, hypnotic haze. The critter’s gentleness captivated me. Despite its size, it seemed vulnerable; as if it knew that at any moment I could squish it to instant death but that it was willing, if necessary, to die for my well-being. I was playing life-or-death with either the kindest or most malevolent creature I had ever encountered. I tried to stir myself but I felt mentally paralyzed; quite unable to convince myself of the danger. It inched still closer to my face.

I was staring at death and all I could think of was how beautifully delicate and gentle this monstrous octoped looked. *How can anything with eight legs and too many eyes make me feel at ease?* It had fangs, for crying out loud! It kept creeping nearer and nearer until it was on my ear. Then it bit me.

I yearned to feel devastatingly betrayed, but I couldn’t muster the emotion. Perhaps I was about to be eaten alive but it was a tiny prick that felt too wonderful for me to even consider flicking the spider away. The beautiful creature acted as if it were pumping venom into me – except that with every second I felt stronger and more mentally alert and invigorated.

When it had finished I leapt to my feet and shouted in sheer exhilaration, “If only earth’s spiders were like this!”

At least that was my intention. I was so startled by the sound of my voice that I abruptly stopped mid-sentence. I tentatively uttered a couple more syllables. Mystified, I uttered a couple more, and then some more; delighted at what I was hearing. My voice had a richness it had never had before. I guess I’m biased, but I was convinced that my new voice outclassed that of top radio broadcasters.

“What’s going on?” I said out loud, just so that I could enjoy what I was hearing, “Are the acoustics different here?” I clapped my hands. That sounded normal. Then I remembered that to avoid the bends, deep-sea divers sometimes breathe a mixture of helium and oxygen. To them it seems like normal air but it makes their voices squeaky. Was the air somehow different here? How could I confirm my theory? I breathed deeply. The atmosphere seemed charged with subtle and delightful aromas. On earth I had had a rather poor sense of smell. Had somehow my sense of smell altered or were these scents quite strong? Remembering my voice, I tried to hyperventilate for a while, then I spoke out loud. It seemed to make no difference to the sound of my voice.

*Had my voice sounded like this in that palace?* I strained to remember if I had emitted any audible sounds when those ‘sparklers’ hit. I did not think so but so much was happening back then that I probably would not have noticed if my voice had sounded different.

The sound of running water re-entered my consciousness. I headed for what sounded like a stream. As I got closer, the trees parted a little and I could see more sky. The most amazing flock of birds flew overhead. Yes, they were brilliantly colored but I had seen gorgeous birds on earth. It was their flight that staggered me. What fascinated me even more than their individual aerial acrobatics was the way their movements were synchronized with each other. Had I not known better, I would have thought their aerial display had been choreographed. I watched wide-eyed, until they were out of sight.

I continued my walk to the stream; all the time scanning the exotic surrounds with seemingly inexhaustible fascination. It was too early to know whether even a stone or a leaf were like those of earth. The butterflies alone seemed enough to keep me intrigued for days. It was not just their breathtaking colors, nor their vast numbers; what clobbered my mind was that I never noticed two that were identical. The variety of shapes, sizes and spectacular colors was astounding.

As I neared the stream, a fish leaped out, playfully turned a double somersault and splashed back into the sparkling waters. Encouraged by the clarity of the water and that fish could survive in it, I dipped my finger into the inviting waters and cautiously licked my dampened finger. In shock I spat it out and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. This was not water. Tentatively, I tasted it again. It was flavored! *Surely not!* I had a little sip. It was flavored, all right, but with a subtlety and intricacy that make fruit juice seem like an amateurish, gaudy splash of color alongside a flawless work of art.

For some reason – the spider venom, perhaps? – I was unusually thirsty. Throwing caution aside, I lay on my stomach lapping up the water – or whatever it was. I was savoring the experience when I was sure someone kissed my cheek. Rather than being startled, I melted in love. I turned and saw the cutest little animal I had ever seen. Warm honey seemed to ooze into my chest where once only granite resided. I have never been a pet freak. I had kept some reptiles when I was a kid and that was it.

Appalled at how my survival instincts kept turning to mush,I told myself, *I’ll have to pull myself together. Could the ‘water’ be intoxicating? Was it the lingering effect of the spider bite? I’d better keep my mind active.* It was then that I realized the obvious: just because an animal looks a harmless vegetarian does not prove it is non-venomous or has some other insidious means of killing, or inflicting pain. What if in this world, the more innocent something looks, the more dangerous it is?

Nevertheless, other animals came up to me, sniffing me, and despite the danger, I stupidly found myself unable to resist their charm. One nestled into me. Earth has so many different animals that I could not be certain that they are not found there, but I cannot recall seeing any of these in zoos or books or videos. Certainly the colors did not seem at all earthlike. The one snuggling me was sky blue with silver stripes.

As I patted a pink and gray squirrel-like animal, it made an endearing sound. It seemed to be expressing utter contentment, as if its idea of heaven was to spend eternity enjoying my company. Never had I felt such ‘affection’ coming from an animal. And what I was touching made mink fur seem as coarse as straw. I do not let myself get attached to nonhumans, but this creature was really getting to me.

Though still perplexed and a little shaken by the nature of my expulsion from those celebrations, I was now less disturbed. Even what I now presumed was a long sleep might have helped a little but that spider bite had revived my spirits profoundly. Particularly reassuring was that wherever I was now, it was certainly not hell. This place was not merely pleasant; it seemed – at least so far – more paradisiacal than anywhere I had ever heard of on earth.

Maybe I had been wrong to have prided myself on my devotion to God and on the minor sufferings I had endured for him, but if God had completely given up on me, would I be in this delightful place?

A fluffy, wide-eyed creature with gorgeous colors appeared. *Such colors suggest these animals do not need camouflage,* I thought. Never had I ever imagined such an adorable creature. Here I was, a grown man feeling almost compelled to pick it up and snuggle into it. I could hardly believe myself being so tender to a mere animal.

Then it happened. Two more species of what seemed like mammals appeared. Their ridiculously beautiful colors unnerved me. One was even rainbow-colored. You might think my reaction peculiar, but I found this harder to come to terms with than anything I had so far experienced. *Fur does not come in these colors!* I argued with my eyes. The rainbow-colored one looked a little like a skunk. That should have tripped an alarm, but the fluffy critter seemed disarmingly friendly. I should be more objective: it seemed neither frightened nor agitated and therefore unlikely to display any defensive or aggressive behavior. Anyhow that creature managed to evade my defenses. It skipped right up to me. I carefully fingered its fur, half expecting to find evidence that the fur had been dyed, or even that the creature was a stuffed toy made to look real.

*Am I hallucinating? What chemicals were in that spider bite?* I worried. *Next I’ll be seeing Daffy Duck!* And yet the animals were so affectionate and playful that I slowly relaxed and began to accept them.

I tried to reassure myself, *Maybe, just maybe, the problem is simply that all my earthly experience has been limited to seeing fauna that need camouflage, either to prey or to avoid predators. Could I be seeing what can happen to animal colors on a planet that has no predators?* Then yet another ridiculously colored animal appeared. It was predominately silver gray with a cobalt blue band down its forehead and around its neck. It had a white belly and a pink fluffy tail that could almost be mistaken for cotton candy. I’m on the brink of blurting out it had the most adorable eyes but that’s getting way too mushy.

I looked down at the animal I had been patting. Just moments before, it had seemed the most wonderful creature in the universe. Now it had a rival. “Sorry, little fella,” I said, scratching its chin.

I almost felt unfaithful as I left it behind to head for this new creature that – I’m ashamed to admit – I found myself aching to hold. It seemed tame, but as I moved closer it pranced down a trail in a manner a little reminiscent of a gamboling lamb. Every now and then it would stop and look back at me with those big eyes as if it wanted me to follow. So, perhaps foolishly, I did.

# ***Chapter 3:*** [Critters](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CGrantley%5CDocuments%5CNET-BURST.NET%5Cnet-burst.net%5Cchristian-fiction%5CMy%20DocumentsNET-BURST.NETnet-burst.netchristian-fictionfree-christian-book-3.htm)

As I followed that beguiling critter to who-knows-where, my mind lazily crept back to my ejection from whatever that place was. Within seconds, a new concern ripped my peace to shreds. What if there are different levels of heaven? (I knew the Bible spoke of a third heaven. I had also heard of a seventh heaven but could not recall whether that is in the Bible.) What if I had been found unworthy of a higher level of heaven and was now banished forever to a lower level?

I was about to console myself with the thought that surely this endearing place could not be hell, when an alarming possibility shattered any complacency. If I had somehow failed one test and been evicted, could I now face another test with the possibility of being catapulted from here as well? What if I were being subjected to a series of tests that starts at the top and keeps taking me lower and lower until I eventually find the level at which I will remain for all eternity? How far could I fall? Could part of the consequences of failing be that I will have to spend forever remembering the glories of the places of which I was deemed unworthy?

*Is this heresy?* I asked myself. *The details are certainly extra-biblical.* That was a little comforting. I could not evade the fact, however, that the Bible seems to indicate varying degrees of reward in the next life.

I have a confession to make: I’m odd. I had been taught from an early age that nothing is nearly as important as one’s spiritual destiny and that no book is as spiritually valuable as the Christian Bible. With this as the driving force in my life, guess what I kept studying as if my life depended on it, year after year.

Prior to things going haywire, I had been convinced that although it is too late after death to change one’s eternal destiny, those who are still on earth can always repent and receive divine forgiveness, no matter how far gone they seem. ***But everything kept screaming I was no longer on earth!***

I began these experiences with a strong set of beliefs. Now my life-long confidence (arrogance?) was beginning to erode.

Can you imagine anyone being wrong about absolutely everything? I can’t. None of us have all truth but all of us have some truth. So even at this stage there were things I was right about. Nevertheless, I was yet to discover how misguided some of my beliefs were. Nor did I realize that each time I find an error in my beliefs is like finding a new foothold when scaling a cliff face.

Despite often finding Bible reading a hard slog, numberless things about it have captured me throughout my life. High on the list is that it stresses that, to an extent that puts countless Christians to shame, the terrifyingly holy Lord is far more compassionate toward those we all denounce as despicably evil, and is far less impressed than us by those of us who think ourselves good. The God of the Bible is eager to forgive those who anger him, and quick to accept those we imagine he would have given up on. Self-righteous goodie-goodies turn his stomach but the very people they despise have a special place in his heart.

The Bible brims with people who had seemed utterly damned by God and yet God relented when they repented. Not only was Rahab a prostitute, she belonged to a tribe that was so corrupt that the Lord insisted that every member of it must be eradicated. She was not just spared but, like Mary, was divinely chosen for the honor of being an ancestress of the Messiah. Appendix 1 confirms that the Messiah’s ancestry is filled with still greater scandals. Not only is the Bible so honest that it refuses to cover them up, it highlights them.

I was multi-tasking as I walked. While occasionally ensuring I did not lose sight of my fluffy travel guide, my mind filled with deep matters. That should have kept me somber but the beauty of this exotic place kept lifting me.

As my eyes kept flitting from one wonder to the next, I became increasingly aware of the light. There was something peculiar about it that I couldn’t quite figure. Even underneath the dense foliage of those ancient trees, exquisite flowers grew. A thought seized me. I looked on the ground behind me, then turned full circle, scanning the ground. I even looked under my feet. *That’s strange.*

In a flash of panic I touched my stomach, chest and face. “Seems solid enough,” I said aloud in relief. *But what if even my hand isn’t solid? What if that’s just the feel of two non-solid objects touching? Surely not!*

I hunted for a rock and lifted it just a little. It was comforting to be able to lift something solid but that was not my purpose. I looked underneath it, relieved. It was not just my body that was not casting shadows. But this raised more questions. *The light is bright and yet there are no shadows! Not multiple shadows, not vague shadows – nothing!* I looked at all the open sky I could find. I glanced under bushes and in trees. *Where is the light coming from?* I pondered the problem for a couple of seconds. *Is the light in the air? Is everything its own light source? What* ***is*** *this place?*

Just then a breeze sprang up, but what a breeze! It swirled and twirled and almost seemed alive. It seemed almost to be playing, or maybe dancing, and the leaves of the trees seemed to respond as if they were enjoying it – as if they were being massaged or lightly tickled. I nearly expected them to giggle in delight.

I reprimanded myself. *Pull yourself together! Who’d have thought you’d be guilty of anthropomorphism! Ah, anthropomorphism – attributing human characteristics to nonhumans.* My mind flashed through the years to the Behavioral Science lecture in which I was first introduced to that word and to the silliness that unscientific people fall into. Now the very word seemed comforting. *Of course! That’s it! I’m in an alien environment. Things are different here. I had momentarily lost my objectivity but now I’m back on track! Hey . . . ‘track . . !’* I finally remembered how I had arrived at this part of the forest. I looked along the trail, and sure enough, the little animal was still there. Its head cocked to one side, it stared at me through its big eyes. It appeared to be waiting for me.

*Is it my imagination, or are animals more intelligent here?* I wasn’t silly enough to expect one to talk to me, or solve a mathematical problem. They just seemed somehow more perceptive. Was I fooling myself or did they actually have a greater awareness of my emotions than I would ever expect of an animal? *Is it merely something about their features that gives an illusion of intelligence?* I asked myself.

I was coming up with few answers, but stretching my mind in this way was reassuring. I seemed to be acting a little saner than when I first began to worry about the possible hallucinogenic effects of spider venom.

I was about to follow the creature, when I noticed the rock I had moved. Everything around seemed so perfectly ordered that a single rock moved a fraction from its original position seemed oddly out of place. I felt compelled to go to that rock and almost guiltily return it to the exact place where it had originally been before I had lifted it. The surprising thing is that I am the most untidy person I know. You should see my house!

(Just as an aside to those who accuse me of being obsessive: my housekeeping is proof that I’m not. Others might obsess about keeping things in order. Not me. I’ll never waste precious time by trying to be tidy. In fact, I’m obsessive about it. Let’s move on before I think too much about that.)

Having completed my out-of-character act, I left the rock and headed for the creature. That cute little animal was certainly acting as if it wanted me to follow. Even putting aside that foolish interpretation of animal behavior, what wild creature would know what would interest a human anyway? Nevertheless, not having a better plan, I continued to follow him, her or it (to assume these creatures reproduced sexually would have been presumptuous).

For simplicity, I am tempted to refer to this animal as ‘it’ but that feels dishonest. The truth is that, whereas the obvious intelligence of the humanoids I had seen made the impersonal pronoun seem inappropriate, it was more complicated with this critter. Since my respect for science was such that I considered myself above attributing to animals such human qualities as personality, the impersonal pronoun started off as the obvious choice. I am somewhat embarrassed to admit, however, that the longer I was with this critter, the more my resistance to the personal pronoun eroded. Despite the inconsistency, it seems more accurate to reflect this in my word usage.

I found myself rapt in joyous wonder. Almost every step revealed still more flora, fauna and vistas captivatingly different from anything on earth. Despite this continual distraction, however, my mind slid back to that ethereal palace. As unforgettable and astounding as the sensory pleasures had been, my thoughts kept returning, like flies to stench, to my inglorious expulsion from what had almost felt like a sacred place. Even in the pristine world I was now privileged to be enjoying, the gloom of failure hung over me, soiling what should have been perfection. Still more disturbing was not knowing what I had done that was apparently so offensive.

I thought of the G-forces and motion sickness that astronauts endure. There is simply no alternative if they are to leave earth. *Maybe I have done nothing wrong. Perhaps that abrupt end and scary ride out of there was the only way to be transported to this exquisite place.* I longed to convince myself but no matter how much I tried, it still felt disconcertingly like failure.

As I groped for comfort, I thought of Jonah. A Bible obsession might make me peculiar but there are even normal people who have heard of him. That sourpuss was down in the mouth (and into the stomach of a monster from the deep) over his initial refusal to honor God by preaching to his nation’s ferocious enemies, whom Jonah regarded as exceptionally wicked. Scripture calls him not an evangelist (someone used of God to rescue people from damnation) but a prophet (2 Kings 14:25; Matthew 12:39). His *entire* God-given prophesy was, “In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed”. What happened to God’s prophecy? The Lord let his own prophesy be ruined. As Jonah had feared, simply because they repented, the Almighty refused to execute justice on the enemy of God’s people. It infuriated the prophet. But it delighted God.

I could go on and on, as well as explaining how even the unpardonable sin remains unforgiveable only until the offender changes his assessment of Jesus. (How could anyone be saved while believing his Savior is of the devil?)

Consider Paul doing his darnedest to exterminate the entire church in its vulnerable infancy and forever eradicate Christianity from the entire planet. Christians would have voted him the person they least liked and least likely to be acclaimed as the greatest-ever apostle. God thought differently. Could this possibly illustrate the gulf separating God’s heart from how millions of Christians see things? Of particular note, is that when persecuting Christians, this divinely chosen apostle must surely have accepted the standard pharisaical line about Jesus being of the devil. Many would have written him off as eternally damned. But not God.

I looked up and was shocked to see a gigantic, hairy quadruped blocking the way. Its rump alone was higher than me and its head towered higher still. Before I had a chance to assess the danger, the creature I had been following took a flying leap onto a low tree branch. The instant it landed, it was off again like a ricocheting bullet, bounding higher still in a new direction. It landed on the animal’s bluish back, then snuggled contentedly into the blond, almost golden, hair on the giant’s thick neck.

The quadruped began slowly walking in the direction we had been going, with its rider seeming to thoroughly enjoy it. The little one looked around and, as if trying to communicate with me, chattered in the most endearing, though incomprehensible, manner.

Then the beast stopped. As I tentatively drew a little closer, it crouched so low that the top of its back was level with my chest. The critter, that on this hulk looked smaller than ever, kept chattering and gesturing as if it had something important to tell me. I guess it is ridiculous but the little one seemed to want me to join it on the beast’s back.

Anyone acquainted with grizzly and polar bear ferocity might be shocked that at this point I had hardly noticed that this oversized quadruped bore certain similarities to a monstrous bear. I’m from the corner of the planet where attacks by killer sharks and crocodiles grab headlines and impact the reader’s psyche. It seems, however, I grew up without enough scary tales about bears reaching me to inject appropriate fear into me.

No matter how non-aggressive I imagined this colossal lifeform to be, however, I at least had the sense to realize it could still unintentionally injure me if startled. Standing as far away as I could, I stretched out my arm and gingerly placed my hand on its side.

What happened next I can neither describe nor explain. As much as that first touch flooded me with a longing to savor its astonishingly silky hair, that sensation was eclipsed by a far more profound and unexpected experience. I was overwhelmed by a mysterious connection with a creature that was obviously many times my strength. It was as if its strength became my strength and its confidence became mine. My fears melted so utterly that I felt an almost overwhelming urge to sit on its back.

Even when crouched down, however, it was more like a mammoth than anything climbable and its silky hair was slippery. With no stirrup and no one to give me a leg up, plus feeling the need to be gentle, this was not going to be easy. Could I find some rocks, or even break off small branches, to drag close to its side and construct something to climb on? Dare I attempt such a violation of this pristine environment? Despite being excited about human space exploration, I thought of all the space junk circling earth, and how humans have already littered the moon and planets and even messed with asteroids.

Before I could begin formulating a plan I was comfortable with, the little one suddenly jumped down, somehow grabbed my legs and the next thing I knew I was perched on top of the beast. To this day, I remain unsure of exactly how it happened. Clearly, however, that little one was far stronger than I ever imagined. I was still in shock when this amazing critter further surprised me by leaping up and joining me.

While still wondering how this would end, an inexplicable feeling of warm confidence in this beast grew. With my legs pressed against its mighty body, the baffling connection I felt with this colossal animal intensified.

It was obviously strong enough to carry me. Whether it could heave itself into a standing position with my extra weight was another matter. If it bolted, or even jolted, I would surely slip off and most likely end up injured. With the precise statistics perhaps mercifully eluding my memory, I recalled my surprise when first learning how dangerous horse riding was in the era before cars. I had no helmet. I could hardly call an ambulance if needed. *Why on earth . . . ?* I was immediately annoyed at using that expression. *Why am I taking such a risk?*

Once I was settled on its back, the massive beast began to lift itself. I felt the slightest apprehension at first but its movement was so gradual that all concern evaporated and the sublime connection I felt with this gentle giant kept building. I marveled at how it kept its back perfectly horizontal as it raised itself.

Upon reaching its full height, it remained motionless, as if giving me the chance to settle my nerves. Then, in a peculiar gait, it began creeping forward, placing each oversized padded paw in a way that eliminated the slightest noise or jolt. The motion was beautifully soothing, even as it slowly picked up pace until moving at least twice my normal walking pace. More than ever, it felt as if its powerful muscles and sure-footedness were mine and that this sensitive creature would respond to my every wish.

From this living lookout, the views seemed even more stunning. Was it, as I initially presumed, the increased height, or was it the exhilaration of an utterly unexpected bond with the massive creature so gently carrying me?

To say more is to stray so far from science that you have every right to dismiss it as a delusion. Nevertheless, it affected me so deeply that it would be remiss of me to omit it. The inexplicable connection I felt with this exotic animal combined with its gentleness to give the impression that I was being treated reverently. Delusion or not, it felt as if this creature regarded me as so important that it was a priceless privilege to serve me. This, in turn, filled me with awe and further magnified the unique tenderness I felt toward this creature.

Amazingly soon, however, my thoughts reverted to spiritual concerns. The worry was that as much as I enjoyed reminding myself of the astonishing lengths to which divine acceptance stretches, the Bible is equally adamant that after death or Judgement Day, everything changes (see Appendix 2).

As surely as none of us has been perfect, we all stand equally in need of divine pardon. Should, however, we die refusing that pardon, content to face the consequences without seeking divine intervention, our choice will last for all eternity.

All of us teeter little more than a heartbeat from Judgment Day. Then all evil will be eradicated, including everyone who has not sought God’s pardon before that cataclysmic day. If we miss the last rescue plane, the result is the same whether or not we see ourselves as respectable, and whether we miss by milliseconds or by years.

I’m too scared of boring you to detail everything that made me certain of this. My confusion, however, was that if, as preposterous as it seemed, I had actually been in heaven, and even now was not on earth, would certain principles that apply only to the period of grace before death work in my current situation? Part of me wanted to scream that they could not. On the other hand, they might still apply if I had not died and will return to living on earth before the Final Judgment. Tangling with so many unknowns is the stuff of migraines.

I was also perplexed as to whether my wild theory about tests had the slightest merit. Instead of prayerfully puzzling over it or, better still, seeking to spiritually prepare for any possible test, I recklessly tried to thrust it from my mind and let myself be distracted by my fascinatingly gorgeous surroundings. I now shudder to realize that I took that course while having no idea if doing so was safe or whether this was the most critical moment in my existence and if my entire eternity hinged on my preparation.

Not only don’t I know why I let myself do it, I don’t even know how it was possible to push that worry out of my head. I don’t like to boast but worrying is usually something I excel at. You might even call me an over-achiever.

It was as if I were lulled into complacency by the wonder and beauty of this place. Despite me having no certainty that it was not deceptive, this otherworldly forest seemed to radiate a warm coziness and security that I had never imagined any wilderness could have. Even harder to explain – and avoid confinement in a psychiatric ward – is that I seemed to detect something peculiar about this forest. What I sensed was so far beyond the purely rational that I can only try my pathetic but best attempt to put it into words and hide in shame. Here it is: the entire place seemed to have an aura of innocence about it. You might understand a little about how the friendliness and cuteness of all the animals might be slightly suggestive of this but somehow even the rocks and vegetation seemed to add to it.

The trail had turned out to be a network of tracks, possibly made by animals. Whenever options appeared, either animal would choose without hesitation. As I think back, I wonder if the giant beneath us were making its own decisions, or if the little one beside me were somehow guiding it. Whatever the process, the chosen route had grown quite steep but the powerful animal supporting me almost glided up it. We turned a bend and froze. As I somehow expected, it was a combined effort. I was startled, and in perfect unison, the creature that somehow felt part of me stopped in its tracks and became a living elevator, lowering me as smoothly and silently as it had been propelling me forward.

Ahead, apparently unaware of our approach, was a man, looking rather like an Arabian in traditional dress, sitting on the ground under a tree. That was about as expected as a penguin in the Sahara. *What’s he doing here?* I asked myself, as if my own presence in this place were perfectly understandable.

The stranger seemed deep in thought. “I don’t know . . .” he sighed dejectedly.

I was still engaged in an animated internal debate about making myself known when I spotted in the distance a nonhuman biped walking toward him. I deliberately slid off the now fully crouched animal. The instant I separated from the creature, I felt different. Thankfully, it was not debilitating but more like the momentary heaviness and loss felt when heaving oneself out of a deep, warm bath.

I suspect the furry little one who had enticed me here remained with me but my attention was riveted elsewhere. I ducked behind the mercifully thick vegetation and sneaked a glance at the still distant alien. Depth perception is challenging in an environment so exotic that not only the lifeforms but even the light is different. Nevertheless, the biped seemed huge. I was glad to be hidden but would the presence of a crouching animal right on the trail close by draw attention to me? And what about the man, who seemed oblivious to everything around him? Should I warn him?

# ***Chapter 4:*** [Eavesdropping](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CGrantley%5CDocuments%5CNET-BURST.NET%5Cnet-burst.net%5Cchristian-fiction%5CMy%20DocumentsNET-BURST.NETnet-burst.netchristian-fictionfree-christian-book-3.htm)

The biped kept closing in. I worried about the man and yet felt paralyzed by fear and indecision. As I stared helplessly, the parable of the good Samaritan flashed into my mind. Self-recriminations assaulted me over my miserable failure at what Jesus regarded as the most elementary aspect of living as God wants.

Meanwhile, I grew increasingly sure that bearing down on us was an alien of the species I had seen in the palace.

I was on the verge of trying to warn the man with a loud whisper and wild hand signals (who knows if he understood English?) when he looked up, noticed the approaching being and slowly stood to greet him. To my shock, as he rose to his feet he began to grow taller and bulkier. Somehow his clothing kept up with the growth and it, too, began to change in appearance. A chill shot through me as this lifeform continued to mutate. His beard faded until it disappeared, while the hair on his head changed and his facial features grew increasingly alien. I stared goggle-eyed as his skin turned golden and began to glow. *This can’t be real! What is happening to me?*

*But how could it possibly* ***not*** *be real?* my mind countered. The notion of these recent episodes being some type of illusion raised far more impossibilities than it offered the slightest explanation. It was not remotely like any dream I have ever had. *I have no idea what drugs are capable of. Maybe under their influence, unreality could seem this real but time and again what I have experienced since supposedly leaving earth far exceeds my powers of imagination. And when could I have been drugged?*

My mind scanned my last day on earth, hunting for the slightest possibility. It had been such a lazy day that I never left the house. No one had any opportunity to slip drugs into anything I had consumed. I had eaten no mushrooms, nor any food that might have passed its use-by date. I had not felt the slightest unwell – no fever, no fall or knock on the head, no headache, no event when my skin could have been punctured. There is no family history of mental disorders.

Perhaps what I next did was ridiculous but I knocked my knuckles on a rock. It not only hurt; I bled. It certainly felt and looked real.

I turned my analysis to the time since apparently leaving earth. *Other than feeling groggy upon first arriving here, my mind has seemed quite sharp. Of course there was the spider bite but I was seeing bizarre things long before the bite. The spider itself was bizarre before it even bit me!*

Running out of options, I felt forced to just one conclusion. *This has to be real!*

I was not yet confident I could accurately distinguish between the extraterrestrials I had so far seen. In the endless palace I had glanced at countless thousands of them. Nevertheless, every one that I had so far studied close up – as much as I dared – was quite distinctive in appearance. Even relative to the others, the transformed being in front of me was particularly tall and muscular, with a nose a little broader and forehead a little higher than most. His eyes were like flaming arrows. It was my guess that the magnificent lifeform that the man had somehow transmuted into was Chebon.

The other alien of superhuman proportions continued to walk toward us. “What’s wrong, Chebon?” he asked.

*So it* ***is*** *Chebon!* I congratulated myself.

“I’ve just returned from a distressing earth mission,” Chebon replied, sounding dejected.

His voice was richer, more majestic and less human than before his transformation. Even though he was complaining, the very nobility and nonhuman aspects of his voice commanded such respect that I think even if I were blind, just hearing these beings’ voices would give me goosebumps.

The words *earth mission* galvanized my attention. My own pounding heart made it obvious why they would disguise themselves when visiting earth. People could literally die in a stampede of fleeing humans.

“Have you ever been there?” he asked.

“No,” responded the newcomer. His voice seemed tinged with slight regret, but who can be sure with nonhumans? “I’ve never left this dimension.” Then his eyes lighted up. “Powering through the dimensional interphase must be sensational!”

*“Powering through the dimensional interphase”? What’s he talking about? Is there more to skipping between worlds than I realized? What had I missed by losing consciousness when flitting from world to world?* This realm had me bubbling with questions like a little child, but no one was giving me answers. Everyone seemed to treat me as if I wasn’t even there. The only consolation was that in the presence of these fearsome beings, I preferred to be ignored.

As usual, the aliens’ lip movements did not correspond with the words I was hearing. *If my sound shell theory is correct, is there some form of invisible barrier around me through which the sound of aliens speaking in their native tongue does not penetrate? Could this same barrier act a little like a one way mirror, allowing me to see through it but rendering me invisible? But the animals could see me. Then again, they said nothing that needed translating.* I found myself alternating between viewing my unanswered questions as fascinating mysteries and exasperating – even potentially dangerous – ignorance.

As I puzzled over being treated as if I were not there, I began to wonder what would happen if I jumped in the path of a moving alien. Would he walk right through me as if one of us – I’m not sure which – were a ghost. That was one experiment I wasn’t keen to perform.

Oblivious to my questions, the conversation continued. “It’s spectacular alright,” agreed Chebon. “And the galaxies aren’t bad, but the moment you touch down on that sin-infested planet – Ooooo.” He seemed to shudder in revulsion.

“Tell me about it!” begged the other alien excitedly.

“The human race is so perverse,” said Chebon, “You know, besides the heavenly sun, not one person on the entire planet is morally perfect!”

*“ . . . the heavenly sun . . . person . . . morally perfect”?* My mind raced. *They can’t be talking about the sun! They must mean the son!* But that raised more questions than ever. *Who’s the son?* Christians might think of Jesus, the Son of God, but they were referring to someone who is on earth right now. Who could that be?

“No one else on the entire plant is perfect?” repeated the newcomer. “I know that’s what they say, but it’s so hard to grasp. *None?*”

If you soon find yourself wanting to ditch this book, you have an inkling of how furious I grew as this conversation unfolded. To allay your concerns now, however, would sabotage the drama. I can only ask you to endure this with me until things improve.

“Unbelievable isn’t it!” responded Chebon. I’ll tell you how dreadful things are. Imagine two earthlings hate someone. Both wish the person were dead. One would never dare commit murder, merely because he’s afraid of his society’s punishment for that crime. The other one is brave enough to ignore the penalty and commits murder. Most earthlings would regard the one fearing punishment as quite respectable and the fearless one as depraved.”

“Surely not!” He had what I guessed to be a stunned look on his face. “Both passionately wish the person were dead and one is considered more moral because he’s a bigger coward?”

To hear them referring to us as ‘earthlings’ made my blood boil. Right then, I did not understand why I reacted so strongly. Later, when I was less riled and I overheard other extraterrestrials using the word, I was finally able to identify a couple of reasons. The term made me feel like an invisible extra in a B-grade sci-fi movie. That detonated an unwanted assortment of negative feelings. Additionally, the word felt to me somewhat condescending. I despised the way their very appearance made me feel inferior. That predisposed me to react against the slightest hint that they might think of themselves as being superior in any other way.

Only as I write this, however, do I think I have found the key reason for detesting the word: my mind was playing tricks on me. I now think my exaggerated annoyance at a single word was my mind’s attempt to excuse the inexplicable intensity of my emotional reaction – or to divert my attention from how irrational my anger was – over what they were saying about human morality. It is one thing for me to give lip service to a Christian doctrine or to acknowledge human failings; it is quite another to hear otherworldly aliens – irreconcilably different beings with no emotional or genetic ties to us – slandering the entire human race. If we made disparaging remarks about our species we would, of necessity, be including ourselves in our comments. They were not.

It was maddening – no, it was more than that, it hurt – to hear aliens bad-mouthing us. *How dare they! These beings who have never had to walk in our shoes!*

“Disgusting, isn’t it!” replied Chebon. “Their morality is so crude – it makes my skin creep.”

*Hmmm . . . “makes my skin creep” . . . I’d have expected that to be a human expression.* I tried to convince myself I needed to determine just how adapted to my linguistic preferences the translation I was being subjected could be. Unlike focusing on the word earthling, however, I was at least partially aware of what I think was my real motive. This time it was not an unconscious attempt to make my fury feel justified. On the contrary, so offensive was what I was hearing that I was trying to keep my cool by distracting myself.

“Do you understand sexuality?” continued Chebon.

The other alien’s eyes seemed to light up even more than usual, “Oh, yes! I’ve studied it. Fascinating!” He was almost whispering. “I know all about the peculiar reproductive powers of earthly creatures. It’s astounding – sharing in divine creativity not by using one’s mind, but one’s body, while at the same time achieving a sort of sacred, mystical union with another creature. It’s kind of like creating a new song and yet it’s *a living being!* There was awe and excitement in his voice. “*Creating life!* Can you imagine it? What a mind-balking, fearful task! And for humans the being that emerges is in the very image of the Stupendous Lord of Beauty! The result does not just honor God, but is in the very image of God! What a sacred, privileged responsibility!

“It’s like effortlessly sculpturing a masterpiece, using material from your own body. It’s like fashioning a most intricate, ingenious work of art while you sleep. It’s two beings so delighting in each other that they fuse together for life and that very act produces life. Two become one and suddenly there is more than two. They die to individuality and from that death springs life. In fact, their love explodes until they teem with life.”

“You sound almost envious!” laughed Chebon. “I assure you, no one would envy what they have become! You know about the perversions?”

The alien’s face darkened – almost literally. “Yes,” he said soberly, “How could they do that to themselves? What could ever drive anyone to defile oneself and trash such a priceless gift?”

“I have no idea. I don’t think any of us will ever understand depravity,” commented Chebon. “They call rape a terrible crime . . .”

“Right . . .” replied the other one, as if wondering where this was leading.

“. . . and yet some have the audacity to call it ‘love’ to seduce – to entice someone to willingly engage in adultery or fornication!”

“That can’t be right!” He stared at Chebon as if expecting him to correct himself, but Chebon stared right back. “Trying to make someone a willing partner in defilement – threatening someone’s eternity by attempting the sealing of a lifelong bond without lifelong commitment, or violating someone’s marital union – they call that defilement *love?*”

“Oh yes! It’s more prevalent in some societies than others but many humans who consider themselves moral actually get a buzz out of encouraging lust by the way they dress and behave. Many think it’s normal. Some even think it’s healthy! They’re blind to *that* evil and yet consider themselves moral just because they have an inkling of how hideous rape is.”

“How perverse!”

“Isn’t their behavior sickening!” said Chebon triumphantly. “Many seducers consider themselves better than rapists even though, as atrocious and emotionally wounding as rape is, it does not make the victim a willing participant in sin and so it leaves their spirit undefiled. I could spend earth-days listing their hypocrisies, Meurel.”

*Meurel! So that’s his name!* I felt as if I had fitted another part of the jigsaw. Okay, I admit it: I was trying to distract myself in an effort to constrain the anger churning within me. Their pompous, self-righteous conversation was tearing me apart. Trying to refute their logic was annoyingly hard but hearing it from alien goodie-goodie two-shoes was infuriating. We might find fault with our own species but that feels almost noble and decidedly different from being attacked by outsiders.

“Most of them realize it’s wrong to break their country’s imperfect laws,” continued Chebon, “but they think it’s quite acceptable to break their Creator’s *perfect* laws. They might acknowledge it’s wrong to exploit another human, but they think it quite all right to exploit their *Maker!* They are constantly plundering the planet he made, breathing the air he created, eating the food he’s provided for them, living in bodies he’s given them, yet they snub him and consider themselves self-made people. Every good thing they have ever experienced comes from the One they selfishly ignore. Even the sleazy illusion of pleasure they feel when sinning is possible only because the Holy One gave them the capacity to experience pleasure. Yet they ignore their loving Creator and even have the audacity to blame him when such a lifestyle doesn’t work!”

My overburdened mind staggered to contemplate how alien their concept of God might be. *They clearly believe in a loving Creator,* I told myself.

“Corrupt to the core!” commented Meurel.

“Utterly. There’s no basic difference between them and Lucifer. Like the devil himself, each of them has violated the laws of the Righteous One,” continued Chebon.

My blood pressure rose. I was too scared even to reveal myself, let alone confront these intimidating beings but how do I force back the anger about to spew out of me? *Those arrogant, oversized . . .* To my annoyance, I couldn’t rummage around in my befuddled brain quick enough to find an appropriately insulting name. Finally, blurting out all I could manage at such short notice, I shrieked in my head . . . *buffoons!*.

“And among the most atrocious,” added Chebon, “are those who think themselves godly.”

“What?” I thought Meurel seemed a little incredulous, but hoping to interpret an alien’s non-verbal signals is a minefield. I might have been merely transferring to him my own feelings, because I was certainly ready to dismiss the entire conversation as conceited nonsense.

“Oh, yes! It is not pagans or criminals or common folk who will arrange their Messiah’s murder but devout Bible scholars and revered religious leaders.”

*“ . . . their Messiah’s murder . . . devout Bible scholars . . . ” Is he talking about Jesus? I panicked. What if this isn’t the Twenty-First Century?* Somehow that felt even scarier than being in another galaxy. Space travel is at least on the fringe of human technology. Time travel is disturbingly different.

My mind was in overdrive. *If they are talking about God and his Son (not sun) Jesus, could that palace have been heaven after all? Could these superhumans actually be angels?*

I had already rejected the notion but now I felt driven to revisit it. If they were really angels, I’m not too comfortable with applying the word to them. Regardless of what those of biblical notoriety actually looked like, depictions in art and how I imagined them to look had little similarity to the ethereal giants I was looking at. Calling them angels is almost as nondescript as calling a *Tyrannosaurus rex* a lizard and is made even more inane by one’s knowledge of such creatures coming only from books and not from the horror of actually being terrorized by one.

Despite seeming an almost meaningless term, *luminaries* or perhaps *celestial beings* somehow seems more appropriate for these otherworldly lifeforms. If, for ease of communication, I ever revert to the word angel, any familiarity we might have with the word belies how heart-stopping these supernatural dignitaries were. Like such words as infinity, perfection and holiness, we bandy the word around until it has a deceptive ring of familiarity. We lull ourselves into the arrogance of forgetting we have nothing but the slightest conception of what we are talking about.

My mind was still wobbling. *Hey! If they really are what we flippantly call angels, it’s no wonder that sexuality is such an issue with them. Jesus said angels aren’t sexual.* It was only then that the uniqueness of each of these beings struck me as peculiar. Whereas sexual reproduction creates a natural variability, we all know that cloning produces more or less identical offspring. It was clear to me that these beings, although not created by sexual reproduction, are not clones in any sense that I am familiar with the term.

*How were they created? Why did God go to all the effort to make every one of them unique? Surely we humans would have mass-produced them.* I felt this must say something significant about how astoundingly superior to us God is, but I had to let the thought go because the conversation continued.

“It has always been, and will always be, that the ones most deceived and most hardened against the love and mercy of the forgiving Judge are those who arrogantly consider themselves better than others. These are the people who whitewash their own lust and would like to stone other perverts. By the hypocritical example they set, they send children to hell and then rage against abortionists who take innocent life. They defame the Flawless One by claiming to represent him while being filled with pride, selfishness and callousness. As the faithful Son says, they make their followers twice as fit for hell as they themselves are.”

I seethed. *I’ve seen how convincingly Chebon had disguised himself. Could these beings actually be cunningly disguised demons sent to undermine my faith? I haven’t detected any deceit but maybe they are just insidiously skilled at it. Hey! Isn’t disguising themselves as a human a form of deceit? And if they’re so perfect what are they doing deceiving people into thinking they are human? I can’t trust these beings!*

Another, even more disturbing but unlikely possibility was beginning to dawn: could my fury be masking a conscience that knew I was guilty of the vilest hypocrisy?

Chebon’s tirade was relentless. “Many speak continually of the Glorious One and yet seek not him but wealth, fame and human approval. They think themselves Godlike but in utter violation of his heart they hate their enemies and despise people who are not like them. They exalt themselves despite knowing the promise of the Faithful One that whoever does this will be brought low.”

Whether justified or not, my indignant fury kept compounding by the second.

“Even the few who pride themselves in condemning sexual perversion are still so perverted that if they trace back their family tree far enough, each of them is the product of lust or rape. Each human owes his or her very existence to perversion! And even without that hypocrisy and even disregarding all the times they themselves have lusted, they are not just sexual perverts but spiritual perverts. Every human is someone who is in the very image of the Holy One, acting like the devil himself. What could be more perverse? And the entire planet is infested with them!”

And I had thought I was angry earlier on! The volcano within me was ready to blow apart.

“That’s appalling!” commented Meurel. “And the irreligious are actually more righteous than the religious?”

“Oh, if only that were true, Meurel! Usually the irreligious self-righteously point the finger at the failings of the religious, only to try to turn the spotlight off their own dirty conscience and in a vain attempt to justify their own wickedness. Often, for example, they accuse religious leaders of being money-grubbing only because they are jealous. They want fame and riches themselves. Some even wish they could come up with their own scheme to rip people off. Hypocrites love deluding themselves into thinking they are taking the moral high ground. They accuse others of hypocrisy and of the very sins they commit in their hearts or wish they could get away with.”

With what might have been just the slightest hint of tenderness, Chebon added, “Nevertheless, there are non-believers who humbly acknowledge their wrong-doing and genuinely want to be righteous. Anyone acting this way is light-years ahead of those who accuse others.”

As Chebon’s tone softened, something appalling seized me. It was as if I looked in the mirror and for the first time in my life saw who I really was. And what I saw repulsed me.

I remembered back in the palace my expectation of reward for my clean lifestyle, intensive Bible study, prolonged times of prayer, sacrificial tithing, witnessing and on and on I could go. From early childhood I had been devoted to Christ. I had kept myself pure – by my measure, not God’s. Not only was I still a virgin, I had never once tasted alcohol, smoked, sampled drugs, gambled or even sworn. Even among exemplary Christians, such a record is so rare these days that I feel tempted to tone it down here lest you think I am exaggerating.

Now I felt disgusted by my foolish arrogance in thinking I deserved a reward. By divine standards – even, it seems, by angelic standards – I was as depraved as any other degenerate human. I had always acknowledged the theory that this applied to me before being born again, but what I had missed is that it applied to me right now. And thinking myself better than others made me even worse than any I looked down on. I loathed myself.

An incident in my youth began bobbing on the surface of my consciousness. Whenever I used to read in Isaiah, “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags,” I would picture in my mind a smelly, grease-covered rag you might find in a mechanic’s workshop. That was daft, of course. There was no engine grease in Bible times. Eventually, I discovered that the English word “filthy,” rather than “dirty,” was very deliberately chosen to translate the Hebrew word because the original referred not simply to dirt but to disgusting bodily filth.

My thoughts zipped to the Apostle Paul saying he regarded his loftiest attempts at righteousness as dung. One of the first New Testament Greek lexicons I ever owned said the word Paul chose was used in his era for offal – the innards of dead animals. That’s not a pretty picture. No longer was this an object of academic curiosity, however. I writhed, knowing just how much it applied to me. To draw attention to my ‘good’ living is as disgusting as proudly displaying used toilet paper, saying, “Look what I’ve done!”

Chebon continued his tirade. “Of course, genuine believers don’t look down on people. Filled with the beauty of the One they adore, they are tender-hearted and forgiving and love their enemies. By continually humbling themselves before the Everlasting Lord and maintaining a childlike dependence upon him, they remain free from the love of money and other sins that blind and enslave.”

Those words hit me hard. For the first time ever, I no longer felt like a “genuine believer.”

Chebon kept going. “Nevertheless, believers or not, all humans keep breaking the Exalted One’s heart by acting contrary to his loving ways.”

I was still far from coming to terms with any of this when, though I suspect I was still physically present in the forest, I was somehow mentally transported back to the endless palace. How this happened defies explanation. It was not a memory, nor imagination, and it seemed as real as if I were physically there.

Though shocked beyond words, I was nonetheless relieved, as it seemed I was being given another chance. There was no time to bask in that, however. A ‘sparkler’ hit and instantly I was sent hurtling back to the chaos of being over my head; swapped by a torrent of pleasures beyond human ability to endure. It felt as if I would explode with ecstasy. “God, help me!” I cried, almost in terror.

The palatial throng kept celebrating with wild gymnastics as though I did not exist.

Everything in the palace seemed the same as before, except for me. Now that I had at least a slight conception of my depravity, I felt as out of place in that sacred palace as someone covered with the most repulsive filth being draped with exquisite million dollar clothes. “I don’t deserve this!” I screamed in horror.

I sensed, in the perfection of the sensations coursing through my body, a presence so mortifyingly holy that never before had I felt such shame. It was like the most powerful searchlight illuminating the dark corners of my life and exposing hideous filth I had never known was there. For me to be enjoying otherworldly pleasures felt as wrong as a sadistic torturer being honored above Mother Teresa; the most disgusting coward being ticker-taped as a hero; the laziest fool being rewarded with endless success; the stingiest, most selfish person being lauded as the greatest philanthropist.

Somehow words were fired into my brain: *It isn’t right to give what is holy to dogs!* Suddenly, it felt as if those words encapsulated a fundamental law of the universe; a basic principle upon which the entire fabric of creation was built. It seemed breaking this law would threaten the continued existence of everything. It felt as though the holy and the profane were such opposites that if, at any point in the universe, they were to touch, it would ignite a chain reaction so explosive that everything in every world would disintegrate. But for me to be delirious with pleasure made it seem worth the gravest of risks. I wanted to flee but I wanted to stay, even if it killed me and destroyed the entire cosmos as well. How depraved is that!

I was a stray mongrel, a flea-infested mutt, muddying the snow-white carpet of heaven. I knew I should slink away in utter humiliation. Instead, I mustered all my strength and determined to gorge myself in pleasures I didn’t deserve. “God, have mercy,” I screamed.

Another celestial ‘sparkler’ hit me. This one was vaguely reminiscent of luxuriating in the best warm shower you could ever imagine, only it made me tingle with joy in ways I have never known. Then followed one that felt more like the softest feathers but was delighting me far beyond what a million feathers could ever do. Another hit. This one reminded me of warm snowflakes, but left all earthly comparison far behind.

*Nothing in me is Christlike,* came the thought. *I must back off immediately or I’ll fry like a single volt motor on a ten thousand volt power line.* Another ‘sparkler’ hit. Would it kill me?

Everything went black.

# ***Chapter 5:*** Annihilate the Human Race?

Like waking from the most disturbing nightmare, dazed, heart racing and breathless, I eventually became aware that Chebon and Meurel were still talking.

I shook myself, trying to bring myself back to reality. *This* ***is*** *reality, isn’t it?* Instantly regretting that thought, I tried to hurl the question out of my mind. Far too many matters were shattering what used to be a cozy, wondrously boring life.

There was a mind-shattering array of things in what I had just experienced in that palace that I desperately needed to process. It was annoyingly hard to focus, however, because of the conversation that droned on with cold disregard for my confusion and raging emotions.

“Why doesn’t the Ever-Present One annihilate the entire species?” asked Meurel.

“Exactly!” came the disturbing reply “I doubt any of us has ever visited that place and not asked that very question within five earth-minutes of arriving. At times it takes all my strength to restrain myself from wiping them out.”

My heart thumped. I defy anyone to focus on other weighty matters after having heard those words.

“Oh, you wouldn’t!” protested Meurel, staring wide-eyed at Chebon.

“I would indeed – if only the Holy One would let me! And justice would be on my side!”

“How could the perfect Judge possibly uphold justice and eliminate evil without wiping out the entire human race?” asked Meurel.

“It utterly bewilders me! It has something to do with the immaculate Son’s earth-mission.”

“All of heaven is abuzz with this. Please, Chebon, you must know more . . .”

“Even the entire celestial intelligentsia has puzzled long and hard over this mystery, Meurel.”

“Teeeeeoool!” said Meurel in a half-whisper, “This must be big. Come on, spill the beans.”

*“Spill the beans”? That’s a peculiar expression coming from the lips of someone who has never even visited earth.* Meurel had presumably uttered some sort of extraterrestrial equivalent of that expression, but it surely couldn’t have been anything close to a literal translation. I concluded I must be hearing quite a sophisticated interpretation, modified precisely to conform to my use of English. I wanted time to ponder the implications, but I was far too enthralled by the fascinating conversation to risk missing a word.

“Well, Meurel, I’m no expert in holy law. I do know that by visiting earth, the wondrous Son has become the only innocent person on his adopted planet.”

“Yes . . .”

“Somehow, though the only sinless person there, he will become the scapegoat for all humanity’s sin.”

“Teeeeeoool!” exclaimed Meurel. I was beginning to conclude that this strange sound these beings sometimes made was some kind of emotional release, perhaps an expression of amazement.

“Somehow, by the holy Son suffering the world’s greatest injustice, it becomes legal for the Innocent and the guilty to swap destinies.”

Meurel’s eyes almost popped out.

“The beloved Son is so desperate to save this sinful race that there’s no limit to how far he’ll go to save them.”

There was silence for quite some time. Then Chebon said excitedly, “Ooooh, I feel a song coming!”

He launched into song.

 Earth needs:
 Death to die but the killer to thrive;
 Fighting to stop but the fighter freed;
 Hurting to flee but the hurter set free.

“Chorus!” shouted Chebon hurriedly, then sang:

 We want:
 Love to rule over all;
 Lion and lamb, the best of friends;
 Pain to stop and grief to end;
 Hate destroyed but the hater restored;
 Offenders released yet justice to reign;
 Wrong condemned but the guilty to mend;
 Sin to be slain but the sinner reclaimed –
 An impossible dream without the Son.
 Earth’s a bad dream without the Son.

 Earth needs:
 Greed to dive but the greedy revived;
 Deceit to drown but the liar saved;
 Sinning subdued but the sinner renewed.

He signaled to Meurel and they sang the chorus in harmony that touched my heart in a way I cannot explain.

Then Chebon sang the next verse alone.

 Earth needs:
 Rape to end and the rapist to mend;
 Abuse to stop and the pervert made new;
 Stealing to cease but the robber released.

They continued, this time dancing as well as making the harmony even more complex.

Perhaps I should pause here to explain my anguish in striving for balance between accuracy and ease of reading. Rather than call the superhuman movements dancing, it might be more accurate to call what I witnessed an extravaganza of rhythmical gyrations combined with synchronized superhuman acrobatics that frequently seemed to defy gravity. My dilemma is that such clumsy expressions make reading tiresome and still leave you with little conception of what actually happened. I constantly find myself having to mention things that are so far outside normal human experience that it is like longing to describe a symphony to people deaf from birth, or a rainbow to people who have never seen.

 Earth needs:
 Greed to –

Chebon abruptly stopped, and a couple of notes later Meurel stopped as well.

“Did you hear something?” asked Chebon. Suddenly their ears grabbed my attention. As I stared, my eyes nearly fell out! Their earlobes were growing in length and twisting forward until facing directly ahead of these astonishing beings. Upon reaching that point, their ears began twisting backwards until pointing behind them. Back and forth they moved, not mindlessly, like oscillating fans, but with distinct, precise movements.

“Pssst!”

Both extraterrestrials looked around, but there was no one there.

“Pssst!” I looked around and a nonhuman arm was waving from behind a bush, “Over here!”

“What in heaven . . . !” exclaimed Chebon, his ears beginning to shrink to closer to human proportions.

“Shhh!” said the colossal alien as he gingerly came out of hiding, looking all around as if checking to see that no one else was there, “I don’t want the others to hear. I’ve just got to talk to someone.”

“Whatever is it, Kokbiel?”

“You know how everyone’s expecting the matchless Son to come back here shortly?” said Kokbiel.

“Yes . . .” replied Chebon and the other angel, both sounding quite mystified.

“Well the rumor’s wrong.”

“That’s no rumor,” replied Chebon, “The Father of Everything has promised!”

“He’s promised!” replied Kokbiel excitedly. “Oh, glory!” he leapt high into the air, turned a double somersault, and landed spectacularly. Then, suddenly getting serious, he said, “But how come? I thought the perfect Son is on earth to take upon himself humanity’s full penalty for their sin.”

“He is!” said Meurel.

“Then how can the infinite Son come back here?”

“Why not? He’ll pay their penalty and resume his rightful place on heaven’s throne.”

“But no one seems to have thought this through. Think about it – what’s the penalty – the logical consequence – of sin?”

“Death,” replied Meurel.

“Sure, sure, the exalted Son will die, but there’s more than that.”

“Well, there’s exclusion from the presence of the Holy Father.”

Kokbiel seemed just a trifle impatient. “Yes, the Father will forsake his dear Son when he’s crucified, but there’s more.”

“Well . . . everyone who sins is under a curse.”

“Of course anyone dying on a cross is cursed! You’re avoiding the issue!” Kokbiel seem to grow even more impatient. “What about spending an eternity in hell?”

Chebon, who had been strangely quiet during this exchange, burst into laughter. “Oh, so that’s what’s worrying you!” He laughed some more, then continued, “When a sinner is banished to hell he’s paid the penalty but he lacks the power to escape and live a sin-free life. He’s stuck there forever because he’s as defiled as ever. No matter how much a sinner suffers, he could never achieve the holiness needed to enter the presence of the Perfect One. But the endless Son, armed with the power of a sinless life, is able to absorb within himself the full legal consequences of sin and escape! He’s never surrendered to sin. The devil has no power over him!”

“Glory!” shouted Kokbiel, leaping high into the air again, “What a relief!” he shouted. Meurel, too, seemed to appreciate the explanation.

“What’s more,” continued Chebon, “the whole point of the only Son’s mission is to deliver humanity. He has to do everything for them – not just be righteous for them and suffer and die for them. He has to defeat death for them, rise for them, enter heaven for them, intercede for them, release the Holy Spirit for them, reign for them, return for them . . .”

“They need the divine Son, as their eternal high priest in heaven as much as they need him as their sacrificial lamb,” added Meurel.

“Where were you when Gabriel was explaining all this?” asked Chebon.

“Teeeeooool! He explained it all?”

“Yes!” both Chebon and Meurel replied, almost simultaneously.

“Chebon has been helping me better understand some aspects, but this part was explained to us all so that our peace would be undisturbed,” added Meurel.

“No wonder no one else was concerned!” said Kokbiel.

“How did you miss all this?” asked Meurel.

“You didn’t sitting where I was,” replied Kokbiel gleefully, “or you’d have been daydreaming too! I was staring at this cute, stunningly beautiful –” He was making what looked rather like an hourglass shape with his hands.

“That’s *impossible!”* said Meurel, his voice seeming to betray horror mixed with disbelief. “Teeeeooool! Have you had too many earth assignments? We’re *celestials!*” he whispered, “We don’t have crushes on each other!”

I was vaguely aware that in the Marilyn Monroe era an hourglass figure was considered desirable but wasn’t it limited to that time? They did not even have tight fitting clothes in Bible times, did they? Were these mighty beings flitting back and forth between different times and cultures? I admit that’s slim evidence that they were time-hopping but if they were, in the light of experiences I have yet to tell you about, I can only admire their ability to cope with it. It would almost be enough to curdle my brain, although they would surely have had the huge advantage of knowing what was happening and knowing that they would not be forever trapped in an unfamiliar time.

Insensible to my musings, the conversation continued.

Kokbiel, looking indignant, replied, “There was this cute flower growing next to me . . . and I couldn’t help daydreaming about the exquisite skill of our Creator and all the beauty that flows from his heart.”

“A flower!” exclaimed Meurel. “What’s *this* business?” he asked, making an hourglass shape with his hands as he spoke.

Kokbiel, with both hands moving closer together than before and in more of an s-shape, said, “It was bending in the wind!”

“Oh!” replied Meurel, seeming to betray a hint of impatience.

Chebon laughed.

Kokbiel looked annoyed. “You’re the one who’s been too influenced by earth, Meurel!”

I was riveted. I had never thought of God’s angels coming to verbal blows. Obviously, I was a novice at interpreting angelic emotions but I felt there was anger in his voice.

Suddenly, Meurel fell to the ground in front of Kokbiel. “Oh, dear Kokbiel! My most humble and profuse apologies. I am appalled that I could think such a thing of you! Please, please, please forgive me. You are absolutely right! Earth assignments must indeed be befuddling my thinking. I will book another debriefing session as soon as possible.”

Kokbiel bent down, took Meurel’s hand and raised him up. He gave a little giggle. “You mean you really thought . . . !” Then they all three burst into convulsive laughter. They staggered like drunkards, whooping and cackling, sometimes doubling over, sometimes helplessly flaying their arms. One of them crumpled to the ground in fits of out-of-control hysterics. His antics just took the others to an even higher level of delirium.

I would defy anyone to view their clowning and remain sober. The joke itself must surely have meant more to them than to me but their antics were so contagious that exploding within me was a compulsion to laugh louder and longer than ever before. That was a luxury, however, that I felt unable to allow myself until first slipping further away, lest my cackles betray my presence to these intimidating extraterrestrials.

Before you, who were not there, sneer at me as chicken-livered, do a serious study of how frequently Bible heroes were scared witless at the appearance of an angel. Moreover, I suspect that in some of these encounters – perhaps all – these formidable, supernatural beings had toned down their appearance, as Chebon had done when I first saw him freshly returned from earth.

I had no clue whether I needed to avoid drawing attention to myself. Nevertheless, while feverishly straining to soften the louder of my howls, I stumbled backwards like a drunken clown in canoe-size shoes until I felt I was a slightly safer distance away. Then, surrendering to the inevitable, I let the belly laughs rip. Never in my life have I laughed so much.

I didn’t notice it for a while but eventually I realized that the expression, “laughed until it hurt” didn’t apply. There were just beautiful, invigorating feelings in what by now should have been sore stomach muscles. It was wonderful! Never have I felt so free to laugh. So immense was the emotional release that it seemed the most therapeutic experience anyone could ever have.

Finally, the laughter began to subside. I found myself lying on the ground in utter contentment. I couldn’t even recall getting there. Even before the laughter was over, however, I began to puzzle over what I had just seen. I vaguely recall in my childhood some old guys making an hourglass shape with their hands to represent a beautiful woman but I haven’t seen such a thing for decades. Curves are now out of fashion. Then I recalled the baggy first century clothing I had seen. There was nothing curvaceous about anyone dressed like that. Where in the world had Meurel visited to become familiar with such a hand sign? I wondered again, *Do they flit from one era to another?*

As usual, questions outweighed answers a thousand to one and confusion was the only winner. It was a peculiar mix of frustrating and fascinating; exhausting and exhilarating. My mind and emotions were on perpetual overload and yet I never wanted it to end.

Before I could make the slightest sense of any of what I had just witnessed, Chebon’s voice interrupted my thoughts. “Anyhow,” he said, Heaven’s Joy is now doing things far more magnificent and costly than creating flowers. He’ll transform every human who lets him and then, at the right time, he’ll eradicate everyone that’s marred and polluted beautiful earth – everything that’s caused pain and suffering and sorrow and . . . Teeeeeoool! What a day that will be! The entire universe will be restored to beautiful harmony and sinless perfection, as if evil had never wrecked everything.”

“I can hardly wait!” said Meurel.

“Yes,” agreed Chebon, “but each day’s delay will give earth-people another chance to entrust their lives to the exalted Son and accept his suffering for them instead of them suffering eternally. Not just Lucifer, but every human has defied their Creator and contributed to earth’s mess. It wouldn’t be fair to destroy Lucifer for his disobedience and ignore the disobedience of humans. Those who don’t accept the incomparable Son’s pardon must be destroyed along with Lucifer and the rest of earth’s evil. Otherwise the Lord of the Cosmos would be guilty of favoritism. A perfect judge –”

“I remember that bit!” interrupted Kokbiel, “A perfect judge must be impartial, no matter how much he loves the accused.”

Chebon stepped up to Kokbiel and raised his straightened arm. It was angled forward at about forty-five degrees, palm vertical. Kokbiel, facing Chebon, did the same. Their hands almost touching, they stood motionless. As I observed them I somehow gained the impression that some type of exchange was taking place, as though their souls were temporarily mingling or they were loving each other on a level beyond my comprehension. After perhaps a minute, Kokbiel left happily, almost skipping like a child, leaving the other two angels to themselves again.

“Chebon . . .” Meurel seemed deep in thought, almost reluctant to speak.

“My explanation to Kokbiel doesn’t entirely satisfy your searching mind, does it?” said Chebon.

“I’m sorry, Chebon.”

“No apology needed. This is a most worthy – indeed a most wondrous – subject on which to engage one’s intellect. Perhaps it would help for you to think of it this way. We’re at war with Lucifer, right?”

“Of course!” said Meurel. “It tears my heart in two that Lucifer and the others have turned their backs on the One who keeps on giving and – as a result – turned their backs on all that is good. Sometimes it seems just yesterday when they were a part of us and as dear to me as you are. What glorious times we had together! What sweet fellowship! And now, what formidable enemies they are. If only we were fighting planet-loads of earthlings or billions of gigantic dinosaurs or cunning xyacks –”

*Xyacks? Who or what are they?* I wondered, but Meurel kept talking. “. . .but to battle opponents who are our equals in strength, skill and intellect . . .”

“Except that we have the Invincible Lord on our side!”

“Oh, yes! But the Undefeatable One keeps restraining himself. If only he’d use his full power, it would be over in an instant.”

“Yes, but their survival has taught us much.”

“Teeeeeoool! How right you are, Chebon! I hate to admit it, but when Lucifer first hatched his plan, his arguments seemed to have some attractive elements. The horrendous consequences of trying to act independently of the Mysterious One are all too obvious now. Back then, however, I had little conception of the ruinous extent to which things keep crashing from bad to worse when we make plans without our Maker. It lay beyond the powers of our imagination to conceive of such havoc, mayhem and degradation. Of course, the Source of all that is good thoroughly warned us, but it seemed so unreal. Now I shudder at just how real it is. I loved our Never-Ending Giver back then and thought him good and wise, but how much more I love and adore the True One now that I have witnessed the alternative!”

“Indeed! It has been so mystifying to us: the Omnipotent Ruler, who could enslave everyone, thus protecting himself from all sorrow, keeps rendering himself highly vulnerable, easily hurt and grossly misunderstood by relentlessly abandoning himself to reckless love. His unassailable delight in everyone is matched only by the enormity of the grief they bring him when they abuse and misuse the powers he has lovingly entrusted to them. None of us can fully comprehend our King’s decision but Lucifer arrogantly considered the Perfect One to be foolish in following this course. So he has sought to win respect for himself by doing the opposite – enslaving and deceiving everyone he possibly can.”

There was a pause. It was as if Chebon were deep in thought and suddenly resurfaced. “Anyhow, we were discussing how the beautiful Son can pay the full penalty for all of humanity’s sin and still be able to return to heaven. We are at war with Lucifer, and a major battlefield is an insignificant planet whose inhabitants the Creator has great plans for because he chose to make them in his own image.”

“Right . . .”

“Well, at present, Lucifer has captured the entire race.”

“Only because they let him,” said Meurel.

“True, but the Indefatigable Lord wants them freed. He has arranged a prisoner-exchange – the entire human race in exchange for his only Son.”

“Teeeeeoool! I know it’s true but it dizzies my mind whenever I think of it.”

“We all gasp at that one,” said Chebon. “Anyhow, the flawless Son will be handed over to the enemy to be violated, tortured, terrorized – Lucifer is permitted to do to him, body and soul, whatever his evil genius can invent.” Chebon’s voice began to break. *Do angels cry?* He paused for a while.

“I think I can continue now,” he said. “In return for the selfless Son handing himself over, every human can walk free. All they need do is acknowledge that they are part of the Son’s prisoner exchange. When Lucifer has done his worst with the beautiful Son, the seemingly defeated Son will overpower Lucifer and burst through death. By then the faithful Son will have fulfilled to the letter his part of the transaction. If Lucifer’s too weak to keep the innocent Son captive, that’s his problem, but the One who paid the price will have won the legal right to force Lucifer to keep his side of the agreement and free every human who no longer wants to be Lucifer’s prisoner. With the hostage crisis resolved –”

“The Divine One is free to blow Lucifer out of the sky at the moment of his choosing,” said Meurel.

“You’ve got it!” exclaimed Chebon. “And every human who has not decisively left Lucifer’s camp before that critical moment –”

“Will be wiped out with him,” added Meurel.

“It’s a dangerous thing to play with the King’s patience,” said Chebon.

They remained silent for a while.

“Thanks, Chebon!” replied Meurel at last, “you’ve made it so simple.”

“Far too simple,” said Chebon, “I can only splash in the shallows of a wonder so vast that even our top intelligentsia has failed to plumb its depths. I long to know more. Everything I glean about this masterpiece of divine love and wisdom makes me want to love the Limitless One more.”

It was not just the atmosphere that was so much clearer, I was seeing spiritually with a clarity I had never before known. I was also seeing myself clearer and consequently becoming increasingly disillusioned with myself. The astounding compensation for my lowered view of myself was the new joy I was feeling toward God. What had begun as the movement of a couple of rocks in my heart was gaining momentum and threatening to become an avalanche. You will think this peculiar, but I can only describe what was happening as falling in love – with God. Yes, in love with God!

I had always insisted that God is a person, not a concept nor a mere force, but it was as if what I had previously known of him was a mere shadow. *Hey, there are no shadows here!* I thought, smiling at the coincidence. My smile vanished as I puzzled over whether it was just a coincidence. Anyhow, you cannot love a shadow. What was happening to me was like having read about someone in a book, then suddenly coming face to face with him and discovering he is far more exciting than I had dared dream. My heart was turning somersaults. One moment I was awestruck, the next overjoyed, the next some new emotion. I was still merely hearing about God and seeing his reality reflected in the faces of celestial beings as they spoke with such love and conviction about the One who meant everything to them. My fear of seeing Most High was intensifying and yet a longing to see him was also growing within me. Would I have the chance to see the Lord of the universe?

“How right you are!” said Meurel, his voice reminding me of their presence. “Will you join me in singing *Eternal wisdom*?”

“Perfect choice!” replied Chebon. Then they sang in reverent harmony:

 Eternal mind of endless God,
 Finite minds can only marvel.
 Precious wisdom of perfect God,
 At your ways we fall in praise.

 The more I look, the more I find
 Wisdom bathed in majesty.
 O endless power of boundless mind,
 Let me slip behind the cloud
 And more glories see.

On each occasion that I had seen glorious beings rhythmically moving to music, their style was quite different. Often their movements were high energy, spectacularly acrobatic displays. This time as they sang, however, Chebon and Meurel proved themselves equally at home with beautifully graceful bodily contortions accompanied by highly expressive movements of hands and limbs. To my amazement, their toes seemed almost as expressive as their fingers.

As the sun is too glorious for me to fully appreciate its splendor and I can only take fleeting glances at it, so was the beauty of these beings. As I tried to drink in their astounding good looks and gracefulness, I remembered that they do not sexually reproduce. Each was fashioned directly by God. We, in contrast, come from a long line of sinners. Sin has ravished the human gene pool and we bear the consequences in our bodies. I wondered how magnificent the human body and mind would be without these defects. But then the angels resumed their song, and loftier thoughts captivated my mind.

 O matchless mind of mighty God,
 Wonders clothed in mystery,
 May I peek beyond the cloud
 And more glories see.

 Almighty mind of mighty God,
 Endless wisdom of matchless glory,
 Boundless wisdom of perfect God,
 Wonders crowned with majesty.

 So much I do not know;
 Truths beyond my grasp,
 But what of you I truly know
 Stuns me till in awe I gasp.

 The more I look, the more I find
 Wisdom bathed in majesty.
 O endless power of boundless mind,
 Let me slip behind the cloud
 And more glories see.

 There’s much I do not know;
 Truths beyond my grasp,
 But what of you I truly know
 Stuns me till in awe I gasp.

No wonder these ethereal beings love singing! That song broke even further my hard heart. I had rarely ever bothered to understand the mysteries of God. I might have been born again, but I had longed to understand the deeper things of God little more than I had bothered to understand some obscure science. I had been content to remain aloof from the most wonderful Person in existence.

I’ve already confessed to so much of my craziness that I guess I have little to lose by telling you what followed. I cried. Being in control is almost a religion to me. Those ‘sparklers’ and the aftermath had been a powerfully emotional time, but I had congratulated myself for restraining my emotions as well as I had. Now, however, it was as though I had been continually forced back until this unmanly act was the only exit. I was driven to such bitter regret over squandered opportunities and mistaken priorities that had robbed me of life’s greatest treasure – knowing God more intimately. It seemed there could be no greater loss; no greater tragedy; and no alternative response but to cry. As bitter tears washed my face, I found it peculiarly refreshing, as if each teardrop softened my sun-dried soul. There was a liberating honesty about it; like blabbing a fearfully kept guilty secret and to one’s surprised relief finding acceptance. On and on I sobbed.

Oh, sweet tears of repentance! Tears, so bitter when they erupted, seemed to turn to nectar the moment they touched this God-charged atmosphere. Until then I had no idea that to see through tears is to see through a telescope. It was then that I knew that tears touch the heart of God. Like a gentle summer breeze, the words, “Blessed are they that mourn,” caressed my softening heart. Realizing those precious words of Jesus were preserved in my too-often-closed Bible, I sobbed even more – I who had previously prided myself on my Bible knowledge.

As I wept, the lights switched on inside me and I *knew* something of the greatness of Almighty God. Imagine, if you can, a diamond of infinite size, with each of its endless facets revealing unique splendor. That’s a hint of the beauty of the character of the infinite Lord. Oh, for an eternity to savor his beauty, marveling at the limitless treasuries of his majesty, wisdom, grace, love, power, justice, goodness, faithfulness, creativity, generosity . . . (Give me eternity and an infinite vocabulary, and I’ll work on completing that sentence.) The infinite Lord is full of surprises and delights and wonders and joys and glories and . . . And still I sobbed.

# ***Chapter 6:*** Fury

I have no idea how long it was before I finally became aware of my furry friend nuzzling me. I felt wiped out but so much better than after my ignominious first exit from the palace, heaven or whatever it was.

My uncertainty about the nature of that place got me distracted again. If it were heaven, where was God? Where was the throne? Where were the redeemed? Shouldn’t there have been some seraphim and cherubim somewhere? Was it just a meeting place for angels?

Hungry mosquitos were less annoying than all the unanswered questions buzzing around in my head. If only I could shoo them away and focus on more important things. But what things are more important? Oh no! More questions.

The cute little critter kept acting as if he wanted me to follow him again. I heaved myself up and looked around. To my alarm, the creature we had been riding was nowhere to be seen. It was a sickening blow. To be upset about having one’s new car stolen was one thing but, to me, this special animal had become far more than a thing or a means of transport. I felt both robbed and abandoned. Further complicating my pain and bewilderment is that it was as if I had lost a significant part of me.

I could have chosen to think of all the astonishing things I had recently enjoyed – even now I was surrounded by wonders. Instead, despite having just had the greatest spiritual high of my life, I railed at God like a spoilt child.

No one had consulted me as to whether I wanted to leave earth and all humanity, find myself with only animals to relate to and then end up more attached to one of them than I ever dreamed possible, only to lose him. All the other losses throughout my life flashed into my mind. I raged. “God is cruel!” I screeched louder than I had thought possible. Instantly, all of nature fell deathly silent.

As I vented my fury, the little critter hopped nearer. That surprised me. Instead of being scared off by my rage, he looked up at me, as if puzzled. We stared at each other for what seemed several minutes, as I thought about my outburst.

*What is happening to me? I’m normally so rational.*

I had known people who were spiritually and emotionally up and down like an elevator but I had prided myself on being pretty stable. “We are called to live by faith, not feelings,” I used to tell them. “Feelings are fickle; God is not.” I was sure that was good advice that helped stabilize me but here was I failing to take my own advice and lashing out like a madman at the kindest person in the universe. I was as smart as a shipwreck survivor using an axe to vent his frustration on the life raft that is his only hope of safety.

Admittedly, I had had exceptionally intense experiences of late that would test anyone’s stability. Nevertheless, I had also enjoyed so many positive things. I could only admire those who endure repeated tragedies and, by having the sense to distinguish between friend and foe, continue to find comfort in God, no matter how numb with shock they feel and how distant that makes him feel.

The staring contest ended with my fluffy friend showing off his gorgeous tail, and setting off along the trail. Anxious to lose this companion as well, I followed.

Since leaving earth – or to put it more like it felt: since having earth and every sense of security wrenched from me – I had been plagued by an ever-growing mountain of unanswered questions that threatened to come crashing down on top of me. The most bewildering question of all, however, was how could I so quickly plummet from an astonishing revelation of the wonder and perfection and goodness of God, to thinking him cruel?

It seems inevitable that for someone who had only known earth, alien worlds would contain puzzling things. What was particularly perplexing, however, was that this time the inexplicable was not part of an alien world, but part of me that had stowed away and come with me from earth. It must have been hiding within me for years. Like an undetected cancer growing within, its discovery might be alarming but one’s well-being hinges on dealing with it.

There was no denying that leaving earth – suddenly and inexplicably losing everything I had ever known – was traumatic. Losing the creature that had carried me so tenderly, however, went beyond losing one more thing. It had triggered an avalanche of memories of other losses earlier in my life. Apparently, I had resolved and recovered from those losses far less than I ever imagined. As I dared think about it, I realized that instead of prayerfully thrashing those things out with God, I had buried them. Peculiarly, such cowardice is often touted as being macho. More likely, the real reason was that, deep down, I feared that maybe God is not as wise or loving as I had hoped.

As I kept following my bushytailed leader, I recalled hearing that it can be helpful when oppressed by upsetting thoughts or feelings, to give oneself a break by moving the focus off one’s internal world onto the external world. I had always thought that change of focus should be from self to God. That might be the ideal but it can be hard work at times and in this place I was spoiled with so many never-before-experienced wonders. I paid extra attention to the twitters, chirps, warbles and even melodies, many of which I had not yet identified as birds, frogs, insects or other lifeforms. I breathed deeply to savor the varying fragrances of flowers as I encountered them. I looked with new eyes at the trees, marveling not just at their spectacular flowers but at the varying textures and colors of the bark, at the surprising shapes of their leaves and the peculiar twists of their majestic branches. I let butterflies land on me and I studied them, drinking in their beauty, like an art connoisseur lost in awe when savoring a priceless masterpiece. My racing thoughts calmed, my inner pain seemed less important and my earlier hissy fit seemed more ridiculous than ever.

As I changed my focus, my spirits pulled out of their nosedive and soared heavenward. Self-pity transmuted into adoration.

After a while, my fluffy guide turned into my personal trainer by picking up the pace. I had felt a little dazed earlier but strength was returning to me and I began to run to keep the little fella in sight; wondering why I was even bothering. It was probably just a coincidence but I recalled reading of studies suggesting that exercise can be as effective as antidepressants.

As I continued running, I broke into a slight sweat. Suddenly, what looked rather like a swarm of pestering flies encircled my head. I was about to shoo them away when I noticed that their wings were fanning me in a most refreshing manner. I decided to put up with the flies until they started annoying me by landing on me. That never happened. I cooled and they flew off as suddenly as they had arrived.

I told myself it was merely coincidental that they arrived the instant I had the slightest need for cooling and left the moment I no longer needed it. Nevertheless, in a spurt of madness, I felt like royalty – as if all of nature existed to serve me, tending to my every need like worker bees treat their queen. The thought humbled me, but I hastily pulled myself together. I was an alien in what might still turn out to be a dangerous environment. This was no time for delusion. And yet, despite the protests of my intellect, I strode on with a new dignity and oozed a still-deeper tenderness toward every plant and creature I saw; as if they were my precious, loving subjects to be cherished and protected.

Then it came to me that I would not have broken into a sweat had I been riding instead of running. Did that mean I would have missed this moving experience?

A strange but beautiful sensation enveloped me. I have no name for it. Driven by my longing to make this priceless encounter as real to you as it was to me, I have reheated the leftovers of the memory and, like a gourmetsavoring the finest cuisine, tried to discern the ingredients. An element or two might have eluded me, but there was no mistaking the strong presence of holy awe. Masterfully blended with this, however, were other ingredients, transforming this sacred awakening into something truly incomparable. Ecstasy was one ingredient. Humility was another. And it was sprinkled with a deliciously warm coating of cozy security.

I still mourn my failure to adequately convey the experience. Here’s my final, quite different attempt: describing it would have to include words like rapturous, ethereal, exquisite, beatific, wondrous, heavenly, matchless *. . .*

I walked with a new spring in my step until suddenly stopping dead. In the middle of the path was a swarm of ants. In their midst was a pile of cherry-like objects. Just moments before, I had discovered I was feeling a little hungry and the thought of cherries now heightened my hunger. Without moving my feet, lest I injure an ant, I squatted down to inspect the scene. Teams of ants were carrying individual ‘cherries’ and adding them to the pile. Then one team brought a ‘cherry’ right up to my feet and gently rocked it back and forth as though they were offering it to me. I took it, then peered underneath, expecting to see ants dangling from it. *That’s strange! Each of them must have let go the instant I took it.* It certainly looked like fruit. Using my fingernail as a makeshift blade, I tore it apart. It was juicy and fleshy with no stone or obvious seeds. Was it edible?

I recalled once being advised that if faced with starvation and I found some unknown berries, I should rub one on some sensitive skin, such as my armpit, and see if I have an allergic reaction. It was claimed this would give a valuable clue as to whether the possible food source is edible. That sounded messy and I assumed one would need to wait quite some time to be sure the skin does not react, and even then it would not be foolproof.

I looked up, and to my surprise the animal I had been following was right in front of me, looking inquisitively at me. Almost as soon as he caught my eye, he ate a ‘cherry,’ then looked up at me, then ate another. While this was happening, I noticed that the ants were leaving.

I hauled up from my memory times as a child when I sampled the exotic fruits of ornamental trees and shrubs. I had felt secure because I always waited until I had observed birds eating the fruit. It was not until years later that I heard to my horror that birds can feed off things that are poisonous to humans.

I had already taken enormous risks in this alien world and each had apparently paid off. Dare I take yet another risk? *It certainly looks good to eat.* I winced as it shattered my consciousness that Eve had uttered almost those exact words. Yes, even Eden had its forbidden fruit. At last I realized that yet again I was on the verge of making a small but possibly critical decision without bothering to ask the only One who knows everything and therefore the only One whose guidance is fully trustworthy.

So I prayed.

My furry friend looked at the ‘cherries,’ then at me, as if trying to urge me to eat them. I tentatively licked the juice on my fingers left from when I had opened one. It was delicious. Tossing caution aside I hungrily gobbled handfuls until none was left.

I smiled to myself, *At last I’ve found some ants I’d be happy to picnic with!* Then I wondered if I had done the right thing. Was I headed for a serious belly ache, or worse?

The animal was off again, waving his fluffy tail in the air as he pranced along the trail. I followed, careful not to tread on any remaining ants, but all had left. I pursued the animal, pondering how my needs had apparently once again been met by a surprising coincidence.

I idly wondered if I would have noticed those gift-bearing ants from atop that silky-haired lookout. Then a disturbing thought hit: could God trust me with special experiences if I were to think him cruel whenever it was time to move on? Am I little better than a child who wants nothing but ice cream and candy and resents his parents for giving him a healthy diet? Could I put God in no-win situations where he either has to withhold blessings I don’t understand, or I’ll turn against him?

There was no denying that it had hurt to lose that beast with whom I had experienced an indescribable bond. Even now, I missed him. As distressing as the loss was, however, it had exposed things within me that needed serious attention. Even though, on one level, the loss left me feeling as if something were missing, I could tell that coming to terms with what it had exposed somehow left me more whole and empowered than I had ever been.

The trail drew close to the creek again, and passed a particularly entrancing spot where trees laden with flowers drooped over the water. Then the thought gripped me: Australian aborigines used to make a sweet drink by swishing flowers laden with nectar in a crude container of water. Could flowers dropping into the creek explain the water’s taste? It was just a theory, but the possibility of a fairly simple, natural explanation was satisfying. No, it was more than that. I found it comforting. I desperately needed assurance that this strange world was real.

As I continued walking, the embarrassing memory returned of having accused God of cruelty. I thought of how, rather than dealing with past losses and hurts by talking them out with God, burying them had let them accumulate dangerously so that they could gang up on me in a moment of weakness. Thankfully, my tailspin had occurred in such an idyllic place that it is was hard to keep denying God’s goodness. Had it happened in more taxing circumstances, it could have been disastrous.

I winced at my failure, and wanted to shove it out of my mind by thinking of happier things. Then it struck me: failing to confront issues that hurt or embarrassed me had become such an ingrained habit that even while the dangers of burying such things were fresh in my mind, I was about to repeat that very mistake.

Earlier, giving myself a break from my inner turmoil in order to draw close to God and gain a new perspective had empowered me to resolve the problem. That is decidedly different, however, from trying to live in permanent denial of an issue so that no effort is made to resolve it. One approach is the road to genuine peace and healing. The other is a sinister counterfeit that demotivates us from getting the help we need.

Continually stirring up my anger, frustration, worry, grief and sense of loss would have only perpetuated the problem. On the other hand, burying a problem and leaving it perpetually unresolved would be like living with a time bomb.

I had a choice: I could shrink in shame from having falsely accused God, and waste the experience by doing all I could to push it from my memory, or I could try to turn it into a stepping stone to greater things by learning from it.

Since the latter seemed harder but better, I sent a quick, wordless prayer to God for help, like a knowing glance between the closest of friends.

No sooner had I done this than I recalled scientific studies confirming that if we walk in an open field, hoping to reach a distant landmark while refusing to look at it (such as keeping our eyes closed) we would end up wandering around in circles and never getting where we wanted, no matter how high our confidence that we were making great progress. Before I could dismiss this as trivia, I was startled by the realization that the same would happen if deprived of vital clues by continuously looking at myself in a handheld mirror. It hit me that it would make no difference whether, while staring at a mirror, I were admiring myself, getting angry with myself, or seeking to improve myself. Regardless of how vain or supposedly noble one’s intentions, fixating on oneself ends pathetically. That shocked me even more. Instantly, I saw where this was heading. No matter what our motivation, we will end up spiritually lost, if we keep looking at ourselves rather than fixing our eyes on God.

To keep focusing on myself – be it my grievances, my opinion, my anger, or whatever – is no smarter than angrily punching a wall over and over and getting mad that my hands hurt. The exciting thing, however, is that realizing what I am doing to myself reveals the simple, though not necessarily instant, solution.

I had just begun reveling in that insight, when my spirits leapt higher still with yet another divinely inspired eureka episode. As empowering as it is to fix our eyes on God, rather than on self, there is an even more life-transforming way of viewing things. The thought exploded with what seemed like supernatural clarity that wonders happen when we begin seeing problems through God’s eyes, instead of our own. Closing my eyes to a problem will never bring closure. Neither will changing my focus from the internal to the external, unless it becomes a leg in the journey of opening myself up to God and moving away from self-centeredness to being God-centered.

With that understanding coming with what seemed like supernatural force, you might have expected more from me but I fared no better than Moses who, in the very presence of a bush that burned supernaturally, succumbed to doubt and fear over doing what God asked.

Niggling doubts did not have a feeding frenzy over whether the universe’s Architect is smarter than I am. It seems a no-brainer that he alone can see not just the big picture but the infinite picture, including not merely the immediate ramifications but the eternal implications of every decision. If he truly is smarter, it should come as no surprise if I often do not understand his reasoning. Surely, I can expect to often disagree with a mind-bogglingly superior being and that no matter how adamant I am that he must be wrong, it will eventually turn out that he was right.

No matter what the logic, however, letting go of self feels reckless. Believing in God’s superior intelligence is easy compared with believing that he loves me more that I love myself and that he wants what is in my best interests even more than I do. What makes that hard to believe is that although I am not always impressed with myself, I know precisely how I feel and I love myself enormously in that I passionately care about what happens to me. Does the infinite Lord really have the intellectual capacity to focus on me as if I were the only person in a lonely universe? Is his love truly infinite and flawless? Is he so warm and personal that alongside him humans are the cold, indifferent and impersonal ones?

I can accept that there are ways in which God knows me better than I know myself. There are aspects of my infancy I have forgotten, I do not know all the molecules my body is comprised of, nor exactly how my brain or digestive system works, nor do I know everything people say about me behind my back. A full list of ways God knows me better than I do would be extensive. But do God’s abilities extend beyond useful facts and knowing my every thought to knowing precisely how I feel?

That’s harder to believe because how I feel is so important to me and we all know that such understanding is beyond the reach of any human, no matter how much some may long to know us. The inability of anyone to truly get inside my head makes me feel so isolated and not understood that I feel the need to do what no one else can and fill the void by focusing on my hurts, fears, hopes, confusion and so on.

But being so self-absorbed stifles me. What if I am not nearly as isolated as I think? What if God knows and cares so utterly that I can confidently leave those things in his capable hands? Then I could truly live.

Beyond even the highly prized teachings of Jesus, his life and sacrificial death insist that God not only knows what is best but is selflessly devoted to giving it to us, if we let him. We could trust a God like that enough to let go of self and let him take care of us. But is that God real?

Despite unanswered questions, thoughts kept flowing. To see things as God sees them is to see them as they truly are. The inevitable result is that our spirits will soar from languishing in self-pity to rejoicing in God; from sorrow to the highest joy. Nothing transforms us so powerfully. Lies keep us miserable. Divine truth shatters those lies.

Inspired by this, I looked to God for understanding of what had caused me to slip up so badly.

I now know, of course, that I eventually returned to earth and was not permanently separated from my own species. I had no such knowledge back then, however. For all I knew, it could have been permanent. There are always holes in our knowledge, such as not knowing the future and how God will stagger us by turning what seem utter disasters into gloriously happy endings. Not having the infinite intelligence of God, we often cannot imagine how this could even be possible. Nor can we peer behind the scenes into the spirit world and see the role of God’s spiritual enemies and how God overcomes evil with good. No human has any hope of predicting all the complex chains of events triggered by a single action, nor of grasping what must be temporarily tolerated in order to achieve the greatest good in a world that is in continual rebellion against God’s loving ways.

Faith in the love and goodness of God, however, stabilizes us and keeps us safe. By filling the holes in our knowledge, faith stops foolishness and groundless accusations against God from flooding in and sinking us.

I had reason to be disappointed with myself. Despite being immersed in signs of God’s goodness, my faith had sprung a leak. Real faith does not need the slightest sign.

I was in worse shape than I had thought, however. Just when I was beginning to think how special I must be to be granted these insights, my smugness was shattered by the realization that I was being babied. Receiving answers so quickly and effortlessly meant God was treating me as spiritually incompetent. Rather than trust me to use to use my faith as I should to doubt-proof gaps in my knowledge, God chose to mollycoddle me. Apparently, he considered my ability to hold on in faith as being so pathetic that I needed instant answers to stay afloat.

That sobered me. In fact, it floored me. Since my teens I had prided myself on my ability to think things through, only to now find myself totally outclassed by those who have simple, childlike faith. I felt like someone who had devoted his life to accumulating gold, only to discover his supposed wealth was nothing but fool’s gold and he was actually poorer than those he had pitied.

I was so stunned I could barely think for several minutes.

Eventually, I managed to pull myself together sufficiently to conclude that, whether motivated by fear, pain-avoidance, or simply laziness, keeping oneself ignorant is foolhardy. Half-truths are dangerous but the full truth will always glorify God and lift us by filling us with love and adoration for him. In the famous words of Jesus, truth sets us free. We play a critical role in this, however. Seek and you will find, said Jesus. We must let go of resentment and self-pity, and reach out to God. In the words of a scripture that warms my heart, draw near to God and he will draw near to you. We should seek God for answers with the tenacity of the widow in Jesus’ parable who kept pestering the judge because she knew he could help.

It hit me hard to realize that although I had prided myself on doing this, I had only done it some of the time. Too often, I had given up and imagined I could get away with burying things in the too-hard basket. What flabbergasted me, however, is that even after the humiliation of discovering this mistake, I was still only half way through grasping the full truth. Moreover, the half I had prided myself on sometimes doing is actually the least important part.

What I had given too little attention to was that not having an infinite IQ means there will always be gaps in my understanding that only faith can plug up and keep me afloat. It is critical that I learn as quickly as possible to live by raw faith so that I have no need of answers dumbed down to accommodate human intelligence for me to be sure of God’s love and wisdom and goodness.

I had been thinking myself so smart, faithful and spiritual, only to now discover I had been doing barely one fourth of what I should – and making life needlessly difficult for myself as a result. What is even more disconcerting is that I was yet to discover that this is typical of me.

Should I beat myself up over this, or feel sorry for myself? Or would that be further evidence of self-obsession and of the need to end my toxic love affair with self? Should I drag my eyes off myself enough to actually feel sorry for God who has had to endure my incompetence? Should I melt with adoration over his astonishing patience, or even be walking on air with gratitude for him somehow managing to get a little truth through to me despite my pride-induced resistance to it?

I was yet to come to a firm conclusion on many things. What I was sure of, however, is that no matter how deceitfully addictive it is, wallowing in self is miserably inferior to soaring in God. This is true even emotionally and in the here and now. Ironically, dying to self is even in our own selfish interest, though I dare not dwell on that, any more than I would risk giddiness when looking down when climbing high.

To see as God sees, is to see from a mountain top. There are those who are so sure their way is best that they choose to see no further than the swamp of self. What if we do not have to condemn ourselves to such a fate, however? What if, through Christ, any of us can leave behind those oppressive limitations and by faith see as God sees? An intense resolve welled within me to be such a person.

At that moment, to leave self behind and be driven by raw faith in the goodness and wisdom of God seemed like the ultimate adventure. I promised myself to do all I could to maintain such faith, no matter how bleak things might get.

I had no idea, however, what horrors lay ahead.

# ***Chapter 7:*** The Planet Quaked

I came to a pond that in Australia, might be called a billabong. The very word melts my cares away, conjuring warm, lazy days and the melodic *bonk-bonk* of banjo frogs calling each other. As I had come to expect, however, this pond far surpassed anything I had known on earth.

The air, the light, a leaf – everything in this exotic world magnified my appreciation of its Creator, and intensified my longing for him. Here, creation seemed served up fresh from the Maker’s hands, like bread hot from the baker’s oven. Earth’s freshest sunrise, most exquisite rosebud, most delightful baby, now seemed like stale crusts that had been trampled under humanity’s feet. Prior to leaving earth, I had no conception of the extent to which everything on that dark planet is tainted with an imperfection that is utterly contrary to the nature of God. Everything on earth is in decay.

I knew not whether earth is the only place subject to such corruption. I had often puzzled over Scripture saying that even the stars are not pure in God’s sight. Is this to be taken literally or could it be a reference to angels? Nevertheless, experiencing earthly things is like trying to discern the artistry in a vandalized, sun-bleached, storm-battered watercolor.

Have you ever bought a car and then started seeing many more cars like it than you have ever seen before? Traffic had not changed, but because that model car now meant more to you, you saw traffic differently. Since returning from other worlds, I now find myself seeing in earthly things the Maker’s fingerprint like never before. Like finding the key to a puzzle, I find his faded fingerprint more discernible in the despoiled things of earth because I now have a clearer notion of what to look for and, more thrilling, the Maker means much more to me now than I had ever dreamed possible. I cannot see even slime or a maggot without marveling. I don’t think I could ever again see so much as a raindrop or a grain of sand, through the same eyes.

I presumed the place I was visiting was so exquisite because it was somehow quarantined from sin’s corruption. If so, that raised a most disturbing thought: what if I ruined Paradise? What if I had killed that spider? Or would I have been struck dead before being allowed to take a life? If I had left that rock out of place would this Paradise be then less than perfect for the first time ever – all because of me? Could my every step be upsetting some delicate balance? “God help me!” I prayed, chiding myself that even in this place God was too rarely in my thoughts.

When philosophically discussing environmental matters, one of my favorite sayings used to be that humanity is out of harmony with creation because humanity is out of harmony with its Creator. This I believed, but I still ran roughshod over the environment. Now that I was trampling through this paradisiacal place, could my imperfections have disastrous consequences for me or for this world?

As alien as this place was, it seemed like, for the first time ever, I were where I truly belonged. I felt as if I were so much the focus of loving attention that even the plants were happy to see me. It was quite ridiculous, of course. Through the ‘water’ and the spider bite, I had taken into my system an unknown cocktail of chemicals. That, I rationalized, had to be the real explanation for this flight beyond reality. Nevertheless, it was a delightful fantasy.

Moving closer to the pond, I peered into the smooth, glassy waters, then jumped; startled by the reflection of a stranger. I looked around for the stranger and then back at the water, the reflection mirrored my movements. It took a couple more moments to verify that it really was my reflection. What staggered me is that the reflection looked vaguely like me but was of someone quite good-looking. I do not enjoy looking in mirrors but I have done so enough to conclude I am far from good-looking. It’s not that I’m ugly but women seem to treat me as if I were part of the wallpaper. For a fleeting moment, I wondered how much it might drag my self-esteem from the sewer if I were better looking. I stopped myself. Wishful thinking only intensifies the pain. Anyhow, I needed to solve the mystery of why in this water I was good-looking.

*Has my face changed? Is there something weird about the reflection? Have I somehow undergone a psychological change, causing me to view myself more positively? Is this how God sees me? Is this what I would look like if it had not been for Adam’s sin messing up the human gene pool? Is this how my resurrection body will look?* The questions flowed but the answers backed up.

As I continued walking, my mind reverted to my second experience in that palace. How come it felt so real, even though I had no awareness of having been physically transported there? I recalled how the apostle Paul had a supernatural experience that left him puzzled as to whether he had visited the third heaven “in the body” or “out of the body.” Was that somehow relevant?

A bird began to warble and another joined it with a melodious sound better described as a chirp. It hardly surprised me that each bird sounded more magnificent than any birdsong I had ever before heard. I was coming to expect such superiority in this place. But what enthralled me was the way their quite distinct calls harmonized and blended perfectly. There was nothing random or haphazard. If ever I have heard a duet, this was a duet. “Antiphonal singing,” I said out loud, priding myself in knowing the term, and once again enjoying the sound of my voice. In some species of earth birds, after pairing off to raise young, the male and female blend their birdcalls into a duet, perhaps to maintain their bond.

*I must see those birds,* I told myself. After a few moments of peering up trees and through leaves I spotted them. I was taken aback. I looked from one to the other, confirming they were definitely the source of the sound. The large one had a toucan-like beak and impressive claws and predominantly teal plumage with a red head and yellow collar. The other, at about a fifth its size, was finch-like. It was gray with a ruby-colored breast. I realized that this was a totally different world and that even on earth, birds can differ markedly in appearance according to their gender and maturity. Nevertheless, I was convinced that the birds harmonizing like I had never heard two earthly birds harmonize, were completely different species. *“Birds of a feather . . . ,”* I quoted to myself, amazed to see this earthly saying not applying here.

I was just beginning to come to terms with this, when a third, utterly different voice joined them. It, too, blended with perfection. I looked in the direction of the new voice to discover it was coming from the animal I had been following. I looked wide-eyed at the animal, then looked back at the birds. Now I was truly flabbergasted. If I were not above such emotion, there would have been tears in my eyes; not because of the matchless beauty of their sounds but to see such diverse creatures uniting in song.

While their wordless song continued, something on the ground caught my attention. I peered down to discover ants engaged in the most peculiar movements. I smiled at the thought that an uneducated person might come to the absurd conclusion that the ants were dancing to the music.

A swarm of flies appeared in the air. They alternately swarmed into a dense ball and dispersed into a less dense swarm, rhythmically repeating this over and over, with variations, creating a visual display that could be mistaken for being in time with the music. Of course I sensibly dismissed that interpretation as impossible. Nevertheless, it was both a fascinating phenomenon and aesthetically pleasing.

What sounded like various species of frog started up. One species gave a syncopated croak. Others were more melodious, but none clashed with each other. I admit I am not musical, but I am neither tone deaf nor totally without rhythm. I swear that each of these sounds added to the birds’ song, emphasizing the beat.

Then another out-of-sight creature sounded, and then another, and another. I detected crickets and monkey-like animals and all sorts of fascinating creatures but most were hidden by the dense forest. Some creatures seemed limited to a single pitch, with the pitch varying from species to species. Each broke their silence only at appropriate musical moments. Before long it was like a vast orchestra of hundreds of completely different instruments all blending together under the hand of an invisible conductor.

A swarm of red insects joined the flies, sometimes mingling with them, sometimes not, thus making more intricate than ever, the varying patterns the flies were creating. Then shiny blue flying beetles arrived, followed shortly by brilliant green dragonflies. Were I looking at a computer-generated screen I could simply dismiss it as beautiful. That it was a living display, however, left me flabbergasted. And I could no longer resist the conclusion that the pulsating, ever-changing patterns matched the music.

That peculiar breeze sprang up again, giving the illusion of each leaf and flexible branch in every bush and tree joining in this amazing concert. It was not that every plant was blown at the same time. It was a bush here, then a tree over there, then one closer. It was a little like someone would use hand bells for musical effect. Different trees and bushes seemed to yield slightly different sounds but I suspected that for the most part the subtlety was beyond my ears.

Finally, I could resist no longer. I, too, joined in. This was an even greater surprise than what was going on around me. I sing like an asthmatic cow. I am occasionally capable of appreciating music but I usually regard it as brain-numbing, sentimental waffle; a mere distraction from intellectual pursuits and worthwhile endeavors. Nevertheless, I raised in song the new voice I had somehow gained in this world and, like a river, words flowed over my lips.

I have no idea where the words came from but I certainly could not produce such a torrent. Writing is my preferred medium because it gives me the time I need to get my words together. Even in this book, when seeking to capture the blur of thoughts bolting through my frenzied brain, it has taken considerable effort to crystallize the muddle into words that would be intelligible to anyone else. Admittedly, I find it ridiculously hard to be satisfied with anything I do but I’ve been known to spend an hour to knock a single sentence into shape. And I most certainly cannot produce original tunes. It’s beyond me how anyone achieves that. My few attempts at musical originality have inevitably ended up being a tune I have already heard. Nevertheless, I was singing a continually new song, and it blended exquisitely with the music around me.

I deliberately skipped a note or two, just to satisfy myself that I still had control over the words and music coming from my mouth. I discovered that in addition to being able to alter the loudness and speed, whatever I chose to think about ended up perfectly melded into the lyrics. The words were too numerous and spontaneous to be originating in my mind and yet I was contributing to this musical miracle. I could stop at any moment, but who would want to end a miracle? Rather than being reduced to a mindless automaton, my mental powers were somehow being enhanced. Every word and every note seemed to pump new life into me. It was as if for my entire earthly life I had been semi-comatose and only now was I at last coming to life. The process itself was enough to overwhelm me with awe but this was totally eclipsed by adoration for my Creator.

Words and melody cascaded from my mouth without repetition or interruption for what I believe was hours. Equally surprising was that as my voice rose and fell in an unrehearsed musical treat, so did that of all of nature, as together we joined in song. I felt I was harmonizing not only with all of creation but with the Creator himself.

To me it was priceless, but I will not risk your patience by filling a book with all the words that came from nowhere and bubbled through my lips. A tiny sample will suffice.

 Lion and lamb, romp together
 In praise of the Prince of Peace.
 Frogs, lift the beat; birds, join in song,
 For love has come and strife has ceased.

 Trees, reach up to your Maker;
 Shake your leaves in celebration.
 Waters, rush to serve your God;
 Rivers, dance in jubilation;
 Smooth the rocks; refresh the land;
 In all you do, boldly proclaim
 You’re the work of the Father’s hand.

 Lord, all creation praises you.
 All good things come from you.
 Every creature delights in you;
 Kicks off its shoes and dances before you.
 We thrill in the love that flows from you;
 Endless love that we return to you.

 You give all things to all.
 Our lives are in your hand.
 You are good to all;
 By you alone we stand.
 We’re overawed by all you’ve done.
 You give and give and give again;
 Your love outshines ten thousand suns.
 We thrill with joy because you reign.
 We give to you
 What comes from you.
 We delight in all that you do.
 No one is worthy of love like you.

 Our greatest longing,
 Our deepest joy,
 Our highest honor,
 Is to be your slave.
 We yield to you in everything.
 Perfect our lives by being our King.

 Lead us,
 Command us.
 Be our Ruler,
 Our loving Master,
 Our matchless Lord.
 Have your perfect way in us.

 Complete our joy,
 Fulfill our need,
 Grant us our hopes,
 By reigning over us.

 Assume your right,
 Reveal your power,
 Show forth your love,
 By reigning over us.

On and on I sang, feeling like the pinnacle of creation; privileged beyond measure to be able to articulate for all creation what each, to its varying intellectual capacity, felt toward its Maker. Continuously rising within me, to a higher and higher and still higher level, was a longing to pour out my life in worship to the Giver of life. Never have I felt so convinced that to enjoy God is to truly live.

I confess to a little silliness in the midst of the most beautifully artistic thing I have ever been a part of. To my horror, I found my arms rising heavenward in worship. Don’t misunderstand: I have never before done this, nor have I since broken my vow never to act like a fanatic. Nevertheless, at that time it seemed perfectly natural. It seemed, in fact, that I was harmonizing with the trees as their upward branches waved in that peculiar wind. This, in turn, made me feel closer to all of creation, as on their behalf I worded praise to our Creator.

Yes, I was guilty of being carried away with emotion. I don’t think I was high on spider venom. You are free to form your own opinion. All I can say is that as I write this I am coldly sober and yet the memory still floods my heart with praise.

After perhaps an hour of delighting in the God of all, and listening in fascination at the ever-changing words and tune, I heard myself sing:

 Let the mountains quake before the Lord,
 And the ground tremble at his holiness.
 Let the rocks jump for joy at –”

Just then, the ground began to rumble. Alarmed, I broke off my song. What have I done? I must be careful as to what I say! The animals continued without interruption.

Recalling stories of animals seeming to sense oncoming disasters, I took comfort from the way the creatures seemed quite unconcerned. As both the quake and nature’s symphony continued, I slowly relaxed, and even began to enjoy the rhythmical, almost exhilarating movement of the ground beneath me. It seemed to add bass to the music and it seemed to vary in rhythm in a way appropriate to the music. As the quake continued I tentatively tried to sing and words began to flow again. Soon I was back to full volume.

I felt like the piece that had been missing from a sophisticated machine. Now at last I was fitted where I belong. The switch was flicked and at last everything functioned like the maker had always intended. Reference to a machine, however, belies the fact that I, and everything I fitted in to, was vibrantly alive. In fact, I was like an instantly healed spastic. The unresponsive part that had sprung to life was all of subhuman creation. Nature now seemed to act in harmony with my mind, almost as much as my physical body acts according to my wishes. No longer was nature a separate entity that usually refused to respond and sometimes caused me pain. At long last, subhuman creation was almost a functioning part of me, with every part serving me by fulfilling my goal of worshipping the God I was made for. And worship was not some formality. It was the height of intimacy; the purest, most uplifting, fulfilling experience in the universe. Worship joined me to the Source of my joy, enabling God’s life, love, goodness and perfection to gush through me in an inexhaustible torrent of perfection. It turned the intimacy of earthly lovers into an empty, childish game of make-believe; like pretending that a toy is the real thing and that a mud pie tastes delicious.

Finally, what seemed like an unseen angelic choir joined in, completing the masterpiece. *Yes!* I told myself triumphantly, *This is the final element. Now all creation is united in praise.* Eventually, the music came to its finale. The ground stilled, along with the wind and every creature. There was total silence, like a hushed yet, joyous, love-filled reverence. I stood motionless for quite some time, allowing my emotions to wind down, like a pounding heart returning to normality.

# ***Chapter 8:*** Terrifying Pleasure

The next thing I knew, I was back to that palace again. My transportation seemed instant. If I had passed out, I was unaware of it. But if I hadn’t lost consciousness this time, why did it happen when first arriving in the forest? Was having previously been in the palace a factor? *The only thing I know is how little I know!* I complained. *In fact, I guess I don’t even know that!* Anyhow, there was no time for more guesswork; an announcement was taking place.

“Thirty sinless earth-years on that sin-infested planet as a baby, a boy, a youth –” marveled a massively-built extraterrestrial.

At least superficially, this seemed like a continuation of the same ceremony whose commencement I had witnessed who knows how long ago. *Surely not!* I told myself. I had no idea what these superior beings are capable of. To my mind, however, it seemed to border on the preposterous for the same event to have continued uninterrupted for all the time I had been absent. I tried to shelve my internal debate so I could rivet my attention on what was being said.

“Without even the Spirit’s anointing!” added another of the angels, amidst all the rejoicing.

*Whatever are they talking about?* Then in a burst of panic I asked myself, *I* ***am*** *in the Twenty-First Century, aren’t I?* In this exotic location, the terrifying possibility of being millions of miles from earth was undeniable. Peculiarly, however, my mind kept bolting like a spooked stallion from the additional possibility of being cut off from home by thousands of years. I had encountered fiction about time travel. Now I was on a crash course as to how shatteringly different from a cozy read it is to face the actual possibility of being marooned not just in a foreign world but a foreign time.

After a while, someone raised his voice, “Could I have a little quiet please?” It sounded like Chebon’s deep, cultured tones. I turned in the direction of the voice and it certainly looked like him. The enormous throng began to quieten. “I have an announcement,” he continued, “To mark this unique occasion, Gabriel has been chosen to distill into words the feelings of all of us.”

Everyone cheered again. I looked on, mystified.

A being who seemed the personification of grandeur came forward. Even among the others, he looked dignified. His voice boomed with authority. “Earth-born observers who think they know Jesus of Nazareth are about to receive the shock of their lives.” The others murmured in agreement.

“They imagine he is one of them.” Some of the throng smiled. Some shook their heads, as if in disbelief.

“Earth has no conception of his humiliation these thirty years.” The rest murmured. Some nodded in what seemed like sad agreement.

“But *heaven* knows and we will not fail to celebrate his empowering this day.”

The throng went wild.

“At last the Supreme Lord is endowed with the power that Christ-transformed earth dwellers will one day enjoy!”

Locked in that statement were truths so profound as to keep my mind whirling for ages. Even as I write, the implications are ricocheting around my head. I wonder if I’ll ever plumb their depths, much less actually live them. I was glad that another celestial roar gave me a little while to ponder that profound mystery.

“Our glorious Master’s baptism in the Spirit,” he continued when the roar eventually waned, “is one step closer to the restoration of the glory which rightly belongs to the only Son of the Most High, through whom, and for whom, all things in every universe exist. His rightful role is to reign in unlimited splendor over every inhabitant of every world forever and ever.”

The entire realm seemed to explode in thunderous cheers, applause, and a peculiar noise that I had now heard several times before. Eventually the stupendous throng began to quieten and Gabriel continued.

“For thirty earth-years the eternal Lord of Glory has been abased. Only now, at the completion of the Spirit-baptism, is his power equal to the potential of his future followers. But now, supercharged with the Spirit, pulsating with holy power, he is primed to explode into earth-stunning ministry. That planet will never be the same again.”

Again the throng erupted into cheers and that peculiar noise.

“Jesus of Nazareth, ablaze with the Spirit, is a beacon so bright he’ll be seen by every succeeding generation of earth-dwellers, century after century until the termination of planet earth.”

The angels went wild. That perplexing sound some emitted continued to intrigue me. Perhaps it was some kind of angelic equivalent of whistling.

Chebon stepped up to Gabriel and raised his straightened arm at about forty-five degrees. They exchanged that same type of salute I had seen him give Kokbiel. Their hands almost touching, they stood rigidly in silence for a few seconds. Then, military-style, Gabriel about-turned and strode off.

“Arch-angel Uriel from the music corps has been commissioned to compose a song for this great occasion.” announced Chebon. Everyone clapped and cheered. “Let’s see how quickly we can learn this sparkling new song.” More cheers followed. Never before visiting other worlds had I thought of angels getting so excited.

Then commenced what I can only call music, but the use of an earth term devalues what I heard. It seemed to kiss my ears and then permeate my entire being. My spirit seemed to soar to realms I had never known. I was captivated. I longed for it to continue forever. Then, in an otherworldly voice, so pure, so noble, Uriel began to sing.

 Son of Man, how you’ve longed for this hour.
 Now you’re anointed, empowered from on high.
 Now is your love matched by infinite power;
 You’ll raise the dead and bring heaven nigh.

He ended his verse. The music continued. Then he began again, this time the pitch was a little higher. All the others joined him. They were harmonizing, but producing no words. What shocked me, however, was the vocal range of the voices, with some being lower and some higher than any human voice I’ve ever heard. Their sound was vaguely like humming. Only Uriel was singing words. Somehow there was such power in his performance that even today each word seems indelibly etched on my brain. I’m sure I’ll never forget a syllable.

 Spirit of God, for redemption you’ve come;
 For all earth’s people you pour out your love.
 Power Divine upon God’s only Son,
 You have come like a heavenly dove.

Chebon, looking at Uriel, said, “Magnificent!” He looked toward the seemingly endless audience. “Isn’t it?” Once again the throng erupted in enthusiastic claps and cheers that swept me to heights of excitement and awe that bordered on fear. Some in the throng gave little jumps on the spot. Some made those peculiar sounds.

Turning toward Uriel again, Chebon said, “We’ve picked up the tune now. Have you got the words for us?”

Uriel did something with his hand and from nowhere three dimensional squiggles appeared, each looking as solid as gold, and suspended on nothing.

As Chebon studied the squiggles he emitted a strange sound, but quite different from the angelic “whistle.” “Teeeeeoool! This is good!” he gasped, “Let’s get all heaven singing!”

Uriel turned to the throng. As his body rhythmically twisted in ways that no human would imitate, the seemingly endless throng responded as if he were conducting them with his entire body. On cue, they began to sing.

 Son and Dove, now you’re blended in time.
 You are united, all-powerful and wise.
 Perfect love binds this union divine,
 Filling the love in the Father’s eyes.

 Yet our joy is tempered with awe
 As we dare ponder your mission of pain;
 Trial upon trial as your agonies soar,
 You’ll shed your blood as mankind you reclaim.

 Father God, your heart feels this pain;
 Your Son surrounded by hardship and foe.
 He’ll be abused in body and name,
 As he redeems those who hate him so.

Perhaps you have known the frustration of longing to convey to a friend the beauty of a song when all you could do is e-mail the lyrics. It seems so hollow compared with what you experienced. Obviously, that frustration is gripping me now, though magnified many times over because the music was beyond anything you can even imagine. Even worse: this anguish seizes me over almost every word I write about any aspect of what I saw or heard or felt in this world.

Although what I was privileged to hear was musically astonishing, it sparked within me something far deeper than music can achieve. Elements of the experience seemed to bypass my analytical mind and convey, in an almost subliminal way, insight into the beings producing the music. There was something about how the vast throng blended in song that suggested they had a profound sensitivity to each other’s unique contribution; a respect – almost admiration – for each other’s individuality. I sensed such an off-the-scale love and unity among them that it awakened within me an almost painful nostalgia; a yearning to be part of something much bigger than myself, bursting with love and unity beyond anything I have ever known.

Nostalgia is meant to be a yen for something enjoyed in the past, but this was different. It was the rekindling of a yearning I vaguely recall once having, but it had long since died because it had seemed too unattainable. I cannot identify how I knew, but something convinced me that these beings had attained it. Thankfully, longings that the angelic singing stirred within me were tempered by having been a participant in the musical miracle in the forest. Otherwise, I think what I sensed in these celestials would have tormented me as much as someone dying of hunger forced to see people enjoying a banquet he could never have.

I wanted the song to go on and on and on. I felt if I heard it continuously for a hundred years the words would still be as fresh and captivating as ever. To my acute disappointment, it ended, and every creature in sight bowed with his head to the floor in reverent worship. Feeling totally out of place, as the only one standing, I attempted to mimic them. The floor proved to be surprisingly comfortable but after what seemed an exceedingly long time, I grew increasingly fidgety.

The celestials continued, seeming to draw immense satisfaction out of this humiliating posture. I feel forced to employ the word *adoration* to try to encapsulate the emotional/mental/spiritual ecstatic state they had apparently entered into. My hesitance springs from a sad acknowledgement that I used to imagine I had a vague notion of the meaning of the word. I now know this arrogant presumption is like a Stone Age primitive supposing he understands the vastness of the universe. It was humiliatingly obvious that I was in the presence of beings who had tapped into spiritual depths that were utterly foreign to me. I flooded with a new admiration for these sacred servants.

In my boredom I gazed at the tiny section of floor beneath my eyes. Set just below the smooth surface of this particular part of the floor were what looked like magnified, exquisitely colored snow crystals but they looked so genuine and priceless; not like some human imitation. The tiny segment of floor before my eyes was fascinating, but not enough to keep me entertained for all the time that these holy entities were devoting to their worship. I recalled other parts of the floor that I had noticed earlier. One part had looked like petrified fire. Another looked as if it contained miniaturized galaxies of stars. Other parts contained jewels. I longed to explore the vast floor, absorbing its beauty, but I knew these superior beings were engaged in something far more profound. I tried not to profane that sacred moment any more than I was already doing.

After I thought I was beginning to understand the meaning of eternity, Chebon finally announced, “Let the celebrations commence!”

I was totally unprepared for the next split second. In an instant these stunningly otherworldly beings exploded from reverent stillness to extravagant celebration. Do creatures ever know how to party! Their unrestrained exuberance made excited children look as somber as mourners. I have never seen anyone have so much fun. Even now, when I feel depressed I recall the sheer delight on their faces and the memory transports me.

I have no idea how to adequately *describe* their acrobatics, but I can *explain* it quite simply: the performers were not human. They leapt four or five times higher than any human could reach and they spun several times faster in their aerial somersaults. Sometimes they gyrated so fast that they were just a blur and when they approached top speed they actually changed color. They could bend backwards as fully and easily as forwards. All of them were simultaneously diving into the air, twisting and twirling and somersaulting, each with individual characteristics. The throng had spread out, but I was still amazed there were no mid-air collisions. Whenever two got close, something like lightning flashed between them. The brilliant colors varied according to which angels the spark flashed between.

As they began to somersault, their clothing changed. Some were now bare-chested, exposing their golden, shiny skin, which made them look even more stunning. There was something alien about their flat chests besides their unique skin. I puzzled over what it was until it hit me: they had no nipples. Like the dimmest of memories, something too elusive for me to identify caused this feature of their anatomy to somehow seem fitting, but too much was happening to explore the thought. Although it was harder to be certain – they were clothed from the waist down – it seemed they also had no navels. Their joy was too infectious, however, for me to get caught up in physiology.

If they were a cross between shooting stars and eagles, I was a beached whale. And yet their sheer exuberance pulsated through me. It was like someone’s laughter that sets you giggling and ends up rocking your entire body. Lumbering earthling or not, I found myself doing a little jig, like music can sometimes set your foot tapping without you realizing it.

Then, to my horror, it happened. It was obviously part of the celebrations, but I have no idea what to call them. I’ll have to stick with my previous inadequate and deceptively innocuous term ‘sparklers’ because they were essentially the same as what had previously frazzled my senses, only this time there were so very many more and each one was unique.

I couldn’t contain the intensity of the first ‘sparkler’ cascading through me. Then, at its very peak when it seemed I would drown in the outrageously exquisite pleasure yet another celestial ‘sparkler’ hit me. I involuntarily doubled over as if punched in the stomach. My legs began to buckle. An observer might suppose I was in pain, but my whole body was crumpling under the weight of intolerable pleasure.

To my dismay, the ‘sparklers’ kept coming – relentlessly. Whenever one touched me, I would tingle in the most thrilling way, and each time it was a totally different sensation. It reminded me of when as a child I was held down and tickled and tickled and tickled. Part of me was frantically screaming for this heavenly extravaganza to stop. It seemed beyond human endurance. And yet another part of me wanted it to go on and on forever.

I recalled hearing of men of God granted such powerful spiritual experiences that they cried out to God for it to cease; literally thinking it would kill them. Afterwards some regretted their move, and instead wished they had prayed for a greater capacity to contain the blessing. “Help me bear this!” I shouted to the God I grievously needed. My voice was drowned in the holy commotion, but I somehow knew my cry had reached heaven’s throne. Soon strength was flowing into me. Gradually I gained a little more capacity to handle the torrent of pleasures rippling through me, but then another ‘sparkler’ hit and I was sent floundering even farther beyond my limits.

At the same time, every fiber of my being was ravaged by the conviction that Satan’s vomit has as much right to be in the holy of holies as I had to be here. I somehow had to get the focus off me or, like a desert ant burnt to a puff of smoke under a magnifying glass, I would die of shame. I emphatically identified with the Apostle Paul calling his righteousness dung. *How could even he survive here?* I wondered. Then in a burst of revelation I recalled him saying in that very passage that he wanted no righteousness that could be called his own but only that which comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

*Yes! That’s it!*

Remembering my spiritual union with Christ, I cried in desperation, “Jesus is worthy! Jesus is worthy!” But the words felt devastatingly hollow when trying to apply them to myself. At that moment no one in the universe could feel more unworthy than me.

I had not thought it possible, but the superhumans twirled and corkscrewed with ever-increasing complexity. The next ‘sparkler’ was like an exquisite massage penetrating my very soul. No wonder the angels were diving into the air. I, too, longed to turn cartwheels in sheer delight, but in the midst of such sensory overload my human body was unable even to stagger.

The ‘sparklers’ seemed to erupt as powerful explosions but instead of bangs they made the most amazing sounds, and instead of the stench of explosives, each emitted an exquisite and different aroma, and even a taste. The force of some would surely have knocked me over had I somehow managed to be upright at the time, yet some were as gentle as mist. Each eruption was a different color and the colors transcended so far beyond anything I have ever seen that I wondered if I had somehow gained the ability to see a wider spectrum of colors than is normally possible for human eyes. Or was it the different atmosphere? Like so much else, I was at a loss to explain it, and I was too emotionally swept off my feet to really care.

I was the vilest trespasser. I knew I should flee. Instead, frantically trying to prolong my stay, I cried, “On the cross, Jesus and I swapped destinies!” The next ‘sparkler’ sent pleasure rumbling through me like thunder, reaching depths within me I never knew existed. Is it possible for one’s internal organs to dance?

Using earthly language to describe the ethereal fireworks exploding within me is like being forced to call an ocean a big bath. Nevertheless, if you will bear with my madness I will attempt to describe the indescribable. You could think of the sensations induced by one ‘sparkler’ as like the most invigorating mountain spa, sending what seemed like a billion microscopic bubbles spiraling inside of me. As that was finally beginning to subside, another hit. The impact bore similarities to satin on bare skin, but a thousand times more rapturous. I shuddered in delight. The best I can do in describing the next is to say it felt outrageously soapy and unimaginably soothing. Whenever I was sure I could contain no more, yet another ‘sparkler’ would hit. The feelings were so intense it was as if I were experiencing reality for the first time.

I was a maggot-infested wound in the body of the Christ. I made all heaven impure. I ruined everything. “Jesus makes me worthy! Jesus makes me worthy!” I screamed in anguish. Another ‘sparkler’ caused me to sort of sneeze repeatedly and with each sneeze the most thrilling sensations raged through me.

I shouldn’t be experiencing such heavenly treats. I was stealing the rewards of the holy and pure. I drew a deep breath, “Jesus and I are one. I claim the privileges of the holy Son.” Oh, the audacity of it! A sadistic rapist passing himself off as the purest virgin would be less outrageous. “My colossal debt to justice has been paid in full! I don’t care how beyond belief it seems, Jesus was punished for *me!*” I cried out loud, recklessly determined to hold on to that claim, even if it killed me.

A ‘sparkler’ brushed my head and instantly my hair came to life. That part of me that on earth had been so devoid of feeling that it could even be cut without the slightest discomfort was now pulsating with matchless feelings. My body wanted me to squeal with delight like a little child, abandoning myself to an otherworldly euphoria. Yet my mind was clouded with the gravest of matters. Each new pleasure intensified the agony, like a starving man savoring the aromas and sights of a banquet he is forbidden on pain of death to taste; like a moth drawn to the fire that will kill it.

“Jesus is in me!” I cried.

The celestial throng continued to celebrate, oblivious to my anguish.

Another ‘sparkler’ felt unbelievably exhilarating. I nearly lost consciousness. Every circuit in my body was ready to blow. *I’ll die!*

*No!* flashed the thought. *Why should I die? Jesus died for me!*

The next ‘sparkler’ was like a beautiful, lazy drowsiness – marred only, of course, by my tortured conscience.

*I have no right to this. I’m being plain stubborn and selfish by not scurrying from heavenly pleasures like a cockroach into a hole.*

This time I had no comeback. It was so horribly true. Here I was trying to get away with stubbornness and selfishness in the very heart of – whatever this place was.

Pleasure-wise, I presume the ‘sparklers’ made heroin seem like water, but I had been so anxious to get my fill of these transcendent wonders that I wanted it even if by getting my wish I threatened the existence of the entire universe! I was so unspeakably selfish that my exquisite pleasure had meant more to me than the survival of every creature in the universe. What an appalling self-discovery! I, who had prided myself in being a cut above the average do-gooder, made Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and psychopathic serial rapists look angelic. Jesus Christ not only relinquished all this pleasure, he embraced humiliation and torture to bless someone as evil as me. And here I was, the antithesis of everything good, clawing after the highest sensations; so pleasure-crazed that my own enjoyment meant more to me than the very survival of the universe.

For virtually my entire life I had accepted as a doctrine that without Christ every human is depraved. Now it was no longer a theory; it was devastating reality. Morally, I was a slug needing to be stepped on and my splattered remains ground into the dirt.

I was finally forced to give up and banish myself to hell, my rightful home forever.

Sinful ‘pleasures’ I thought I had enjoyed on earth streaked through my mind in naked shame. Each now seemed as repulsive as if I were forced to keep eating delicious chocolate even though I was already vomiting up chocolate. *I’m disgusting! How could I have been so stupid, so vile, so perverse?* I was sickened to recall that I had once considered myself to be living an exemplary life. I am so loathsome that without Jesus trading places with me I couldn’t face the truth about me and still live with myself. Surely hell needs just one accurate mirror for the torment to be unbearable.

“Help me, Lord Jesus!” I cried in agony.

In my mind’s eye I saw myself charging into a burning building to rescue someone I loved more than life itself. Every movement began to slow down. Shielding her body, I suffer horrific burns to carry her to safety, where I collapse, writhing in agony. But it is worth every throb of pain because the love of my life is untouched by the fire. All that matters is that she’s unharmed. Seeing my wounds she says, “I don’t deserve such love!” I look on in horror as she then runs back into the fire and kills herself; breaking my heart by her death and rendering all my suffering an utter waste.

I had been on the brink of treating my heroic Savior like that. How dare I let Jesus’ agony be wasted! If I beat myself up, Jesus was beaten for nothing. He suffered horrifically to give me the right of access to all God’s riches. For his sake, I must refuse to throw aside such a costly sacrifice. For some reason – sheer love I guess – he considered me worth it. I won’t let him down. My feelings are of no consequence. I’ll seize the maximum for his sake. “FOR HIS SAKE!” I yelled. At last I found peace. “Yes, for Jesus’ sake!” I shouted in joyous relief, “For the sake of the One who died for me!”

By thinking of myself as unworthy, I was seeing myself as I truly would be had Jesus never hung upon the cross for me. But he *had* been crucified for me. He was tortured to death to swap my sin for his sinlessness. He took my guilt and gave me his innocence. And here I was on the brink of throwing it all away and reducing to a senseless waste his agonizing death for me.

The next ‘sparkler’ was like a burst of love. Another seemed almost intoxicating. Some stirred emotions I had never known on earth. ‘Immense satisfaction,’ is my best attempt to describe one such emotion, but those words seem so inferior to what I felt that it hardly seems worth the effort of groping for words. Another was a little like awe and wonder but went far beyond the boundaries of those words. Another was too outrageous to find the slightest comparison.

The only way to bear the ecstasy was to forget myself and enjoy every blessing for Jesus’ sake, delighting him by reveling in all that his torment had purchased for me. Anything from him is a priceless gift. No matter how enormous or how tiny, I arrogantly judge any of his gifts to be, I dare not push away a single one because it had cost him everything to make me worthy to receive it.

Each ‘sparkler’ seemed to put something in the air that I could actually taste with each breath. One was a little like honey, another more like apples, the next totally incomparable with anything on earth. The variety seemed endless.

No earthly experience could compete with the smallest of these pleasures. It was suddenly obvious that for a Christian, there is no such thing as sacrifice. Exchanging the greatest of earthly pleasures for this, is no sacrifice. A lifetime of agony would be a small price to pay for a few moments of these celebrations. Then from deep within me boomed a voice, *Even now you have no conception of the ecstasies of those counted worthy to gaze upon the face of Almighty God. These are mere trinkets. You have only caught the reflected glory of mere angels. Basking in the glory of the presence of the King of kings outclasses what you are presently experiencing, as the midday summer sun outshines the stars when seen from the planet of your birth.*

I gasped. The thought of anything more rapturous was beyond comprehension. Another ‘sparkler’ hit. This time, it was too much.

# Chapter 9: The Dark Planet

Awareness of my new circumstances was slowly seeping into my consciousness. I groggily opened my eyes, and sensed it was neither in the palace nor the forest. Everything had an inferior but familiar look and feel to it. I was partly excited, partly disappointed at the possibility of being back on earth. Added to the mix was a twinge of anxiety and curiosity over not recognizing my surroundings.

Then I noticed my sleeve and in shock quickly examined the rest of me. I felt violated. Someone had completely undressed me, removing every trace of clothing, and put weird clothes on me. My wallet was gone.

Theft, violation and cruelty all had a cold, familiar feel to them.

Had I had my wallet since leaving earth? I had been vaguely aware that I must have left my cell phone behind but there are things one does not keep reaching for when no longer on earth. Suddenly I craved them as reminders of what I used to regard as normality. In fact, for a moment, I ached for them as pathetically as a little child wanting his teddy.

I looked in vain for my watch and then on my bare wrist I noticed my suntan.

How did I get so brown? *Just how big a hole is there in my memory? Could I have been living here for years? Then again, if I believed in fairy tales, my change of location, clothing and skin color could have happened in an instant.* My mind darted to the book of Acts where Philip suddenly found himself in a different location. What I could recall of the account provided no clues. Then I remembered those bright ‘sparklers’ back – wherever and whenever it was. Had they emitted ultraviolet light and tanned me? If so, why hadn’t I noticed my darker skin when I was in the forest after my first exposure to the ‘sparklers’? There was no white band where my watch used to be. When had I last had my watch?

There was no time to consider all of that. My mind hurtled to more critical matters. Who had done this to me? Why? And – more disturbing still – when?

In the midst of my alarm, I recalled with relief my return visit to that palace. Had my first visit to the palace and then the forest been followed by immediately being dumped in an earth-like planet, my fears would have soared of failing tests and being exiled to lower and lower places.

Not only was I aching to savor the memory of my more recent experiences in the palace, I was itching to begin unraveling their mysteries and thinking through the implications. So many other questions were crowding in, however, and they were far too worrying and demanding not to be given top priority.

I recalled as a kid reading in a magazine about a woman who regained consciousness to find herself dressed somewhat like I was. She had been drugged and kidnapped. The article was about white slavery. In a panic, I looked around. No one was guarding me. Was this my one chance of escape? But escape to where?

I looked around and saw people and housing suggesting I was in some third world village. A remote part of Afghanistan was my wild guess. Thankfully, I could see no guns. It was highly presumptuous but I felt sure I was back on earth. Not only did the people look like humans, everything seemed as dark and grimy as my home planet.

The people had olive complexion and were wearing clothes roughly like those I found myself dressed in. I remembered my suntan. I again asked myself, *Have I been living here for years?* Belatedly, another possibility collided with my thoughts. *Or is this to help me blend in?* My mind was just easing into this thought when I began to panic over a possible implication. *Does this mean I’ll be here for years?*

I stood up and discovered that I felt physically different. Sort of – heavier. Had I become weaker, or was I in the process of readjusting to a change of gravity?

Then I saw him. He was surrounded by people. Everyone’s attention was riveted on him. He looked ordinary, and yet everything about him – voice, gestures, facial expressions – conveyed a powerful and peculiar mix of humility and authority. He had the air of a man who knew exactly where he is going; a man so confident that he had not the slightest need to prove himself to anyone. Like everyone else present, I was captivated by this man.

I strained to hear his every word.

“When someone invites you to a feast, sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted. Many who are first now will be last.”

His lip movements did not correspond with what I was hearing, and yet I still could not take my eyes off him. “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. But it is not so among you. Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man,” he drew his outstretched hands a little closer to himself, “comes not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

I had moved as close as I could. I wanted to get closer still, but there were just too many people. True, there was a small space to my front left but I decided to give that a miss. The spot was covered with animal manure – from a donkey perhaps? This was not the ideal time to discover I was wearing open sandals. At least no one was staring at me, however.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you when people hate you for my sake. Leap for joy in that day, because great is your reward in heaven.”

*He’s either a superb actor, or this isn’t Afghanistan. In fact . . .* The very notion made me sick. *If that’s who I think it is, this isn’t even the twenty-first century.*

You must think me as sharp as a sausage but every survival instinct within me kept resisting any thought of it being a different era. I recoiled from even contemplating the difficulties of finding my way to somewhere more civilized and then, without so much as a credit card or ID, somehow traveling to my home on the other side of the world. That daunting challenge would be a breeze, however, compared to trying to figure out how to time travel. How could I possibly find my way back not merely to a different country but to a different century?

He continued to speak and I found myself so stirred by his message that my very real concerns began to fall away.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you will be hungry.”

I’m not an idiot. He was obviously speaking the words of Jesus – or at least a cut down version of them but this could not be the first century. *This must be some form of an outdoor play. Quite good, actually*.

“Bless those who curse you. Do good to those who hate you. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that! But love your enemies, and lend to them, expecting nothing back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Give, and it will be given to you. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.”

The conviction and passion and intensity with which he spoke so gripped my attention as to leave me almost overpowered. To put on paper what he said is to so drain it of color and life as to be like reading about a sunrise rather than seeing one. But something far more exciting and significant was happening within me than could ever be explained in terms of his voice and body language. It was if my very spirit were being supernaturally illumined. Truths I had thought I knew were suddenly exploding into spiritual life within me. No longer were these theological tenets or moral principles. They were life; they were revelation that seemed almost on par with a discovery that would explain the entire universe. With every word, vital jigsaw pieces were snapping into place. Eternal mysteries were being resolved.

“Sell your possessions and give to the needy,” continued the man. *(He was just an amazing actor, wasn’t he? I mean he really couldn’t be* . . .) “Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out; an inexhaustible treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

“I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

A burly man near the front interrupted, “We have left everything to follow you! What then shall we have?”

*Certain actors must be interspersed throughout the crowd.* Then it struck me: *If most of those listening are the audience, how come they are dressed for the part? They must have been supplied with costumes. I’m glad I’m not paying the admission fee.*

I looked around at the women. None were wearing makeup. They had not arrived dressed up and simply changed their clothes. To be frank, the crowd smelled as if showering was not high on their priorities.

*Is this a movie set?* There was not the slightest indicator.

The man who had everyone’s attention smiled at his questioner. “I tell you, when all things are renewed and the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on thrones, judging Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or land for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and eternal life as well.”

“What fantastic teaching!” said someone, “I could listen to it for hours!” I had been so mesmerized by the proceedings that the voice startled me as though I were waking from a dream. There was something familiar about that voice. I looked around and there was Chebon with two other angels. Until then, I had not even noticed them there. No one paid them the slightest attention. It was as if they were invisible to everyone, and yet I could see and hear them as clearly as I could see everyone else.

Chebon laughed unlike anyone I’ve ever heard. “You *have* been listening for hours! The sun’s going down!”

“Teeeeeoool!” exclaimed the first angel, looking around as if suddenly becoming more aware of his surroundings.

“No one in any universe has lived those words like that Man will,” remarked another extraterrestrial. He was surprisingly chubby by angelic standards. Until seeing him I would not have thought it possible for one person to look both cute and majestic, but he did.

“They are truly living words,” mused Chebon. “They not only bring life, but they fall from the lips of God-become-man, who *is* the Living Word.”

The implications refused to register with me. Part of me wanted it to be Jesus that I had been hearing but another part recoiled at the possibility of being cut adrift from the only era I have ever known. I would sooner hold red hot metal than hold on to the thought that I had somehow lost contact with the twenty-first century. It was far more sensible to believe I had witnessed the best acting I had ever seen. If the thought of being lost in space is terrifying, I am left with no words to describe the added horror of being lost in time. I was to discover that a mind unable to embrace a terrifyingly unfamiliar reality is capable of peculiar things.

There was a slight pause. Then the chubby nonhuman said, “You know, I think I could put some of those beautiful truths into a song.”

“Teeeeeoool! Let’s hear it!” said the first angel with obvious delight. My appreciation was deepening as to how special music is to these amazing beings.

“It’s only a few lines,” replied ‘Chubby’.

“Oh, come on!” urged Chebon.

“Yes, Kairel!” chimed in the first angel.

*Kairel . . . I must remember that name.*

“Well . . . okay.”

Kairel stood and suddenly the weirdest contraption appeared in front of him, aligned to his feet, his hands and his mouth. He started blowing into it. Simultaneously, his hands began moving over the instrument as if he were playing a harp, and his feet moved, as if he were operating foot pedals on an organ, only with superhuman agility. He almost looked as if he were dancing. The fact that he was standing added to this impression. Immediately I heard a sound like I had heard in – wherever that place was. It must have been one of heaven’s musical instruments. Somehow I had never noticed any in the palace. I presumed there was just so much else happening that I had missed seeing them.

I should have been wondering what the crowd were doing and why they seemed oblivious to these unearthly beings but there was just too much else screaming for my attention.

The more I looked, the more I was convinced that Kairel was dancing with his musical contraption. It was a dance that produced the most exquisite music. I had already discovered that angels have far more flexible bodies than us. He occasionally knocked his knees together in a form of percussion. He twisted his spine in peculiar ways and this, too, seemed to affect the music.

The instrument was translucent; shimmering with light. The changing colors were neither random, nor simplistically linked to the music. They added another dimension to the music, a little like the way skilled choreography noiselessly adds a new element to music. But the experience gripped my heart far too powerfully for me to subject it to rational analysis. My skin prickled with icy goose bumps. Like a magnet, the music seemed to draw from my innermost being feelings of awe beyond anything I had ever known. Not even my previous exposure to celestial music had prepared me for this.

I cannot say whether this music was superior to what I had heard earlier in that otherworldly place or that forest. Since somehow leaving my own time and world, I had experienced so much that all superlatives have fled from me like con artists exposed by truth. My ability to compare one wonder with another was exhausted. Nevertheless, this particular music had the effect of flooding me with an awareness of how worthy is the majestic Lord of the very best any creature in any universe is capable of offering him.

Before I knew it, I found myself on my face crying out to the Creator of every good thing, “You are worthy! You are worthy! You are worthy! You are worthy!”

I have never been one to grovel and yet here I was with my face in the dirt, acting almost like a worm. To my surprise, there was something peculiarly thrilling about assuming such a humiliating position. I doubt I had ever felt so fulfilled and – despite my posture – so uplifted. In a sense I felt broken and yet I have never felt so whole. I felt like a lover who had previously thought it the height of humiliation to kiss someone’s feet and now finding it the pinnacle of delight. An exhilarating Niagara of adoring love for God was thundering through me, knocking me to the ground. I was on my face not through shame but because love had swept me off my feet.

Love changes everything.

Like a lightning flash illuminating my soul, the realization hit that in contrast to the euphoria of falling in love with a human, I was adoring the Perfect One – the One who could never disappoint. I was captivated by the beauty of the One so vast that for all eternity I will keep gaining new glimpses into the wonders of his uniqueness. Not only will there never be an insight into the Infinite Lord that disappoints, each new discovery will thrill me still further, intensifying my awe.

Whether it was supernatural, or merely psychological, I do not know, but while I was locked into adoration of the Everlasting Lord, time seemed to freeze. It seemed to last for days, maybe years. Eventually, I snapped back to a startled awareness of my surroundings because Kairel, who had previously been blowing into his musical contraption, somehow began to sing into it. I was so shocked by the musical effect that I could not have been more surprised had I heard a piano or a violin speak. He somehow used the instrument he was playing to amplify and modify his voice. The effect was stunningly beautiful. It was as if when he had previously been using the instrument he had merely been humming. Now he added words.

 All those who choose
 All things to lose
 Will forever gain.
 Those who give,
 Really live.
 And those who serve
 Without reserve
 Will forever reign.

Chebon and the other angel cheered in obvious delight.

“But it’s too short,” said Kairel. “Come on Chebon, you’re good at songs, how about some more verses?”

“Well, let’s see . . .” said Chebon, “Sing your verse again.”

Kairel repeated his song, while Chebon seemed deep in thought. The verse ended, but the music continued. Then Kairel looked to Chebon, who raised his voice and sang.

 The nail-pierced Christ
 Will pay a price
 Far beyond anyone,
 So it’s right,
 In our sight,
 That he’ll be praised
 And forever raised
 Far above everyone.

The music continued for a while.

“Chorus” announced Chebon. The music stopped and Chebon sang unaccompanied.

 He’ll give his all,
 That all his foes
 May be forgiven.
 He gives to all,
 And gave his all.
 So all to him be given.

“Thanks Gabe!” said Kairel, “you’ve made the next verse easy.” He began playing his instrument again. Then he sang.

 The Son has loved
 So far above
 All in every sphere;
 On his foes
 Love bestows.
 So him we love
 So far above
 All, in every sphere.

All three joined in the chorus:

 He’ll give his all,
 That all his foes
 May be forgiven.
 He gives to all,
 And gave his all.
 So all to him be given.

I was enthralled. Their singing made human voices sound like the rasping of a hand saw, and that angelic instrument made earthly instruments seem like industrial machines. Yet somehow, even this beautiful song was no match for the simple dignity and power of the words that had fallen from Jesus’ lips.

I suspected that had I managed to attempt conversing with these terrifyingly superior beings they would continue to treat me as if I did not exist. Anyhow, that is my best excuse I can provide for never pounding a celestial lifeform with any of my innumerable questions, including why they used such a vast variety of names for God the Father and the Son. Whatever their reason, Kairel was about to use a name for God that could hardly have messed me up more had he put my head in a tumble drier.

Kairel began to speak. “The Never-Changing, Ever-Changing One *. .* .”

That peculiar expression so seized my attention that I didn’t even notice the rest of his sentence. As I grappled with it, I was just beginning to see ways in which the never-ending Lord is never-changing and ways in which he is ever-changing, when something almost nightmarish erupted within me: concepts were somehow seeded wordlessly into my mind. They appeared as seemingly contradictory couplets, each mind-rockingly perplexing, whirling around in my quickly frazzled brain.

If it were purely bewildering I would have concluded I was suffering a mental meltdown but it was also peculiarly exhilarating and associated with heightened mental clarity and yet simultaneously so sobering as to seem to rule out some form of mania.

Suddenly, words the color of a shimmering oil slick appeared in midair. I stared open-mouthed. The characters forming what I presumed to be words were like no human language I have ever encountered. Then the words writhed and dived, twisting and twirling and hurling themselves to the ground as they spun round and round in a giddy, gaudy tangle of squirming language. The sight not only made me nauseous, they melded into meanings that sent me reeling.

I sensed that each concept was encapsulated by a word in another language – perhaps an angelic language – but in our language it is virtually untranslatable. Each concept came with total clarity and yet I find myself unable to convey them in English. Despite a degree of overlap – sometimes as little as a third – attempting English approximations is like trying to fit a foot into a glove. So much is lost in my best attempts at translation that I sweat over whether the result is so crude as to be insulting to the Holy One. I am left utterly frustrated. Reverence pushes me to omit all reference to this experience and yet it had such a profound effect on me that I yearn to pass it on. I don’t know whether I am doing the right thing by attempting this. I am reminded of Paul receiving heavenly things he was not permitted to utter and similarly for John and Daniel (2 Corinthians 12:4; Revelation 10:4; Daniel 8:26; 12:4).

There were so many couplets and the effect was so disconcerting that I could not possibly absorb it all. Many left me so confused that some may have escaped my powers of recollection. Far more disturbing than this, however, is that my best attempt to express each concept in English is so appallingly inadequate that I have waged war with myself over whether I should totally remove it all from this account, lest I be guilty of dishonoring the Perfect One. The words I have had to settle with are hopeless failures at expressing the grandeur, mystery, beauty and desirability of God as the concepts appeared in my mind. Some of my best attempts to share them seem almost blasphemous, and possibly are. I have reluctantly decided to include my crude approximations, just to convey a vague idea of what I experienced. I plead with you to understand, however, that my attempted reconstruction is unreliable and grossly inadequate.

Maybe you should pray about whether you should skip the next paragraph.

The concepts thrust into my mind included things vaguely like: The Tender-Hearted Terror . . . The Submissive Controller . . . The Unknowable Self-Discloser . . . The Never Sleeping, Always Resting One . . . The Lofty Slave . . . The Ever-Present Distant One . . . The All-Knowing Forgetter . . . The Subservient Autocrat . . . The Motherly Father . . . The Warm Aloof One . . . The Intolerant Forgiver . . . The Ferocious Dove . . . The Non-Interfering Meddler . . . The Exalted Groveler . . . The Jubilant Mourner . . . The Supportive Adversary . . . The Starry-Eyed Realist . . . The Gentle Avenger . . . The Victorious Loser . . . Flexible Concrete . . . Ordered Chaos . . . Meticulously Planned Spontaneity . . .The Harmless Executioner . . . The Warm-Hearted Iceberg . . . The Grieving Rejoicer . . . Terrifying Selflessness . . . The Sinner-Loving Sin-Hater . . . The Serious Comedian . . . The Approachable Untouchable . . . The Servant of All who is Lord of all. . . Love-Crazed Wisdom . . . Marshmallow-Centered Granite . . .

I was dumbfounded. The concepts sent swirling inside me were not just flabbergasting; my entire theology was spiraling out of control. *Do all those words apply to the Matchless One? Are some even blasphemous?* My inability to answer such basic questions was more than unsettling; it was alarming.

Yes, the Bible applies apparently bizarre words to the divine. Note the apparent contradictions in the following samples: the door and the stumbling block, the root and the branch, the rock and the bread, the vine and the vinedresser, the sacrifice and the high priest, the beginning and the end, the lamb and the lion, the lamb and the shepherd, the king of kings and the servant, the author and the word, the judge and the savior, the light who surrounds himself with darkness (that last one sounds so weird that I feel compelled to cite some references: Psalm 18:11; Deuteronomy 4:11; 5:23).

Many words in this list from Scripture are unexpected and at first glance seem demeaning to God but when grouped as virtual opposites, the result is even more disturbing. Nevertheless, when slipped between black leather covers and uttered in reverent tones they somehow lose their power to shock. I wonder how many people would accuse someone of blasphemy for applying these words to God, had the terms not have been preserved in the Bible. For example, had there been no biblical precedent, there is no way I would have dared call the Holy Lord – the most intelligent, life-giving and loving person in the universe – a rock. And if ‘rock’ at least implies durability, this certainly is not true of ‘bread’ or ‘manna’ – terms that Jesus applied to himself even though they are substances renowned for quickly turning stale and then useless. The new list of concepts that spun out of control in my mind, however, flung me out of my comfort zone almost with the force with which I had been expelled from the endless palace.

Even more unnerving than my utter confusion was that each bewildering couplet was like a hail of bullets executing my conceited complacency in assuming I knew the heart of the Infinite One. Everything I thought I knew about God might as well have been smashed by a whirlwind until even the dust of the ruins had been sucked up and flung into the depths of the sea. *Oh, the unsearchable depths of my ignorance!*

All my claim to theological understanding was exposed as fraud. I staggered at the sudden awareness that not only had I arrogantly deceived others, I had deceived myself; blinded by the brilliance of my pea-brained presumptions. I felt a kinship with Isaiah whose brief encounter with God left him exclaiming, “Woe is me! I am ruined!” I understood Job, who thought he knew God so well and ended up having to tell his Lord, “I’ve spoken of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. . . . I’ve heard of you with my ears; and now I’ve seen you with my eyes. Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes.” I thought of the apostle Paul declaring, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and unfathomable his ways!”

I remembered Jeremiah saying, “The heart is deceitful above all things and incurable. Who can understand it?” If this is true even of the human heart, what chance have I of understanding the Infinite Lord?

Only later did I remember another quote from Job: “Can you fathom the depths of God or discover the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than the heavens – what can you do? They are deeper than Sheol – what can you know? Their measure is longer than the earth and wider than the sea.” Now, having refound this Scripture while penning this account, I hold it close to my heart and pray I never again let this truth slip from me.

I writhed under the crushing conviction that I had been guilty of idol worship. Like a primitive manufacturing an idol, in my mind I had fashioned God into a static and definable and controllable god, instead of the overwhelmingly supreme, incomprehensibly complex and dynamic God that he truly is. I had had the audacity to try to diminish the terrifyingly superior Creator of everything that has ever been and will ever exist. He holds in his hands everyone’s eternal destiny and every atom in our body and everything that ever touches us. The sickening realization ripped through me that I had treated the Infinite Ruler of time and space almost as a pet – my little puppy dog who occasionally is naughty by not obeying me but who basically acknowledges that I am his master, and superior to him.

I thought of the most revered theologians and leaders in Jesus’ day who were sure they had God and Messianic prophecy figured out. They crucified the Son of God while smugly considering themselves immeasurably more godly and spiritually discerning than their ancestors who had likewise failed to recognize God’s prophets. And here was I, smugly thinking myself better than them and that I had the Infinite Lord figured out.

I fell to the ground; so overawed by the immensity of the Almighty Genius, the Supreme Expert, the Exalted Creator and Ruler of Everything, that I felt as insignificant as a grain of sand on an empty beach before the One who is so inconceivably vast that not even the entire universe can contain him.

*You are perfect,* I gasped my confession to him. *I’m depraved, ignorant, and foolishly conceited. I deserve never-ending hell; you deserve endless praise. I beg your forgiveness of my atrocious ignorance and disgusting arrogance.*

I truly loathed myself but instead of the end result being depressing it was somehow refreshing and empowering. Something similar had happened to me several times of late.

I feel I’ve let you deep into my soul; having repeatedly exposed myself to ridicule and disdain by sharing so openly with you. I’m a little apprehensive but I guess I might as well keep going and disclose yet another secret: I have what might be an abnormal dependence upon analogies. It would be over the top to say that my sanity depends on them but whenever something difficult to account for affects me, my mind remains unsettled until I can concoct some kind of satisfying analogy. Without one, I feel somewhat disconnected from reality and from ‘normal’ people. For me, an adequate analogy links the unknown to the known; the inexplicable to the explicable. It relieves me by allowing something apparently weird and almost unintelligible seem less freakish and more understandable.

So would you indulge my idiosyncrasy by considering my attempt to make more sense of how, contrary to all expectations, embracing unwanted truths about myself has turned into a positive experience? I see it as like finally admitting to myself that I have a life-threatening illness and reluctantly undergoing surgery I fear could go horribly wrong. Then, to my delight, it brings me health and vitality beyond my wildest expectations.

I felt more at peace after finding this analogy but I felt there must be another. My mind kept groping until seizing this: it is like being plagued by a guilty secret until finally confessing it to a loved one, expecting it to end the relationship, only to be met by such an outpouring of love and understanding that it results not just in relief, but in the relationship soaring to never-before-known heights of intimacy and fulfillment. That is typical of the God of Truth. He is the forgiving Lord; the God of surprises.

The music died and the extraterrestrials vanished. I scanned the area in a slight panic. They were nowhere to be seen. The crowd was dispersing. I was beginning to feel on edge. I was alone in a foreign time and place. A couple of men in front of me were engaged in an animated discussion and my alarm intensified. I heard them distinctly but could no longer understand a word of their language.

Then *everything* vanished.

# Chapter 10: Gloom

I regained consciousness.

The curiosity – even the need – to know if I had been transported to some other world kept mounting within me, but I kept my eyes firmly closed. Something of still greater significance gripped me. So much had been distracting me but I felt compelled for my own sanity to seize this moment of solitude to at least begin to process what had happened in that celestial palace.

As far as I could guess, I had experienced more sheer pleasure than any earthbound mortal has ever known. Nevertheless, as astonishing as it might seem to someone who has never been there, I would eagerly swap an eternity of such highs for the satisfaction of finally getting it right spiritually. There are things of infinitely greater value than thrills, pleasure or ease.

I gasped at having survived heavenly pleasures that would have killed even the most saintly humans, had they trusted in their own attempts to be good enough. I had stolen forbidden pleasures in a manner so virtuous that it was accepted by the Holy One. It worked, because I wanted nothing good I had ever attempted to be credited to me. I was trusting solely in the purity and utter perfection of the Son of Almighty God.

Absolutely anyone could have succeeded in this, but I nearly hadn’t. For far too much of my supposedly Christian life, I would have totally blown it. From childhood, I had realized that the only way to be spiritually transformed is by believing there is nothing I can do to buy God’s favor. By the Holy Judge’s unreachable standards, everyone on planet earth is morally bankrupt. We each owe a debt to divine justice that is so far beyond our means that we could make no progress in paying it off if we tried our utmost not just for all our lives but for all of eternity. What makes this catastrophic is that unless our moral debt is paid in full, we will be forever barred from access to the most wonderful but fearsomely holy Lord. The only solution in the universe is through trusting exclusively in Christ paying the moral debt we could never pay.

That I understood. I had foolishly slipped, however, into supposing this basic spiritual principle applies only to getting started with God. My grave mistake was imagining that once it became possible to relate to a holy God, I could then build up my credit with him through prayer, obedience, sacrifice, and so on, with which I could earn rewards and buy spiritual blessings. I failed to realize that we never move beyond total dependence upon divine mercy. All spiritual gifts are as undeserved and impossible for any human to earn as the gift of forgiveness. They can only be gratefully received by trusting God’s generosity in what Christ did for us on the cross.

At last, I understood why the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Galatia, “O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? . . . After beginning with the Spirit, are you now reverting to human effort? . . . Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law [human attempts to please God], or because you believe what you heard [trusting the message that Jesus has done for us what we could never do]?”

Even after the momentous discovery that my moral credit card would always come up *Insufficient Funds,* I could have failed in any situation like the one presented to me by those ‘sparklers.’ I could have skulked away, not being bold enough to have dared to use Jesus’ credit card instead of my own.

Facing the reality of my moral depravity had enabled me to release my vise-like grip (maybe that should be ***vice***-like grip) on my attempts to please God. This freed me to cling to the only true holiness available to humanity – the unassailable purity that comes through faith in the only Sinless Man.

I reeled at the thought of how much I must have missed out on throughout my previous life by foolishly hoping that my devotion might somehow enable me to claw my way out of the slime pit to attain a standard of perfection acceptable to God. And even after finally discovering how impossible that was, I had failed to bet all my faith on the fact that as surely as Christ bore my sins on the cross, I bear his sinlessness. Time after time, instead of stubbornly clinging to this truth, I had let it slip from my grasp. This time, I mused with satisfaction, even though I had wavered, I had hung on long enough to enjoy some of the benefits of trusting solely in the divine acceptance that comes through faith in Jesus.

A warmth flooded my heart as I pondered the endless array of miracles Christ had opened for me when, in his extravagant love, he sacrificed his all, to join his destiny with mine. He had spiritually fused himself to me on a deeper level than a man and wife could ever be one entity.

I marveled that the crucified Innocent had treated my moral imperfections as his own – and suffered the unspeakable consequences – so that I could treat his moral perfection as my own – and revel in the unspeakable consequences. He had let himself be cursed by my sins, so that I could be blessed by his sinlessness. Unlike me, he completed his part perfectly.

As I savored the victory, I somehow knew I had found the key that unlocked the vault to every treasure – to every achievement of eternal worth, every adventure worth embarking on, everything capable of giving a person true dignity and honor. It unlocked the incomparable joy of true love and fulfillment and wisdom and such priceless things as purity and goodness, whose worth no one can even conceive, until granted the undeserved privilege of basking in them.

Perhaps I should pause here. I might as well admit it: I’m a chronic worrier. When I’m not recycling old worries, my mind is on the prowl for new ones – preferably something to beat myself up over.

Right now, as I recount my experiences, I worry about disappointing you. You were hoping for an entertaining and exciting book. Will I spoil it by revealing what was churning in my head during these times?

To explain my dilemma, let’s start by stating that shaving with a chainsaw is better than becoming a Bible freak. That’s someone who reads the Bible without living the Bible, or tries to live the Bible without prayerfully studying it.

Becoming a spiritual monstrosity is an ever-present danger and most people who become one do not even realize it. The way to halve the risk is to become a Bible nerd – someone who lives and breathes the Bible. That’s my goal, and I make no apology for it. To settle for a rudimentary Bible knowledge is as shameful and irresponsible as a sixty-year-old doctor who has done nothing to keep abreast with medical advances since his days in med school.

Even when the most staggering things are happening, my mind might go on a Bible hunt or have a Bible debate with itself. Should such times be your cue to furiously turn pages searching for a better part of the book? Writers might bloat with pride when told they have produced a page-turner. That would shrivel pretty quickly, however, upon learning that this type of page turning is meant.

For you to make an informed decision as to what to do when I lapse into such a mode, it might help to know how my brain works.

Language is basic to how we think. We could barely think without it. Other aspects of our education and experiences continually influence our thinking process. For me, Bible knowledge is nearly that basic. As a jigsaw piece makes little sense until we see how it fits into the puzzle, little in life makes sense to me until I discover how it fits into biblical revelation.

In a vain search for popularity, I could remove from this book my attempts to make sense of things by seeing how they gel with the Word of God. To delete these parts, however, would be to rob you. It would be like removing gold from jewelry and replacing it with plastic.

A truth seeker without a Bible is as pitiable as an astronomer deprived of everything but his naked eye.

You might not realize just how little earth’s greatest scientists could achieve without devoting enormous time to accumulating vast amounts of knowledge from other people. To advance human understanding, even the most innovative scientists must draw upon the discoveries of innumerable predecessors. They must fastidiously study existing knowledge – even beginning with such ancient inventions as language and writing. Likewise, spiritual achievers must extract treasures from humanity’s existing deposits of spiritual truth in order to build anything of heavenly value. In this case, existing knowledge originated not from humans but from God himself and he has chosen to deposit it between Bible covers. No matter how much spiritual potential a person might have, it will be squandered unless he or she devours the Bible, hungrily drawing upon its vast reserves of truth.

I’m a Bible junkie. I’m enthralled by life-giving truth. If you do not understand my obsession, you have my heartfelt sympathy and I pray you will quickly make life’s greatest discovery. More than my infatuation with eternal truth, however, I’m head-over-heels in love with the Source of all truth, the Bible’s author. Who could be so in love, without longing to hang on to his every word?

If you insist, you can always defraud yourself by skipping my Bible-based deliberations to what you think are the good bits. That would be like a child ignoring a priceless gift in order to play with the packaging. Nevertheless, it remains an option.

With that out of the way, I’ll return to my musings about having somehow lost practical awareness of the most basic tenant of the Christian faith. Like every Christian, I had commenced my spiritual life by believing that each of us is too depraved to ever earn God’s forgiveness and approval. If ever challenged, I would rigorously defend the fundamental belief that no one can be saved except by God’s grace through faith in Christ. I remained so familiar with this doctrine and my departure from actually believing it was so imperceptibly gradual that I never realized how appallingly far I had slumped from it.

I was familiar with *Proverbs* saying such things as, “There is a way that seems right to a person, but in the end it leads to death” and “There are . . . those who are pure in their own eyes and yet are not washed from their filth”. I had no idea it applied to my current spiritual life. I considered myself so doctrinally pure and devoted to Christ. I was sure I was going the right way but it was leading me away from the Savior.

For fear of ever again letting these truths slip from my life, I rehearsed them in my mind, praying that they stick indelibly. *No matter how much we bask in God’s forgiveness and live ‘exemplary lives,’ our acceptance by God always remains totally undeserved. No matter how much we sacrificially devote our lives to serving God and living more righteously than anyone else, we remain spiritually bankrupt and as dependent upon the grace of God through Christ as the most deluded heretic or morally depraved no-hoper ever to live. The extent to which we think ourselves better than someone else is the extent to which we have fallen into deception and damming heresy.*

Too often I had foolishly surrendered to the dangerous illusion that Jesus was a million miles away from me. Now he seemed not just close, but part of me, and I was part of him. I realized that this had been the case even when he (or I) had seemed so distant.

Now that my mind had settled enough to face whatever challenges were about to assault me, I cracked open my eyes. I was back on earth again. I recognized it immediately. Back to the grime. Back to the murky atmosphere. I shuddered. *Earth seems so* . . . *contaminated*. Without even considering such wonders as the ‘sparklers’, merely the difference in the physical atmosphere and light was enough to make returning to earth leave me feeling like a cross between a multi-millionaire suddenly made bankrupt and a love-crazed romantic reeling at losing the one who means everything to her.

Until leaving it for the first time, I had never viewed my birth planet as the fall-out zone of a spiritual catastrophe. I had mourned the ravages of modern civilization upon the raw beauty and delicate balance of nature but something more tragic and fundamental was at play than I had ever realized. My mind flashed through memories of earth – flowers, sunsets, mountains. Despite innumerable traces of beauty and harmony and much to marvel at and delight in, even the most unspoiled parts still have the feel of a vandalized masterpiece. It is as if some sort of spiritual nuclear chain reaction has ripped through the entire planet, corrupting, degrading and mutating everything. It struck me with new force that sin pervades everything – even nature – on earth. Everything reeks of it.

I finally opened my eyes. I found myself staring mindlessly at my arm. Eventually, it registered that I had lost my ‘suntan.’ I was a little disappointed. I had rather liked it, to be honest. I was happier, however, to discover that I had my watch and usual clothes back. I lazily felt for my wallet and noted that I had it. I was momentarily relieved until the thought came, *What use is that in a foreign place?*

Then my heart leapt. *What if I’ve arrived somewhere where I can use it?* I excitedly looked around, only to feel myself slump more than ever. Wherever I was, it was not earth. The vegetation and what I presumed to be giant fungi were undeniably alien. Not only was the sky brown, there were two moons in it. One of them looked about one and a half times the size of earth’s moon and the other was significantly smaller. Having no idea how distant they were, it was pointless trying to speculate about their real size. They seemed to contribute to the light – everything had three vague shadows – but the result was better called gloom than light.

In an alien environment I could only resort to a wild guess, but to me the place seemed degraded. Parts seemed overgrown and yet there were also bare patches. Some bushes seemed stripped of leaves. Some trees looked dead.

Plain-colored blurs, quickly vanishing along the ground, and screeches that might have been from birds, indicated that animal life existed, but everything seemed terrified of me. *Does this mean there are predators here?* My heart thudded. *Could I be on their menu?*

There was a creepy feel to the place. The contrast made me appreciate even more the forest I had earlier visited. An insect bit me. I instinctively slapped it. It had drawn blood and I had killed it. I felt no remorse, only revulsion at the blood-sucking bug. Other hideous, insect-like creatures began annoying me.

I felt cold. I stood and I tried to walk in an attempt to warm up, but moving was difficult. Some of the plants had thorns. Could some prickles not only rip my skin but be poisonous? Maybe I was being paranoid again, but this was certainly no paradise.

I thought I heard voices. Having no better plan, I headed toward the sound. I had only taken a few steps when I fell. Wondering what had tripped me, I looked down and was shocked to see a vine twisting around my leg. Never have I seen vegetation move like that. Suddenly, small, leech-like creatures emerged from the base of the plant, about ten feet from my leg. They began swarming toward me like ants on the attack. *Is this some deadly symbiotic relationship? Does the plant catch and the swarm kill? Does the swarm get the blood and the plant get the carcass as fertilizer?* I wasn’t keen to find out.

To my alarm, however, my leg refused to budge. Thankfully, the vine had already extended as far as it could, so it could not twist higher up my body. I tried to unwrap the vine, but it was digging so deeply into my flesh that I could not get a grip on it. Conscious of the slow but relentless march of the swarm, I frantically looked around for a suitable rock. Finding one, I began pounding that murderous vine, hoping to hack through it at a point just below my leg. To my dismay, all I seemed to be doing was hammering that part of the stem deeper into the ground. I desperately needed an anvil. There were plenty of bones – I didn’t care to wonder why there were so many – but none were hard enough. A quick glance at the slowly approaching swarm increased my alarm. Belatedly, I spied a rock that might be just within reach, but the swarm was almost up to it. I had to risk it. I stretched full length and still could not reach it.

Not only was the elusive rock dangerously close to the swarm, I was about to discover I had foolishly overlooked the implications of it also being closer to the base of the plant. A movement caught my eye. Another branch of the vine was creeping toward me! I guessed it to be about six seconds away from reaching my neck, but my estimate was based on the hope that it did not have the ability to creep within striking range and then pounce.

I quickly grabbed an old bone to extend my reach. I still couldn’t reach the rock. I found a longer bone and at last managed to drag the rock toward me, just before the swarm reached it. Their progress was slow but relentless.

Rock in hand, I quickly slithered as far away from the swarm and that creeping branch as my trapped leg would allow. I was now at a different angle to where the swarm had been heading. A chill swept me as I watched them immediately change direction so that once again they were heading straight for me.

*What are they honing in on? Body heat? Smell? How can I confuse them?* I had ideas, but every one required materials I did not have. I was as stripped of physical resources as a wild animal – except for my clothes. *Hey! Clothes . . . smell! There* ***is*** *something I can do!* I dived into my pocket, grabbed my handkerchief and quickly rubbed it on both my armpits. Then, in panic-driven stupidity I threw it toward the swarm. Not surprisingly, it was too light to go the distance, and even if it had worked it would only draw them closer to me. To my relief, the throw was so pathetic that the hanky was still within easy reach. I retrieved it, tied it to a bone and deliberately stopped for a precious second to consider the best place to lob it. My throw was astray, but near enough. My smelly hanky seemed to distract a few of the swarm, but most continued their march toward me.

I sighed, then remembered that I now had a second rock. Placing the flatter rock under the vine stem, I furiously pounded on it with the other rock. This was far more effective, but progress was still agonizingly slow. *Wow! Is this stem tough! I guess it has to be if it is going to trap animals that would otherwise bite through it. In fact, what stops them from biting through? Is it poisonous?* I tried not to get any of its sap on me.

The swarm’s march was merciless. It might have been slow by most standards, but the distance it had to cover was terrifyingly short and, most disturbing of all, it was a speeding, unstoppable freight train, relative to my actions. As I pounded with even greater desperation I grew surprisingly short of breath. I put that down to sheer terror. My arms were tiring but the thought of what that swarm might do to me spurred me to pound and hack and scrape even more feverishly. I was trying to focus my efforts on just one point of the stem. Finally, I had pulverized that section until nothing was left but stringy, fibrous material. The swarm was almost on me. I pulled as hard as I could. The fibers refused to snap.

I kept pounding. Then the rock broke. *Oh, no!* I looked with fear at the swarm. It was now just seconds from me. I threw bones at the swarm, but this tactic only seemed to enrage them. I looked back at the shattered rock. *Wait! Maybe the break has created a sharp edge!* It hadn’t. I tried sawing with it anyway. I pulled hard on the vine. It might as well have been steel.

I looked at the pulverized section of the stem below my leg. *The part around my leg must surely be lifeless by now.* At last the obvious hit me. It was time to change tactics. Starting from the almost severed part of the vine, I began untwisting it from my leg. To my relief it was working but some of the swarm was already on me. The instant I was free I flipped in a backward somersault.

Well that was the plan. My execution of the move might not match an acrobat’s definition of a summersault but anything I lacked in finesse was compensated by a panic-driven need to get out of the swarms’ range in as close to lightning speed as a lumbering oaf could manage. Having completed the first stage of my skedaddle, I scrambled to my feet, ran a few paces then hastily bent down to check for blood-sucking stowaways. Horrified, I swiped a couple off that, thankfully, were only on my clothing, ran three or four more steps, then scoured my person, hunting for more.

I found no more but before I could double check, I crumpled helplessly to the ground; chest heaving, heart pounding.

My understandable mix of surging emotions after that harrowing episode was mingled with a peculiar feeling that I eventually identified as a somewhat perverse hint of ‘I told you so!’ What might have previously been ridiculed as paranoia had been vindicated. Whatever was happening in this surreal series of events was clearly not without its dangers. It was not a particularly comforting thought, however. I recalled, without any amusement, a joke about a hypochondriac’s glee at being able to prepay for his tombstone with the words carved into it, “I told you I was ill!”

Deeply shaken, a part of me had lost all desire to investigate the distant voices I could still vaguely hear. Rationally, however, I knew that in such a dangerous environment, I needed help. If there were intelligent life here, they would know better than me how to survive. Even if I just stayed out of sight but close to them, I would probably be safer.

The unpleasant (I was beginning to think ‘gruesome’ was a more appropriate word environment) had lowered my confidence that I would find innocence anywhere in this world. So when my breathing had stabilized somewhat, I put the next stage of my plan into action. (The truth is that such terminology helped me feel more in control than I actually was.) I considered it wise to sneak up to whatever was making those sounds, and size them up before deciding my next move.

Progress was slow. While eying with suspicion every plant as a potential death trap, I found myself flaying at flying, insect-like critters that were taking an unwelcome interest in my blood, while at the same time feeling the need to proceed as noiselessly as possible. When I had crept close enough, I peered through things I were not even sure were leaves and spied the source of the sounds. To my immense relief, they were angels. I didn’t recognize the few that I could see clearly but that was not surprising. There had been myriads of angels in the endless palace and these here were as beautiful as any I’ve ever seen. It was safe to show myself. I stood up.

“We don’t want them getting any crazy ideas about the Messiah being God. I’ll tolerate a few thinking he’s a great teacher – maybe even a prophet – but nothing more. You got that?”

*Eh? Did I hear right?* I panicked. *What’s going on?* I quickly ducked behind the strange vegetation again. *Have I been wrong about Jesus? They* ***are*** *angels, aren’t they?* I sneaked another look. They were angels all right. A scrap from the Apostle Paul’s writings washed up on the shore of my consciousness – something about if even an angel preaches a different gospel, let him be accursed.

My mind was thrashing in dazed bewilderment.

The beautiful angel continued. “As usual, we want as many lies out there as we can get. That’s the beauty of lying – you can have a million lies for every boring truth. What endless scope for ingenious creativity! Aren’t love and truth sickeningly dull! Where’s the challenge and excitement in such dreary predictability?”

“Your Selfishness, Sir, wouldn’t it be better to have one really good lie that all of us reinforce?” asked one of the listeners, timidly.

*Your Selfishness? Did I hear correctly? The tone of voice made it sound almost like a term of honor. Was it some type of translation glitch?*

“No, it wouldn’t, you insubordinate heap of trash!” bellowed the first angel. “Do you want another beating?”

The magnificent being who had asked the question cowered. I had never seen an angel look like that. In fact, as I looked from face to face, they had the unmistakable fearsome appearance of angels but even the bully somehow seemed to lack an element of nobility and confidence I had come to expect in angelic facial expressions and body language.

“While these suckers are skirting around some lies, priding themselves in avoiding them, they’ll fall for another lie and never know it. Let them see through some lies and they’ll think they’re smart enough to see through *all* lies without reliance upon their God. Works every time!”

“Please, your Exalted Wickedness . . .” said one, feebly.

“Well, almost every time!” snapped the first angel, showing obvious annoyance.

“Please, Sir . . .” he repeated.

“What is it, you pathetic blob!”

“O Glorious Savage, these people aren’t like pagans – they know their Scriptures.”

“Ha! Why do you think I keep getting you to study those despicable writings? You haven’t been slacking off, have you? Because if you have . . .”

“Oh, no, sir! I’ve studied hard.”

“Well, why do you think I’ve been hounding you about this? Know your enemy, vacuum head, know your enemy. Know their Scriptures better than they do. Confuse them. Keep whispering wrong interpretations into their minds – interpretations that will inflate their egos, making them think they’re ever so clever, or interpretations that appeal to their lust or greed or laziness or whatever.”

“Excuse me, Most Evil Genius,” said another, “but some of them sincerely pray to their God for understanding of the Scriptures.”

“Okay, we’ve got a problem there, but they are only a tiny minority. We’ll have to keep telling them how good they are at understanding deep scriptural truths.”

“Please, sir . . .”

“What, now?” he snapped.

“Won’t that just encourage them?”

“Oh, why do I waste my time with you! No, bug brain, it won’t encourage them! It will fill them with self-confidence. Before long they’ll think they can slacken off in seeking their God for understanding of his writings.”

“Brilliant, sir, just brilliant!”

“Of course it’s brilliant! That’s why I’m me and you’re you!”

I’d seen enough. If these nonhumans were quaking before the slightly bigger one, he would grind me to dust. But could I retreat without snapping a twig or doing something to give myself away?

The head honcho continued: “Exploit all their weaknesses. Take, for example, their prejudices. Play on the fact that their Messiah was brought up in a despised village. Hush up the fact that he was actually born elsewhere – in the prophesied location. Exploit the leaders’ fear of a popular uprising and of the occupying army’s response. Patriotism’s a wonderful thing! Keep whispering in their ears that he might instigate violence. Make the leaders jealous of his popularity. Keep praising their traditions, whenever these traditions deviate from the spirit of God’s law. Take full advantage of every way in which their Messiah’s behavior differs from these traditions. Keep them so focused on nitpicking the letter of the law that they never realize they have drifted from real love.”

“O Masterful Tyrant . . . ,” began an angel. He might have been slightly smaller than his instructor, but he was still massively built, perhaps eight-foot tall, with spectacular looks. “Their weaknesses that we should exploit are hate, prejudice, fear, greed, jealousy, selfishness, prayerlessness, trusting themselves rather than their God, and so on, right?”

“Yes, slug slime! Haven’t you got that into your head yet?”

It was pathetic to see this magnificent being cringing as he tried to complete his question. “Then, please Most Excellent Oppressor, if these are their weaknesses, how come all of us live like that?”

I recently shared this incident with some friends. They burst into laughter. I have managed to forgive them now. In fact, having wrestled with my friends’ response, I have come to envy them. The big difference between them and me is that I was there. This massive being was about to be tortured. Even now, the haunting memory of the terror on his face sends shudders scurrying through me, ruining all chance of me scrounging any amusement out of this incident. The memory remains like a horror movie in which a corpse is dumped beneath murky waters. No matter how much I want it to stay hidden, it inevitably ends up floating to the surface when least expected, chilling me once again.

The bully’s face distorted with rage so terrifying as to make a snarling wolf look like a church mouse.

“No, no! Please, your highness, sir, I am just trying to learn.”

The distraction seemed the ideal time for me to get away, but I think I was running more in terror than out of careful planning, especially as the smaller humanoid’s blood-curdling cries began. Yes, I still have nightmares about those tormented screeches.

I kept running, crashing through undergrowth. I looked back one last time to ensure I was not being followed. It was then that I must have smashed into the massive angel. Don’t argue with me over whether otherworldly spiritual beings are physical. Maybe I whammed into his forcefield or something. All I know is that hitting a brick wall could not have been more painful. In an instant, I was on the ground, groveling at the feet of a nine-foot hulk, whose face was clouded with hate. His ghoulish presence was so overpowering that I longed to shrink, transmute into a cockroach and find a rock to slither under in shame-faced defeat.

*What a way to discover a gaping hole in my theory that I’m invisible to angels! But it definitely seemed as if I were invisible to the other angels.* My mind whirled in confusion.

“Well, well! What have we here?” he snarled. “It’s been ages since I had my very own prisoner.”

I was still panting uncontrollably from my run. *There’s never an iron lung around when you need one,* came the thought. Despite the distance and my continual puffing, I could still hear the other angel’s whimpers. *If they do that to their own . . . If such a powerful being is reduced to such . . .* I couldn’t bear to think of the implications.

I was a mouse staring at a tiger as I strained my neck to look at this ferocious giant.

I snapped shut my eyes. *God, HELP! Get me out of here!* I opened my eyes to verify that I was now home or in some paradise. Nothing had happened! Again I shut my eyes. *NOW!* I peeked a look. I’d settle for any place other than at the feet of that ogre. *I’m still here!* I cried out to God. *NOW, P-L-E-A-S-E!* Still nothing. *God, you got me into this, GET ME OUT!*

What had happened to God?

# Chapter 11: [Enslaved](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CGrantley%5CDocuments%5CNET-BURST.NET%5Cnet-burst.net%5Cchristian-fiction%5CMy%20DocumentsNET-BURST.NETnet-burst.netchristian-fictionfree-christian-book-3.htm)

“Kiss my feet!” demanded my captor.

His bare feet were plastered with mud and filth. He had obviously stepped in a variety of animal droppings over a long time. I doubt if he had washed for years. The stench made me want to vomit. What I was being asked to kiss must have been writhing with enough germs to kill a battalion. He used no force or threat. I knew what he was capable of. That was enough. I kissed his feet, in between gasps for breath.

“Now repeat after me,” he ordered, “I am the lowest scum in the universe.”

*You are the lowest . . .* I might have felt a rebel on the inside, but unspeakable horrors threatened like a knife to my throat. “I am – (gasp) – the lowest – (gasp) – scum in – (gasp) – the universe.”

*Why am I so short of breath? Is this a panic attack or something to do with the atmosphere?*

“I exist only to serve my master,” he coached.

“I exist – (gasp) – only to – (gasp) – serve my – (gasp) –master.”

“I hate God for abandoning me.”

I couldn’t get the words out. I think it was more exhaustion than heroism.

“Doesn’t matter,” he snapped, “God’s no use to you here, pimple puss!” The tone in his voice oozed such disgust it would make even a compliment seem like the grossest insult. I marveled that such non-verbal subtleties could be transmitted cross-species. As I write, having had more time to think about it, I take this as evidence that all of us were originally designed by the same God, no matter how diverse we might be and how much we might mutilate his handiwork.

“Get on your feet!” said the tyrant who was now my slavemaster, “You’re coming with me, plaything!”

*What can I do? There’s no way I can outrun him. I don’t know if I’ll ever stop puffing from my last run! At my best, I couldn’t outfight even the weakest angel I’ve seen, let alone this thug!*

Yes, I knew all the theory. In Jesus’ name, demons should be subject to me. I had thought of demons as nasty little critters that I might have a fighting chance with, if only I could somehow muster enough faith – and energy – to shout loud enough to bluff them. I did not even know if these evil beings were demons. I thought of how *Ephesians* seems to list different classes of evil spiritual powers when saying we wrestle not against flesh and blood. Whatever they were, these demented beasts were monsters! They were totally out of my league.

I stumbled to my feet as best as my breathlessness would allow. Doubled over, and heaving like an asthmatic, I meekly staggered behind him. I don’t precisely know what a demigod is but I guess I was treating him as one.

He brought me to the other angels. “Look what I’ve got!” he proudly exclaimed.

The others seemed envious. Some came up and handled me. I felt dirtier than I’ve felt in my entire life.

“Where does he come from?” asked one of them.

“Dunno. Haven’t interrogated him yet.”

“Where are you from?” demanded one of them. The intensity and violence in his stare made me wonder how close I was to heart failure.

“E-earth,” I stammered.

Their faces filled with skepticism.

I knew I was about to be beaten.

“I want the time-space coordinates NOW,” snapped my new owner.

*Yeah,* . . . *right!* “Er – um – ahh . . .”

“Don’t mess with me,” screamed the would-be demigod, in hate-crazed fury.

I panicked. “Please, Sir,” I begged, “I don’t know what’s been happening to me. I’ve been taken from world to world against my will. I’ve been here less than an hour. I don’t even know where I am. Is this hell?”

At the mention of hell the angels looked uncomfortable.

“He really must be confused,” said one.

“No, this isn’t hell,” growled my nemesis, “but when we end up there, be assured that you’ll be keeping us company. We’ll make sure you get every bit of torment that’s dished out to us.”

The others laughed, nervously.

*It’s going to get worse? I thought I was a Christian! What went wrong? Why didn’t God protect me? Why had my master – hate using that word – said earlier that God is no use to me here? Was he bluffing? He certainly seemed confident.*

“***Where*** did you say you are from?” asked my owner incredulously.

“Planet Earth,” I said, worrying about where this would lead.

“**Earth?** As in dirt?”

The question floored me. My brain jammed. With each millisecond of silence I could sense my interrogator becoming increasingly impatient. I panicked like having stalled a car on a railroad track when a freight train is hurtling toward me. That just compounded my brain malfunction.

“Yes,” I finally blurted, having no confidence in my response.

“You’ve ***got*** to be kidding! Who in their right mind would call their own planet, ‘Dirt?’ ”

“Well . . .” I’d never had to answer such a question before.

My subjugator started poking at a gadget he held in his hand. I’d never noticed it before. “Ah, here we are! ‘Stilas, third planet from the star Seutone 462, known by the majority of its most advanced lifeforms as *Earth*.’ He looked at me, “Earth? What an unimaginative name! Surely symptomatic of a dull, inferior breed. You do breed don’t you?” He stared hard at my body with eyes that seemed like cold blades of steel.

Words continued to elude me.

“Let’s see . . .” he fiddled with his gadget again. “Yes . . . formed by sexual reproduction . . . gestation period approx 4.65 quintones or 270 revolutions of their planet.”

He looked up. “Well!” he announced cheerfully, “We’re going to have such fun together, aren’t we?”

I said nothing.

“AREN’T WE!”

I nodded.

“Now what are we going to feed you, my pet?” he said with mock affection. He thought for a moment or two. “I know! You’d love a nice meal of slugs, wouldn’t you!”

*Oh, no! Does he mean real, live slugs?*

“Ooooo! You’re so evil,” gushed one of the underlings. Apparently, that was high praise. There could be no denying that I had been profoundly sobered by overhearing in the forest the other angels’ assessment of human morality. Nevertheless, I still found myself unable to control the disgust I felt toward the sickeningly beautiful sadists who had reduced me to a cowering slave.

“Oh, and don’t be concerned if you have difficulty keeping the little critters down,” my master said sweetly, “If that happens, you’ll enjoy the double treat of eating your own vomit.”

I was sent off to look under rocks for slugs and bring them back to the group, presumably so they could all enjoy seeing me eat them alive. No one followed me. *The power of these beings! They’re not even bothering to guard me. I bow to their every wish.* Though superficially beautiful, each of them seemed like a dozen giant crocodiles, cobras and grizzlies melded into one terrifying mass, pumped with superhuman intelligence and propelled by unspeakable evil.

Over and over, my slavemaster’s words ran through my head, “God’s no use to you here.” Suddenly I stopped. *Hang on! God is God. There can be no place in the universe where God isn’t. Wherever I am, God must be here, too.*

I could never blame God for abandoning me. Only a conceited, self-infatuated fool would think he deserves anything from God, after the way we’ve each treated him. But hasn’t God promised never to forsake us? Didn’t I once, in the blasé state of not being in a crisis, say that God has staked the integrity of his character on that promise? If only such a naïve view of life worked here!

A saying I had once composed smashed into my consciousness. “The only difference between the valley and the mountaintop is how far you can see. You should walk through the valley according to what you saw from the mountaintop.” *Is that the empty platitude it now seems? Or is it my only link to reality? Bah! I prayed for deliverance and nothing happened. Can anything be more real than those demonic beasts that towered over me?*

It seemed an eternity ago, but I could still vaguely remember those ‘sparklers’. Right now, that weird event seemed more a delusion than a mountaintop experience, but if it held any truth at all, it must be that spiritual life is never a question of what anyone deserves. It is solely a matter of what Jesus has done for every single human being. *According to the theory* (yes, in my mind it had shrunk to a mere theory) – *all that any of us need do is to let God have his way in our lives – let him forgive us and set us free. Ah, free – I could sure use some of that right now! Anyhow, at the moment Santa Claus seems more believable.*

In the past, I’ve told others to trust God and ignore their feelings, but I’m not grappling with feelings here. I’m face to face with the grimmest of realities. The theory is that God is too loving and faithful to have abandoned me. *Then why am I in this mess? I didn’t ask to be here! I didn’t turn my back on God.*

The soul-crushing reality is that I had prayed and nothing happened.

I recalled what someone once told me. His assertion was that God loves us so much that, as a father wants his favorite son to become like him, so God wants us to become like him. I could swallow that bit. It was the rest that was harder. To be regal like God is, the theory continues, we must exercise divine authority. (Even at the best of times that seemed to me too much like hard work.) The Almighty has given us that authority, but it won’t help us behave even slightly Godlike if, through fear, ignorance, or whatever, we never use it. So, claimed this guy, to help us grow up and take upon ourselves the dignity God wants us to enjoy, he lets us get into situations he knows we can get out of, when we use the authority he has given us. Then, goes the assertion, God restrains himself from delivering us, waiting for us to learn how to be Godlike.

*Another beautiful theory!* I sarcastically told myself, as I found a slug under a rock.

*Face it!* I chided myself, *The theory might seem as real as Mary Poppins right now, but it’s your one and only hope.* I shuddered to think what would be involved in being that tyrant’s plaything. *What if it’s up to me whether I remain enslaved? What if I could have remained free if only I hadn’t given in to intimidation?*

*No human is a match for these crazed beasts! They’re so vicious and unpredictable that they’re even afraid of each other!*

Then came the counter-argument: *If the Almighty were to fight on my behalf, the size of the foe would be irrelevant. But is God on my side?* I thought for a moment, then carefully rehearsed the theory to myself in a way least likely to devastate my flimsy faith. Any suggestion that God’s acceptance depended on me would scuttle me. *The theory is that God chose to be on my side, not because I’m good or desirable, but because he’s so good and loving that the Son of God has gone to the extreme of sacrificing his life to make it possible.* I thought I had already proved that to myself in the ethereal palace and here I was back to square one again.

It was just making enough sense to be half convincing when another crushing thought came thundering through my brain. *What if the era I’m now in is some time prior to Jesus’ sacrifice?* I pondered the dilemma and hoped it didn’t matter. Never had I needed so desperately those peculiar Scriptures about Jesus being slain before the foundation of the earth. I felt mildly confident about it because for years I had been convinced that Jesus died for all generations. His sacrifice was as much for those who lived and died before he physically entered the human race, as for those born after his return to heaven. That seems to fit snugly with the full teaching of Scripture. My memory flung in my direction a key verse from somewhere in *Hebrews* that says that if Jesus’ one-off death had not been sufficient for all generations, he would have had to die over and over since the dawn of human history. Of necessity, the destiny-determining death and resurrection of Christ occurred in a specific point in time and space, but it was an act of the Eternal Lord.

Drawing comfort from the words, ‘Eternal Lord,’ I tried convincing myself that with an eternal God, timing is not an issue. If I were somehow bouncing from era to era, surely the Almighty could.

Besides, I assured myself, Jesus and his disciples cast out demons before his death and resurrection. If that made me feel better it was only for a split-second before another thought gatecrashed the party. Remembering the disciples brought me face to face with the memory that in least one instance they had failed to cast out a demon and Jesus had to rescue them. I tried to push this aside and spur myself on, *I must do my utmost to exercise my Christ-bought authority. There’s no other option! I can’t outrun these superhuman brutes. I can’t imagine myself outsmarting them. And even if I escaped, where would I go? I’d still be in this God-forsaken . . .*

In my delicate state of mind, “God-forsaken” was an unfortunate choice of words.

I lifted a sizable rock and recoiled in horror. Under it was a hideous centipede-like creature. Its every leg was the size of the centipedes I was used to on earth. When I felt I had run a safe distance away and at last my heart began to return to its normal rhythm, I reverted to my mental wrestling. *But for this to have the slimmest chance of working I need faith! On a scale of one to ten, my faith must be around minus 100 right now. I’m afraid even to utter a word in their presence.*

Then the Scripture came to haunt me: “Faith comes by hearing . . . the word of Christ.” *Fat lot of good that is – cut off from the Bible and from all preachers!*

A mere four chapters a day gets you through the Bible in a year. I had at least the memory of a few Scriptures, and over my life I had read through the entire Bible many times, but it seemed easier to give up in despair than to try to dredge Scripture up from the murky depths of my memory and then try to build up faith with the fragments. *Being a defeatist is about the only thing I’m good at! My faith has always been pathetic. I’ve never had any experience with demons. Over all my life I’ve had little success with answered prayer. If I was like that in the times when I had so much going for me, it’s ridiculous to think I could do better now that things are a thousand times harder.*

Then I returned to the inescapable reality: If my chance of successfully using my faith to get out of here is only one in a thousand, it is still my only chance. I might as well focus all my efforts on that one, solitary chance.

I scanned the archives of my mind for Paul writing that absolutely nothing could separate us from God’s love. In my frazzled mind I blew off the dust but the print was still faint. *Did he include demons in his list? Can’t remember. I think it was something along those lines.*

“. . . in God I trust; I will not be afraid.” That fragment of the Bible was just beginning to pump a little faith into me when a bolt of panic shot through me. *Hey, doesn’t the psalmist go on to indicate he’s referring to fearing mortal man?* I strained to remember. I was only eighty percent sure, but that was all it took to swamp me with despair. *If only I had the luxury of being overpowered by mere humans!* Icy terror swept over me, shattering my tiny jar of faith. All my faith drained out like water. I angrily fought off more of those insect-like flying blood-suckers.

To my annoyance, David and Goliath seized my consciousness. There was no point remembering that. Not only was his foe merely a gigantic human, I’d always regarded little David as a superhero whose boldness I could never come within a thousand miles of. *Did he say to Goliath something like, “I come to you in the name of the Lord”?* Somehow, I found that statement comforting. I might not have faith worth mentioning, but “the name of the Lord” somehow seemed simple and obtainable.

*The word is near you, even on your lips (or was that ‘mouth’?) That’s Romans 10 – or is it 9? – no, I think it’s 10. Oh, you ant-brain! Stop fretting about the reference!* While lifting more rocks, I continued struggling to haul up Scriptures along these lines, hoping to convince myself. The issue was not whether God is powerful enough to deliver me – that is a no-brainer – but did he *want* to deliver me and if I took a stand, has he promised not to let me crash to oblivion?

*What if mentioning Jesus just makes them angry?* The thought of dealing with an even more enraged evil being was too much. That poor angel’s screams, though physically over, were still echoing in my head. *But I’ve got no alternative! I’m going to have to go back there and somehow try to use Jesus’ name as if it were a loaded gun.*

I prayed feverishly.

With a few slimy slugs squirming in my hand, I made my way back to the angels with the enthusiasm of a naughty schoolboy sent to the principal’s office. The moment I saw one of them, I wanted to slink away to try yet again to muster my elusive faith.

“Oh, there you are!” he whispered. It was the angel I had felt sorry for – the one who had received the horrendous beating. “Come with me! I can get you away to a safe place.”

Was this the answer to my prayers?

“Quickly!” he whispered, “Your only chance is this instant!”

I followed, wondering if I were making the mistake of my life. *Who can trust a demon or fallen angel or whatever he is?*

“Quietly!” he ordered, showing fear on his face. “Do you have any idea what will happen to you if you’re caught trying to escape?”

Comforting thought!

As we silently crept farther away from where the others were, the speed picked up. I had great difficulty keeping up. I was gasping so much that I concluded that the atmosphere must have less oxygen than on earth. I kept pleading with him to slow down but he wasn’t interested.

A crash in the undergrowth startled me into looking up and I was suddenly face to face with a muscly, six-legged, car-sized carnivore. Its massive, fur-covered hind legs seemed designed for leaping and its front legs ended in formidable claws. Somehow its solitary, wrap-around eye was highly disturbing. What riveted my attention, however, was its bared fangs in shark-like rows. Its colossal jaws widened even farther as it emitted a spine-shuddering noise that fell somewhere between a hiss and a snarl. I was frozen in fear but fleeing was hardly an option anyhow. I guessed it could seize me in a single pounce and rip me apart in seconds. We stared at each other: a hunter and its prey.

The angel had been leading the way. He ploughed on, oblivious to my peril. I found myself too petrified to call out. In a flash – quicker than you can read this – I debated with myself. *Is there any point in praying? God seems to have abandoned me. But Jesus promised never to leave or forsake his followers. Why not try praying anyhow? What do you have to lose?*

Before I could complete my inner debate, a terrifying roar brought me closer to a heart attack than I think I have ever been. The carnivore fled. As fast as my trembling body would allow, I spun round in the direction of the roar, wondering what new terror I faced, and there stood the angel. *Had he made that sound?*

I can barely imagine what a disappointment to brainwashed viewers of action movies I must be, but the sheer trauma of the encounter incapacitated me. I was nearly paralyzed by the shock and again peculiarly breathless but the angel, unable to get me to walk, impatiently dragged me along. Eventually, the increasing pain of my feet being scraped across the ground and my maddeningly slow recovery met at a point where I managed to stumble on independently.

My brush with death confirmed that I now had little choice but to stay with him. *What a situation to be in!* I lamented, *. . . having to regard evil as my protector.*

Not that I needed anything to make me feel even more miserable, but I was still fighting off nasty bee-sized flying critters. I still had not got around to counting their legs, but they were roughly like insects.

We had not walked much farther when a sudden growl broke the silence. I shot in the air like a shell-shocked jack rabbit, and then froze.

“Keep walking!” ordered the angel.

I remained nailed to the spot.

“It’s just fungus!” He was clearly disgusted by my ignorance-cum-cowardice.

“Fungus?” I asked in amazement. *Fungus that growls like an animal?* I puzzled over the enigma, eventually concluding that the fungus must somehow imitate the sound of an animal of prey to keep grazing animals away. “How does it produce the sound?” I asked.

The angel ignored my question. Yes, I found the notion of growling fungi intriguing, but I suspect it was less scientific curiosity than my desperation for a distraction from having to think about my predicament. I must have Brussels sprouts for brains, because I kept testing that brute of an angel’s patience by pestering him for an answer.

“Gas!” he finally blurted, in a way that convinced me that I dare not say another word. From that one word response I guessed that the fungus must produce gas that builds up in chambers within it until just the slightest vibration on the ground releases the gas, and the sudden expulsion of gas produces the sound. *But why doesn’t a mere breeze set it off?* We passed another fungus of the same species and I noticed spreading out from it along the ground what looked like rootlets. I guessed these must act like trip wires.

Eventually the Scripture, “Set your minds on things above,” emerged in the untamed wilderness that is my mind. At that reminder I grew annoyed at myself for squandering valuable time pursuing trivia when I was in a life-or-death situation. I remembered the disciples snoozing at the critical time in the Garden of Gethsemane – the very time when they should have been following Jesus’ lead by praying like him. So I resolved to silently pray for God’s help and for increased faith, even though, to my annoyance, my mind kept wandering, and God continued to seem a million miles from me.

We walked and walked and walked. I was nearing exhaustion when at last we came to the mouth of a cave. “Now you’re *my* slave! Get in there!”

I was afraid of such! *At least he’s not quite as powerful as the other angel.* I wildly hoped that was some kind of advantage, but I failed to imagine how. He towered over me and had the biceps of a rhino.

“Hey!” I said with some alarm, as I peered into the cave, “could there be anything venomous in there?”

“Dunno! How do you expect me to know your susceptibility to venom?” He roughly thrust me toward the cave. “Get in!”

I have no explanation for the marked drop in temperature but it felt deathly cold inside in that dark hole. “Hey! I’ll freeze in here!”

Unconcerned, he began piling massive boulders over the mouth of the cave. *The strength of that brute . . . !*

“I’ll be back in a few days when the others give up looking for you.”

*A few* ***days****!* “What will I eat?”

“Who cares? Am I your nursemaid?”

“I felt so sorry for you when you were beaten,” I told the angel, hoping he would soften toward me.

“Oh, you’re such a good friend!” he gushed. “You’re going to make me feel sooooo much better. Do you know why?”

The mock friendliness in his voice convinced me that I didn’t want to know, but I felt the need to humor him. “Why?”

He continued in his sickly sweet tone, “Because from now on, whenever I’m hurt, I’m going to take it out on you.”

*I shouldn’t have asked.*

He had almost finished sealing off the entrance to the cave when I remembered I was going to have to breathe – for days. He didn’t care.

You might think it inconceivable but as I languished in total darkness, I suffered something horrendously worse than my dire external circumstances. Freezing in a sealed hole, losing everything, and being enslaved by a sadistic tormentor were as nothing compared with the empty deadness, darkness and devastation inside of me. God had abandoned me.

To glimpse a shadow of the unutterable agony of my soul, take the feelings of a jilted lover, add the shock of being ruthlessly betrayed by your best and only friend, and combine it with the death of the most precious person in your life.

I lamented ever having been born, and regretted ever having heard about God.

All the wealth of a million worlds, all the friends in the universe, every conceivable high (even all those ‘sparklers’) were utterly useless. They could never drag me out of the unthinkable calamity of losing God.

After far too long, I somehow clawed my way toward sanity enough to realize that no matter how angry, spurned and betrayed I felt, the only possibility of escape lay in trying to believe the best about God, despite the crushing weight of all the evidence to the contrary.

Then something in Jesus’ life that had always puzzled me came to mind. It might be boring to you but I cannot put into words how much it meant to me at that critical time. I recalled once hearing that in the original, Scripture speaks of Jesus being *driven* by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. I was not even sure if that were a correct rendering and in any case what happened to Jesus must have been very different to my predicament. Spurious coincidence or not, however, *driven* sounds as forceful and involuntary as my arrival on this God-forsaken (I despise that word) planet.

Regardless of that, what felt as comforting to me as a lifebuoy thrown to a drowning man, was that despite the torrid time Jesus must have had in the wilderness, it could not have meant that God had abandoned him. Peculiarly, in fact, plummeting to those depths seemed associated with God’s approval. It happened immediately after what was presumably the highlight of Jesus’ earthly life so far. He had just been baptized, filled with the Spirit and the Almighty had audibly proclaimed his love and approval of Jesus.

What also meant more to me than ever before was that immediately after his ordeal in the wilderness, Scripture speaks of him still being filled with the Spirit. How Jesus felt in the midst of oppression is anyone’s guess but God had been with him through it all.

Surely, I’m in a completely different category and yet –

“Here they are!” The voice was faint. No doubt the boulders sealing the cave had something to do with that. I strained to hear. There had seemed something disturbingly familiar about the voice.

“Your two-timing slave came willingly! I saw it all, O Magnificent Despot!”

With those few words everything clicked like the cocking of a gun pressed against my head. The voice sounded like one of the angels I had seen earlier. Never have I ached so bitterly to be wrong. It seemed to me as clear as a death sentence, however, that he was talking to my former master. I must have been the ‘two-timing slave’ who had ‘came willingly.’ *Oh, great! Just what I always wanted – a* *tattletale demon. Things keep getting better and better!*

Someone moved one of the top rocks blocking the entrance. Without daring to move closer, I quickly found a climbable side of the cave and scrambled high enough to peer through the crack. I was just in time to see my latest captor crumple to the ground in sheer terror. Had he been outside the whole time? Maybe I had not been in the cave for as long as it had seemed.

He looked like trembling jello on the ground as he awaited his fate. “Exalted Lord,” he addressed the brutish one, “I’m not smart like you. He tricked me! It’s all his fault!” His pathetic whimpering was not exactly encouraging and I certainly hoped the bigger one didn’t believe him.

“Move the rocks away,” ordered the gorilla who had come to repossess me.

They brought me out. I looked around. All of the angels were there. My original master scowled at me. “Do you know what we do to two-timers like you?”

No, I didn’t and I certainly had no interest in finding out. *Here’s my chance to discover why I had heard my second captor screaming like nothing I’ve ever heard before just after I had fled in terror. Come to think of it, their pain threshold is probably far higher than mine.*

It was obvious that at any split second my torture would commence. I began to lecture myself. *Pull yourself together! You’ve got about two seconds to pluck faith from nowhere and try to exercise the authority that is meant to be yours as a child of God. “Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.”* I was thankful for that Scripture rising from somewhere within, but I fiercely tried not to dwell on the implications of that verse ending with “the world,” since wherever I was, it was far from the world in which that Scripture was penned.

I cleared my throat, “Ah hum!” *Oh,* ***brilliant*** *start!*

“In the name of Jesus . . .” I said, with all the attention-grabbing power of a squashed flea.

“How do you spell that?” asked my master. He started spelling into the gadget he held in his hand. “G-E-E-Z-”

*Oh, no! Don’t tell me he’s never even heard of Jesus! Hey, I’d heard them talking about him!* My mind skidded back to the conversation I’d overheard. Alarmed, I couldn’t recall any mention of Jesus’ name. I’d assumed Jesus was the Messiah they spoke of but what if it were some other person on some other planet?

“Jesus!” I squeaked. I had intended it to be a shout, hoping that volume would count for something. I spelt it out, “J-E-S-U-S!” He pointed his gadget at me as if trying to record what I was saying.

Peering intently at the gadget he muttered, “Oh, here we are! ‘Jesus: one of the countless thousands of make-believe gods on a backward little planet in what they call the Milky Way.’ ”

“Liar!” I screamed, trying to sound far more certain than I felt. Then, in what I was sure was a flash of genius, I added, “And if earth’s so backward, how come you speak English!”

He erupted into the most terrifying laugh I’ve ever heard, “You pathetic little creature! You have no conception of my intellectual powers, have you! Don’t you think I can scan your brain and instantly lock in to your language system!”

My mind spun at the implications of an opponent with such intellectual power. I tried to pull myself together. Was he bluffing about his ignorance of Jesus? I craned my neck to glimpse his head. *Surely such monsters would have no need to resort to bluff. Trying to make sense of any of this is migraine material!*

Still having no alternative, I mustered every bit of voice I could find, “In the name of Jesus, be gone!”

Nothing happened. My faith – desperate wishful thinking? – slumped even lower. Then an angel staggered. He fell. And as he did, others began to stumble.

Suddenly everything vanished.

I was safe!

I hoped.

# Chapter 12: Double Take

As I slowly regained consciousness, my eyes remained firmly closed. At that early stage, my body was almost paralyzed. To be honest with myself, I guess fear added to my reluctance to open my eyes. As I lay there – wherever ‘there’ was – you have (indeed, I might have) expected my thoughts to rush back to that cliffhanging battle of wills with those evil beings before last losing consciousness. I had a pressing need to make sense of it all, plus the obvious need to ascertain how safe I now was. Instead, I distracted myself by attempting to put a positive spin on my lapses of consciousness.

No matter how annoying, they must give my senses some sort of rest – perhaps rest that I needed more than I realize. Even when highly pleasant, so much new stimulation must take its toll. To my frustration, however, when first coming to I felt more exhausted than ever, as if waking from heavy sedation.

Then a new thought hit. What if it took ages to be transported to each place and I had been put into some form of suspended animation to spare me the boredom? What a comforting thought! The further away I was from those evil thugs, the better.

I was only beginning to consider this when an alternative hypothesis formed. What if it were the opposite? What if I actually sped to the new destination at such a terrifying speed that it was a gross assault to the senses or my body that I was mercifully spared the trauma by some sort of general anesthetic? My return trip to the palace did not seem to fit, but I lost interest in perusing that thought.

I was becoming rather uncomfortably aware that I was on a cold, hard floor. I changed position a little and quickly found myself puzzling over how I could have so quickly crashed from the heights of worship to such dismal unbelief. How could I have even wondered whether God had abandoned me? I was sickened to realize how little of God’s truth must actually be within me, if it has to be propped up by circumstances. Despite my superficial familiarity with the words of Scripture, it must be more like cotton candy inside me than the concrete of my belief system. Truth does not change according to circumstances nor with the boldness with which others make their own assertions.

As intriguing – indeed important – as that might be, I could only procrastinate for so long. Feeling stronger, I opened my eyes and discovered I was in a tiny circular room. At the perimeter, the flat floor curved seamlessly upwards and became the walls, which remained perpendicular until curving into a domed ceiling. The floors, walls and ceiling were all made of the same featureless, white material. The cornerless, windowless and doorless little room was completely bare except for a table and chair. There was no way out.

Then a possibility smacked me. *I did win back there, didn’t I?* A dart of panic fired through me. *That beast didn’t somehow turn the tables so that I’m now his prisoner, did he?* I tried to pull myself together. If faith is a key to victory, I’d better start trying to scrounge some. *What is faith anyway?*

Then into my alarmingly uncontrollable mind popped the thought, *Hey! If, as they claimed, those demons – or whatever they are – spoke my language because they could scan my brain, how come I understood them right from the beginning when I was just overhearing them and they presumably didn’t even know I was there?* I pondered for a minute. *Oh, sorting out all of this is just too difficult!*

I have no idea why my mind bolts away from me, chasing such trivia. It’s ridiculous having a mind that has a mind of its own. If only my thoughts were more like a set of precisely engineered tools than a pack of startled rats.

Then another thought rattled me. *What if they had known all along that I was eavesdropping? What if that entire conversation had been staged to make me fear the dominant angel?* My mind swaggered. *Surely not!* I protested, distressed to find myself beyond my ability to determine what is real and what is deception. I wished I were more intelligent and then recalled in my university days hearing a scientist confess that whenever science finds an answer it raises ten more questions. *If ever I needed God . . .*

On the table I found a blank notebook, a ballpen and a Bible. Remarkably, they seemed just like what I would find on earth. Anyhow, it did not take great genius to work out that I was there for Bible study. I admit the thought came that that repulsive angel might have put it there to mock me, but I tried hard to shove aside that possibility.

From my pathetic performance on that horrid planet, it was painfully obvious that such study was sorely needed. I marveled that I still wasn’t back there being tortured. I could hardly claim that it was because of my great faith that the Lord had graciously rescued me.

I opened the Bible. *Where do I start? I’d better do things properly this time.* So I asked God to direct me to whatever Scriptures he wanted me to focus on. I plucked from my memory Psalm 119, “Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things in your law.” For many years my mind has linked this with Luke telling us that, despite Jesus’ disciples hearing all his teaching, it was only after his resurrection that he finally “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” about him. So I asked the Lord to open my understanding and cause me to get his glorious truths deep into my spirit. Then I plunged in, devouring the Word of God like a famished man at a banquet.

My question about the precise nature of biblical faith led me to read about mountain-moving faith. Locating it was a breeze. I had long known that the famous Faith Chapter is *Hebrews 11* and one day I made the easily remembered discovery that the same chapter number in *Mark* likewise focuses on faith.

I had always wondered if it were enough simply to believe God *can* do something or whether we should believe he *will* do it. I read in this passage Jesus saying, “. . . whatever you ask for in prayer, *believe that you have received it*, and it will be yours”. Clearly this is more specific than merely believing that God has the raw power to do something if he truly wants to.

But why aren’t Christians all around the world literally sending mountains crashing into the sea as specifically stated in that passage? The context was literal enough: Jesus had just caused a fig tree to wither up from the roots after merely speaking the word. I decided to examine another miracle I likewise don’t see hordes of Christians putting into practice: walking on water.

My above-average Bible knowledge often lets me down in the Gospels. A few references stick in my slippery mind but the repetitive nature of the Gospels somehow renders it difficult for me to recall the exact location of various events in Jesus’ earthly ministry. I resigned myself to a long search but to my surprise I turned straight to it. As I tried to read the incident with fresh eyes this rushed out at me: “ ‘Lord, if it’s you,’ Peter replied, ‘command me to come to you on the water.’ ” In an instant, the fog cleared. Suddenly I understood what for years had sabotaged my faith.

*That’s it! Peter was not stepping out on some general promise,* I triumphantly told myself. *He first sought Jesus and only after receiving a personalized word from him about the matter did he move.*

Peter was not doing it merely because he thought it would be fun or even a good idea; he had received Jesus’ specific go-ahead. The man with the mouth big enough to swallow the entire lake might have been trying to get his way by asking his Lord to tell him to come. Nevertheless, he did not step out of the boat until it was undeniably obvious that he was not trying to manipulate God; he was obeying him.

My mind sped to the context of “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” The words are immediately preceded by the critical instruction to submit oneself to God. I quickly turned to *John 15*, knowing this was about abiding in the vine. I quickly scanned it, looking for a verse I vaguely recalled. In seconds I had it: “ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” I noted that this is not some unconditional promise; it is smack in the middle of a dissertation on abiding in Christ and it then moves on to discussing the critical importance of obeying his commands.

Something James wrote about asking amiss sprang to mind. I located it with surprising ease: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” *Ouch! That hits hard!*

I had a faint recollection of something somewhere in *1 John* that seemed relevant. Given my fogginess on this scripture, the exact verse should have been harder to find but again it turned out easier than I expected. “This is the confidence we have in him: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked from him.” Sandwiched in there are the key words, “. . . if we ask anything according to his will . . .”

Of course, relationship must be critical. I recalled James writing that even demons believe in God’s power.

The sons of Sceva immortalized themselves by proving that knowing *about* Jesus counts for nothing in the spirit world (Acts 19:13-20). It doesn’t take much, but you either have a living relationship with the risen Lord or it will be you, not demons, who do the fleeing. More than their barefaced ignorance was exposed as the sons of Sceva streaked away from their abortive attempt to cast out demons. It was no laughing matter. Many in the city – even those who had considered themselves Christians – rightly hit the panic button and realized that adherence to a doctrine is not enough; single-minded devotion to Christ is critical.

So we must ask in submission to God and in harmony with his specific will for us. Nevertheless, faith still seems critical. I turned to the Faith Chapter. I got surprisingly little out of it until my mind lit up as I read near the end of the chapter of those whose faith didn’t result in miraculous deliverances but solely in empowering them to endure horrific events. I was beginning to see that much of faith is just dogged perseverance no matter how much circumstances seem to scream that God has let you down. I turned to those in the Gospels that Jesus commended for their faith. In ways that would have crushed me, the Canaanite woman kept being given the divine brush-off, but she persisted, utterly refusing to take no for an answer. And instead of this annoying the Lord, it filled him with praise.

The thought exploded within me that faith is not about screwing up one’s face and raising one’s blood pressure until reaching some point on the faith scale that somehow pries a miracle out of the clenched fist of a reluctant God. Faith is not about twisting God’s arm but of doggedly refusing to believe God is anything but good and loving.

In the light of *Mark 11*, adding “if it be your will” to my prayers, seems a cop-out. Nevertheless, I was now convinced that total submission to God’s will is essential for answered prayer. I puzzled; eventually concluding that the key must be to keep seeking God until certain of his will in a specific circumstance and *then* believing that I have it before I receive it.

So here’s the rub: does God always want me victorious over evil powers? I felt peculiarly restrained from responding with an emphatic *Yes!*

As I puzzled over how to lay this matter to rest, the thought emerged that God’s attitude to temptation could be relevant. We often talk of the devil tempting us but surely only God has the power to be everywhere at once. So if Satan doesn’t have the power to tempt thousands of people around the word at any one time, who does the tempting? Satan’s underlings?

Temptation is a peculiar thing. God wants no one to be defeated by it but, in this life at least, it does not seem his will to stop all temptation. I recalled how the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness specifically to be tempted. Surely God never wants us to be spiritually defeated, nor enslaved by anything demonic, but does that mean it is never his will that we be challenged or buffeted by the demonic?

I decided I had better look up the account of Paul’s ‘thorn in the flesh’. I knew it was in *2 Corinthians* – maybe chapter 11, but probably 12. Here’s what I found: “To keep me from becoming conceited . . . there was given me . . . a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I begged the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.’ ”

This brought to mind the verse near the beginning of either *James* or *1 Peter* (it turned out to be *James*) to “Count it all joy . . . whenever you face trials of many kinds.” My eye slid to the context and suddenly I discovered something mind-walloping. *Why hadn’t I seen it before?* I wondered; staggered that I could have missed it despite reading it countless times since childhood.

I had always presumed this verse was imploring us to rejoice *despite* trials. Now I realized it was actually saying rejoice *because* of trials. It is saying that trials are a spiritual goldmine. They end up doing us so much good spiritually that we should celebrate entering hard times like a money-crazed gambler would celebrate winning a lottery.

I had an inkling of a verse or two somewhere in the first half of *Romans* that also spoke of rejoicing in trials. I knew it was close to a reference to love being shed abroad in our hearts. (Instead of flitting from passage to passage in my Bible reading, I usually read individual books of the Bible as one normally reads a book – from beginning to end. Having a vague idea of the context, means that I only have to recall the location of a fragment of it to flip to that part of the Bible and find all of the rest. That helps people like me, with a mind more like a mudslide than a bear trap.)

I located the passage in chapter 5 and, to my surprise, I discovered that although, as one would expect, Paul’s words differed from those of James, they were both expounding the same truth. Moved by the Spirit, these two very different men declared that the reason for rejoicing in one’s suffering is that to encounter hard times is to hit spiritual pay dirt. Suffering, declared the apostle whose intense personal familiarity with the subject must have taught him one or two things about it, produces within us qualities of eternal value.

So God always wants us to triumph spiritually and yet tough times and even direct assaults from the Evil One can end up doing us good. Even the great apostle of faith himself had his prayer for deliverance denied not once, not twice but three times until finally realizing that he somehow needed this satanic affliction for his spiritual protection from pride.

*Hmm . . . Who’d have thought that? How easy it must be to smugly presume one knows God’s will on a matter and not bother to passionately seek his heart about it? And if we got it wrong – trying in vain to seize by faith something from God that he is too wise and loving to give us – how quick would we be to accuse the Perfect One of not keeping his word, or decide that the Bible doesn’t work, or reach some other spiritually disastrous false conclusion? This isn’t nearly as straightforward as I had hoped.*

I thought of Jesus on the cross. What at that moment seemed utter defeat was actually an essential part of the greatest victory the universe has ever seen. *Things aren’t always what they seem,* I mused. *Perhaps faith is often about refusing to accept as defeat, things that seem like defeat. Could I define faith as a refusal to limit oneself to what human eyes see as the only conclusion?*

I kept reading scripture after scripture, building up my awareness of who I am in Christ and who Christ is in me. To say it was exhilarating is an understatement but the Lord sobered me by revealing that too often such discoveries end in tragedy because they are not preceded by dying to self. To get drunk on pride when handling such spiritual dynamite can be as catastrophic as getting blind drunk while attempting to diffuse a bomb.

My study forced me to conclude that God is love and that love craves relationship. God’s purpose in empowering us is not to enable us to act [autonomously](https://www.google.com.au/search?client=firefox-b&dcr=0&q=autonomously&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjI5deSwO3ZAhXBvrwKHTwWCMEQkeECCCYoAA) but to do everything in intimate partnership with him.

I will not continue detailing what I found in Earth’s most exciting book. You have the privilege of reading it yourself. As I kept reading, however, it was as though life was somehow being pumped into what had become old, wilted truths. They again became fresh, vital and powerful to me. I felt stronger and stronger.

Time wore on, however, and I grew increasingly bored. I looked around the room. There was not a thing to do except read the Bible. *How long am I going to be stuck here? Is God punishing me for messing up when those evil beings had me bluffed?* I looked at the cold, hard floor. *I can’t even sleep in this place!* I looked at the featureless walls. There was nothing even to count. I began to daydream. After perhaps an hour, I walked around and around the desk. I was becoming increasingly annoyed about being in what amounted to solitary confinement in a prison cell. “God, let me out of here!” I prayed. Finally, I sat down, put my head on the table and hoped I could while away some of the interminable hours by sleeping.

I don’t know how long I had been asleep when something startled me. I looked up and what I saw horrified me so much that I frantically hoped I was simply suffering the worst nightmare I could ever have. Unfortunately, it seemed all too real. Standing in front of me was my former master. And he was angrier and more terrifying than ever.

Instantly, I saw my time in that tiny room very differently. No longer was it a divine prison sentence; it was a grievously needed, tragically squandered training opportunity. *Oh, no, no, no, no!* I lamented, *If only I’d known this would happen, I’d now be equipped to take on this beast! What an idiot I’ve been!*

Just before my sleep, I had managed to convince myself that through my faith-union with Christ I was a son of God – divine royalty. Now, in this overwhelmingly evil presence, I was like a punctured inflatable doll, caving into a formless mass as faith hissed out of me at an alarming speed. In a frantic attempt to patch the leak before even the little that remained was lost, I tried to convince myself that even the most drastic change in my feelings cannot change who I am in Christ and who he is in me.

“You didn’t really think you’d get away from me, did you?” he snarled. “There’s no place in the universe where you can run that I won’t follow. You’ve yet to know the terror of discovering my powers. You’re mine forever!”

To my dismay, the refresher course I had undertaken before my sleep now seemed a million years ago. I struggled to put on a bold front and practice the truth of God’s Word. “And neither have you discovered my powers!” I said, defiantly pointing my finger at him, in a manner inconsistent with how I felt. “I’m glad you’re back, you con artist! You caught me unawares last time and I idiotically let you push me around. But now I know my status in Christ. I know what my Lord has achieved and the power he has entrusted to me.”

He looked at me stony-faced.

“You’re all bluff!” I asserted. “You’re defeated. The Ruler of the universe is in me!” I proudly congratulated myself about how much better I was doing this time around.

“Do you see me quaking?” he retorted in terrifying fury. “I’m here because you’ve blown it! You’ve exhausted God’s patience. No longer will he respond to puny faith. He had mercy on you last time. He rescued you despite your lack of faith and gave you one last chance to build yourself up spiritually, and instead of seizing the opportunity, what have you been doing? You’ve been goofing off! You’ve been sleeping. You’ve been daydreaming. You’ve even had the audacity to complain to God for removing every distraction. If so much as the pen had been slightly different from the technology you are used to, you’d have let yourself be sidetracked into examining it, instead of studying Scripture.”

*Wow! Has he ever read my ‘file’! So much for doing better than last time!*

“Even though there was no suitable place to sleep, you still managed to sleep rather than put God first. God spoilt you rotten by giving you every opportunity to concentrate on him and his Word. And instead of relishing the chance and worshipping your God for being far kinder to you than you could ever deserve, you trashed the last chance you’ll ever get. You threw all his kindness back in his face and even griped to God for his mercy to you in removing distractions.”

He might as well have been a street fighter hammering me with his fists. His every word was a sickening body blow, and he kept pounding and pounding and pounding. “You are vomit! You’ve had the audacity to try to fool yourself into supposing you’re a follower of the Selfless One and you’re as self-centered as me. The big difference between us is that I’m not a hypocrite! You turn the stomach of every angel in heaven and we on the other side feel the same way about your nauseating hypocrisy. You’ve lost it. You belong to me forever.”

Then he began listing my every sin. He went on and on and on.

*How does he know all these things? Talk about being an expert in condemnation! Hey . . . !* Suddenly a memorized portion of Romans 8 reached out from the depths of my mind and grabbed me. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. *He’s trying to bluff me again!*

I interrupted his tirade about my sins. “You deceiver!” I said in a feeble attempt to sound bold. “Yes, your words are baited with truth. It’s the only way you can dupe your victims into swallowing the hook.” As usual, I found it hard to spit out the words. I’m so hopeless at speaking off the cuff. And yet, with each word, I found myself getting stronger. An indignation was beginning to well up from within me, and a fluency that was not my own. “Like all your horde, you’re a compulsive liar – a parasite that can survive only by sucking the life out of truth. Though you rebel against God, you are totally dependent upon him. You can build your mantraps only by tearing down the edifice of God’s truth – plundering heaven’s mansion for building materials – because you have nothing that is your own. You can catch your slaves only by using God’s truth to bait the trap.”

*Wow! That sounded good! Did I really say that? Hey! Don’t dare fall into pride!*

“Yes,” I continued, “I’ve committed all those sins, but I’m a new creation in Christ Jesus. The person who did those vile things died when Jesus died. Jesus and I are one. I’ve risen to a new life through Jesus rising from the dead.”

“Ha! Don’t give me that rubbish! You committed those sins *after* you committed your life to Jesus.”

*Oh, man!* I heaved a deep breath.

“Yes, and I repented of those sins after I committed them – just as I repent of my most recent shameful laziness – and the blood of Jesus cleanses me from all sin. You have no power over me, you con artist! Jesus has cleansed me. There is no sin in me, because of the power of Jesus’ forgiveness. In the name of Jesus, be gone!”

He resolutely stood his ground.

“You’re defeated. Jesus has won. I belong to Jesus. So be gone!”

He looked as fierce and determined as ever.

*What do I do now?* “You can bluff all you like. You have no authority over me and you know it.”

He was not budging.

I was scared. “GO!”

He did not blink an eye. *Come to think of it, do angles have eyelids? Oh, for crying out loud! I can’t even focus when my life depends on it!*

“In the authority of Jesus, LEAVE!”

He smiled.

I cringed.

“You *have* to leave!”

Still nothing.

Then suddenly he vanished.

I was in such shock over the return of that terrifying trickster that now that it was over – or was it just a momentary respite? – it was as though my typically hyperactive brain had seized up.

For quite some time, my mind was almost totally blank. Eventually, it began to slowly fill up again. My mind slid to Jesus speaking of the demon returning despite having been forcefully evicted, and things ending up many times worse than the original disaster. This compelled the disturbing conclusion that demons must keep returning every now and then, to test the defenses to see if any weaknesses have developed that could allow them to force their way back in.

I thought of people who command demons to never return, to go directly to hell, and so on. *Is that just wishful thinking?* I could not recall it in the Bible. If this were possible before Judgment Day, why hasn’t God already done it, or at least why haven’t all demons been banished from earth after twenty centuries of Christian activity? Why did Jesus cast “Legion’s” demons into pigs, if sending them to hell or some other confinement was a viable option?

I thought of how, after Jesus’ temptations, Scripture says the devil left Jesus “for a season” or as modern versions often put it: “until an opportune time”. Not even Jesus’ massive victory over Satan himself was enough to keep him free from spiritual attack for long.

I was so thankful to still be in that capsule-like room with a Bible to pore over. I needed that Book like a drowning man needs a lifebuoy. I looked up 1 Peter 5:8, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Despite the power of the cross and miracle of new birth, Christians are warned about the necessity to remain vigilant, not letting their guard down, because they are still vulnerable to attack.

I knew there was a warning in 1 Corinthians 10 and decided to check the exact wording. It was just before my favorite Scripture about promised victory over temptation: “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” This reminded me of Peter who was so sure he would never deny his Lord.

Then, of course, there is Ephesians 6 about putting on the whole armor of God. Surely the need to do this implies we could be attacked at any moment. I looked it up and the wording was even clearer than I had remembered: “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the evil day comes, you will be able to stand your ground . . . With this in mind [I took this to mean, knowing that the “evil day” will definitely come our way], be alert and always keep on praying . . .”

All of this, taken together, made it seem unlikely that I had seen the last of that fiendish brute. Thankfully, this does not mean I need ever suffer defeat. I recalled something encouraging in either *Colossians* or *Ephesians* (I often get those two mixed up). I found it in *Colossians* “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” This reminded me of another verse. I eventually found it in 2 Corinthians 2:14, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ . . .”

In Christ, victory is always available but whether we will always avail ourselves of it, and how prolonged the fight will be, are entirely different matters. This side of Judgment Day, we work, eat, sleep and play in a spiritual battle zone. I examined several Gospel accounts of the emotionally exhausted disciples, unable to keep their eyes open despite Jesus’ repeated warnings to “watch and pray”. This was not merely something for that critical moment. I remember once noting that in another context Jesus warned us to always be on the watch and to keep praying because a spiritual challenge could arise when least expected.

Not surprisingly, the disciples’ failure to give priority to prayer left them spiritually depleted when armed soldiers arrived to arrest their Savior. Those who, moments earlier, were too exhausted to pray, suddenly found the strength to outrun professional soldiers; deserting their Master in the process.

I began to wonder if my battles had so far been abnormally short and easy. My thoughts returned to Paul praying three times for relief from Satan’s messenger that was tormenting him, and being told that he simply had to endure it. *How long did that go on for?*

I began to worship God, praising him for once again being merciful to me, despite having yet again had a wrong attitude toward him and failing to do even the little that was within my power to do – making full use of the time available to me to study his Word. “Truly you are good and do good,” I wrote in the notebook on the desk. “Your tender mercies bathe everything you do.”

Then everything went black.

# Chapter 13: The Sea of Glass

When my senses finally resurfaced, I thought I could hear distant laughter. I was lying face down on something soft. As I opened my eyes I was startled by an octopus-like creature swimming under me. Thankfully, I felt dry, though I did not understand how that was possible.

*What’s going on?* *Where am I now?* As relieved as I was to be away from that vile angel, I was annoyed at having to puzzle over what should be the most basic of questions. Never before had I regarded it as a blessing just to know from one moment to the next what planet I am on.

*Will life ever be normal again?* I don’t like to boast but in my humble opinion, complaining is one art I believe I have mastered.

As I grew more aware of my surroundings, I discovered I was on a floor that was surprisingly comfortable to lie on. It was made of a strange substance that was somehow less visible than glass – perhaps because it was non-reflective – but as soft and warm as a mattress. It felt spongy, and yet when I depressed it, there was no shadow, nor any distortion when I looked through it. The seemingly endless floor covered an equally vast aquarium, filled with fish, water plants and all sorts of sea creatures. The depth varied greatly. In the shallower parts I could see such things as shells, starfish, sea urchins. These parts fell away to deeper areas, sometimes plunging to great depths, and yet even in the deepest parts I could see clearly all the way to the bottom. I was unsure whether this was solely because of the clarity of the water or whether there was some light source on the bottom.

The mystery above me was just as captivating. I could not decide whether it was a sky or an exceedingly high ceiling. The place was brightly lit, like that celestial palace I had visited, yet what was above me looked like a cloudless, moonless night far from any light pollution. But the stars – if that is what they were – were all sorts of exotic colors. The blackness between what I thought could be stars suggested not much light was coming from above, adding to my suspicion that there might be a light source at the bottom of the aquarium.

Wherever I looked, breathtaking beauty engulfed me. As my understanding of how the Almighty’s work is testimony to his glory kept soaring higher than ever, however, so did my grief about the planet of my birth. The best earth has to offer mirrors the beauty and majesty and perfection of God little better than the brass mirrors of Bible times enabled a person to see one’s image.

My heart felt ready to burst with love for the Creator and Sustainer of every galaxy, every atom, every creature. “God, you’re magnificent!” I shouted at the top of my lungs. *What’s happening to me? I’m becoming worse than those fanatics I despise back on earth. Why can’t I pull myself together and act with dignity and reverence?*

Then, for some reason, my eyes locked on to a very ordinary-looking strand of seaweed. I felt I wanted to hug it!

“You’ve got chopped liver for brains!” I told myself out loud, as I struggled to control myself. Yet my folly only grew worse. Such powerful feelings percolated from deep within me that to my amazement I found myself babbling as if I were a cherry short of a fruitcake. “How could I not love you, sweet seaweed, work of my dear Father’s hands,” I heard myself say. “What a masterpiece you are; a piece of the Master’s skill; a finite expression of the infinite Mind; revelation of the divine genius of Source of all life, who gives all things to all.” I stared at that seaweed as if I had fallen in love. “Oh, sweet glimmer of the glory of God; faithfully transmitting a fragment of the majesty of the Creator! If only I were as faithful as you in fulfilling my divine purpose.”

I spoke so eloquently and effortlessly I was almost as amazed as when words gushed from my mouth when singing that song in – wherever it was. If on earth I had had such spontaneity when romancing women, my life might have been so different. Yet here I was, at last using my mouth instead of my pen, and the object of my affection was a bit of seaweed!

Eventually, the sound of laughter broke into my consciousness again. Although most of the floor was that soft, transparent material, scattered here and there were stands of palm trees on white patches, which at this distance I could only presume to be beaches. It was from one of these areas that the laughter seemed to be coming. I thought I knew enough to recognize it as angelic giggling. Far in the distance I believed I could make out what looked like two angels, rolling on the floor in fits of laughter. I suspected that they were a long way off, but in a world where the clarity of the light/atmosphere seemed superior to earth’s, I lacked confidence in such judgments. And if they were as distant as I supposed, sound must act differently here.

I tried to head off in their direction, keen to find out what was happening. At least that is what I told myself. I think my greater motivation was the hope that the distraction would help me pull myself together emotionally before I lost my mind. It was almost terrifying to realize I had just spoken to seaweed!

Moving was disconcerting at first. It was like walking in mid-air. The surface was quite invisible. At first I found myself wanting to step down hollows, or leap from high point to high point, all of which were actually below the surface and could be safely ignored. Soon I got used to ignoring what was below my feet. I learned to trust that the surface was perfectly flat. There was nothing to trip over or fall into and no inclines or uneven sections.

I had expected walking on the spongy floor to be as awkward as trying to walk on a mattress. Instead, it was a pleasure to walk on. In fact, it felt so good that I broke into a run. And then I was even more surprised. To call it running does no justice to what happened. At first, I sort of bounced along, as the springy floor propelled me forward. As my skill level increased it turned more into a bob than a bounce. I continued to adjust my movements and they grew still more graceful. ‘Bounded’ is perhaps the best way to describe the unearthly way I powered ahead with exhilarating ease and speed. Never before had I experienced such effortless movement.

The air seemed so pure and rich. It was a joy to breathe deeply. For the sheer invigoration, I chose to shoot across the surface as fast as I could go.

The image might not quite fit reality but I imagined myself as a skillfully thrown stone skipping and skimming over the surface of a lake. Perhaps it was thinking of my pebble-throwing childhood that caused me to recall a schoolteacher telling my class how immature we were for running everywhere, rather than walking. To me as a ten-year-old, spontaneously running felt so normal that the teacher’s words made no more sense than being told I should breathe less.

Now I found myself a kid again, with energy and an enthusiasm for running I had thought I had lost forever.

Whoever had been giggling turned out to be ridiculously farther away than I would ever have guessed. And I did not mind a bit. In fact, I decided to zig-zag off course at breakneck speed; deliberately prolonging the journey just for the heaven of it. (I am unsure of the accuracy of that last expression but it was certainly closer to heaven than anything I have known on earth.)

There was a hole in my plan, however. What lived below the surface was too fascinating. I felt repeatedly compelled to stop in my tracks. (Actually, I looked behind and was relieved to discover that despite sinking deep into that soft material, it fully rebounded so that I was not spoiling anything by leaving tracks. My only disappointment was that it would have been fascinating to have retraced my steps to a point where I had been zipping along at full speed and used the tracks to measure how far apart the steps were. Of course, I had no tape measure but I could still have approximated it. I think the distance between steps would have been impressive. Anyhow, I needed to keep stopping (or, more accurately, coming to a screeching halt) because a particularly beautiful coral, or some other marvel just had to be admired.

Mind you, when powering along this surface, stopping proved somewhat problematical. It turned out to be an art that took several attempts to perfect, but falling onto this soft surface was – I guess I shouldn’t be admitting this – rather fun.

On one of my many stops I noticed a shell that was so gorgeous that, without thinking, I reached down to pick it up for a closer inspection. To my astonishment my hand slipped through the substance I had been kneeling on, allowing me to enter blood-warm water. I froze in shock upon realizing what had happened. Then, deciding I might as well complete the act, I picked up the shell. After delicately examining it I attempted to reverse the process and return the shell. It worked without a hitch but not without my awe at the amazing properties of this transparent layer that not only supported me but propelled me and even allowed me to penetrate it whenever I wanted.

There was no way I was going to surrender to the notion that this material let me do whatever I wanted because it read my mind. The phenomenon vaguely reminded me of something but I could not recall what. (Since returning to twenty-first century earth, I have on occasions scratched my head over what it reminded me of. Perhaps it was just the way a stone can both skip over water and sink into it. It might, however, have been my vague awareness of non-Newtonian fluids that act like a solid when impacted.)

As I bounded along, relishing this seemingly endless aquarium, the words “sea of glass” popped into my head. Had the author of *Revelation* been referring to this place when he used that expression? I thought it most unlikely but I felt unable to dismiss the notion entirely. I found myself continually adding to my ever-increasing list of unanswered questions.

Each time I paused to delight in yet another wonder, my earlier reaction to that strand of seaweed seemed less and less ridiculous. I recalled how in that forest I had felt connected to all of creation.

Now that I am back on earth, writing this after having months to try to come to terms with it all, it doesn’t seem that the union I sensed back then with nature has changed me much, other than lifting my spirits whenever I recall the event. I am under no illusion of having some life-changing truth to share, but I am definitely enjoying reliving the memory of what I sensed there and have never felt since.

My best attempt at coming to terms with what I experienced is that through Christ, my very humanity connected me with both the physical and the spiritual world. On one side, I felt a oneness – an exquisite harmony – with all of creation. And on the other side – and in an even higher sense – I felt a spiritual oneness with the infinite Lord. It was as though I was divinely ordained to be the cherished bridge between the two. All of this flowed from my Redeemer and was powered by love that flooded everything within and without with indescribable joy and peace.

As a husband and wife are distinct personalities and yet are mysteriously one, so I felt a oneness with all of creation; a oneness that made me whole, and yet a oneness in which my uniqueness was valued. There was no sense in which it diminished me. It empowered me and made me more alive.

In the forest I was a part of everything there and they were all a part of me. We completed each other, without my individuality being violated. I felt special. The spine-tingling assurance flooded my being that I had a unique contribution to make to the glory of God. I seemed a vital jigsaw piece that slotted precisely into the perfection of creation. And the same seemed true for everything else in that world. I felt I belonged there, in a way that I never known on the planet I had always considered to be home.

Don’t feel left out: there is nothing exclusive about any aspect of my relationship with Christ. At the time, I was too caught up in the moment for my thoughts to drift to other people but anything I experienced would surely apply to all of redeemed humanity, had they been there.

In this place, nature felt like an extension of myself, without it being some pantheistic delusion. Whatever happened, it was authentically Christian and hinged on my spiritual union with Christ. All of the creation I was immersed in seemed almost as much a part of me as my body. And yet, because it remained fascinatingly distinct and different from me, I could delight in it without falling into vanity or self-obsession.

What for me made nature’s value soar even higher was that it seemed in one sense mine but in another sense God’s. It was a reflection both of my Lord’s glory as creator and of his glory as a lover, because it was not only the work of his hands but his precious gift to me.

I felt toward nature like a starry-eyed lover delighting in her engagement ring; not because of its material value but because love endowed it with infinite sentimental value, making it priceless. And yet nature was even more thrilling because it was living and not some inanimate object. Moreover, nature is more than something God paid for and more than something he carefully selected as an expression of his undying love; it is something he has fashioned. Even rocks are not just his gift but his works of art, and were created not only by the greatest artist in the universe but by our Lover. They were not just the product of his genius but the outpouring of his love for me.

It was tragically different on earth, but in that forest I had felt as if even to rip out a blade of grass would somehow diminish me. It was partly as a king’s power and glory would be reduced if he lost a portion of his kingdom.

The words, “animal kingdom” flashed into my mind. I was familiar with the term, of course, but I had never before considered that every kingdom has a king or queen. To whom are all earth’s animals willing subjects? Adam, I recalled, had been granted divine authority over everything living on earth, but nature stopped peacefully submitting to him when he stopped submitting to God, the ultimate authority. Having lost his divine authority, he could only try to rule by brute force – quite unlike the perfect Man, Jesus, who ruled by merely speaking to a storm or simply deciding to ride an unbroken donkey or walk on water.

But if in any sense I felt a king, it was not as if I had any need or desire to lord it over my subjects. I did not feel toward nature like a conqueror or an owner but like a proud father whose delight is not to exploit but to empower. Welling from within was no desire to dominate but to nurture, guide and tenderly protect.

If I were a king, it was one whose glory is not only diminished by the loss of a single plant but by the slightest oppression of one of his subjects. Rather than it be an ego trip, it seemed the loss of a single blade of grass or a handful of dirt would be like what a basketball player would suffer if a member of his team were injured in the middle of a key game.

I felt a oneness of purpose with everything in existence, because all exist to display the glory of the infinite God.

Of course, my contribution to the glory of God was more significant than that of grass, but I sensed that God’s intellect is so stupendous that he is personally and lovingly concerned for the minutest thing. As beholding the beauty of God’s handiwork had somehow tenderized my own heart, it seemed I was tuning in to a tenderness in God’s heart – a tenderness that my own hardness of heart had previously blocked from my consciousness. I wonder if until then I had shrunk from truly knowing God, for fear that he would turn out to be cold and harsh. As an awareness of God’s tenderness and goodness grew within me I became overawed by how infinitely worthy God is of love and thanks and adoration and perfection. This grew so strong that I recoiled at the thought of him being robbed of the tiniest contribution to his glory, even if it be just a blade of grass.

Finally, my thoughts began to meander to other people. In that special forest, it seemed that everything belonged. Everything had a role to play. And if I felt that way about trees and rocks and animals, how inconceivably intense would my feelings be in a world filled with redeemed and perfected humanity? Would these people truly be the crown of creation, exalted even above angels?

My spirit somehow caught the faintest glimpse of what it would be like to be simultaneously in love with multiplied millions of people, each of whom I found stunningly beautiful, fascinating and exciting, and all of whom were equally in love with me. In an instant I had insight into the thrill of an eternity reveling in perhaps a billion never-ending relationships, each of which was more permanent, satisfying, uplifting and conflict-free than the best marriage ever known on earth. The intimacy was not sexual, but somehow even more wondrous. In this flash of awareness I seemed transported to a place where everyone saw me as witty and fun to be with. I was valued and famous and irreplaceable. They adored me in the most passionate, but God-honoring sense. And the feeling was mutual.

My mind tumbled back to that endless palace and how a terrifyingly sterile empty vastness quickly morphed into a cozy building solely because of the presence of all those heavenly beings. At the time I had thought of Christians being referred to as living stones and pillars but it had not seemed relevant because they were nonhuman. Now I remembered that the Word of God calls Christ the door and the church’s cornerstone. I had not even been viewing the church and yet that living palace, combined with these scriptures, somehow affirmed to me that the church’s glory truly is every one of its people.

I sensed a world in which everyone was a hero, a megastar and highly desirable in everyone else’s eyes. I, and everyone else, felt the center of attention. Jealously was impossible because everyone’s happiness was wrapped up in everyone else’s happiness. No one could be honored without everyone else being so happy for that person that it felt to them all as if they themselves had been honored. The intensity of love, the ease of communication, the feeling of oneness and the appreciation of each person’s uniqueness soared beyond anything I had ever imagined.

In what seemed like an explosion of revelation, I saw how so much changes when that which is perfect arrives. A caterpillar might be unable to imagine any greater pleasure than eating leaves. When it sprouts wings and tastes nectar, however, it never bothers to go back to eating leaves. Likewise, when we gain our new bodies, sex will be superseded by higher pleasures. As toys are the appropriate gift of a loving parent to a baby, marital relations are a beautiful gift from God. Nevertheless, babies grow up, and followers of Christ eventually burst through mortality into eternal pleasures. We will then miss earth’s highlights no more than we miss the teddy bear and the make-believe money of our childhood. What is necessary in a world of physical birth and death has no function in this place of perfection. Just as locks would be out of place in a world of perfect love, so would any exclusive relationship between people. As people cannot share secrets in a world where everyone already knows everything, so marriage could not exist in this world – not, of course, because marriage is not of God, but simply because that which is perfect has come.

I apologize for my laborious attempt to convey something precious to me that was seeded into my mind in almost an instant. It was comparable to a panoramic view being flashed on a screen. In seconds you can absorb what takes so much longer to describe to anyone who cannot see the screen, and even after all those words, the result is not as impacting as seeing it for yourself. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to squander a few more words in an attempt to transport you to the understanding I was somehow granted.

My new feelings toward nonhuman creation had been indescribably wonderful, and yet I somehow knew that my delight in redeemed humanity would be many times beyond what just moments before had seemed the ultimate experience.

Then, just when it seemed impossible for anything to surpass what I was sensing, I somehow glimpsed love, fulfillment and never-ending excitement that were exceedingly higher still – knowing God on a level beyond my current comprehension.

Suddenly I understood why Scripture says no one has ever seen God and lived, even though other passages refer to people seeing God. It’s like my claim to have seen earth’s sun when I’m referring merely to the briefest glimpse from – get this – 93 million miles away, and even then it was far too blinding for me to properly take in what I was seeing. As my eyes would burn out long before I could gaze close up upon the sun’s full splendor, so my brain would fry long before I could truly behold God’s beauty. No wonder I almost died in that ethereal palace, trying to contain the ecstasy of the mere reflected glory of God. I would need an astoundingly superior body to have any hope of containing the excitement of truly knowing God, rather than being knocked senseless by a millisecond burst of his reflected glory from a million miles away. I was no longer surprised that Scripture says Daniel “was exhausted and lay sick for days” after a mere vision of symbols and an angel.

How can anyone describe something a million times better than the greatest earthly experience? All I can do is point, dumbstruck, at God – the warmest, most fascinating, most exciting Person in all existence. It is to be expected that intimacy with God should far surpass anything else, since he is the beautiful Mind behind all the other wonders. He is the inexhaustible Source of all love and goodness; the perfect and infinite Designer and Maker of every good thing anyone has ever enjoyed.

A mysterious certainty gripped my heart that not only is God a person, he is exceedingly more personal than we are, and with far deeper feelings and emotions. Alongside him, we are the cold, impersonal ones. God is as superior to us in intelligence, creativity and personality, as we are superior to a worm in each of those dimensions. Our current difficulty is in having the courage to get close enough to God to discover how thrillingly personal and lovable he is.

Most of us would shrink from getting close to certain people who we feel are too cultured or beautiful or famous or rich or intelligent to want our friendship. If we feel this way about mere humans who, by one or two measures might be marginally superior to us, it’s no wonder we shrink from God who is in every way infinitely superior to us.

Even those of us who know that God accepts us as his children, still starve ourselves of many thrilling encounters with God because, deep down, we can’t believe someone so superior would genuinely want to be best friends with us. This drives us to keep aloof from God, breaking his heart in the process. Then we who have kept ourselves somewhat cold and distant from God have the audacity to think it is he, not us, who is cold and aloof. In reality, God is so passionate about us that he makes it his business to familiarize himself with every hair on our head.

We rob ourselves of so much of the ultimate experience – never-ending intimacy with the most delightfully uplifting Person in the universe – because we cannot believe God truly wants it. That is why faith is so crucial.

Many of us find it almost impossible to believe that God is virtually infatuated with us but this is because we misunderstand what we are asked to believe. We are not expected to believe that we are worthy of God’s love. That would be ridiculous. We need believe only that the very nature of the One who said “love your enemies” is to love emphatically those whom everyone else considers undesirable. We are not required to delude ourselves into believing we are lovable, but merely to believe that the God of infinite love far exceeds our ability to be head-over-heels in love with someone others finds unlovable. The Almighty is as superior to us in his ability to love as he is superior in every other desirable way.

Neither are we asked to believe that God’s love turns him into a crazed maniac who jettisons his commitment to truth, holiness and perfect justice by turning a blind eye to our sins. Instead, he is the holy Lord whose love drives him to remove our sins by executing justice for us on the cross and bestowing upon us divine holiness and power over sin.

It is not that God loves us because we are desirable but that since the God of the impossible loves us, he is able to transform us into people who are desirable. The Eternal Master sees in us not only who we are but who we will be when he completes his masterpiece.

It somehow seemed as clear to me as the mysterious substance under my feet, that I was trusting to keep me from drowning, that once we spiritually meld ourselves to God through Jesus, there is no way that God’s superiority keeps us from enjoying him. On the contrary, it makes the relationship breathtakingly superior to any relationship we could ever have.

Men differ from women and yet not only is that difference not insurmountable, it adds a whole dimension to marriage. Likewise, we differ from God, but that just adds wonder and excitement to our union with him. On the other hand, men and women are so alike that the similarity also makes marriage special. And we are so much like God. Not only are we in his image, we were literally made for intimacy with him. When God has completed his work of recreating us, restoring us to the splendor of his original intentions by removing from us all of sin’s hideous defects and deformities, the mix of similarities and differences between God and us will be exquisite. No other companionship or union in the universe can equal it.

Now that I had mastered the art of bounding along the top of the sea-sized aquarium, my rhythmic movement on the bouncy floor was almost hypnotically soothing. Under its influence my mind floated to other matters. I found myself mystified as to how I had gained that sudden burst of understanding about the life to come. It was as though God had gone forward in time, tapped into memories I will one day have, and transferred them into my current brain.

Weirdly, I immediately began receiving revelation about receiving revelation. It struck me that nothing we receive from God is ever deserved – not even God rewarding our faithfulness. Out of the vastness of his love, he keeps pouring out to us, even though none of us ever reach the point of deserving or earning anything other than hell. Our never-ending dependence upon God’s generosity, however, does not mean we never have a role to play in receiving.

The spiritual insights God was now graciously flowing into me were traveling along the route cut into my mind by years of regular Bible study. In isolation, Bible study will never suffice. I pray I never need more dramatic proof of that than my dismal failure when first encountering those ‘sparklers’. To be merely hearers of the Word will only increase our condemnation; we must be doers of the Word. But we cannot be doers without first being hearers.

I thought of the Apostle Paul whose proud knowledge of Scripture led him to conclude that Christianity was a dangerous heresy that must be violently wiped from the planet. In the words of the apostle, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” The last thing we need is to be so inflated by pride in our Bible knowledge that we lose sight of the two greatest commandments: to love God with everything we have and to love others as ourselves. Despite his bad start, however, almost immediately after his conversion, Paul was proving to the Jews in Damascus that Jesus is the Messiah. This was possible only by Paul drawing upon his vast knowledge of relevant scriptures. My study – like Paul’s – was like someone miserly saving his every cent. Once he discovers the error of his ways, that money is still in his bank account, ready to be spent in ways that truly glorify God.

Like someone dying of thirst in a desert, have you drunk in every word dropping from the lips of the long-awaited Messiah, the eternal Son of God, the Living Word – the one who not merely claimed to be *the* Truth but proved it by living what he preached like no one ever has, then selflessly sacrificing his life for his enemies and rising to life again? Like a scrooge gathering diamonds, have you treasured every word uttered by its Savior, the one through whom and for whom all things exist, who *1 Corinthians* calls “the power of God and the wisdom of God”, who is the God of all gods, the King of all kings and the Lord of all lords? Like the most passionate art connoisseur examining the greatest masterpiece in the universe, have you studied every word from the One who sustains all things by his word and at whose name every knee must bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth? If you have, you will know how much Christ, the Ultimate Revelation of God, revered Scripture. His words were peppered with “It is written,” and he was forever saying such things as “Scripture cannot be broken,” “the Scriptures . . . testify of me,” “You are in error, knowing neither the Scriptures, nor the power of God,” “I have not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them,” and referring to a Psalm as “David, speaking by the Spirit.”

Furthermore, near the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus told his disciples, “I have many more things to tell you, but you cannot bear them now. When, however, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. For he will not speak on his own, but will speak only what he hears. And he will declare to you the things that are to come.” So, despite his wonderful teaching, Jesus insisted there were further spiritual truths that he had left unspoken until he fulfilled his promise to reveal it to the disciples through his Spirit, after Pentecost. Combine this with Jesus announcing that the disciples were his chosen ones to make more disciples, build the church and teach others. Their teachings form the rest of the New Testament. So my reverence for Jesus compels me to conclude that from *Genesis* to *Revelation*, the entire Bible is of critical importance. There is no source of truth available to any of us that is nearly as valuable.

Besides prayer, I believe the greatest insight into the meaning of any part of the Bible is found in the other parts of the Bible that deal with the same topic, figure of speech, historical period, or whatever. For most of my life, this conviction has driven me to invest much time connecting in my mind scriptures with other scriptures. I read each book of the Bible from beginning to end, but throughout the process I am thinking *This verse reminds me of that verse and that verse in other parts of the Bible.* Now, after multiplied years of this, any scripture detonates within me a chain reaction of links to other scriptures. It has become a mental habit; an investment that keeps on paying rich dividends.

This particular approach to Bible study has served me well but I presume another way might be equally effective for someone else. The critical factor in receiving divine revelation is not the method but the diligence, faithfulness, humility and passion with which one pours one’s life into studying the Word of God. This gives the Author of the principle of sowing and reaping, something to work with.

My mind glided to the Gospel of John where Jesus told his disciples that the promised Holy Spirit would bring to their memory what Jesus had taught them. I was gripped by the order of events: first comes disciplined learning from Jesus and, sometime later, the Spirit-inspired activation of what has been learned. This prompted my memory of Peter’s famous Spirit-filled sermon on the Day of Pentecost. For years I had presumed that his message was entirely supernatural. Then I discovered it was almost entirely Old Testament quotes that Peter must have memorized, laced with a few things he had learned from Jesus after three intensive years under his teaching.

We can have key, life-changing moments when jigsaw pieces dramatically fit together but it seems that God first expects us to gather the pieces through diligent study.

I paused. In a magnificent display of color changes, what seemed like an octopus drifted below me. Thinking it sensible to take nothing for granted in a**n** exotic **world**, I counted the legs. Instantly, I regretted it. I counted a second time. Seven legs. That ruined everything for me. To my annoyance, I now cannot, in good conscience, hide that number from anyone who sees the glaring problem.

*Seven legs! That’s just too cute, too contrived, too –* The ring of truth had just cracked. *How can something be so real and yet so unbelievable?* I reluctantly recalled how often the number seven appears in the Book of Revelation. Was this, or some crazy notion of seven and perfection, somehow influencing my subconscious? *Aren’t I a little old for my first psychotic episode?* People might have had their suspicions before, but now everyone will know I am a nutcase.

The one thing that definitely was not too perfect to be true was my mood. It was foul. So much for being as gooey as honey moments earlier. Mr. Super Spiritual stank. I might not have been in heaven but all of high heaven must have had to hold their nose.

You might think that by flipping out over a number I was making a mountain out of a molehill. As an Australian, I have never seen a molehill. I once asked someone how big they are. “Boy, they’re big!” she replied. Now I’m more confused than ever.

Anyhow, what it boils down to is that if you think Thomas was a skeptic, you will have a field day with me. He refused to believe until he could put his fingers in Jesus’ wounds. How cheeky is that! When my exploits go on record, however, people will be erecting moments to Thomas as a faith giant. Thomas might not have believed until his physical senses confirmed it but I had just proved I will not even believe my own senses if my mind gives me any wriggle room for doubt.

I cannot deny how desperately I wanted to run from what my mind screamed was the irrefutable conclusion that I had lost my sanity. Nor can I deny how deliciously tempting it was to distract myself when surrounded by such exquisite and fascinating marine life.

I began bounding forward again. There was something so invigorating about the movement that it somehow seemed to lift my spirits as well as my body. *Are septopuses (heptopuses?) really so bad?*

*Why is it that even in an idyllic world I cannot be carefree for long?* I recalled a quote from a successful writer of soapy television shows: “Happy people are boring people.” *How boring would life be without challenges? How come I never run out of questions?*

Angelic laughter again broke into my consciousness. I had been so lost in all of this that I had forgotten them. *Wow! Do those beings know how to have fun! They must spend half of eternity laughing!*

As the thought hardened of enjoying eternity with a perfect God and people he has restored to perfection, it was more than that clear stuff under my feet that was putting a spring in my step as I bounded toward the celestial creatures.

# Chapter 14: Armed to the Teeth

Propelled more like a kangaroo than a human, I gleefully sprang toward the giggling angels. Even from this distance, their laughter was so infectious that I had a ridiculously huge grin on my face despite not having a clue about what was so funny.

As happens excruciatingly often, I was still warming to the heavenly thought of honeymooning with God and his perfected loved ones when it was chilled by a worry. *What if this supposed revelation that has somehow been downloaded into my consciousness is merely a trick of the mind? How can I know whether it is truly from God? It feels right and it feels exciting, but are such feelings enough to confirm spiritual truth? How many million people have been spiritually deceived even though it felt right to them?*

I berated myself for being so paranoid and tried to chase off the unfounded worry. It slunk away but still lurked in the shadows like a hungry wolf. I resorted to comforting myself with the thought that so far, in this extraordinary mix of otherworldly experiences, all my fears had proved groundless. The fearsome extraterrestrials I had met when I had nowhere to hide had left me alone. I hadn’t ended up stuck in first century Palestine. The spider, the water, and the berries had all seemed safe. My encounters with those malevolent angels were an obvious exception but I still ended up safe. Other than that, I didn’t know whether I had been visiting different parts of heaven, or flitting from planet to planet that perhaps were light-years apart. Maybe I had been whisked away to other dimensions or something equally weird, but I thought it most likely that I was currently in Paradise. *No one could be deceived in Paradise!* Then a chill shuddered through me like a Niagara of ice water: I thought of what had happened to Adam and Eve in Paradise.

Then it grew even worse: I remembered Meurel saying how Lucifer and other angels had turned their backs on God.

*But that insight – or whatever it was – I had into a world in which I was in harmony with God and all creation, feels so right*, I protested. *It rings so true. Every part of me screams “Yes!” and “Hallelujah!” to it.* Then a Scripture from *Proverbs* came crashing into my consciousness. “There is a way that seems right to a person, but in the end it leads to death.” Tailgating that came some equally disturbing words from *Jeremiah:* “The heart is deceitful above all things and incurable. Who can understand it?”

I continued arguing with myself. *But it feels so uplifting!* Then I remembered Eve again, and wondered how exhilarating she must have found the delusion of becoming like God by eating the forbidden fruit.

I found myself so weighed down by these thoughts that my joyous sprint over the aquarium had slowed to a weary plod.

*But no matter how unsubstantiated some of that recent ‘revelation’ was, the best parts are rock solid Scriptural truth,* I assured myself. God *is* good, personal, and incomprehensibly loving. The divine plan – the plan of the One who cannot fail – is that those who cling to him will become Christlike. Somehow, everyone who wants it will be transformed. We will be pure and overflowing with inner beauty. Deceit and fear and selfishness are too contrary to God’s perfect ways to survive in heaven. Surely, love and trust and harmony and openness would characterize the relationships of the redeemed. Did not Jesus pray that all his followers be one, even as he and his Father are one? Isn’t it impossible for the all-powerful Lord of all to let that fervent prayer fall to the ground? Didn’t Jesus, at the very time of upholding the sanctity and exclusiveness of the marriage bond, indicate that in the life to come we would be too angel-like for marriage to exist? Doesn’t *Romans* talk about earth’s subhuman creation yearning for the day when, along with the bodies of Christian believers, it would be transformed? *Doesn’t* ***Colossians*** *– or is it* ***Ephesians****? – proclaim Jesus as the firstborn of all creation, through whom and for whom all things were made and then goes on to say that through his sacrifice he has reconciled to himself* ***all things****?*

I was surprised to note that my pace had picked up again. In that exhilarating motion that slid somewhere between gliding and bouncing, I sped almost effortlessly across the invisible surface as if airborne. What struck me, however, was how long it was taking to reach the angels. It was as if the expanse separating them from me kept stretching. *How could they seem so close and yet be so far away?* Physicists keep coming up with discoveries and theories that defy my understanding. *Is some peculiar law of physics coming into play?* I puzzled. *Or have my eyes somehow been fitted with zoom lenses? But the angels had not just looked close, they had sounded close. Is it something to do with the atmosphere? Does the air act like a huge magnifying glass and amplifier?*

Whatever the explanation, I had no complaints: the journey was invigorating and there was plenty to occupy myself.

*How I thank God for the Bible!* I told myself, remembering that just moments ago it had helped my sanity to anchor myself in it. *Scriptural truths are like stepping stones in a swamp of uncertainty. Get off the stones on to my own guesses or supposed ‘revelation’ and I might stand or sink – no one really knows – but I am always safe on the firm revelation of Scripture.*

I had only begun chasing this thought down the corridors of my mind when, to my horror, I crashed into the Pharisees and theologians and chief priests of Jesus’ day. Their astounding Bible knowledge was indisputable. While presumably believing they were honoring God, these reverent scholars of Holy Writ, plotted the murder of the Son of God. I again plummeted into despair. They were more men of the Word than me. They prided themselves in it. *That’s it!* It was a eureka moment for me. They *prided* themselves on their Bible knowledge.

My thoughts dashed to Jesus emphasizing the importance of humbling oneself, and becoming as a little child. Children keep asking questions. They keep growing. They do not suppose they know it all. They are not too proud to admit they need help. When the psalmist prayed “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law,” he was displaying this childlike attitude. His faith was not in his scholastic ability. He acknowledged a deep dependence upon God to give him special understanding of the Bible.

Then I thought of Jesus’ own example. “I can of myself do nothing,” he said. What humility! What childlike dependence upon God! “I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just,” Jesus continued, “for I seek not my own will but the will of him who has sent me.” He is the glorious Son of God who said, “I do not seek my own glory,” and “I do not accept praise from people.” How different would my understanding of Scripture be if I continually dismissed human approval and sought only to please God?

As I drew closer to my destination I noticed that one of the nonhumans rolling on the ground was plump. Then I spied a third coming toward them from another angle. I had guessed correctly. They were on a sandy beach. I recognized the leaner, more muscular one. His eyes were fiery, not just in intensity but almost in color, his nose was broad and he towered over the other two. It was Chebon. Was I slowly warming to these peculiar beings?

As I stepped on to the beach I accidentally flipped some sand backwards onto the clear stuff. The sand flew off. Amazed, I had another go and the same thing happened. That soft, clear substance seemed to repel sand, rather like the way identical magnetic poles repel each other. *But why isn’t it just scattered? Why does all the sand go back to the beach?* I puzzled. *The rest of the sand – or perhaps something under the sand – must attract it.* Then as I took a few steps I noticed that the sand was moving to replace every depression made by my footprints.

As I examined the sand I discovered it was unlike any sand I had ever seen. At arm’s length it was white but up close it was remarkably colorful.

Everything – down to a single grain of sand – seemed perfectly ordered. Nothing, it seemed, could ever be out of place, or be soiled. Everything seemed perennially fresh; swept spotless forever.

I looked up, and the other heavenly being had arrived. “What’s the joke?” he asked those giggling. Upon hearing his voice, I looked closer (something I still did not feel comfortable doing) and realized he was Meurel. It almost felt good seeing another familiar face. The downside is that their size and majesty still kept me on edge and they continued to ignore me.

“It’s unbelievable!” said Chebon before breaking out into laughter again. It seemed ages before he eventually managed to add, “Lucifer –” then he was off again, chuckling uncontrollably, rolling all over the floor, slapping the plump one on the side, who was also convulsing with laughter. “Oh, you tell him!” he finally told the plump one, and burst into more laughter.

The plump one turned around. It was ‘Chubby’ Kairel! It was almost like meeting an old friend. It was strange that I should feel so attached to these beings. I guess I felt more insecure in this alien, though pleasant, environment than I realized. I seemed to be seizing any semblance of familiarity. On the other hand, so much about these beings was overpowering that I never managed to feel more comfortable in their presence than if I were stark naked in front of royalty. I was beginning to realize that not all angels have a vastly superior intellect. Some seemed almost childlike at times. Should I find myself nose to nose with a man-eating crocodile, however, I would not require it to complete an IQ test before I felt on edge. And likewise, if I were in the presence of some dignitary or Christian superstar. A chill jolted through me as I recalled Chebon confessing he had to fight the urge to wipe out all of humanity.

Kairel’s melodious laughter at last calmed down enough to ask Meurel, “What’s the perfect time in the Jewish calendar for the Messiah to die?”

“Well, let’s see . . .” said Meurel, deep in thought, “this will be the ultimate sacrifice. Most sacrifices are offered . . . er . . . during the Passover? Hey, wait – the Passover – that’s commemorating the time when the Timeless One intervened in human history to free his people from slavery.”

“Yes!” added Kairel enthusiastically, “As Jews look back to that point in time, so God’s people will forever look back to the time when their Savior died to free them from slavery to sin.”

Meurel’s face lit up. “Come to think of it, there are so many parallels between the Passover and the ultimate sacrifice. There’s the shedding of blood of a male lamb that is faultless. There’s –”

“And don’t forget it’s the time when hordes of pilgrims from all over the world converge upon Jerusalem. The city will be crammed with witnesses,” chimed in Kairel, who was also becoming excited.

Chebon at last seemed to have regained his composure. “And it’s only a few weeks before Pentecost, the ideal time for the outpouring of God’s Spirit.”

“Yes!” Meurel sounded triumphant, “There’s no doubt about it, the perfect time would be the Passover. Hey, isn’t that just a few earth-days away?”

“Right!” said Kairel.

“Well, just yesterday, earth-time, the Jewish leaders decided that under no circumstances would they arrest the almighty Son during the Passover.” Chebon started giggling again.

“They did?” Meurel sounded concerned.

“Yes, because of all the pilgrims,” added Kairel. “You know how the crowds flock around the incarnate Son. There’d be a riot if they tried to arrest him with thousands of potential supporters around.”

“Oh, no!” said Meurel, his face lined with dismay.

“And it’s more than just the ideal time. The glorious Son has already publicly announced that he’ll die during this Passover!” Chebon was off again in fits of laughter.

“That’s a catastrophe! How can you laugh? You should be ashamed –”

“Calm down!” said Chebon in between laughs, “There’s more!” Chebon was beside himself again. In the end, he waved to Kairel to continue.

“Yes, just today Lucifer entered into Judas – *Lucifer* would you believe!” He was laughing again. “Lucifer has persuaded Judas to betray the holy Son!” Then Kairel collapsed into another laughing fit.

“I don’t get it,” puzzled Meurel.

“Hoooo, hoooo, hoooo, haaaa, haaaa, haaaa!” Finally, Kairel sobered up enough to explain, “Judas, being in the priceless Son’s inner circle, can lead the Jews to the Son when he’s away from the public eye. So there’ll be no riot! They won’t have to defer his arrest!”

“Teeeeeoool!” exclaimed Meurel, “So the priestly Son really will die at the right time and all because of Lucifer!” Now it was Meurel’s time to double over in laughter.

“How vain can you get –” commented Chebon, “Lucifer imagining he could defy the Flawless One! The Evil One has created havoc, but the All-Knowing, All-Powerful One has always had the upper hand.”

Kairel, a huge grin on his face, said, “There’s Lucifer, using all his evil genius to destroy the God he hates and he ends up furthering the Undefeatable One’s purposes!”

“And hastening his own destruction!” added Chebon. “Oh that devil! Even when he wins he loses! Everything he hurls in fury boomerangs back onto his own head!”

Meurel, almost whispering in reverent awe, “What a fearful thing it is to rebel against the Stupendous Lord.”

Kairel’s eyes lit up, “Hey! Wouldn’t that make a great song!”

*Wow! Angels will make a song out of anything!* I then remembered that often the Bible speaks of singing a new song. *They sure know how to have a good time.*

Grinning from ear to ear, Chebon sang to a lively tune:

 O that devil,
 Even when he wins he loses.

As he sang, he started skidding his feet over the sand, producing a sound. Others joined in with different foot moments and the result augmented the music in a most remarkable way.

He signaled to the other two and they repeated the lines two times, at the end of which Chebon sang,

“He’s armed to the teeth with boomerangs.” He nodded to the others and they joined him in repeating the new line twice. They chuckled.

From nowhere, Kairel’s musical contraption appeared, just like it had on earth, and they sang the song again with his accompaniment.

Then Kairel attempted a new verse, “What a fearful thing it is,” he sang, then the others repeated his line twice, at the end of which they looked to him for more. Kairel was deep in thought, then with a twinkle in his eye as if he had been teasing, sang, “To fight the Lord.”

Then it was Chebon’s turn. “What a foolish thing it is,” he sang. Then the others joined in:

 What a foolish thing it is,
 What a foolish thing it is,
 To fight the Lord.

I have never heard angels sing in unison. I wonder if they even know the concept. Their harmony was *. . .* “Out of this world” is an expression that comes to mind, but despite my natural weakness for corny puns, I’m not brave enough to risk readers sniggering at what to me was a profoundly moving experience and is still a sacred memory. Perhaps if I were more musical I would have a more adequate vocabulary, but the harmony was not just staggeringly beautiful, it was exceedingly intricate.

As the music continued, Kairel and Chebon both looked to Meurel, as if expecting him to contribute. He thought for a couple of seconds, then sang, “What a futile thing it is.”

Then everyone joined in:

 What a futile thing it is,
 What a futile thing it is,
 To fight the Lord.

“What a fearful thing,” sang Kairel, who then looked to Chebon.

“What a foolish thing,” sang Chebon, then looked to Meurel.

“What a futile thing,” concluded Meurel. He signaled to the others.

“To fight the Lord,” they sang together, and then burst into laughter.

“Great song, Chebon! Why not call in some of the choir? said Meurel.

“Yeeeaaaaaah!” chimed in Kairel.

I have no idea how he did it, but instantly there were a hundred or so angels surrounding us, some with various contraptions in their hands that I guessed to be types of musical instruments I had not seen before.

The trio quickly taught the newcomers the song, ending with the refrain:

 O that devil,
 Even when he wins he loses.
 O that devil,
 Even when he wins he loses.
 He’s armed to the teeth with boomerangs.
 He’s armed to the teeth with boomerangs.

Then a brilliantly colored, translucent boomerang appeared in Meurel’s hand. Everyone turned deadly serious. Meurel’s face clouded in apparent rage. He hurled the boomerang with all his superhuman might. It swooshed through the air with amazing speed. Although boomerang-shaped, its flight was as straight as a bullet’s. It whirled parallel to the floor at Meurel’s eyelevel until it was out of sight. The supernatural audience went wild with delight. Meurel turned around to acknowledge their cheers, obviously enjoying being the center of attention. Suddenly I noticed the boomerang had re-appeared. Meurel was too absorbed in waving to those cheering him to notice what was happening. The boomerang, acting as if it were on an invisible rubber band, kept getting faster and faster and louder and louder. *LOOK OUT!*

Everyone hushed to a deathly quiet, but it was too late. The weapon slammed into Meurel’s head with a sickening crunch. His head lurched forward while simultaneously he uttered a grunt. He staggered and then collapsed; his limp body crashing to the floor, where he remained motionless. In the deathly quiet, I thought I could hear my heart pumping. Except for my heart, everyone seemed paralyzed.

Suddenly Meurel sprang to his feet again, a bright, cheeky smile on his shining face, as he held aloft the boomerang that I had been sure had killed him. The angels burst into wild cheering and whistling, laughing and jumping. Meurel beamed with delight, seeming to feed off all the commotion like an attention-seeking showman.

Then I wondered: did the angels know all along that it was just an act? Except for me, were there no spectators but only eager participants in a spontaneous game? Had I just witnessed communal fun on a level I had never dared let myself ache for? I sensed in these ethereal beings an exquisite oneness, uninhibited selflessness and love of life. I suddenly felt that for all my existence I had been pining for this without ever knowing it.

Right to this present moment, to have witnessed this communal spirit and unconstrained joy has been both a delight and a source of heartache. It is like someone born crippled and living with cripples, unexpectedly discovering that some people can run and leap and dance. As a delicious crumb that just intensifies a starving man’s hunger, what I sensed in those heavenly beings awakened something within me. It felt as if I were becoming vaguely aware that I’ve been robbed of what I was born for.

Like a carefree child turning into a madly-in-love virgin aching for marriage, I’ll never be the same. Though more intense, what I feel is reminiscent of that peculiar mixture of pleasure and pain that grips me when I gaze upon a sunset. With the beauty comes an ache to fill some indefinable emptiness within; an uneasy awareness that I was made for glories planet earth cannot give.

Suddenly, but gently, the sand flew aside revealing the spongy material covering the sea. These powerful beings began leaping into the air and the mysterious material that turned me into a kangaroo began acting like a giant trampoline firing them higher and higher into the air. I had been astonished at the heights they had attained in the endless palace, but they were now soaring several times higher, and of course, combining it with mind-buckling acrobatics.

After a time of indescribable jubilation, the music started up and the choir resumed the song with greater gusto than ever:

 O that devil,
 Even when he wins he loses.
 O that devil,
 Even when he wins he loses.
 He’s armed to the teeth with boomerangs.
 He’s armed to the teeth with boomerangs.

Finally, their song ended. They all cheered and rejoiced. Then someone started up another song that was obviously known to them. They sang and danced to it; pausing, then punching the air with great delight whenever they sang “power.”

 Who can deny all the – power of God?
 Who can defy all the – power of God?
 You can rely on the – power of God!
 There’s no reply to the – power of God.

 Always delight in the – power of God.
 Never make light of the – power of God.
 Infinite might is the – power of God.
 Devils take fright at the – power of God.

 Satan is foiled by the – power of God.
 Demons recoil at the – power of God.
 They have no choice, it’s the – power of God.
 Let us rejoice in the – power of God.

 By the blood of his Son the victory’s won;
 He overcomes evil with good.
 He frees the guilty and sees justice done;
 Who would think that he could!

For a split second of stupidity I wondered how they could be singing about Jesus’ shed blood when he had not died yet. Then I recalled my experience on that gloomy planet and joyously embraced that mysterious Scripture that speaks of the timeless Son having been slain from before Planet Earth even existed.

Now it’s time to stop my procrastinating. Like some guilty secret threatening my sanity if I hold it in much longer, I feel compelled to risk confessing something that will further erode your opinion of my mental fitness to provide a credible account. I should have told you much earlier but I wanted you to get to know me a bit better before blurting it out. The memory of this moment, when many angels were together, reminds me of what I saw in that celestial palace, because on both occasions they were similarly dressed.

Well, here goes . . . In that palace that seemed to have no end, as I gazed upon that countless number of glorious beings, each was dressed in almost-blinding white, and yet I somehow sensed that each was dressed in a different shade of pure white. I know – it’s impossible. White is white. You can get close to white, but there is only one color that is pure white. And yet . . .

I might blame the light. I would call the light in that place ‘weird’ if planet earth were the standard of normality. But that feels dishonest. Having experienced what I did, it is earth, not that place, that now seems weird. It is as if on the planet I grew up on, pure white is flat, having somehow lost an entire dimension. I guess I’ve been spoilt, but white on earth now seems as disappointing as black and white television compared with color.

I’ve explained that their hair was not white, only whitish. There was no mystery about the hair of each angel seeming a different shade. I’m no color expert but it seemed to me that the hair coloring of each angel, though of course different from the color of the clothing, blended perfectly with the clothing in a way that another angel’s hair would not.

There’s an alternative explanation for what I saw. I find it attractive because it is less likely to get me locked away in an asylum. Perhaps at certain angles, the material of their clothing gave a hint of a gorgeous color – a little like metallic paint on cars – and perhaps because of the folds in their garments this other color was never entirely missing, even though the overall effect was that each garment was snow white. The exact shade of the almost invisible secondary color seemed unique for each angel. (At least I never noticed two wearing identical shades of white.)

There’s another possibility. I realize I’m further risking my reputation by offering yet another speculation, but I wondered whether the material in every garment was identical, but it somehow changed according to the uniqueness of each angel. I cannot explain why that seems to ring true.

I know you think I should let this matter go but you weren’t there. There was something elusive and yet captivatingly mysterious about part of me feeling certain I was seeing the purest of whites and yet another part of me somehow sensing additional hues. Theories kept pouring into my head in a wild attempt to come to terms with it. Even if you reject my other guesses, fabric that at a certain angle shines a different color sounds believable. It might even be correct, but as much as I have tried to convince myself, it doesn’t sit quite right with what I saw. Could I have been temporarily granted superhuman eyesight?

Whatever the explanation, from top to bottom every garment shined pure white and yet it somehow felt as if every garment were a different shade. And the myriads of different, yet identical, colors seemed to portray an individuality and yet a oneness about these beings that somehow felt right to me. In fact, for some reason that surpassed conscious thought, both the sight and the concept of an exquisite blend of uniqueness and uniformity exhilarated me.

It was obvious that they wanted another brand new song, “Come on, Meurel!” urged Kairel.

Meurel thought for a moment then sang:

 What a wondrous thing,
 What a wondrous thing it is,
 What a wondrous thing,
 To know the Lord.

Meurel, looking to Chebon, said, “Your turn!”

Chebon immediately burst into:

 What a glorious thing,
 What a glorious thing it is,
 What a glorious thing,
 To serve the Lord.

The whole choir joined in, singing and dancing and rejoicing. It seemed they would go for hours, but I found myself mysteriously sliding backwards. Some unknown force was pulling me. It was imperceptible at first but I was gaining speed at an ever-increasing rate. Soon the scenery became a blur. Then I blanked out.

# Chapter 15: The Nursery

I seemed to hear the squeals, whoops and giggles of little children. It had to be a dream, but as time wore on I began to doubt that presumption. *Where am I now?* I moaned to myself. *What is happening to me? And why?* It was bad enough being who knows how many light-years from earth, let alone bouncing from one alien world to another.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of pounding hooves. They were getting dangerously close. I opened my eyes in a panic, stared for a split second of wide-eyed disbelief, then slammed my eyes shut again. *Oh no!*

If only I could say it felt as if I’d been punched in the stomach. It was far worse.

A few seconds later, I again cracked open my eyelids to confirm that my eyes had not somehow betrayed me, then bolted them tight in horror.

Until now, so many experiences, though off the scale in weirdness, had somehow seemed remarkably real. Now it all came crashing down in one sickening blow. I had no idea how it happened but I must have been on some type of hallucinogen the entire time.

The hooves belonged to gaudily colored unicorns with golden horns, ridden by giggling children who seemed to be racing each other. They were followed by a moronic assortment of other ludicrous creatures, each ridden by children squealing in delight.

After a minute or so with my eyes again mercifully closed, curiosity got the better of me. The next fleeting moment I could bear looking at the nonsense was briefer than it takes to describe what I glimpsed. A giant grasshopper was saddled up with a rider. In pursuit was a lime green ostrich followed by what looked like a dinosaur with pink and white zebra stripes.

*Could it be that my previous experiences had been real but the last time I lost consciousness I fell into some sort of deep sleep and now – only now – I’m dreaming? If so, it’s the most vivid dream I’ve ever had, even if it is one of the least believable.*

*Is it possible to dream when knocked unconscious?* I felt so peculiar that I wondered if the next time I regain consciousness I would find myself in hospital hooked up to life-support. *Or maybe in a pysch ward.*

I instantly regretted that last thought. As I pictured myself coming to in an insane asylum, horror gripped me so tightly it seemed it would never let go. If ever it were possible to unthink a thought . . .

I had never thought of it when life had been mundane but I have since come to suspect that it is as strong as any survival instinct for our minds to keep convincing ourselves that what we see, hear and touch must be reality. This mental bias, combined with hair-curling clashes with evil beings, and what had seemed a reassuringly realistic and biblically accurate glimpse of Jesus preaching, had pushed from my consciousness worries about spider venom and seven legs. (Hey! Had I actually checked how many legs that spider had? Surely it was too symmetrical for only seven legs.) Now, with devastating reason, all those concerns were flooding back in a tsunami so horrifying that it seemed not only my body but my brain would freeze in fear.

I passed out.

When I came to, I was disappointed with myself. Passing out seemed to have become my primary coping mechanism. How pathetic! Moreover, it had solved nothing. Oblivious to thoughts that were shredding my mind like an exploding bomb, the insane procession mercilessly continued to assault my eyes. An oversized rocking horse somehow propelled itself forward. Flying above it was what I presume to be a mythical Pegasus. The horse-like monstrosity with gossamer wings was predominately red with orange heart-shaped polka dots and blue mane.

If you have never truly feared for your sanity, you cannot even conceive how grateful you should be.

A cloth giraffe with two toddlers clinging to its baggy neck trotted by.

Too disgusted to tolerate any more lunacy, I turned my head. Now I was staring at a low, spreading tree producing not fruit but various types of ice cream cones. Next to it was a palm whose trunk looked like an oversized Christmas treat with red and white stripes. You might think it could not possibly get worse. It did. Not only did the trunk look ridiculously like candy; a child was licking it. Above it was a low-lying cloud from which children were peering down on me. Lamentably, I am not being poetic to say it looked like cotton candy. One of the children even seemed to be eating it. A gigantic bubble floated by. Inside it was an overjoyed little boy, bouncing up and down in obvious delight. I had had enough. I sealed shut my eyes.

Remarkably – since the hallucination must surely have arisen from my own subconscious – nothing seemed to correspond to my own childhood fantasies, except perhaps for the cloud. Lying on clouds had a vague twinge of familiarity about it. Perhaps as a child I had daydreamed of something remotely similar, but not edible clouds, and I had no recollection of the rest. Unicorns seemed more like a little girl’s fantasy.

This event soured everything. What had previously filled me with wonder and I had considered myself privileged to have witnessed, now disgusted me. I felt as humiliated as a victim of the cruelest hoax. Being betrayed by my most trusted friend could not have ripped me apart worse than this. To be honest, I wished I were dead.

What was I going to do now? I could dredge up no idea as to how to turn off a hallucination. Should I just passively let it happen?

I did not bother to pry open my eyes but I heard what sounded like an angel’s voice in the distance. “This is an immense honor. You have each been selected for an assignment that is especially dear to the Father’s heart.” As the voice continued to expound on the “immense honor,” I decided to look in that direction. An impressive-looking angel was addressing a large group of angels. They looked roughly like other angels I had previously seen. I took this as crushing confirmation that nothing I had previously seen had been real.

It was not that I felt let down: it felt more like having been dropped onto concrete from several floors up and left to writhe in agony.

“You may have presumed that those you see playing here are earthlings who died as children. They are not.” The others looked at each other in what I guessed to be amazement.

“These are child parts of earth-based humans who have multiple personalities. Many of them are now adults. As children, they suffered, through the atrocities of war, child abuse or the like, horrors so extreme that to try to cope with psychologically intolerable levels of trauma, the mind of each of them compartmentalized itself. It’s the mind’s attempt to shield the rest of itself from awareness of the trauma.”

This was just further confirmation that I had **lost my marbles**.

“Much of what you see,” he continued, “such as the gigantic butterfly that child is riding,” (I looked up and there truly was such a thing) “is actually the projections of their own minds. It is their attempt to mentally escape earthly traumas beyond their ability to endure.”

*Hey! That almost makes sense! What if this isn’t a hallucination after all? Or is it someone else’s hallucination? This is just too confusing.*

How could I possibly be seeing the disembodied child parts of people with multiple personalities? I knew almost nothing about multiple personalities but it does not take a genius to know that any adult’s child parts are not literally children that could leave their bodies and end up in front of me. *I’ve seen mindboggling things of late but this is truly off the planet!* I smirked, realizing that I had literally been off the planet. *Okay, this isn’t my planet but this is far too wacky!*

Oblivious to my mind recoiling at the impossibilities, the Lecturer’s words kept rumbling on as relentlessly as a runaway locomotive. “Rather than rationally, emotionally and spiritually resolving issues in their lives, humans in extreme situations typically do their utmost to push disturbing memories out of their minds and even try to trick their minds into thinking it never happened. Some even think this cowardly reaction is heroic or even spiritual.”

The angelic audience erupted. “Teeeeeoool!” “Teeeeeoool!” “Teeeeeoool!” Admittedly when I’d previously heard that weird sound it was usually when fewer angels were present, but I had never before heard so many. I could only assume they had found the Lecturer’s last statement astounding.

“It doesn’t work, of course,” continued the Lecturer after they had settled. “The unresolved issues remain like a cancer in the back of their minds, eating away at them in psychologically and spiritually destructive ways.”

I lifted my eyes and saw green rolling hills. I could see wildflowers on the grassy slopes. Little children of various nationalities were kicking or throwing what looked like large, apparently harmless, balls of fire. Some seemed to be playing tag. Some were just babies, able only to crawl. Some were sitting in little groups on the grass, listening intently to what I presumed to be angels but they did not look like the formidable beings I was by now familiar with. They were smaller, more tender and looked more feminine. Some of the children were being held by them.

The angel kept talking. Not knowing his name, I’m forced to simply call him the Lecturer.

“There is also an appalling parallel between what happens within the bodies of these people, with different parts squabbling, turning against each other and acting independently, and what happens in Christ’s physical body that is his church. So many parts within his body keep doing their own thing, creating chaos and rendering his body dysfunctional.”

Not only was I shocked when I heard this, even now it seems I will spend the rest of my life trying to unravel the implications.

The Lecturer continued, “Of course, the parts who are here, benefit from the spiritual instruction we provide and from bonding with the Son of God. But we also provide things of critical importance to the healthy mental development of these earthly creatures, such as stress-free play and social interaction that trauma had cruelly deprived them of when they were growing up. And helping any mind here ends up helping the entire mind of the person on earth he or she belongs to.

“Earthlings who understand a fractured mind will not harass or persecute parts of their own minds. So for them, this place in unnecessary. These parts you see, however, need to be here to avoid being oppressed and re-traumatized by other parts of their own mind. They have suffered rejection not just by other people but by the remainder of their own minds. When the parts on earth finally accept the importance of lovingly accepting each part, it will be safe for the parts here to return to earth and contribute to healing of the mind they belong to.”

Their minds might benefit but I was not so sure about my own mind as it spun wildly trying to grasp what was being said.

Anyhow, the Lecturer had more to say: “Those child parts who have come here, do so because on earth they are in a highly vulnerable situation. Often the actual trauma ended years ago but these are being mercilessly tormented there by people who either don’t care or don’t understand the psychological damage they are inflicting. Some of these parts have been persecuted or abused by the very person who shares their brain. Some have been terrorized by pastors or Christian counselors who treat these child parts, the darlings of the Father’s heart, as demons.”

“Teeeeeoool!” “Teeeeeoool!” “Teeeeeoool!” “Teeeeeoool!” They were off again, almost like triggered smoke detectors.

What I was hearing was bewildering but made enough sense for me to revise my previous presumption that all my unearthly experiences had been nothing but cruel tricks of the mind. I should have been immensely relieved. But I wasn’t. It was more like a serious wound that was slowly beginning to heal. You don’t – or at least I don’t – instantly bounce back from something that had felt like the most sickening blow.

The Lecturer continued. “Someone having several personalities within him sounds superficially like demons, doesn’t it?”

Having risen to the status of self-proclaimed expert at angelic body language, it seemed to me that they were not impressed by that statement.

“In a frantic attempt to simplify a world they find overwhelmingly complex, humans want to label everything they don’t understand; trying to force everything they encounter into the few categories they know. Even godly humans keep forgetting to consult the Spring of all Knowledge and Wisdom before leaping to disastrously wrong assumptions. So, with tragic consequences, some with less understanding of demons than they suppose, presume that the child parts of traumatized people are demons.

“One of the greatest weaknesses humans have is their intelligence.”

“Just to clarify something,” interrupted one of the listeners, “you mean their *lack* of intelligence, don’t you?”.

“No, Teshua. As far as creatures go – especially *earthly* creatures – human intelligence is not insignificant. Because of this, so many of them keep sliding into the horrendous presumption that they know enough or can figure out enough not to need to keep consulting the Omniscient Lord on every matter. The more intelligent one is, the greater the danger of trusting one’s intellectual powers or experience, rather than keep humbly seeking the Supreme One’s revelation. You see –”

Suddenly the children went wild with excitement.

“It’s pandemonium whenever their beloved Papa arrives!” grinned the Lecturer. “You just have to forget about trying to instruct or guide them at such times!”

Then I saw him. His features were only vaguely like the earthly Jesus I had seen before, but he was so stunningly regal that I just knew this had to be Heaven’s Delight; the exalted Son of God. Everything about him, though reminiscent of humanity, was markedly different from any earthly person. His skin literally glowed. His slightly wavy, shoulder length hair was brownish but, perhaps because of the radiance emanating from him, no one on earth has hair that color. He seemed of no particular race, and yet I could see in him features of every racial group. With an enormous grin and sparkling eyes he was beaming with delight at the children. It seemed that each child was his precious darling, the light of his life.

I had seen the eternal Son of God reduced to someone who physically fitted in with the crowd of fallen humanity, but never before had I laid eyes on the risen Lord, restored to the eternal glory that was his alone. What was now boring through my eyes into my heart was so enthralling that it was like love at first sight. I admit it: as much as I had thought I had loved Christ before, it was nothing compared with what was now overwhelming me. I was entranced. I was out-of-my-mind in love.

It was true: no matter how much all the ‘sparklers’ in that endless palace were beyond anything earth offers, they were little more than trashy trinkets, and all their euphoria was a split second fizzle, relative to the Lord of glory. The most fascinating things I have ever laid eyes on and the most exhilarating experiences are dead boring alongside this captivatingly radiant Being. Anyone in their right mind would swap in a heartbeat all the treasures and beauty and pleasures of a thousand universes for one moment with him.

You know how I wrestle with words, straining to take you out of your skin and transport you to realms light-years beyond the planet of your birth. If I could succeed in conveying just one thing, however, it would be the beauty, the wonder, the majesty, the magnetism of the eyes of the astounding Being I was privileged to gaze upon. Like prisms, they shone with every conceivable color, but there was far more to them than just stunning physical beauty that utterly surpassed any eyes I had ever before imagined. They glistened with life, twinkled with joy, and beamed with love. In comparison, diamonds are dull, fire is frigid, and leaping gazelles are lifeless. But even more than this, his eyes revealed such warmth, such openness, such acceptance that instead of cowering in fear, I felt irresistibly drawn to this Man who was infinitely more than man. No matter how macho I tried to be, I felt that to be in his arms was to truly be home for the first time in my life. One glimpse at those eyes would sweeten the sourest soul, melt the hardest heart and satiate the most love-starved person.

I saw boundless wisdom, goodness, agelessness, infinity and eternity in those eyes. They seemed endless oceans of love that I ached to dive into and soak in for all eternity. If you think it madness for me to see so much in one pair of eyes, the explanation is simple: you have never seen such eyes.

No artist could hope to capture the sparkle, the depth, the love, the life, the fun, the playfulness, the tenderness, the fire in those eyes. Never before had it struck me as repugnant blasphemy to try to represent the magnificence of the Pre-eminent One by using two or three dimensional images. If we cannot even capture love in stone or on canvass, who dare imagine that any attempt at portraying the glory of the Infinite One would end up anything less than a sick insult?

Eventually I found myself able to note other things about him. His robe was a warm golden color that shimmered in the radiance, revealing hints of the colors of the rainbow. The fabric seemed a little like satin. I was surprised that his feet were bare. Was this reaction simply my cultural bias? My mind momentarily slid into overdrive to process this. I concluded that if we regard someone as fully dressed despite having bare hands, face and head, why should feet be covered?

I am procrastinating. Although the exalted Lord’s lack of shoes initially set my mind rattling, I soon discovered something far more riveting about his feet. It soared to the most sacred experience of my life. My dilemma is that if it does not defy explanation, it certainly eludes my ability to make fully intelligible to anyone what it did to me and why it impacted me so profoundly.

The next few paragraphs are so inadequate that it is not just embarrassment that keeps me from divulging how long I have spent laboring over writing them. Here’s how my mind works: telling you how much time I’ve devoted to this would stew me with anxiety over whether you might think I’m exaggerating. From there my worries would hurtle out of control. If readers doubt the accuracy of this account I might as well quit writing.

You might think my mind is more of an ass than an asset but it’s what I’m stuck with. At times it drives me nuts and I worry I’m dragging you down with me. Nevertheless, fear that you will not believe me stops me from specifying how long I’ve spent wrestling with how to best convey the impact of those bare feet. I dare admit only that it was a long time. Now I’m worrying I’ve spent too long trying to justify myself. All I know is that I long to do the right thing by you.

Sorry about that. I’m not conceding I’m obsessive-compulsive but you might have noticed what I call an Occasional Obsessive Outburst (not OCD, but OOO, or Ooo! for short). For me, Ooo! is a groan. You, on the other hand, might utter it with an upturned nose as I bore you yet again with still more attempts to justify myself. Try as I might, I can edit Ooos out of this book no more than compulsive hand-washers or lock-checkers can stop their habit. I just need to sleep at night knowing I’ve tried my best to explain myself. The problem is I always feel I could have done better.

Anyhow, I must somehow muster the iron will to move on and provide my attempt to convey and explain my reaction to what I saw. In those feet, and in his hands, were scars that were simultaneously the most hideous and the most beautiful marks I have ever been privileged to see. Prior to this life-changing event I had puzzled over the resurrected body of the eternal Being who does not just live but *is* Life. Why, I used to wonder, does the incorruptible body of the Divine Healer who will resurrect and glorify even cremated bodies, still bear the wounds of torture? Now, I am overawed with gratitude that these exquisite scars are preserved in living flesh for all eternity. My idle curiosity has been drowned by wonder so overwhelming that it seems almost profane to attempt to reduce it to words.

Never before had I realized how little objectivity is involved in accessing beauty. Deciding that something is ugly or beautiful is almost entirely a matter of emotions. I might have expected to recoil at the sight of such grotesque scars but, instead, the sight detonated an explosion of emotions too profound and powerful for words. I can, however, tell you in just fourteen characters what transformed stomach-turning scars into by far the most heartwarming marks I will ever see. As I gawked at them, the words HE DID THAT FOR ME kept reverberating through my entire being, transporting me to extremes of awe, wonder, amazement and love that I had never before considered attainable.

The very hideousness of those scars elevated them to marks of honor, love and beauty beyond anything else in any universe. Over and over the truth kept cycling through me as I stared transfixed at those ‘ugly’ scars: he did that for *me!* Never have I felt so loved, so cherished, so valued and so contentedly secure. As extreme as those feelings were, however, I was not at all focused on myself. I was love-struck, almost to the point of being totally oblivious to anything but those scars. I could not stop marveling at the one who suffered horrific torment because of the immensity of his love for me – and you.

For as long as I can remember I have always believed Jesus suffered for me and I had thought I treasured this as a vitally important fact. Now, however, this fact had so dramatically transmuted into life-changing reality as to render my previous understanding more like an insignificant theory than the most thrilling, all-powerful truth on which my entire existence hinges. The difference between my previous belief and my new awareness is as stark as if I had continually protected myself from getting hurt by keeping aloof from a woman I adored but believed was out of my league, and then discovering she has been feverishly in love with me since before I even noticed her. As I stared in wide-eyed awe at those scars, love so astoundingly deep and fulfilling and yet so unobtainable that I dare not dream of, suddenly became reality.

Let me try one more time to explain what happened to me. Suppose your elderly aunt died, leaving you an old painting you had once admired as a child, but now your tastes have matured. At times you are tempted to burn it but out of respect for your aunt you keep it. One day you discover it is a priceless masterpiece. How thankful you would be that you held on to it! That is an inkling of how I now feel about having held on to God’s love for all those years. I thought I knew all about it but I actually had appallingly little appreciation of its true worth. If, like most people, you have not had an experience comparable to mine, I fall to my knees and shamelessly beg you to hold on to God’s love in sheer faith. One day – in this life or the next – you will revel in ecstasy over discovering its true worth.

Eventually, as if returning from a trance, I became aware of the children squealing with delight. “Papa! Papa!” many of them called.

I was taken aback. *Jesus is the Son, not the Father!* Then it hit me: Everyone’s earthly father is somebody’s son. Jesus was God’s Son, not our son. Come to think of it: I had always puzzled over Isaiah’s prophecy that the Messiah would be called “the Everlasting Father.” He is the Ancient of Days and truly the Father of us all, while remaining the Son of God.

Arms extended, this majestic Being kneeled down – yes, the exalted Lord of glory kneeled before them – and they mobbed him. Giggling and squealing, they knocked him to the ground; jumping on him, climbing all over him, clinging to him. He laughed and laughed as he romped with them in uninhibited delight. His laugh was so heartwarming that I was even more drawn to him. I stood transfixed.

It seemed that to them, he was the personification of fun stretched to incomparable extremes.

As I gazed upon what struck me as a peculiarly sacred commotion, a Scripture rose from within me with irresistible force. The reference escaped me but I knew it was originally in the Old Testament and Jesus had quoted it to silence some of his critics: “From the mouths of children and infants you have perfected praise.” There was nothing dignified about the chaos I was viewing and yet the little ones’ sheer delight in Jesus somehow seemed the very pinnacle of praise, leaving the most sophisticated adult attempts at worship seeming cold, sterile imitations of the genuine article.

I could no longer see the Lord of glory. He was somewhere beneath a pile of squealing, squirming children, but my eyes were riveted on the center of the chaos, in the hope of catching a further glimpse of the King.

I could hear the Lecturer resume, but his words never registered. I was so stunned, mesmerized, besotted – call it whatever you want – that nothing but the slim chance of again glimpsing the Exalted Lord was of any interest to me.

The angel’s words rambled on until at length their significance breached my consciousness with the explosive force of a hand grenade. He had said something like, “These are emotionally shattered people with the fragile senses of earth-based fallen humanity, so he has to tone his glory way down to almost zero for their sake.” Once I understood what he had said, I almost choked.

*This is* ***toned-down*** *glory?* That shot my mind to when Saul was struck to the ground on the Damascus Road and blinded by the intensity of the brighter-than-noonday-sun radiance of the risen Lord. Even after three days in which to recover, it still took a divine miracle for Saul to be able to see again.

As I pondered the word *toned-down* I recalled how much less intimidating the angels playing with the children were. They looked far more human. Some were even less than five-foot tall. I looked further afield and my eyes almost fell out. Far in the distance, apparently oblivious to the presence of Jesus, was another group of children accompanied by beings with white feathery wings and halos!

I had by now grown so accustomed to seeing nine-foot monsters with golden skin and alien features that I stared open-mouthed in disbelief. I remained too stunned to even blink, until it eventually registered that each of the heavenly helpers I was now seeing must have shrunk, lost his powerful physique, grown wings, a halo and gained a human face, because these particular children found it more comforting for angels to conform to their own expectations, scrounged from traditional representations in children’s books.

I smugly congratulated myself on being strong and mature enough to see angels as they truly are. Suddenly my fragile mental stability was threatened by wondering whether even the angels I had seen, despite seeming oblivious of me, had modified their appearance for my sake. If what I heard had somehow been modified and personalized so that it ended up a translation, what if . . .

I didn’t want to finish the sentence. Ever since this bizarre series of events had begun, my mind had been continually whirling at far too close to overload without trying to grapple with the mind-convulsing thought that my own eyes might be treacherous.

I guess I should admit to myself that it was more than avoiding intellectual overkill that drove me to dismiss this notion. To be cut off, possibly forever, from home and family and everything familiar – even something so basic as my own planet – was more than intellectually confusing; it was harrowing. This was further compounded by being so isolated as to be treated as if I do not exist, except by despicable monsters wanting to torment me. Even worse: try imagining what it would be like to be in a totally alien, possibly hostile, environment and not be able to trust your own eyes and ears? When already near breaking point under all this pressure, to let myself be haunted by whether my own eyes were deceiving me seemed to jeopardize my very sanity. So I dismissed the notion as preposterous and returned to observing Jesus.

Should, by taking this action, I congratulate myself for cleverly choosing what was essential for basic survival or should I beat myself up for being weak and cowardly? Dare I even see it as heroic? I recalled a movie about Aron Ralston who in a freak accident found himself all alone with his arm pinned by a boulder. Having no alternative, he courageously rescued himself by hacking his arm off, struggling down a cliff face and walking to safety. I could never in a hundred delusional years convince myself – let alone anyone else – that what I was doing neared this astonishing feat, but maybe I was likewise bravely going to whatever lengths it took to pull myself back from the precipice of insanity. On the other hand, we would all be more easily convinced by the argument that I was just being plain lazy. Was I gallantly taking decisive action or proving my intellectual inadequacy or even shrinking from a mental challenge in a shameful act of escapism? I had no idea. I was too smart/frazzled/scared/lazy/crazy/courageous or whatever even to squander the mental effort it would take to analyze myself. Instead, I fixed my attention on Jesus.

Eventually the little ones calmed enough for Christ to begin dancing with them; the attending angels providing the music. As he danced, he would take into his arms each child, one at a time, and whisper in the child’s ear. I could tell by the varying length of time that he spoke to each of them that what he said must have been unique for each child. I was keen to hear what he was saying, so I drew as near as I dared and strained to hear.

“You know how much you like presents . . .” he whispered to one.

The boy’s eyes lit up, “Yes!”

“You really, really like them?” teased the Lord of glory.

“Yes!” the boy’s eyes grew even bigger.

“Well, that’s how much I love you,” he said, as his grin broadened still farther.

It dawned on me that these children who, I presume, we might pity for having never known a kind-hearted earthly father, were now enjoying not just a good father, but the perfect one. They were in one sense underprivileged and yet through the intensity of their intimacy with the exquisitely perfect Father they were now more privileged than those with superb human parents.

Suddenly I felt peculiarly confused as to who is privileged and who is not; who is spiritually blessed and who is to be pitied. As the confusion escalated, fragments of Scripture began whirling inside my head. *“*The last will be first, and the first will be last . . .” “For whoever is the least among all of you, he is the greatest. . . .” “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted . . .” “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. . . .” “Blessed are those who are persecuted . . .” “Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .”

On and on the torrent of words spun; twisting and twirling inside me. “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to little children . . .” “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in torment . . .” “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were mighty; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the mighty. He chose the lowly and despised things of the world, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are . . .” “Blessed are you when people insult you . . .”

While simultaneously hearing each word echoing in my head, I could see that word in flashing colors, writhing and whirlpooling. *“*For when I am weak, then I am strong . . .” “Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you . . .*”*

I began to feel giddy, then nauseous. I panicked, wondering whether I would pass out, vomit, or go insane. Then, as instantly at it had begun, the internal whirlwind of words and scrambled thoughts stopped dead.

*Wow! What was that all about?* To this day, I am still confused as to who, in the final analysis, is privileged and who is to be pitied.

By the time I was able to focus again, the King of kings had left and the Lecturer had launched into a long, complex explanation of how they could be seeing the child parts of people who were still on earth. I won’t bore you with all of it. Okay, I confess I cannot fully recall it all and, though I hate admitting it, some technical details whizzed over my head.

The best I could make of it is that, except for the spiritual beings, what I was observing was rather like virtual reality. It was a representation of what was simultaneously taking place within a part of the compartmentalized minds of each person on earth who had a part represented here. What they were seeing and feeling in their minds, however, was identical to what I was observing. Whenever someone here interacted with any of these – for lack of a more accurate term – touchable holograms, it was relayed back to the person on earth.

Parts reeling in emotional pain were mercifully granted this experience, if, instead of receiving the comfort they deserved, they were being further traumatized by neglect, or outright persecution by other parts of the person. The other ‘personalities’ of each person were oblivious to this experience, but the specific part of each person represented here was so vividly aware of what I could see that it was reality to him/her. If I were to get religious I could say each of the child parts I could see was simultaneously having the same vision or, more accurately, trance.

Apparently, the time the children stay in this virtual reality (perhaps I should call it spiritual reality) is temporary but can vary from just minutes to years, earth-time. From what I could gather, there are many more groups like the one I was seeing, scattered in diverse locations. There are not just child parts who need this special care, but even adult parts can be so badly treated on earth that they temporarily need a safe haven like this one.

As the explanation droned on, a gentle breeze picked up, wafting the soft scents of exotic flowers, flooding me with its warm comfort. The giggles of happy children were like music to my soul. I looked in their direction and noticed to my disgust that some of them were licking the grass. I glanced at others and noticed some eating the flowers. I stared at them, wondering why their attending angels did not intervene or feed them properly.

As I looked more intently I soon grew so intrigued by how much they appeared to be enjoying tasting the plants that I began to contemplate trying some myself. I tentatively put a piece of grass to my lips and touched it with my tongue. It was delicious! I greedily scoffed a handful and it melted in my mouth like ice cream. I tried a flower and it was like candy. The next one shocked me speechless. It was not just unbelievably delicious; it was like nothing I had ever before tasted. If you could describe peppermint or Turkish delight or strawberry yogurt to someone who has never tasted anything remotely like them, you should be writing this account. If I could only market this flavor, chocolate sales would plummet and I’d be an instant billionaire. Every plant species had a different flavor. *Wow!* (I almost found myself saying “Teeeeeoool!”) *This certainly is a child’s idea of heaven!*

# Chapter 16: Departure

I must slip out of this account for just a little while. I apologize for breaking the flow of my record of events but I feel compelled to justify my decision not to cave in to my yearning for acceptance by omitting the previous chapter.

My curiosity had been so aroused by what I had just witnessed that when at last I stopped being smacked from world to world to world like some hapless ping pong ball, and my time/space odyssey (that should be spelt ***odd***yssey) finally ended, I researched Multiple Personality Disorder. By so doing, I plunged into a world as astounding as any described in this book. I discovered that having multiple personalities is more common than I had ever imagined. You and I have most likely met such people – and might even be close friends with them – and never guessed it. More surprising still, there is a good chance that the people themselves have not yet guessed.

They are not crazed weirdos created by Hollywood, but deeply hurting people doing their utmost to suppress their inner pain and live normal lives. They are found in all levels of society. Even though their low self-esteem usually blinds them to their giftedness, they are likely to have above average intelligence or be exceptionally creative.

I learned that the more scientific term is Dissociative Identity Disorder (D.I.D.) and that the usual term for the various ‘personalities’ is alters (short for alternate personality). The predominant personality is usually called the host.

Though still in its infancy, scientific research is uncovering amazing things about these people. For example, some people with this condition can switch from having a severe allergic reaction to medication, or some other substance, to having no allergy at all, depending upon which alter is in control. Likewise, heart rhythms (as measured by E.K.G.s), brain waves (E.E.G.s), and blood pressure can vary markedly from alter to alter within the one person. Apparently they can also switch instantly to different blood alcohol levels, and glucose levels and some research suggests that differences between alters can even be detected in CAT and PET scans.

A person can need spectacles and the next moment, when another alter takes over, has to remove them to see. They can speak with different accents or even languages that other alters do not know. Someone crippled with arthritis can switch alters and suddenly run, skip and play like a child. Some of them have great difficulty at banks and so on, because they have a whole range of different signatures and when a particular alter is not available, none of the others can produce the required signature. A person might be strongly right-handed and yet have an alter who is left-handed. People who are hopeless at a particular skill or talent – poetry, art or whatever – can suddenly find themselves brilliant at it when another part of them takes over. It might be decades before they discover that one of their alters has always had this ability.

As is typical of quirky me, I slid into an almost hypnotic fascination with an academic analysis of the topic. Finally, the gut-wrenching human cost flung me back to reality. I grew so intrigued that I felt I had to meet someone with D.I.D. An extensive, on-line search led me to e-mail contacts and eventually I found myself face to face with Karen, an attractive, middle-aged Christian who freely admitted she had D.I.D. This articulate woman was well on the way to becoming an acclaimed poet and had significant other gifts as well. I’m respecting her confidentiality by not using her real name.

Karen looked me in the eye and whizzed through her story of horrific sexual abuse as a child growing up in what everyone had presumed to be a respectable home. As an adult trying her utmost to cope with the aftermath, she spent years under counselors and therapists, both Christian and secular, and they never diagnosed her as having D.I.D. Belatedly, someone correctly identified her affliction but, like the woman who touched the hem of Jesus’ clothes, she continued to suffer at the hands of professionals. Not only did they take her money, they tried treatments that suppressed her alters and only increased her suffering. The lowest part of all was when she mustered the courage to confide in her beloved pastor that she had multiple personalities. He immediately concluded that her alters must be demons and tried to cast them out. The consequences were devastating.

Imagine being told by a respected spiritual leader, not just that you have demons but that you *are* a demon! That’s how Karen’s alters received it. They plummeted from having writhed in emotional agony and shattered self-esteem all their lives, to be being authoritatively pronounced totally evil, nonhuman, abandoned by God and beyond redemption. They concluded that the torturous existence they had already suffered was destined to end in nothing less than eternal torment in the fires of hell.

These indispensable parts of Karen were, of course, not cast out. Instead, after having been hurt and suppressed for most of their existence, they fled in terrified horror into even deeper hiding within her. Some ended up spending time with God, rather like what I had witnessed. Not surprisingly, every alter vanishing from her consciousness gave Karen the illusion of greater normality and she temporarily seemed to have more peace, thus emboldening her pastor in his misdiagnosis.

Without as much as considering the agony of her suppressed alters, the cost was far more extreme than was realized even for that part of her that thought she was more at peace. There are parts of the brain that only an alter has control of. To lose contact with an alter is to lose access to that part of the brain. With the alters too terrified to contribute to Karen’s well-being, significant parts of her intellectual capacity were inaccessible. Oh, she could stagger on, but it was years before she had even a clue of how much she had been robbed. Convinced by the pastor’s well-meaning and understandable mistake, she became her own worst enemy; hounding back into suppression any alter within her that ever dared surface. Most tragic of all, the wonderful healing that she eventually experienced was delayed for twelve years until she finally learnt the truth about D.I.D.

Momentarily, I felt some of her grief over what could have been twelve highly productive years being wasted. In fact, such is the range and magnitude of her talents that the moment that pastor decided to ‘help’ her, the whole world lost. As she kept reeling off all the damage this man of God had inflicted by calling her alters demons, I began to express my hot indignation at his foolishness.

“No!” objected Karen. “He was sincerely doing his best. He’s just one of the millions who care but have no understanding of D.I.D. He had no idea how much discernment is needed.

“Alters can superficially seem like demons. Many alters have not only been subjected to ungodly abuse but never allowed access to the rest of the person’s knowledge and experience. So even devout Christians can be expected to have certain alters who, until instructed otherwise, have never had the chance to know anything about the true God. Like most people cut off from a knowledge of the gospel and writhing in intolerable emotional pain, some can be filled with rage and bitterness and bound by all sorts of addictions and sins that are totally contrary to their Christian parts. Some could be terrified of God because they see him as male, and from their experiences with the only males they have known they conclude that all males are potential abusers.

“Until needy parts find healing in Christ they are likely to engage is self-harm, such as cutting themselves. Most likely, they will attempt suicide, which in practical terms means trying to kill their host. Some can even name themselves, ‘Pain,’ ‘Fury,’ ‘Evil,’ or some other demonic-sounding name. Some of them can think of themselves as animals or aliens or the opposite sex, or gay.”

I was flabbergasted. Now even I was beginning to wonder if it was demonic. “Self-harm?” I said out loud. The instant she had mentioned it my mind had flashed uncontrollably to the crazed man in Jesus’ day with the legion of demons.

“Haven’t you ever been so exasperated with yourself for making some mistake that you’ve berated yourself and felt like hitting yourself?”

I had, on rare occasions, but I wasn’t going to admit it. ‘Legion’ cutting himself with stones (Mark 5:5) was still playing on the screen on my mind. “So you don’t believe in demons?” My voice was raised in frustration.

“I not only believe in demons, I’ve had eight demons cast out of me,” she retorted defiantly.

Now I was truly confused.

“Of course demons exist. They are more common than most people realize. But not everything that superficially seems like a demon is one, just as not everything that superficially seems natural is devoid of demonic influence. We must exercise caution and prayerful discernment in such delicate matters. Not just callous demons are involved but highly vulnerable, sensitive people who could be devastated by even as little as a raised voice.

“I’ve met people who have been seriously injured physically – one even had a miscarriage – by kind-hearted people trying to cast out nonexistent demons.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“In the case of the miscarriage, a large group of people, seeking to bless the woman, laid hands on her in prayer. They had no idea she suffers from claustrophobia and she panicked with so many people pressing on her. Instead of them backing off and giving her some space, someone mistook her reaction for a demonic manifestation and began to physically restrain her. She panicked even more and began to thrash in a frantic attempt to burst out of her confinement, and the vicious circle escalated.”

I felt sick. *Wow! One really must be careful!*

“And don’t be quick to consign psychological issues to some weird category,” she added. “The result could have been the same if, unknown to them, her clothing had covered a physical injury and the pressure of the hands caused her to reel or squeal in pain. We need cool heads when encountering anything that initially seems bizarre.”

Karen must have sensed I was weakening but still far from convinced. So she patiently continued to labor away at the arduous task of trying convince me that the outlandish aspects of D.I.D. were nothing more sinister than a natural reaction to extreme trauma.

She started with the basics. “Some people talk about the ‘inner child’. People sometimes speak about ‘going back into their shell’. More controversially, you might even have heard talk about men ‘getting in touch with their feminine side’.”

I was nodding, until that last statement.

“Okay, that last one might be kinky,” she added hastily, “but you’ll agree that almost everyone contrasts the conscious with the unconscious, and Christians often speak of head knowledge versus heart knowledge.”

I had to agree with that.

“These are all ways of acknowledging that everyone has more than one side to their personality and that often a part of who they are is somewhat hidden from their consciousness. With D.I.D., this natural aspect of being human is simply more pronounced. It has been pushed to extremes because their trauma has been extreme.”

Karen had clearly thought this through, but I couldn’t help thinking her explanation was over-simplistic. Undeterred, she annihilated my skepticism by speeding through a detailed rationale for peculiar behavior that, at least superficially, could be mistaken for demonic. I’ll just summarize the points that won me over.

Little children are so impressionable and trusting of adults that if an adult continually and emphatically asserts that they are useless or evil or sluts, they typically – and tragically – end up convinced that it must be true.

When children are in such physical or emotional agony that they form alters, they do so because they are scared to let themselves feel the pain. Since humans feel – and feeling pain is the last thing they want – it is hardly surprising if some alters try to use their powerful imagination to convince themselves that they are not human. Likewise, when one considers what they have suffered, it is understandable that in order to feel safe, some alters convince themselves that they are the opposite sex. Sex abuse victims, for example, commonly wish they were the opposite sex because they believe this would have protected them from the horrors they suffered.

Karen bravely confessed to sometimes having had lesbian tendencies until she discovered that it was because parts of her believed they were male. In some of Jesus’ many encounters with them, he gradually and tenderly helped them realize they could be just as strong and as safe being female, and now Karen delights in being fully feminine and heterosexual.

Widening her scope to include the experiences of some of her acquaintances, Karen recounted story after story of amazing transformations. She told of the hearts of angry, bitter, mean alters melting in response to unconditional love and how, often in the space of just a few days, they would fully respond to the gospel and fall head over heels in love with Jesus. Thereafter they often have times of being taught directly by Jesus and regularly have powerful, deeply moving encounters with each member of the Trinity in ways that would make the average Christian highly envious. They develop a deep love for God’s Word and the power of the cross, and in almost no time some of them become fearless in standing up to demons and sending them fleeing in the name of Jesus.

“Alters bear their host’s pain,” said Karen, “thus allowing the hosts, at least temporarily, to cope better. Jesus is, in a real sense, the ultimate alter and he bore on the cross all of our pain. When alters realize this, they release their pain and shame and guilt to him. Their burdens go and they fill with peace and joy. They stop being nasty and become kind and loving and eager to devote the rest of their lives to glorifying God. Of course, like every Christian, they still face trials, battles with temptation and so on, and they work through these just like other new Christians.”

I was convinced, but as I thought more about that pastor’s mistake, it hit me what a hot potato this topic is. I selfishly began to worry about whether it would damage book sales to include this chapter. Why risk making enemies of Christian leaders I respect who, despite their best intentions, are mistaken about D.I.D.?

For a moment I began to think out loud . . .

“No!” she shouted in what seemed like anger. She immediately felt the need to try to salvage that mistake by converting it into a plea. “Please don’t,” she said, with as much calmness as she could muster. “I needlessly suffered years and years and years of turmoil, confusion and indescribable anguish. Besides the almost intolerable emotional pain, it ruined my marriage, messed up my children and hindered my walk with God. So much of my life has been lost. So much good I could have done and people I could have helped – gone forever.

“What disasters I could have been spared if only my pastor or counselors or simply me, had been better informed,” she exclaimed. “And this tragedy is the norm for people with D.I.D. Even those who, like me, have ended up gloriously healed, have typically had their healing deferred by ten or twenty years because of widespread ignorance. And people with D.I.D. are usually remarkably gifted. Have you any idea of all the good just one or two of them – let alone all of them – could have achieved, and how much they could have enriched the entire world, had they been healed many years earlier?”

My mind sped through Karen’s immense talents and tried to grasp the enormity of what could be achieved with ten or more extra years added to such people in the prime of their lives.

“Not a few of them kill themselves before learning the truth about D.I.D. And all the others languish in agony so intense that over and over they contemplate suicide.

“Basic, sane information about D.I.D. must be disseminated as widely as possible to stop this needless tragedy being repeated over and over in thousands of lives.”

I must have raised an eyebrow over those last few words because she came back at me hard, “Yes, *thousands* of lives, worldwide.”

I was shaken. Having been granted a unique experience had apparently lumbered me with a unique responsibility.

Source of Scientific Information about Dissociative Identity Disorder:

*Got Parts? An Insider’s Guide to Managing Life Successfully with Dissociative Identity Disorder* by ATW, Loving Healing Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2005, page 98-97

Much More Information about Dissociative Identity Disorder:

www.net-burst.net/counselor-therapist/dissociative-resources.htm

# Chapter 17: Where Good and Evil Cross

“The forces of evil . . .” blared a staggeringly alien voice. The words had exploded like cannons. Deafening. Terrifying. And yet the words that ripped through my ears came with the clarity, and almost the tone, of a trumpet. Never had I heard a voice so majestic, so powerful, so crisp.

My eyes snapped open, but everything was still black. Then I saw what I can only call multiple flashes of red lightning. Sometimes the flashes were so frequent as to be almost like a dazzling red strobe light.

The darkness, interspersed only by almost blinding red lightning, made it nearly impossible for me to see. As alarming as this lack of visibility was, I had no desire to see a being that sounded like this one.

I was probably in a sweat, trembling, but the churning within me was so violent that it downed all consciousness of my physiological reaction. I could not have been stunned more if I had been suddenly awakened from a deep sleep by *both* an air raid siren screaming just inches from my ears and being drenched with ice water. The shock alone might have been enough to account for the intensity of my emotional reaction, but mixed with that was a terrifying awareness of impending disaster.

Unable to detect even the direction, much less the distance of the voice, I wanted to remain frozen, lest I accidentally touch the being that had spoken. Nevertheless, I had a disturbing thought that I felt I needed to check out. I lifted a leg. While keeping that leg raised, I lifted my other leg. My fears were confirmed. No part of me was touching anything. I was somehow suspended in nothingness. *Not entirely nothing,* I reasoned. *I’m still breathing, so I can’t be in outer space.*

The piercing voice resumed its attack on my senses:

 “The forces of evil have mustered.
 Line upon line with murderous intent:
 Fiendish myriads with fearsome force,
 Aligned in fury against their Foe;
 Arrayed to crush the Son of God.
 Satan and demons with awesome power,
 Hideous gods and hate-crazed ghouls,
 Beastly spirits and wicked powers.
 Countless fiends take lethal aim;
 Flaming arrows of devilish rage,
 Amassed to destroy the Holy One.”

I wanted to flee but it felt like there was no place in the universe in which to hide. It seemed as if some dreadful event was about to shatter every atom not only within me but in every universe and dimension in all creation. Everything – physical, spiritual, corrupt or holy – seemed a hair’s breadth from annihilation.

The voice continued. It was sort of masculine but no man ever sounded like this. I was scared to listen lest there be further ghastly news, and yet I had to find out more.

 “From above the Almighty laughs.
 He mocks their evil schemes;
 Outwits their darkened minds,
 Twists their wrath in his plan of love,
 And makes them pawns in their own demise.”

Then I was somewhere else. Ground was beneath my feet. It was lighter, but not full daylight. I heard the sound of a small crowd beginning to murmur.

“What’s happening?” said one of the louder voices. “It’s getting dark!”

“It’s an omen!” said another in an alarmed half-whisper.

“That’s no eclipse! I’ve never seen such a thing,” said an old voice.

“You can feel the evil,” said someone else.

“Darkness falls on the Son of Light,” said another reverently.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I could make out some crosses and a crowd of spectators.

“Well may the sun grow dark.” I looked around and it was a supernatural being. *It* ***must*** *be an angel*, I assured myself. Never have I seen an angel so somber. He was bowed down, his back to the crosses and the crowd. He continued, apparently talking into the air:

 “Unthinkable things transpire.
 Purity and Corruption trade places.
 Innocence and Guilt swap destinies.

 The Spotless Virgin raped by sin.
 Endless Glory extinguished by shame;
 Beloved Son and Father ripped apart.”

A great feeling of dread and horror fell on me. His haunting voice continued.

 “Well may the sun grow dark:
 The heavens reel in horror.
 The Blessed One cursed;
 Immortality surrenders to Death.
 All creation teeters.
 He who holds the stars
 Is now in death’s cold sway.

 “Grow dark, great sun.
 Weep, you heavens.
 Bow down you mountains.
 Your Creator dies.”

No one but me seemed to hear or see this powerful being. I tried hard to pierce the gloom with my eyes to see the distant crosses. Instantly, I regretted it. I am not squeamish. I am not sentimental. But I was quite unable to endure the sight. I would rather have died. I was precariously close to vomiting. What made the sight particularly harrowing was the contrast between the glorious Being I had seen playing with the children and the one drained of glory and in the throes of death. I tried not even to let myself think this was the same Person I had previously felt so infatuated with that I had been unable to wrench my eyes off him.

Another angel appeared, glanced fleetingly at the cross, then recoiled; horror and anguish distorting his face.

“NO!” His ear-splitting shout pierced my soul like an arctic blast. I was shaken as he continued his tirade. “This should never be! Innocence made guilty. The Holy One crushed by sin’s curse as if humanity’s sins were his own! The Pure and Perfect One smeared with humanity’s shame – scorned, spurned, cursed.

“O Precious Father, what is humanity that you should suffer this much? Stop! . . . Please! Don’t do this . . . . No one is worth this much agony –” Then, with a blood-curdling scream, he bellowed, “NO ONE!”

His shriek was startlingly loud. What shook me to the core, however, was far more than just the volume of sound. It simply magnified what he was saying, and added to the intense emotion in his voice and body language, all compounding the effect of that gruesome scene on the cross. To say the combined effect was chilling or gut-churning or crippling is quite inadequate. So extreme was my emotional reaction that I was pushed to the very brink of my endurance. It was as if his every word pounded me like a sickening body blow.

I can find no adequate explanation for the enormity of my inner turmoil. It felt more gut-wrenching than merely being a spectator to a grisly incident of earth-shattering proportions. It was almost as if the intensity of the angelic outbursts was causing me to experience Jesus’ tortuous death, not through a hardened human heart, but through the passionate innocence of angelic eyes and emotions.

The effect reached its peak when the angel screamed, “No one!” As you can physically feel loud, low frequency sounds, those words seemed to rip through my entire body almost as physically as a hail of bullets though, of course, not as deadly. My knees buckled, I doubled over and crumpled to the ground. This time, a loss of consciousness would have been welcomed. Instead, I remained acutely aware of my surroundings.

An uncomfortable silence dragged on for several minutes.

“My God, why have you forsaken Me?” I assumed the words, barely audible, came from the middle cross. I didn’t want to look up to check.

“O Father of Compassion!” shouted the celestial being, “how can you do this? You hurl upon your darling Son all the outrage ever felt when the objects of your love were cheated, abused, violated. Flaming anger fueled by infinite love – fury so intense that only you can contain it – unleashed upon the Innocent One, instead of on those who deserve it! Why? WHY?”

I had sincerely believed I loved Jesus passionately. At the sight of the grief on this extraterrestrial’s face, however, I suddenly found myself appalled at how little I loved my Savior. Only then did I realize that my emotional response to Christ’s crucifixion has never been like the trauma I would feel at seeing a loved one being tortured to death. In fact, until this experience, I think I had been little more moved by the thought of Jesus’ suffering than by reading a newspaper account of the death of a stranger.

More silence. At last, more quietly this time, he spoke. “Seconds scream like hours. How long must this torment continue? HOW LONG?” He was back to full volume again.

He looked fleetingly at the center cross, then quickly turned his back again, as if the sight were too painful. “He suffers in silence, but I cannot be still.” Then in what seemed a mixture of anger, exasperation, and disbelief, he shrieked, “This is no ordinary man!” The words seemed to rip through my insides.

“O Matchless One, let me intervene. Let me spare your Son – your only Son – your precious Son . . .” Then, he began to sob. It came as no surprise, having witnessed his anguish, but before this I would never have thought of an angel crying so bitterly.

A voice seemed to well up within me:

 “Behold your crucified King;
 Source of all beauty;
 Spring of life,
 Cascading goodness,
 Gushing love
 Tinged with blood,
 Upon a sin-stained swamp –
 The ruined planet
 That was once his precious jewel.”

“It’s finished!” said the Man on the middle cross.

An unseen celestial choir began to sing in sober tones:

 While demons mock and men revile,
 Into the naked, beaten Christ,
 Satan’s venom drains.
 Lethal fangs expel their bile
 Till not a drop remains
 For those who torture him.

While they mourned in song, it seemed as if an enormous viper attacked Jesus. I shuddered as it bit with such fury that its entire body trembled. Finally, it went limp as though dead. At that very moment Jesus’ head dropped as though he, too, were dead. I looked again and the serpent was a spear in Jesus’ side.

Then, a monstrous scorpion stung the crucified Christ. Its sting was torn off and remained embedded in Jesus’ side. The scorpion died and shriveled up. When I next looked, the sting was a spear that a Roman soldier ripped out of Jesus’ body.

Next, I saw deadly projectiles – darts, arrows, spears, rocks – hurled at the crucified Savior. A multitude crouching directly behind his mutilated body sheltered in safety.

As this was happening the invisible choir sang:

 All who cling to Christ are safe;
 Shielded by his mangled form.
 In him they put their faith;
 For them his flesh is torn.
 He suffered for their guilt;
 The filth they wallowed in.
 Deadly darts that enter him
 Touch not those who follow him.

As they finished, Gabriel appeared from nowhere, triumphantly declaring:

 “It’s done! He’s drained that dreaded cup.
 Not one dreg remains.

 It’s paid! Sins’ debts are canceled.
 The ransom’s paid in full.

 Consumed! Cruel fires burnt out for lack of fuel.
 Nothing’s left that isn’t charred.

 It’s stilled! God’s wrath is fully spent –
 Spewed upon his holy Son.

 He’s dead! Hell’s fury at last is ended.
 Not one cruel blow has missed its mark.

 Twice dead! Dead in body and dead to God.
 Naught remains but rotting flesh.”

Then, that still-invisible choir began to sing in quiet reverence:

 “Violence quivers
 In the hands of peace.
 Mysteries grow
 As the struggles cease.
 Pride crumbles before a humble Christ.
 Arrogance breaks on his broken frame.
 Evil quakes at this holy loss;
 End of life, no end to shame,
 At the place where good and evil cross.

 Hell’s power is lost;
 Death’s sting has died:
 Impaled upon a cross,
 Embedded in a bleeding side.
 The lion is vanquished by the lamb;
 The serpent by the dove.
 Depravity quashed by purity;
 Hate consumed by love,
 At the place where good and evil cross.”

I looked on in shocked bewilderment. I somehow felt as if what I had just witnessed made a nuclear holocaust seem like a picnic. It seemed as if all human suffering had somehow been focused on one human being. Somehow, what had just occurred was the pivotal point of all of history, but how it all fitted together I had almost no idea.

On one level, I was trying to grasp what it would be like to die of starvation when I was nothing but a spoilt brat who throws a tantrum if his meal is delayed thirty seconds. On another level, I was an ant on the Statue of Liberty, having no conception of the artistry and meaning of what I was trampling underfoot because I could never get back far enough, nor have eyes strong enough to truly see. The ramifications of what had just transpired were further beyond my comprehension than a four-year-old trying to grapple with mathematics that confound the minds of earth’s greatest geniuses. Everywhere I looked I was completely out of my depth.

The soldiers pulled the nails and the corpse fell to the ground – a stinking pile of sweat and blood. About half a dozen spectators emerged from the crowd and heaved the crumpled mass. It flopped onto a sheet. Fighting waves of nausea, they straightened the limbs. They lugged the body to a nearby grave, then tightly bound the lifeless shell – head, eyes, nose, mouth, arms, trunk, legs, feet. As they worked on the corpse they found themselves confronting all the unavoidable signs of death – body cold, eyes set, chest silent and motionless; gaping wounds in the head, back, side, hands, feet, all refusing to bleed. The professional executioner had drained every drop with that final thrust and twist of the spear.

They bound with the corpse seventy-five pounds of aromatic spices to fight the stench of death. No need to struggle with the massive stone. An armed squad had arrived to check the body, seal the tomb and remain on guard until relieved by the morning shift.

The ghastly scene finally dissolved.

# ***Chapter 18: The Blubbering Idiot***

When consciousness tenderly roused me, I found myself immersed in beauty. My sleepy senses had barely begun to absorb the extravagant beauty of my surroundings when, to my bewilderment, I burst into tears.

There was no denying that experiencing the crucifixion had been emotionally shattering beyond all expectation. It was not some movie. Nor was I a mere observer. I was *there*, not just physically but intensely involved with what I can only conclude were supernaturally heightened intellect and senses with which to perceive the enormity of what was happening. To have been granted full insight into that cataclysmic event might have killed me. Even if I had been sheltered from the full impact, however, what I experienced was deeper by far than I had ever considered possible.

Imagine the devastation of witnessing the kindest person in the universe brutally humiliated and tortured to death by cold-hearted thugs. Add to this the sickening shock of suffering the tragic death of the love of your life, the darling of your heart, the most precious person in your world. Now compound these by enduring the trauma of the entire cosmos teetering on the brink of annihilation. That’s the best I can do to convey the depth of what had gutted me. I suppose that if anyone is justified in getting emotional, it is someone who has endured this.

I recalled the book of Revelation speaking of God wiping away all tears and yet, to my consternation, here was I blubbering like a baby. I was forced to admit, however, that there seemed to be something peculiarly healing about those tears. Somehow I felt more whole than ever before, as if at last I was reunited with a long-lost part of me. In fact, it was even more dramatic: it was as if a dead part of me had sprung to life. I could hardly have been more surprised or relieved if, having resigned myself to going through life dragging a paralyzed limb, nerve endings had suddenly reconnected and I was restored. I felt a peculiar kinship with the man crippled from birth “walking and jumping, and praising God.”

Nevertheless, not even being alone spared me from acute feelings of shame and embarrassment over what I despised as yet another ridiculously out-of-character outpouring of emotions.

*What am I’m coming to? I’ve been in worlds of astounding peace and beauty and in each of them I shed more tears than in my entire previous adult life!*

My emotional reaction made me feel as pathetic as a tripod that cannot stand on its own two feet – and made as much sense. Why was this so alarmingly gnawing away at my self-esteem? As I tried to analyze it, I realized that I viewed failing to control my emotions as proving myself a failure as a man. Regardless of whether anyone else knew of my failure, I could never hide that withering truth from myself. My lack of emotional control meant that, outside of suicide, there was no alternative to having to drag myself through life knowing I could never be female but neither was I a real man. If I were neither a ‘she’ nor a real man, I shriveled into an ‘it’ – a thing, not a person. You might think this extreme but, for me, that is what it boiled down to, unless I could scrounge some satisfying rationale for reaching another conclusion about my tears.

When the tears stopped long enough for my eyes to focus, I scanned my surroundings. I was in a place of indescribable magnificence. Were I writing some time B.C. (Before Computers) I would have a full wastepaper bin testifying to my inability to convey the splendor. ‘Garden’ is far too bland a word for what I beheld. In fact, ‘beheld’ is also inadequate. Even ‘experienced’ does not quite cut it. It was as though the warm, delightfully invasive essence of paradisiacal surroundings seeped into me until absorbed into the deepest part of my being.

Words I’ve trashed include ‘a stupendous, otherworldly plant sculpture,’ ‘a celestial floral extravaganza,’ and ‘the quintessence of beauty’. In defeat, I will simply call it an exquisite garden that seemed to stretch forever, and move on before any more straining after nonexistent words fuses my few remaining brain cells. All I will say is that I no longer smile at Kokbiel for being stunned by the beauty of a single flower. If beauty can heal, I must have been surrounded by the most powerful medicine in the universe.

This garden was so spectacularly beautiful and fascinating that it fired to fever pitch my drive to explore it as extensively as possible, thus maximizing what was likely to be a never-to-be-repeated experience.

Despite the uniquely peaceful surroundings, however, my mind was far from peaceful. My frequent blubbering throughout so much of my otherworldly experiences was not just embarrassing but deeply disturbing. Emotionally, I was a fruit loop short of a dog’s breakfast, and ignoring the matter would only prolong the mess. I needed, with God’s help, to think this through until resolved in my mind. My internal deliberations dragged on for a while but proved wonderfully healing and liberating.

I’ve lost sleep arguing with myself over whether including ramblings about my hang-ups would detract from the book. My own tears caused enough problems without boring you to tears as well. My dilemma is that I’m nagged by the possibility that I might not be the only one who could benefit from my mental journey from hang-ups to peace. Can we do a deal? If any of this is of low interest to you, speed forward to more gripping parts of this book. Not only will I not be offended, it will spare me some shame.

My *Type A* personality goads me to squeeze the maximum out of every second by multitasking wherever possible. This made it inevitable that I would attempt both exploration of the garden and resolution of a psychological dilemma at the same time. The resulting jumble of words in my head would be too confusing for most readers. Being a stickler for honesty, I feel compelled to let you know the balance between accuracy and readability I have settled for. It is not just in panic situations that my thoughts bolt in all directions. The result is such a tangle that to avoid taxing the reader, I feel obligated to provide a more ordered account than my brain was capable of at the time. In my retelling I will flit a little from one matter to another to provide a feel for how I was observing while simultaneously meditating on a weightier topic. Nevertheless, for ease of reading, I have reorganized the rush of thoughts into paragraphs devoted to one topic at a time.

The garden was too huge for me to have any idea of its full dimensions. Not only did I not know where it ended, I even wondered *if* it ended. It might, for example, have covered an entire planet. If so, had I been able to walk for enough years in any direction, I would end up where I started.

I can only speak for the fraction of the garden that I explored, but the first thing that staggered me – and nothing I saw later changed this observation – was how densely planted everything was. Even individual plants were so dense as to make most earthly plants seem spindly and wasteful of space. I presumed the plants were rooted in soil but this remained mere speculation because nowhere was there any space between plants for a speck of dirt to show. Earth’s gardens now strike me as so sparsely planted as to almost be deserts. As my eyes drank in the scene, the words ‘concentrated beauty’ formed in my mind. Wherever I looked, plants were packed so tightly and each blended with such harmony with all its surrounding plants that it was as though the entire garden were a single organism, just as my body consists of different cells and organs and yet is one organism.

At first I felt hemmed in, with no place to walk. The smooth, low parts seemed too delicate and precious to tread on. They were slightly like extravagantly lush, manicured lawns, but more like elaborately patterned carpets. Patterns that were exquisitely colorful, without being garish, were formed by the arrangement of various species of tiny flowering plants. The designs were not repetitive. Each part was unique, but there was nothing random nor robotic about the patterns. Except for having no rational basis for such a claim, I would almost be tempted to say they were lovingly planned.

I recoiled from walking on these living carpets, lest I trample on a work of art and crush any of the minute flowers that formed them. Disturbingly, however, there seemed no alternative. I squatted to examine a portion more closely and then lightly brushed my hand over it. Though silky, it seemed surprisingly hardy. Emboldened by my initial inspection, I gently pressed down on the flower-studded carpet with my hand. The moment I released the pressure the plants sprang back. Gaining confidence, I slowly slipped to my knees to examine the plants still more closely, and found them beautifully soft to kneel on.

In the end, having nowhere else to go, I somewhat guiltily took a tentative step on this immaculate masterpiece. It was delightfully spongy. I looked behind and, to my relief, I had left not even the faintest footprint. I marveled at the resilience of flowers that I would have expected to be delicate. For the first time ever, earth’s best carpets seemed grotesquely artificial, like a plastic engagement ring, or trying to pass off a cement slab as a mattress.

Alarmingly, I again found myself sobbing. I presumed my bawling was some type of reaction to the horror of the crucifixion scene but I was now not even consciously focused on those events. I was so perplexed by my tears that the wheels of my mind spun on a different track to the beauty I was examining. I began grappling with why I, or any grown man, would surrender his masculinity to tears.

I was acutely aware that Jesus had cried. As a kid struggling with memory verses and wanting an easy way out, I knew full well that the shortest verse in the Bible is “Jesus wept.” Since my Bible was taking it easy in a some distant corner of the universe, I was desperate for every memory verse that had managed to stick, no matter how short. I might once have prided myself in my Bible knowledge. Now I was wishing I had invested much more time in Bible reading.

Anyhow, since my teens, I had never managed to reconcile Jesus’ tears with my belief that he is the perfect man. I guess if I were to ruthlessly rip through all my attempts to suppress it, the unsettling truth is that I have always worried that Jesus was a bit effeminate. Until I found myself blubbering in this garden, I do not think I had ever dared admit this to myself. Cringing at this near-blasphemous admission, I frantically clawed for anything that might reassure me of Jesus’ masculinity.

*Jesus certainly managed to inspire real men*, I told myself lamely. I imagined Peter and the other weather-beaten fishermen with bulging muscles and calloused hands as they braved storms, rowed against contrary winds and hauled in nets. *Hey! Peter wept after denying Jesus!* This was the first time I had ever linked Peter’s tears with his physical strength. In a frantic search for tough men among Jesus’ followers, I zeroed in on the “Sons of Thunder.” I felt assured of their masculinity, then questioned why I should associate being a hothead with manhood. *Isn’t anger an emotion? Isn’t it hypocritical for men who can’t control their anger to pride themselves in controlling their emotions just because they don’t cry?* Such pride suddenly seemed embarrassingly ludicrous.

Thinking of hypocrisy triggered the thought of Jesus repeatedly blasting pharisaical hypocrisy and courageously standing up to religious heavyweights. They had severe authority back then. They were, after all, the ones behind Jesus’ execution. I recalled them on the brink of stoning the woman caught in adultery, and actually completing the act with Stephen. I thought of Jews flaying the apostle Paul’s back. Then I pictured Jesus riling the authorities by single-handedly hauling the moneychangers out of the temple. Not only was he contending with several men whose livelihoods were at stake, he was violating an officially-sanctioned practice and creating a near riot in what Jews revered as the most sacred place in the world. The temple was sure to have been protected by zealous armed guards who would have no qualms about shedding blood to maintain the sanctity of this holy place.

Once I learned to regard these densely packed beds of miniature flowers as gorgeous silken lawns, rather than no-go zones, the place suddenly felt spacious.

Whereas individual flowers forming the walkways were minuscule, flowers elsewhere ranged up to twelve or more inches across. In fact, I was later to find species with flowers several feet across, with each flower having intricate colorings and structure.

The entire atmosphere seemed to raise the word ‘tranquility’ to heights I had never before conceived. I breathed deeply, savoring the scents greeting my strangely awakened senses. Despite knowing nothing about aromatherapy besides the name, I have always been – I will put it mildly – dubious about it. Nevertheless, if there could be any possible remedial value in scents, I felt that this was the place for it.

Delicate birdcalls graced the air. Their song was not only spectacular; I don’t think I have ever heard anything so gentle and calming. Their music seemed empowered to drift cares away, as if, after staggering under a hundred pound load of wood, I had slipped into a refreshing stream that floated the burden off my back.

As the sights, scents and sounds of this wondrous place permeated my being, they seemed to have a much-needed healing effect, after the horror of what I had witnessed at the crucifixion.

While yet again inexplicably bucketing tears, I kept trying to counter my doubts about Jesus’ masculinity by endeavoring to impress his bravery upon my consciousness. I recalled Jesus knowing the torturous fate awaiting him and that at any moment he could turn back, or call down battalions of supernaturally fierce angels, and yet defiantly setting his “face like flint” (as the Messianic prophesy put it) as he headed for Jerusalem, with his disciples dragging their heels behind him.

That reference to flint brought Jeremiah to mind. At this prophet’s very calling, God declared he had made this man “a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall.” And yet Jeremiah ended up shedding so many tears that he is known as “the weeping prophet.” A hard-as-iron, weeping man? Never before had I laid next to each other such ridiculously incompatible facets of a man of God. I found the thought as head spinning as a lion and lamb lying together. At this, my mind tore to Jesus being called the Lion and the Lamb. Could anyone be hard and soft at the same time? Is this what it means to be fully human – even gloriously human? Is deadening one’s emotions akin to deadening part of one’s brain?

With these confusing thoughts utterly unresolved, my mind fled to King David. If ever there were a man’s man, it was this giant-killer. I recalled the biblical record of David and his men crying until they had no strength left to cry. Admittedly, his home had been burnt to the ground and he not only lost everything he owned, but a huge, ruthless army had abducted his own wives and children – along with his best friends’ loved ones – presumably to rape and enslave them all. Then he found his once-loyal men so embittered by the loss that they were plotting to murder him. Just when we might be ready to write him off as a crying shame, however, David stuns us all by strengthening himself in God, and chasing down the army in an endurance feat so incredible that many of his battle-hardened men were quite unable to keep up with him. Then, when he is not only ridiculously outnumbered but should have been too exhausted to move, he utterly defeats and plunders the foreign army.

My mind leapt to that angelic lecturer calling it cowardly to try to bury emotionally charged issues. Was that relevant? Had I, for all those years, been cowering in fear of my emotions, as if scared of my own shadow? Had what I arrogantly regarded as being manly, actually been cowardly, and had I robbed myself in the process? For me, such thoughts were almost as shocking as heresy.

I continued dawdling down the path, savoring every sight and scent, not daring to walk faster, lest I miss any of the numberless wonders, each of which seemed unique. Was I following the most beautiful path in the universe? If not, I was at a loss to imagine what could surpass it. I rounded the first bend and stopped dead in amazement. One of the plants was glowing. Careful examination confirmed that the leaves were not reflecting light but emitting it. I would love to cite an intelligent reason for being unconcerned about whether the glowing plants were radioactive. I thought of mildly radioactive glow-in-dark watch and clock dials that, for some reason I have not investigated, have been withdrawn from the market. This plant was glowing in broad daylight! My thoughts skipped to a perfectly natural hot spring in the Australian Outback. Once ludicrously touted as a health spa, it was discovered that the concentration of naturally-occurring uranium in the area is so high that the water’s 140°F (60°C) heat is generated by unhealthy levels of radioactivity. The area is so radioactive that often not even the air is safe to breathe. It would be nice to say how brave I was in ignoring such possible hazards. My embarrassing admission, however, is that the garden was making me feel too cozy to worry about them.

Before long, I discovered other plants with flowers glowing various colors. Gazing upon them felt strangely comforting.

Everything was spectacular, and yet there was almost a reverent subtlety about the colors. Nothing was even slightly somber, but the entire realm seemed to emit an aura of hushed serenity, rather than jubilant celebration. It seemed a place for quiet reflection. The farther I walked, however, the more the mood of the place seemed to brighten, like the dawning of a new day. As some of earth’s plants have shiny leaves, some of the flowers here had shiny petals. Of course, this intrigued me at first. Nevertheless, I grew so used to it that it was quite some time before I realized that, along with brighter colors, the proportion of shiny flowers was ever-so-gradually increasing as I followed the path.

I might have been alone, but loneliness was worlds away. In fact, though I squirm to admit it, and can provide no explanation for it, I felt cherished. Feelings are feelings. They do not have to be the slightest rational. So I will confess that I could not have felt more pampered and special if each leaf were in love with me and each flower were smiling at me, beaming with delight just to see me, and greeting me as if I were royalty.

In places, the walkways felt less like paths than spacious hallways walled by towering, flowering, hedge-like plants that glowed beautifully. Some even twinkled. Sometimes there were flowering canopies over the walkway.

*Didn’t Paul mention tears somewhere?* Yes, my mind with a mind of its own still kept reverting to this matter. *How many references to crying are there in the Bible? Emotionally, how far below the norm has the average Western Christian slipped?* I made an urgent mental note to make this a Bible study priority, if ever again I had access to the Bible.

As I meandered along the path, drawn first to one side and then to some new attraction on the other, I found myself puzzling over what it means to be a man. Things have blurred in a technologically advanced society in which physical strength means less than it ever did and where women seem to act more like men than ever before. I wondered if dividing manhood into its basic components might help. A man is a mature male human. To be mature is to be smarter and wiser than children. To be human is to be more intelligent than animals. *Hey! A significant part of being a man is intellect! If my thinking ability separates me from animals and children, what could possibly be manly about refusing to think about unpleasant things? If a real man is not a coward, wouldn’t it be more manly to face one’s past and resolve the pain and other issues by thinking about them, rather than fleeing them?*

I was lazily watching butterflies float by, when it dawned that, like the butterflies in that special forest, their colors not only were spectacular, they somehow seemed to display their beauty more freely than earth’s butterflies. They spent more time gliding than earth’s varieties and seemed tamer but I sensed there was more to it than that. I puzzled over this until my mood suddenly changed to chiding myself for having previously missed the obvious. In my experience of earth’s moths and butterflies, moths typically spread out their dull-colored wings when they land, whereas brightly colored butterflies usually close their wings upon landing. The behavior of each has the effect of maximizing their camouflage when at rest. These beauties, however, seemed unconcerned about camouflage and freely let me enjoy their splendor whenever they landed.

As I let the path woo me farther, I began to hear water. I rounded a bend and stared in astonishment. What had captivated my senses was too delicate and intricate to be called a waterfall, but despite its unique features it somehow looked natural, rather than the work of human hands. The term water feature reeks too much of artificiality to seem appropriate. It trickled, dripped and dribbled in a manner that sounded almost musical. Its smooth, predominately black rocks were marble. They glistened almost playfully as the water moved over them. As I gazed enthralled, the combined effect of sight and sound seemed both to massage and mesmerize my senses to the point where I almost felt as if gravity had slipped away and I were floating weightless. I even ceased blubbering.

Facing this aquatic marvel was a flower-laden bush that looked so much as if it had been sculptured into a garden bench that I could not resist trying to sit in it. I expected it to be a little prickly, as bushes usually are, and I was anxious not to break it in any way. As I gingerly lowered myself into it, the surprisingly strong, yet sumptuously soft and springy plant somehow wrapped itself around me as if it were cuddling me. I doubt that there could be a seat anywhere in the universe that feels more luxurious.

As I sank deep into the seat, my mind slipped back to my previous sobbing. As you know by now, I cannot let things go for long. They keep coming back to haunt me. At the mere reminder of having cried, shame swamped me and I caught myself trying to fling the memory aside.

The irony is that I had been feeling a little smug over having progressed in my understanding of masculinity and emotion. As I pondered the contradiction, I concluded that my lingering shame over tears was a little like my fear of handling snakes. I have spent most of my life in a region renowned for several species of the world’s most deadly snakes. When given the opportunity to hold a snake that I was certain is non-venomous, however, my heart thumped. I accepted the challenge; stubbornly refused to cave in to my irrational fear of a harmless snake. I told myself that I should likewise refuse to be dominated by an irrational feeling that tears imply weakness.

I was just beginning to congratulate myself over my ability to analyze such things when a realization punched me in the stomach. *I’ve done it again!* I reeled in amazement that yet again I had resorted to my timeworn way of coping. *Am I so addicted to avoiding unpleasant memories that I am seldom even conscious that I am doing it?* Rather than face all the unpleasantness and come to terms with my glimpse of the crucifixion, I had plunged into an intellectual examination of emotions and masculinity. It was as if I had subconsciously hoped – and it had almost worked – that by these mental gymnastics I would fool myself into not realizing I was running from emotional and personal issues.

It seems that I, who had prided myself in not using drugs or drink, am as much into escapism as anyone who resorts to substance abuse.

I resumed walking and thinking about my emotional hang-ups while simultaneously trying to take in all the sights, wonders and fragrances. Suddenly, jewels seized my attention. I strolled over to investigate. To my astonishment, one moved. Upon examination they turned out to be beetle-like creatures. After marveling at them for a while I forced myself to move on because there was so much more to explore.

No matter how much I longed to erase the memory of that ghastly crucifixion, I did not have to be Einstein to know that God had obviously given me the experience for a purpose and that suppressing the memory would render that divine revelation a waste.

My mind leapfrogged from one life experience to another that I preferred to forget. There was no way I could conclude that the experiences I did not want to think about were from God. They had the fingerprints of evil smudged all over them. Was it acceptable to keep pushing the memories away and leave them unresolved, or would I somehow be wasting an invaluable learning opportunity by suppressing them? But what was there to learn? Did God use punishment to ‘teach people a lesson’? That was not applicable to my four-year-old brother dying, nor to my other unpleasant memories.

Like a wheel in a game show, my mind whirled until finally stopping at the beginning of *2 Corinthians* where God is called “the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble by the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God.” This makes our ability to minister to others dependent upon us receiving God’s comfort.

I keep expecting God to meet all my needs without me articulating them, despite this being at odds with Jesus’ teaching. He kept pleading with us to ask in order to receive. The wheel whizzed again in my mind, this time landing on all the times Jesus asked sick people what they wanted before he healed them. If God will not heal until we admit our need for healing, could living in denial of inner pain keep God from comforting us? And could this, in turn, prevent us from being empowered to help other people in the way implied in *2 Corinthians*? What, then, are the full implications of trying to act macho by refusing to admit even to ourselves – let alone to God – the extent of our inner pain? Could it not only keep us messed up and cause other people to miss out, but keep us from our life’s mission?

My mind spun to the Epistle of James, where it links healing and effective prayer to confessing our sins to each other. In contrast, I tend to be too big a coward even to confess privately to myself and God, weaknesses that are not even sins. My thoughts blurred, ending up first at Jesus saying that what has been whispered in secret shall be shouted from the housetops, and then moving on to the Scripture that affirms that all things are naked and exposed before the One to whom we must give account. Just as it is infinitely better to repent this side of Judgment Day, wouldn’t it be better to get shameful secrets over and done with by being open about everything now?

I kept finding new species of insect-like creatures that made jewels seem dull, lifeless and uninteresting. Many species reflected light but some almost seemed to emit light.

My mind was off again. This time I revisited Jesus’ famous statement in which he said he is the Truth, and another occasion when he said the truth shall set us free. I smirked at the memory of that beast of an angel raving about the “beauty” of lies and pronouncing truth “dull” and “boring.” I had almost ended up enslaved to him as his permanent plaything because of his lies. In my humble opinion, slavery is rather more boring than freedom.

Since God is a God of truth, he must surely want us to live in truth, not in denial. My mind kept turning until coming to rest on further confirmation in the form of Jesus’ statement that God must be worshipped in spirit and in truth.

The next prize my mind landed on was the famous Scripture, about God weaving all things together for good in the lives of those who love him. That took my dizzy thoughts to Joseph in the Old Testament telling his brothers something like, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” There is no way that the Holy One could have approved of the evil in these brothers’ hearts. If the good Lord is so astonishingly undefeatable as to bring good out of such evil schemes, he can surely bring good out of evil things I have suffered that I would rather forget. Could I, by suppressing unpleasant memories, miss at least some of the good that God would otherwise have brought out of a regrettable event?

That thought opened so many possibilities as to keep me intellectually entertained for weeks, but then I realized what was happening. *I’m doing it again! Is there no limit to how far I’ll go to side-step unpleasant memories?*

So I quickly prayed, then dragged my reluctant mind by the scruff of its neck back to the memory of the crucifixion. There could hardly be anything more traumatic than witnessing one’s loved one being tortured to death. And yet I sensed that not even that could fully account for the violent intensity of my emotional reaction to what I had witnessed.

I felt a haunting echo of myself as a little child trudging my way to the torturer (he called himself a dentist but don’t let that fool you). With almost equal reluctance, I dredged up memories from the murk where I had hoped they would remain. I played back in my mind the angels recoiling at the sight of their beloved Lord on the cross. Their reactions had been so explosive as to somehow send shockwaves through my entire being. The sickening blow to my senses made me feel there was something appallingly wrong and of mind-withering significance for the Holy Creator of the cosmos to be naked on a cross, pinned out like a bug specimen on public display to titillate curious spectators. The feeling was so strong that it was as if truth had been speared into me, entering my heart without passing through my mind. It seemed I knew mysteries that even now continued to elude my intellectual understanding.

My thoughts fled to that heavenly being’s blood-curdling shriek, “This is no ordinary man!” There was something about the eerie, stomach-churning sensation that tore through me as he had expelled those words. It felt as if that statement is of terrifying significance. Hoping that God would guide my thoughts, I determined to explore the implications of those words.

A flash of light snatched my attention. It was an invertebrate with light pulsating from it, confirming my suspicion that some of these critters actually emitted light. Moreover, the light kept changing color and as I drew closer I felt delightful waves of warmth and some other type of energy sweeping over me with each flash of light. But I had grave matters to wrestle with.

Can any of us truly comprehend the mind-wobbling importance and value and eternal potential of just one ‘ordinary’ human? Even so, the Eternal Son is infinitely greater. No matter how dirty and tattered a child’s beloved teddy bear is, for those who deeply love and understand the little child, it would be like a knife in the stomach to see that stuffed toy ripped to shreds. Nevertheless, it would be an incomparably greater tragedy for the child himself to be tortured to death. No matter how excruciatingly tragic the death of a loved one is, it is infinitely more appalling to contemplate the death of the One through whom all things are made and on whom everything – whether animate or inanimate – depends. Every other lamentable death is like the loss of a reproduction of a masterpiece, compared to the master artist himself being struck down in the prime of his creativity.

I found another living seat. I slipped into it for the sheer delight of doing so. It differed from the first but was equally sumptuous.

I remembered the time I gasped as I read, in the book of Acts, Peter’ shattering words: “You killed the author of life.” I thought of the beginning of *Hebrews* that speaks of the mighty Son of God holding the entire cosmos together by his word. It is in him that “we live and move and have our being.” He is the one who gives life and all things to all. Killing the Origin and Sustaining Power behind all life is as terrifying as accidentally detonating a chain reaction that could implode the entire universe.

As it says in *Colossians*, the Son of God is the one *by* whom and *for* whom, all things were created. Truly, I had witnessed the total humiliation and attempted destruction of the most significant person in the entire cosmos.

A melodious warble broke my concentration. In this magnificent place I had grown so accustomed to the ever-changing symphony of birds that most of it had slipped to the fringes of my consciousness as soothing background music while I pondered eternal mysteries. This particular feathered musician was only a couple of feet away but by now I was used to their endearing fearlessness. As satin is shiny, and cotton, no matter how brightly colored, is dull, most of the birds in this paradise had shiny feathers. This sheen made even plainly colored birds look regal, transforming a dull gray, for example, into a gorgeous silver. The bird whose musical interlude had interrupted my thoughts was almost seductively beautiful. I felt so enticed that I reached out to it, even though I expected it to fly off. To my delight, it landed on my hand and let me stroke its soft, slippery feathers. It yielded to my touch as if enjoying the caress and its song changed to what seemed like contented cooing.

As fascinating as this was, I was even more drawn to the memory of those haunting words: “This is no ordinary man!” As my thoughts returned like a homing pigeon to the incarnation of the One through whom all beauty exists, I remembered being told as a child that the Son of God becoming human is equivalent to us becoming an ant. Not even that, however, adequately embraces the enormity of the gulf between the Creator and the created. In comparison, the difference between an amoeba and a mighty, sinless angel who has lived in splendor for eons is nothing. Our Lord is not merely a different and vastly superior species; he had no beginning. He is not just from a different world; he *made* every world. He has no limitation. Whereas he is dependent upon nothing, we are dependent not only upon the God who holds our very atoms together but even upon oxygen, food, water, light, a narrow temperature range, and so on. We live for a few years: he *is* Life. We sometimes manage to discover a fragment of truth; he *is* Truth.

On that cross was not only the greatest being in the entire cosmos, I had witnessed the ultimate violation of Innocence. No one in the universe has been *more* violated, and no human has had such innocence. If moral purity were portrayed by whiteness, the best of us are dirty shades of gray, and Christ’s purity is so blindingly white as to burn our eyes out. The moral gap between the lowest criminal and the greatest saint, or the most defiled rapist and the chastest virgin, is nothing compared with the gulf between any of us and the Sinless One. Trace anyone’s family tree back far enough and there will be a conception based on rape, adultery, or lust. So there is a real sense in which all of us owe our very existence to sin. But the Man in torment on the cross was eternally pure. A newborn human will grow up to sin, but this Man was utterly different.

No wonder witnessing Jesus’ death and burial had such a devastating effect on me. As much as I despised those awful feelings, they had dragged me kicking and screaming to an understanding I had sorely needed, even though I still believe my intellectual grasp of the full ramifications of this stupendous event is, at best, fragmentary and superficial.

I felt a kinship with the two disciples walking to Emmaus whose hearts were fired up by the risen Lord opening the Scriptures to them. It was as if Scriptures that for years had been lying idle in my mind had at last been activated and transformed into vital pieces of a fascinating, life-enriching jigsaw. At times I had become a little stuck but often it had been so effortless that rather than me trying to fit the pieces, it was more like seeing the jigsaw assemble itself.

As I felt refreshed, I thought of the First Psalm promising that those who meditate day and night upon the Word of God end up like trees in Israel’s low rainfall flourishing because their roots extend into a dependable source of water. I marveled at how, instead of tiring me, my concentrated thinking about spiritual matters was invigorating and inspiring me as much as all the spectacular physical beauty surrounding me. My hope is that sharing it with you also benefits you.

Sitting in that seat was so special that I felt like indulging myself in it for hours, but there were too many other wonders to explore in this fascinating garden.

# Chapter 19: ***Skipping Manfully?***

Despite an insane urge to skip like a little child, I retained my respectability and strode manfully along the path, even if repeatedly interrupted by the need to stare in childlike wonder at yet another botanical marvel. As I continued with appropriate dignity, two fragments of Scripture began to tease my mind: “. . . a little child will lead them . . .” and “. . . unless you change and become as little children . . .” The words haunted me, but seeing no relevance, I dismissed them.

The living carpet I was privileged to walk on has forever left me disappointed with human technology. There seemed something particularly exciting about it being alive, but I struggled to identify exactly why being alive made it so special. The floral carpet was as superior to artificial floor coverings as living animals outclass stuffed exhibits in a museum. The miniature flowers formed unique patterns. The variations seemed endless, and the extravagant beauty and sumptuous feel were without earthly rival. Its grandeur made me feel like royalty. Nonetheless, it was so magnificent and pristine that it graced me with humility. This was accentuated by the growing sense that no one but the King of kings was worthy to step on it.

Actually, nourished by my experience in front of that cross, the mere thought of stepping where the risen, once-crucified Lord of glory might once have trod made me feel like falling to my knees in adoration. I resisted the urge, of course. I’m not into kneeling. Besides, I had no rational basis for supposing he had ever physically been here.

As physiologically ridiculous as it might be, I strove to sharpen my every sense and open wide every pore of my skin, hoping to draw deep into every part of me, all the exhilarating splendor and perfection surrounding me; from the ever-changing melodic artistry of songbirds, to the individual fragrances of uncountable varieties of flowers, to the sensuous feel of the air, to the rapturous sights caressing my eyes.

What would have been a surprisingly plain stretch of living carpet ahead of me was anything but plain because on it were about three dozen roughly insect-like creatures, all of the same species. As I had come to expect from this place, they were gorgeous but it was how they interacted with each other that seized my attention.

It might be normal to call a gathering of invertebrates a swarm but by earthly standards there was nothing remotely normal about what I was witnessing. I feel more drawn to calling these a team. They were moving in out in a complex, ever-changing pattern, more like synchronized swimmers than any invertebrates I have ever seen on earth. Each used its more than six legs to walk along the carpet at what for most of earth’s insects would be a fast speed. They looked like shiny winged butterflies with beetle-like bodies.

I was still relishing the spectacle when out of nowhere the key to my quandary about emotions flashed into my mind. I felt like scolding myself for not seeing it before.

The question is not how could Jesus be manly when he acted like he did; the question is, how could I be so feebleminded as to accept a definition of masculinity that is contrary to the Divine Role Model? How could I not end up a psychological mess if I am trying to force myself into a mold that my Maker never intended for me? The standards I submit myself to should come not from how I feel about things, nor from my upbringing, nor from my peers, nor from movies and television or other media, nor even from church or fellow Christians (since they, too, can be influenced by factors other than God). The standards I allow to rule me should be set by the One who best knows me – my Maker.

My mind excitedly rushed to Jesus saying that his yoke is easy. That cannot be said of the lifestyle others seek to impose – especially when considering the long-term consequences. I must have the intelligence of a very smart maggot to accept rules to live by that do not come from God! To do so is to dethrone God in my life and make those rules my god. My relieved mind joyfully embraced the truth in *Romans 12* about the critical importance of not conforming to the world’s standards but surrendering to the perfect will of God and allowing him to transform my opinions and values.

A huge burden lifted. *I’ve finally got to the heart of the matter! The problem is not my emotions but feeling guilty about not meeting harsh standards that my loving Maker never imposed on me. I need to let myself float free from these oppressive burdens.* There is a vast difference between knowing the truth and living it, but the solid foundation for healing had been established.

I began to notice that whenever I passed a certain type of flowering shrub I felt strangely pleasant sensations. As usual, I cannot adequately describe the feeling. Think of it as a mix of heartwarming and thrilling, blended with a delightful serenity. They reminded me of the bush whose leaves had moved toward me. Similar shrubs were scattered throughout the garden. I could not recall seeing two that were clearly the same species but they seemed sufficiently similar to belong to same genus. Their large, furry leaves were nearly as colorful as flowers. On earth they would be considered exceptionally beautiful but the truth is that other plants in this exotic realm looked more spectacular. And yet I felt strangely drawn to them.

As I continued exploring, I found myself paying more and more attention to these comparatively plain-looking plants. It was ever so slight but the leaves seemed to reach out to me, point in my direction, and follow me as I moved past. I was ready to dismiss it as an illusion but the thought came, *As earth’s plants benefit from sunlight, was this plant able to tap into the lower end of the light spectrum and derive some benefit from my body heat? But why did it make* ***me*** *feel so good after all that trauma?*

From the depths of my mind a vague recollection surfaced of having read that grief and trauma release chemicals into the body that can have an adverse effect on one’s mind and body. It was the wildest of theories and probably way off track but I wondered whether this plant was radiating something that breaks down those chemicals.

Words rose from the murky depths of my mind and thrashed around like a drowning man frantically trying to attract the attention of a would-be rescuer. It was a mere fragment of the Bible but the realization struck – more powerfully than I had ever experienced – just how precious and sacred is every snipped of Scripture, and how every portion should be cherished way beyond what the art world reveres as priceless treasures. The words that seized me were, “And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” They kept struggling for my attention and yet I was not quite sure of their significance.

As I continued walking, puzzling over whether that Scripture had even the slightest relevance to what I was experiencing, another intricate water feature came into view. Though quite different from the first, this one, too, seemed almost hypnotic and subtly musical. As I let the intriguing effect captivate me for a few seconds, it swept over my senses like a skilled pianist over ivory and ebony; like the fingers of a masseuse; like the sweet caresses of a lover.

Feeling the need to maximize the use of time, I tried to shake myself out of an almost trance-like state. I moved closer and reached out, letting the water trickle over my fingers. To my surprise, it was delightfully warm. While adjusting to this surprise, I gradually grew aware that it felt unusually oily. I rubbed some between my fingers. In comparison, the water I am used to feels disappointingly thin, almost rough. It was then I noticed under the water – or whatever it was – a cozy hollow covered with a thick, moss-like water plant. A quick double check confirmed that I was alone. Almost before I knew it, I had slipped off my clothes and slid into the inviting water.

I am extremely modest and to do this without the reassurance of locked doors was most out of character. Nevertheless, as I had hoped, the underwater moss was silky soft without being worryingly slippery. As I slipped into the water, tiny bubbles began rising like soda pop. The sensation was peculiarly invigorating. The water was just the right depth for me to recline and be covered up to my chin.

As I drifted into a dreamy contentment, my mind floated back to the stupendous pleasure of the ‘sparklers’ in the celestial palace. I pondered the mystery of how, despite the ecstasy exceeding anything I had ever imagined, it somehow seemed shallow compared with the satisfaction I felt in finally discovering more of the extent to which Christ alone, and never our efforts, make us worthy of access to the majestic Lord of glory.

Suddenly the truth speared my understanding that regardless of what we call them – mountain top experiences, the manifest presence of God, visions, or whatever – spiritual highs can be as dangerously addictive as chemical highs. Any addiction to highs – even to godly highs not nearly as extreme as those ‘sparklers’– corrupts; spreading the stench of death and decay to all it touches; putrefying all beauty, and turning the sweetest thing sour. The inevitable result is a shameful loss of all dignity; the squandering of one’s life; the selling of one’s soul for yet another high. It is the road to ruin paved with tinsel; the stinking swamp of despair that is so alluring until the iron jaws of the trap snap shut.

There is no question that we should fervently seek God and his revelation and empowering, but why? So that we might delight him and better serve him, or so that we could boast or avoid the need to hang on by sheer faith, even when everything within and without seems to scream, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“Count the cost,” counseled Jesus. Who has the audacity to imagine he can outsmart Jesus and get away with doing things on the cheap? Dare anyone do lip service to honoring our Lord, while in practice dismissing him as a spiritual dimwit by spurning his warning (and those of the rest of Scripture) about the cost?

Who wouldn’t want power from on high if all it took were signs, wonders and thrills? But what if the transformation we need either leads to, or results from, experiences like those Jesus endured in the wilderness, the garden of Gethsemane and the cross? What if the Spirit’s anointing brings not fame but scorn, and Christlikeness leads not to smugness but servitude?

Who can live a soft life while being a true follower of the one who was ridiculed, rejected and tortured?

Do we seek goosebumps and warm fuzzies, or the guts to take up our cross and follow our crucified Lord to Golgotha? Do we crave God’s glory, or our glory; to put a smile on God’s face, or on our own?

I saw with a clarity that had previously eluded me that to be loving and wise, God must severely restrict even godly highs, lest they lead to the gnawing emptiness of addiction – a nightmarish slavery to emptiness. Our Maker respects our individuality and knows better than us our differing needs and weaknesses. We seldom realize that sometimes the very thing we imagine we need could end up hurting or even destroying us. Not grasping this, we so easily fall into envy or even resentment towards God when we hear of others claiming to have had amazing experiences with God that we have never had.

The lives of Peter and Paul and Old Testament prophets flashed through my mind. How easy it is to be jealous of their supernatural experiences but who would be envious of their downers and torments? Would we want a Damascus Road experience and to hear inexpressible wonders that are forbidden to repeat (2 Corinthians 12:4), if they came packaged with devastating numbers of shipwrecks, stonings, floggings and incarcerations? Even today, Paul is despised by many Bible readers.

I wondered how many even genuine modern Christian testimonies are doctored because it is believed audiences want only half of the story.

Are we so out of touch with spiritual reality that even our accounts of earthly life must end with “and they lived happily ever after”? We live in a world where top models have to be subjected to plastic surgery, plastered with makeup and their images digitally altered before they are considered acceptable. Is it any wonder that so many of us feel pressured to be fake and fall for the blasphemous lie that God must favor others over us?

There were numerous other pieces of the puzzle I will not detail here, such as Paul warning of fake Christians who are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God and end up with a form of godliness while denying its power, and Peter writing of Christian pretenders who, having once escaped corruption but again letting themselves be ensnared by it, preach freedom while they themselves are slaves of their own lusts.

As all the pieces slipped into place, I found myself so transfixed by the picture that emerged that I nearly lost awareness of where I was physically. In time, however, like the gentle dawning of a new day, I gradually became mindful of my surroundings. I was, of course, still soaking in a deliciously soothing spa that seemed to float my cares away.

A normal person might have luxuriated in that salubrious setting for hours, but normality and I have only a passing acquaintance. I said I have a *Type A* personality that keeps me restless, but the truth is that mine must be *Triple A*. Some might say that’s just the size of the battery that could keep my tiny brain powered for centuries. Anyhow, there was far too much to explore to squander time in an out-of-this-world Jacuzzi.

It was then I began to contemplate a minor problem. I had plunged into the water so impulsively that I had not considered having no way to dry myself before sliding back into my clothes.

Knowing no alternative, I climbed out of the pool. At that very instant, what I can only call a warm whirlwind sprang up and I felt myself drying. While I was wondering how long that oily substance I had detected in the water would take to dry from my skin and whether it would leave a greasy residue, the exhilarating wind stopped and I found myself snugly dry. My skin felt so fresh that I began to wonder if the oil, instead of being a disadvantage in the drying process, might counter any tendency of repeated wind treatments to give me dry skin.

 Problem solved. But a new one beckoned. Surely this was not a coincidence. Had I tripped some automated process or was this a direct act of God? A cursory hunt for pressure pads or laser beams left my question unanswered.

While pondering how the whirlwind had ceased right on cue, an unsettling thought hit: had the wind somehow been switched on and off by someone spying on me? I anxiously scanned my surroundings. It revealed no peering eyes, but it uncovered plenty of opportunities for paranoia. The garden was too dense for anyone to move off the path, but the flatness of the topography at this point meant that I could see only a few yards from the path. I presumed the vegetation continued beyond my line of sight but for all I knew it could be entirely open back there, allowing a hundred heads to pop up from some back entrance and stare at me whenever they chose. And how could I detect spy cameras?

I quickly dressed, trying to comfort myself with the thought that anyone caring enough to dry me at the appropriate time must be rather benevolent. Despite my best attempts, however, I could not entirely dismiss the possibility of such an incident happening in a horror movie featuring a psycho-killer.

I decided it wouldn’t hurt to pray for protection. Then it dawned that, once again, even while thinking about God I had in one sense been ignoring him. I was a bit disgusted with myself to realize that here I was in idyllic surroundings with my every need being met and I still had not thought to thank God and appreciate his loving kindness. I grappled with that for a moment and concluded that no one has ever been taken for granted as much as God has. No one has ever had his love and patience so exploited and abused by so many billions of people. Like self-centered brats, we keep demeaning the Supreme Power, the Ruler of the Cosmos. So often we expect him to bow to our every demand, and we even throw a hissy fit if his infinite wisdom does not line up with our puny thinking. We call him Lord, meaning master, and then treat him as our slave. “Lord, do this. Lord do that.”

As I continued discovering endless new delights in the garden, I pondered this role reversal many of us play with God. Surely our wonderful Lord does not want cold formality. My mind flew back to the King of kings playing with those child parts of emotionally wounded people. And it seems wrong to ration ourselves as to the requests we make of God. I remembered how in his teaching, Jesus kept pleading with us to ask God for everything. There is no question that, as the greatest lover in the universe, God longs to bless us.

While drinking in the beauty of my surrounds, I kept trying to crystallize in my mind why taking God for granted feels so wrong. It cannot be that I should slavishly, or even superstitiously, thank God lest he stop blessing me.

Another pitifully short memory verse (actually, it was not even the full verse) clamored for my attention: “God is love.” I tried to think through the implications. True love is incompatible with being self-absorbed. To love is to delight in someone and want the best for the person. It is focused on the other person. It is, to be other-centered, not self-centered. So, I concluded, the God of infinite love must be continually focused on others. He cannot be self-centered or egotistical. As highlighted by our Savior, he is willing to sacrifice absolutely everything for us. And neither is God insecure. It is not as if he is emotionally deficient and needs to feel appreciated. It cannot be for selfish reasons that he seeks our praise and thanks.

Nevertheless, despite being willing to steel oneself to suffer for the beloved, love is not cold and clinical. It seeks a response. It craves interaction with the beloved. To my surprise, a new definition of love formed in my mind: to love is to make oneself emotionally vulnerable, exposing oneself to the pain of rejection. Love is risky. I recalled seeing a wall plaque that said something like, “If you love something set it free. If it returns, it is yours forever; if not, it was never yours.” If you maintain iron control over things, you might avoid heartache, but to operate in love is to give people permission to crush you.

I marveled that a God who had everything and was totally sufficient in himself would expose himself to all that pain. I flooded with warmth to think God has put aside his self-sufficiency to make himself vulnerable to me, giving me the power to delight him or emotionally hurt him. It was as if I grew several feet taller to think how exceedingly important God has made me by granting me power over his heart – the power to make Omnipotent Lord happy or sad.

It felt as if still more were behind a totally unselfish God wanting my thanks and praise. I reasoned that by preventing us from being self-absorbed, praise and thanksgiving makes us more Godlike. Then the realization gripped me that what makes a lack of gratefulness so tragic is that it stunts us as people and diminishes our capacity to see God’s love and greatness.

This awareness struck me with such force that I began to wonder if, this side of eternity (if that’s where I currently stood), I could ever grasp how much I have damaged myself, shriveling my capacity to perceive God, by failing to foster a spirit of gratefulness to him.

I looked around me, noting that the farther I walked, the brighter the flower colors and the more exuberant the tone of the garden. *Praise and thanksgiving transports me and transforms me,* I told myself. *It lifts my thoughts from the gutter. Through it, not just my thoughts, but my very life, soars from the trivial to the eternal. It not only lifts my spirits, it lifts my spirit; it not only makes me feel better, it makes me a better person*. I wanted to think and pray more to confirm these conclusions but they seemed right.

Although unable to recall at that moment where, or how often, I knew that at least some translations of *Psalms* speak of magnifying God. That peculiar expression tantalized me. Who can increase infinity? I eventually concluded that while praise cannot make God bigger, it magnifies my ability to behold his glory. Praise sensitizes us to the supernatural. And by empowering us to see God’s power, love, wisdom and so on, it builds our faith.

My thoughts retreated to my encounters with those angelic thugs who wanted me as their pet, and how I had been so pathetic that I only barely managed to escape. Then I remembered Jehoshaphat’s astounding victory over fearsome hordes of enemies by sending the choir into battle ahead of the army. They won by praise and worship. Not a single weapon was used. My mind careened to a peculiar passage near the end of *Psalms* that speaks of executing vengeance upon God’s enemies with the high praises of God in one’s mouth. Is praise and thanksgiving the forgotten element of spiritual warfare?

I almost leapt internally with the excitement of finding a missing jigsaw piece. I had barely begun to enjoy the elation, however, when a memory threatened to choke me. Into my mind’s eye zoomed the picture of me in that uncomfortable round room trying to sleep, rather than search the Scriptures more deeply.

*I had no idea that filthy angel would return so soon!* I told myself, trying to struggle free from shame’s stranglehold. Then I recalled Jesus speaking of foolish virgins, lazy servants, and so on; fervently warning over and over about the necessity of being ready at all times. Despite our smugness, to be human is to not know what the next moment might bring. So how dare I, a mere human, goof off, regularly feeling so sure that right now is not the critical moment?

The thought loomed that times when life is easy are not divine invitations to loll around but never-to-be repeated opportunities to spiritually prepare for the next attack. Our spiritual survival – and certainly the extent of our eternal reward – hinges not so much on our response when under attack but on our faithful use of times when there is no danger. Every second we squander is lost forever. We need the attitude of elite soldiers who are relentless in training during times of peace so that they are in peak condition the moment everyone else is taken by surprise.

Just when I was about to go hurtling down the road of frantic hypervigilance and becoming a spiritual workaholic, my mind slammed on the brakes, spun around and stared in the opposite direction. Yes, prayer, worship and growing in knowing and living the Word of God are important. But what about rest, refreshment and enjoying God? Shouldn’t they be part of our preparation as well? I even began to wonder if snoozing after my Bible study in that circular room had actually been as grave an offense as I had supposed. Was I on the precipice of letting companionship with the universe’s most wonderful person and resting in his love degenerate into incessant striving?

It had taken three experiences with those ‘sparklers’ before finally grasping that the critical factor in everything spiritual is not human effort but simple faith in God’s staggering generosity in what his eternal Son did for us on the cross. Was I already letting that crucial truth slip through my fingers?

How significant is it that it was not God but that malicious anti-God bully who had accused me of slacking off? I had instantly caved in to the presumption that he was right, assigning divine authority to words spewed out by a slimy reprobate, simply because he had astonishing knowledge of my weaknesses. How much of the condemnation I had felt when caught napping had merely been a malevolent spiritual con trick?

Like so much else, definitive answers were in exasperatingly short supply but it began to seem increasingly likely that there had been even more demonic bluff in that sleazeball’s words than I had previously supposed.

*Phew! Where are these thoughts coming from? Are these thoughts entirely my own or is God slipping some of them into my mind? Why do I find it so hard to differentiate between my own thoughts and those coming from God? And why hadn’t I seen things with such clarity when on earth?*

I began to worry about whether I would ever get back to the planet and era that until recently had been the totality of my experience. Nevertheless, I tried to dismiss the worry and focus on loftier matters.

The dreaded memory returned of how I had felt so weak in the presence of those ugly angels. To my relief, I remembered Nehemiah’s refusal to let the people grieve over their sins and, instead, declaring that the joy of the Lord is their strength. One of my tiny memory verses from years ago surfaced: “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.” How easy it is to dismiss those words as head-in-the-clouds fanaticism! Perplexingly, however, – I’m tempted to saying infuriatingly – they were penned by the apostle whose repeated whippings, stonings, imprisonments and so on, must surely have kept his feet on the ground.

That word “always” is most annoying. Obeying the Scripture would be a cinch if only it had said rejoice in the Lord *sometimes*. Why did God have to spoil a perfectly sensible verse? Another ridiculously short memory verse by the same apostle leapt into my consciousness: “Rejoice evermore,” as the old version puts it. That was equally unsettling. The cold-blooded truth is that when things get tough, I often act as if my suffering has earned me the right to be miserable. More words from the apostle echoed in the canyons of my mind: “You are not your own, you were bought with a price . . .” I caught myself starting to feel miserable about not being allowed to feel miserable.

I knew putting these Scriptures into practice would be highly challenging but I was just beginning to think I might be edging toward getting an intellectual handle on the importance of rejoicing in every situation when I suddenly remembered what I had so recently discovered about the importance of not suppressing one’s emotions and living in denial. *Isn’t rejoicing when you feel miserable living in denial?* Instantly, my newfound elation over being able to see things clearly in this place fizzled. I slumped into confusion.

*Oh, man!* I complained. *Is spiritual life really so frustratingly complicated? Why is the Bible filled with almost impossible statements and made even worse by apparent contradictions?*

I consoled myself with the thought that we would have little need of a Bible filled with what to us is common sense. We’d have come up with that without divine help. How could a book crammed with the wisdom of an infinite God be genuine unless it mystifies anyone trained in wisdom deduced by finite minds?

*The Bible has certainly met* ***that*** *criterion for divine inspiration, but how do I reconcile the apparent contradictions?* The time-honored way is to block from one’s mind one of the seemingly contradictory truths and live solely by the other. I probably do that much more than I care to admit to myself but with this particular pair of contradictory truths, each one was now too vivid for me to block out. *There must be a balance somewhere.*

My thoughts were interrupted by the discovery of the largest flowers I had so far seen. Not only was each flower several feet across, they were so complex that they seemed to have flowers inside flowers inside flowers, and on and on it went with each layer being a different color and design. I stared almost awestruck for several minutes until my thoughts eventually began to slide back to resolving the balance between not living in denial and yet always rejoicing.

From the dusty archives of my mind came the words “a time to mourn.” Did *Ecclesiastes* also mention a time to rejoice? I couldn’t remember, but from the structure of that little poem about there being a time for everything, I presumed it said something like that. I revisited the incident when David had cried and then encouraged himself in the Lord. Next, I tried in vain to make Paul speaking often of tears to gel with him also speaking so often of joy and rejoicing.

David was a powerful, battle-hardened warrior. Jeremiah was thick-skinned; divinely hardened against rejection and ostracism. Paul kept pushing himself into joy and rejoicing in the midst of extreme suffering. And yet all of them cried often. Despite my concerted efforts to reconcile all of this, I still found it baffling.

Thoughts had been flying like a whirlwind on a shredded Bible but at this point everything ground to a halt and I was left in brain-numbing bewilderment.

With nothing else coming to mind, I paid more attention to my surroundings. Fascinating plants, however, failed to distract me from my confusion over how I could live these Bible truths without falling into hardness and denial, or going the other way and losing all joy.

One plant had beautiful, vase-like structures that looked quite sturdy. Wondering what they looked like inside, I gently put my hand around one to tilt it toward me. To my dismay, it snapped off in my hand. I looked inside and found that it was three-fourths filled with fluid. It was as if I were holding a cup in my hand, and there was something peculiarly inviting about that honey-colored fluid.

Could this plant be insectivorous? I reasoned that if these ‘cups’ were designed to trap and digest insects as a nutrient source for the plants, the fluid could be highly poisonous. After considerable internal debate, I dipped my finger in it. It did not sting or feel corrosive. I hesitated, rushed off a text-message-length prayer and then recklessly put the tiniest amount to my tongue. As I had hoped, it was honey-sweet. In fact, it was so delicious I wanted to drink my fill of several ‘cups,’ but I held back.

Could it still be poisonous, despite the taste? I recalled back home using poison laced with sugar to attract and kill ants. In that case, the goal was for the ants to take the poison back to their nest and end up killing the entire nest. That could not be any advantage to this plant, I argued. But I had only been thinking of the plant ingesting the insects. What if the purpose were to keep the area free from insects that could somehow damage the plants – perhaps from insects that nest by boring into stems or roots. Then I realized that even if insects go away after drinking the nectar, they could still fertilize the plant’s soil if they died in the near vicinity of the plant. This led to an off-the-wall possibility: what if, in this world, plants do things not for their own survival advantage but to help other plants?

My yearning to drink this highly tempting nectar kept me debating the whole matter with myself rather than asking God and expecting him to reply. *Why do some people seem to hear God so clearly and here am I constantly wondering what to do?*

I wondered if it even mattered if it were poisonous, since the end of *Mark* speaks of safely drinking deadly poison. Then I worried about the controversy over whether that part of *Mark* belonged to the original text. Then I recalled under Elijah’s ministry (or was it Elisha’s?) poisonous food being safely eaten. So the tiresome debate continued to rage. Sometimes I wish I could just switch off my brain.

Underneath all that mental commotion, however, I still felt confusion gnawing away at me over how anyone could possibly remain emotionally tender and in touch with reality, and yet strong and joyful in the midst of pain and tragedy.

Of course, it was easy to dismiss the whole issue as cultural. People in the Bible lived in a society where it was acceptable for men to cry. It is a safe guess that this affected the upbringing boys received. My stiff-upper-lip upbringing must have been different from theirs and whereas little boys’ emotions are pliable, by now my emotional hang-ups have become hardwired and I am stuck with them for life. Will you join me in feeling sorry for poor me?

That’s too convenient a cop-out to sit comfortably with me. For starters, being joyful was clearly not some type of automatic response for Paul’s original readers, or he would not have had to keep urging them to rejoice. Moreover, if Christ has set me free and if Jesus could talk about being born again as a child of God, why should I be in lifelong bondage to my original birth and upbringing? I might be like an addict for whom breaking a long-established habit is highly challenging, but is the God of the impossible up to the challenge or is he not?

It had taken me ridiculously long, but finally I remembered that the Christian life is meant to be humanly impossible. It is supernatural: a union between us and Almighty God.

I slowly savored that thought, occasionally more actively chewing it, as I kept exploring this botanical wonderland; continually discovering new surprises to marvel at.

Gradually the thought formed that our union with God is like a driver’s union with a car. Just as a car and driver can together achieve humanly impossible speeds and distances, so we can achieve the humanly impossible through our union with the all-powerful Lord.

That was an intriguing twist to a metaphor I had often used. Until then, I had always thought of my life being the car and God being the driver but for my new metaphor to work, God had to be the car. Anyhow, I was sure that the truly spiritual person puts God in the driver’s seat.

I continued walking, still carefully carrying the ‘flower cup.’ I did not have the heart to litter. I knew, of course, it should be biodegradable – assuming there are organisms that perform this function here – but everything was so immaculate. I had not seen one leaf or petal out of place. In fact, now I came to think of it, I had not seen a slightly withered or damaged part of a plant.

If God is both the car and the driver, I’m merely the passenger. I was surprised at how empty and deflated that made me feel. I tried to dismiss the feeling as pride that I needed to kill. Not only was I uncomfortable about being considered a mere passenger, however, it clashed with my experience. If I’m just a passenger, why do I still need the Bible to teach me about emotions and a vast array of other things? Why is the Christian life not simply one decision to hand God the controls and thereafter living a truly godly life is automatic?

Pondering this, pushed me to a conclusion so contrary to my timeworn metaphor that it felt like heresy: no matter how spiritual we become, God always puts us in the driver’s seat. He provides the supernaturally powered vehicle and longs to give us the best possible journey by being our driving instructor, navigator and companion. If we yield to God’s guidance, he decides where we should go and sometimes he might even give moment by moment suggestions about route, speed, driving technique and so on. Nevertheless, we always remain at the controls, with the power to ignore him.

My union with God is about slipping into his car so that I can do what is humanly impossible and then daily yielding to his wisdom as to how to drive this powerful vehicle.

Life is far more complex than learning to drive, however. As I pondered the issues, it seemed to me that we Christians consciously live part of our lives God’s way, but we live many aspects of our lives the way we always have. In fact, we are often unaware that a better way even exists. The practical reality is that there are just too many facets of our lives needing change for us to attend to all of them at once. If we keep growing spiritually, the Christian life should be a continual adventure throughout our time on earth, as we find ourselves repeatedly surprised by discovering still more ways in which our lives can be improved and become more Godlike. Each discovery is just the beginning. We must then courageously decide to attempt the new method and endure the long mistake-ridden process of learning, until we become proficient at it. Once mastered, however, each transformation liberates us, bringing us more peace and fulfillment than we had ever imagined.

I lazily mulled the thought, having no conception of the abomination awaiting me.

# ***Chapter*** 20: The Great Deception

Suddenly, standing in front of me was a group of beings. They seemed distinctly feminine, sensually pleasing and more beautiful than I ever imagined anyone could be. I was sure they were angels, although slightly shorter and more slender than those I had previously seen. Before I had a chance to properly assess them, they fell before me in graceful unison onto their faces, saying as one, in the sweetest voices, “We fall at your feet in adoration, our exalted King!”

As this was happening I found myself slowly elevating off the ground. It was unnerving but gradual enough not to be too disturbing. I ended up suspended in mid-air, six or so feet above the ground.

“We exalt you, O mighty one. We bow before you in worship.”

I looked around, sure that God must have been behind me, but unless he were invisible, I was alone. I returned my eyes to stare in utter bewilderment at these exquisite beings; puzzling over what wonder was about to unfold. They remained motionless before me, stretched out with their heads on the living carpet. I thought of the celestial throng worshipping in the palace.

*Mighty One? Exalted King?* With an immense stretch of the imagination, that might possibly be right if, despite their sophisticated appearance, these beings were an inferior species.

*But* ***worship*** *me? That can’t be right.*

They remained motionless. I noted their long, flowing hair, delicately feminine hands and their pure white, slinky garments. Looking down from my elevated position, I was surprised by the way their backsides stuck up as they bowed.

*What should I do?*

“Who are you?” I belatedly blurted out, with none of the royal dignity or great wisdom I supposed they expected of me.

“We are the ministering spirits referred to in the holy book of Hebrews.” They spoke in perfect unison. It sounded eerie and yet somehow holy. “We are sent to serve you who will inherit salvation.”

I was familiar with the scripture they were referring to.

“We are here to worship and serve you, O mighty man of valor.”

I knew an angel had used that latter title for Gideon, so I felt a little more comfortable with that part, but what is this about worship?

As if they knew my thoughts they continued in unison, “The Son has confirmed the Scripture, ‘You are gods’.”

I had always puzzled over that passage in John’s Gospel. Now it seemed even more mystifying.

“We have seen your holy victory in the endless palace,” they continued. “We know your magnificent triumph in keeping your virginity in a corrupt world. We know how you defeated evil and ruled over those powerful angels of darkness. You are the great one we have been waiting for millennia to serve.”

*Really?* *For millennia?* I admit I rather liked that thought.

“Whoever is faithful with little will be given much,” they continued. “We are the ‘much’ that is poured out to you for your great faithfulness. We will keep you holy and free from temptation by fulfilling your every desire.”

“Eh?” (It was not my day for sounding regal.)

“You have kept yourself from women. We are your reward.”

*Surely not!* I hesitated for a moment and finally stammered, “H-how can that be?”

“We cannot defile. To you we will seem physical but we are spirits, not flesh. We are the pure ones. So we will keep you pure. We will keep you from temptation. We will satisfy your every need. You have stood the test and proved yourself a conqueror. By your defiant stand, year after year, you have defeated the lusts of the flesh. We are your reward.”

I wanted to believe it, but . . .

*This isn’t that dark planet,* I reassured myself. *I haven’t seen the tiniest hint of evil in this perfect place. Surely this is Paradise. Surely these gorgeous beings must be of God.*

“We can change our appearance however you wish,” they continued. “We are holy, heavenly beings. Our divine mission is to exceed your deepest yearnings so utterly as to make them seem pathetic, while ensuring your mind is fixed on us and not anything defiled. We honor you for your powerful resolve never to corrupt yourself by lusting after humans. Because you have proved yourself over and over, we will satisfy you and spare you any more of that torturous temptation.”

Dumbfounded, I stared at these sensual creatures bowing in worship before me. Then they stood and, taking my shock to new heights, morphed into women. Each differed in skin tone, facial features, hair, height, figures, and so on, and yet somehow each looked more jaw-droppingly beautiful than any woman I have ever seen, even in movies or photoshopped images. Some were adorned modestly but exquisitely. Some looked highly sophisticated in sensual formal gowns. Some were scantily clad. A few were even – After much inner debate, I have decided not to say. It seems better not to risk it playing on your mind. Anyhow, all looked as if they were madly in love with me.

“And that’s just some human possibilities,” they said, with a mischievous twinkle in their eyes.

I confess that anyone taking my pulse right then would have to be good at counting. I was transfixed by I don’t know how many seconds. To this day I am undecided as to whether I was gripped by lust or simply paralyzed by shock and sensory overload. I like to think I was about to regain control of my eyes and look away. Before that could happen, however, my eyes glued to them for a new reason; they began growing taller and becoming more muscular.

They were transforming as I had seen Chebon doing; only I grew increasingly disturbed by what I was seeing. Soon my worries proved fully justified. Before me stood my former master and all his thugs. I crashed back to the ground. The flowering carpet spared me from what could have been an injury.

“Got ya!” gloated the master. His grin shot chills through me. The heinous mob with him gleefully erupted into malicious celebration as if they had pulled off the greatest con job of their disgusting lives. To think I was making the scum of the universe deliriously happy was disturbing indeed. Those spiritual parasites made sewer rats gorging themselves on a stinking carcass and blood-sucking leeches seem noble.

“You’re ours forever, now,” continued their tyrannical leader. You are apostate – utterly unforgivable.” All the others cheered in obvious delight.

“Eh?” That was still the best I could come up. I tried to stagger back onto my feet.

“You can’t act innocent with us. You made yourself God by accepting our worship.”

“*You* worshipped me!” I protested, “I didn’t seek it. It was *your* doing!”

“Do you think you can fool us? I read minds, remember!”

*Can he actually read my mind or is he bluffing?*

“Not once did you try to stop us,” he continued. “You and your ego enjoyed every bit of it. Like Lucifer himself, you who were once so spiritually enlightened have cheated God out of the worship God claims belongs to him alone.”

*Like Lucifer himself?* My insides writhed in horror. *Did I really accept their worship? I certainly didn’t stop them. I thought I was just stunned, but God’s standards are so much higher than mine.*

My stomach felt like it had been stabbed with a sword-sized hypodermic of toxic guilt. I had never imagined such appalling pangs of remorse could surge through one’s body and soul.

*How could I have been so stupid and heartless to have betrayed my Lord like that!*

The tortuous guilt continued to rage.

*O God! I’m so, so sorry. I beg your forgiveness.*

Instead of sensing the slightest hint of forgiveness, the feeling of utter damnation I had presumed had to be already at maximum seemed to ramp up even higher.

*God isn’t going to forgive me!*

Ghastly feelings kept confirming over and over that I was doomed. I understood, however, how catastrophic – to use a mild word – it would be to allow myself to keep thinking that way. It looked hopeless but somehow I had to scrounge the strength to change my thinking.

My mind shot back to that supernatural monster saying I was utterly unforgivable. *How is that even possible?* I asked myself. *Didn’t Jesus die for the sins of the [entire] world? Surely that has to include every conceivable sin! Doesn’t God’s unbreakable Word pronounce that* ***whosoever*** *believes in Jesus shall have eternal life?*

Recalling my experience with the ‘sparklers,’ I bolted a panic-stricken prayer for help to God who seemed a billion lightyears away. Feebly, I tried to claw my way out of the bottomless hell-hole of utter despair.

*Lord God, I loathe myself for failing you, so I dare not add to the grief I have caused you by doubting your love and the power of your dear Son’s sacrifice.*

*No matter how rejected and hopeless and unforgiven I feel, and no matter how deserving I am of eternal torment by these evil beings, I refuse to break your heart even more than I already have by wasting Jesus’ costly sacrifice. He suffered horrifically that I might be purified from all my filth and despicable failures, so for his sake I accept your cleansing and total forgiveness.*

Everything within me continued to scream that God was furious with me and that he was unyielding in his determination to punish me forever and ever. The conviction was overwhelmingly strong that I had crossed the line and foolishly gone beyond the reach of Christ’s power to forgive. I clung by a spider’s thread that the condemnation was merely a feeling.

I knew in every fiber of my being that I was utterly unworthy of forgiveness. Remembering my victory when being hit by those ‘sparklers,’ I kept telling myself over and over, *Jesus is worthy. He makes me worthy. Jesus is worthy. He makes me worthy.*

“You’re doomed!” declared my tormentor.

“God will forgive me,” I retorted, as confidently as I could.

They all erupted into laughter. They kept laughing and laughing until I began to wonder if they would ever stop. Each malicious cackle might as well have been yet another round of bullets shooting down the little confidence I had mustered. I kept slumping to new lows.

When they at last regained a little composure their leader declared, “By accepting worship you are now one of us. Do you think God forgives Lucifer or any of us?”

I prayed frantically. Nothing but cold silence greeted me.

“And do *you* seek God’s forgiveness?” I was surprised I had thought of that.

They looked uncomfortable.

“I thought not!” I replied, “Well I do! I ask God’s forgiveness right now and he forgives me because of Jesus.”

“You’re obviously an idiot,” snarled the leader, “but we’re not. We know more about God’s law than you could grasp in a thousand lifetimes. You who once knew God have committed the ultimate blasphemy of accepting worship that supposedly belongs to God alone. You’re apostate – a Judas. You are beyond God’s forgiveness.”

To my consternation, all of the others murmured in agreement.

Again I tried praying. Again I felt nothing but hopelessness and horrific guilt.

“Nothing is unforgivable!” I eventually managed to spit out, feverishly hoping I was right. “Jesus died for the sins of the whole world – all humanity. That *has* to include any sin any human could ever commit.”

“You’re deluding yourself,” came the dreaded reply. “You know that the Son himself spoke about the unforgivable sin.”

The horror I felt defies description. I again tried a pitiful prayer for wisdom and felt nothing but mortifying condemnation.

*For Jesus’ sake I accept forgiveness. For Jesus’ sake . . . for the one who died for me.*

I robotically recited what I had studied years ago, “When speaking of the unpardonable sin, Jesus was referring to believing he is not the Savior of the world but is of the devil. No one would seek God’s forgiveness through someone they believe is anti-God. But once anyone sees through that deception and discovers that Jesus truly is the Source of divine forgiveness, he can then seek and receive full forgiveness through Jesus, no matter how atrocious his sins have been.”

Then I decided to go for it. “In the mighty name of Jesus who shed his blood for me and through the cross and his triumphant resurrection defeated all evil, I command you to leave!”

Nothing happened.

“Don’t try to dupe me!” He was angry. “You know *Hebrews 10:* ‘For if we deliberately keep on sinning after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sins, but only a terrifying prospect of judgment and fiery indignation that will consume God’s enemies.’ ”

I was distraught. He was still there, bolder than ever, and quoting Scripture to affirm his right to ignore me. Bereft of any other option, however, I just had to keep shooting off quick prayers, draw upon previous Bible study, and press on as if I knew what I were talking about.

“I’m not like the Hebrew Christians that Scripture was addressed to,” I pronounced. “They needed that warning because they were tempted to abandon sole faith in Jesus’ sacrifice and revert to Judaism and its sacrifices. That’s the whole thrust of the epistle. Unlike them, I know there is no other sacrifice because Jesus died for *all* of humanity’s sin. Jesus is all I need and my faith is not misplaced by hoping in other sacrifices or rituals. My faith is in his sacrifice alone.”

“By wanting sex with us, you made yourself spiritually one with evil.”

*Was he changing the subject? Was he trying to conceal that he was conceding defeat on this point or was he simply trying to further twist the knife in my soul?*

“I never had sex with any of you,” I said smugly.

“Don’t give me that garbage. You know you lusted after us. You know the Son says that to lust after someone is to commit adultery with the person.”

*Had I truly lusted after them or was I just tempted? If only lust were easier to define! I’m not made of granite but I’m not meant to be, am I?*

He was relentless. “The thought is just as damming as the action. In God’s eyes you made yourself spiritually one with us. You know how *Corinthians* says even casual sex with a prostitute has such spiritual implications that it is taking what belongs to Christ and making it one with the devil.”

I had a rough idea of how toward the end of chapter six of both *First and Second Corinthians* could be combined to say something like that. What struck me, however, was how every word he spoke rang so true. Every part of me seemed compelled to acknowledge the power of his assertions and nod in reluctant agreement.

“In God’s eyes,” he continued triumphantly, “you have made yourself spiritually one with us. And this is binding forever. You know how *Malachi* says God hates divorce, so he could never agree to you divorcing us.”

*Is this true?* He might as well have used his massive fist to punch me in the stomach. I staggered at the power of his arguments. I could never outwit him. Here I was in a world of divine perfection, and evil was about to totally enslave me.

“You are ours! You have engaged in the ultimate perversion and it is irreversible. By the mystical power of sexual union that my colleagues have duped earthlings into knowing so little about, you have superglued yourself to us. And you will be tormented by the consequences for all eternity.”

I was too distraught to wonder how he knew about human technology (superglue).

*Is this as catastrophic as he claims? Or is he playing a malevolent mind game? How can I tell?*

Just when I was sure the agony of my guilt made it impossible for me to feel any worse, he added, “You were so easy to deceive because you wanted to believe it.”

I crumpled to a low I had never thought existed.

“You’re one of us, now and forever – except that you’re still a puny earthling who will have to spend eternity squirming like a grub at our feet as you serve us all. Get on your knees, slave!”

I was trembling so uncontrollably that I could barely stand anyhow. Nevertheless, I tried to keep on my feet as long as I could.

“Jesus came to defeat the devil and to set humanity free from every spiritual bondage.” My voice had shriveled into a squeak. *So much for trying to sound brave . . .*

“Jesus died for the sins of the world!” I managed to spit out. “That has to include the vilest sins that any human is capable of committing.” I had already said that, but things were growing graver by the second. Then I thought of something else. “I will not insult the holiness of God by suggesting that to him there is any such thing as a small sin. Every sin is horrific in his eyes. Salvation is available not because of the smallness of one’s sin but because of the greatness of God’s love and the unlimited power of Christ’s sacrifice. ‘If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ That’s the eternal Word of God no matter what devious arguments you invent.” *Hey! That sounded rather good!*

“We are here in fulfillment of the holy Word of God that cannot be broken,” came the crushing reply. “I was cast out and, as the Son declared in the gospels, I have returned with even more demons to repossess you because you are empty, swept clean and in order. Yes, we are back because you are empty. You are not filled with Spirit of God.”

*Oh, no!* I certainly felt empty and I had not had any special sign of the Spirit’s infilling. I was almost frozen with horror. Like someone with hypothermia wanting to sleep even though it meant certain death, I wanted to cave in and admit it was futile to keep trying to resist the indisputable truth of his words. Alarmingly, however, what I was facing was infinitely worse than a Christian’s death. I complained bitterly, *Where is God when I need him?*

With the grace and intelligence of a man plummeting to death frantically flapping his arms in hope of slowing his fall, I tried a quick prayer yet again. I decided to put on my game face and stagger on for a few more moments before my inevitable, irreversible defeat.

“You’re a liar!” *What are these bold words coming from my lips? Is God truly with me despite the guilt and abandonment I feel?* “You’re back only because you’re hoping to bluff me into not exercising my Christ-bought authority over you. And I’m not falling for it!”

“Ha! You’ve already commanded me to leave in Jesus’ name and I’m still here. Doesn’t *James* say, ‘Resist the devil and he will flee from you’? Have I fled?”

“I don’t care how long it takes: you will flee!”

They all laughed. That was not a good sign.

“Are we scared?” Their leader, the fiercest, biggest one, continued as their spokesperson. “You’re the one who is shaking in terror! If you had a fraction of the faith required to be rid of us you wouldn’t be trembling. You’re shaking so much you put a jackhammer to shame and that’s because you know I’m right and that you are doomed!” They laughed again. I hated that sound. And I was in no mood to wonder how they knew about jackhammers.

“On, your knees!” he raged in an ear-splitting shriek. I had no idea whether it was terror or the sheer volume of his words that shook my body like a boom box.

The vivid memory recurred of the tortured screams of that powerful angel as he cowered before the same being who was now ordering me. I shot off another tiny prayer, prepared for more pain than I have ever known, and did my best to remain upright.

“Faith is not about feelings!” I had hurled back the statement faster than I could think it through.

“Your own conscience confirms that you have totally blown it,” came the unwanted reply. “You feel riddled with guilt and banished from God.”

“Yes, I feel utterly condemned and without hope but what I feel is irrelevant. Christians are called to live by faith, not feelings.” I didn’t know how those words came out of my mouth but as I heard myself utter them it was like a revelation. I was sure they were the truth and I resolved to cling to those words as if my life depended upon them – which it probably did.

The ferocious superhuman glared at me with blood-curdling hate. I stared back, as defiantly as a shaking lump of jello could muster.

“I’ll be back!” he snapped.

“And I’ll be waiting to give you the boot!” I retorted, hoping I sounded much more confident than I felt.

Then they vanished.

I flopped to the ground, a quivering wreck. *Will they really be back again? What diabolical tricks when I least expect it will they use next time?*

# Chapter 21: Shattered

Never in my life had I imagined it possible to feel so shattered. No doubt there are people who have suffered far worse but I was reeling as if I had been emotionally brutalized and traumatized beyond description.

It had all been academic but my university studies on the subject had rammed home how ridiculous most movies are in portraying someone finally being rescued as the happy ending of a grisly ordeal. For the police and an entertainment-crazed audience it might be the end, but for the victim it is merely the opening scene in a grievously prolonged saga that might, years later, eventually end in something akin to recovery. Maybe you would have coped better but, for me, what I had just endured was an emotional bloodbath so harrowing that I felt I had every right to expect nightmares about this ordeal to plague my sleep for the rest of my life.

I’m embarrassed about being in worse shape since this latest demonic encounter than after witnessing my Lord’s humiliation and torment. Perhaps it flashes in neon lights how self-obsessed I am, but to doctor the truth to make me look better would make me an infinitely greater failure. All of heaven would see me as a liar. The alternative to being ruthlessly honest in this account is to humiliate myself not before a few thousand readers but before my eternal Judge. I do not have to be Einstein to know that is incomparably worse.

I am even clueless as to why this latest attack floored me even more than previous attacks. Was it the cumulative effect of it all? I have heard ordinary folks speak of a “delayed reaction” in reference to experiences that send one’s emotions convulsing in shock. I had no idea as to whether that was relevant. All I knew was that right now it seemed that my ability to cope with life was dangling by a thread.

Feeling so stupefied and helpless was disturbing enough but having no idea if my mental stability would ever return to normality teetered between worrying and terrifying. And to complete the ruination, finding myself reduced to nothing but a hollowed-out shell of a person convinced me that I was not only useless but a total failure. Aren’t Christians meant to always feel on top and in control, with a zest for life? If they are, I was a failure not just because I had withered to a state where the simplest task seemed beyond me, but I was the worst kind of failure – a spiritual failure. I had sunk too low to see the gaping holes in that fallacy.

You might yet again be disappointed with me; thinking I should be exalting in my triumph instead of languishing in exhausted despair. Perhaps I should be reading your book, not vice versa, or perhaps you would less cocky had you been forced into my shoes. Anyhow, I’ll press on with this account.

I recalled how, beyond anything I had ever known, that amazing spider bite had perked me up. My need was far greater now. Certain that this was what I so desperately needed, I ensured that I truly believed God would provide one. With this faith now coursing through my spiritual veins, I passionately prayed for a spider like the one God had graciously sent me in the forest.

None appeared. I waited. Nothing happened. I vaguely recalled some of the many Scriptures about waiting upon the Lord. Minutes crawled as if on broken glass. I waited and waited.

Nothing.

Where was God? “This is no time to play hide and seek!” I told him defiantly. Still nothing.

So I decided to pray a second time. Not a spider in sight, despite my great need.

I recalled that when desperate, both Jesus and the apostle Paul, prayed three times. Mustering even more faith, I prayed again. Nothing happened. Then I remembered that when Jesus prayed three times in the garden and when Paul prayed three times for the removal of the ‘thorn’, neither of them had their prayers answered. My annoyance grew.

Eventually, I recalled Elijah on Mount Carmel after his phenomenal contest with the prophets of Baal. Though hopelessly outnumbered (I have since confirmed that the exact number was an astonishing four hundred and fifty to one), and after all the false prophets’ frantic efforts had failed abysmally, Elijah’s prayer had been spectacularly answered with lightning out of a blue sky landing on the exact spot and bursting into flames the water-soaked carcasses. With faith that must now have been as high as the moon, Elijah immediately prayed for the breaking of the drought. Nothing happened. Undeterred, he prayed again. Still nothing. He prayed a third time. Still nothing. This, perhaps greatest of all prophets other than our Lord, had to pray not three, not four, not five but seven times before a speck of a cloud appeared on the horizon.

So I kept on and on, praying for a spider. Still no spider. *Where is God when you need him? Of all the times for God to let me down! Just when I needed help more than ever before, he’s gone on vacation!*

Of course, I was not even close to pushing God out of my life but, as you might have gathered, I was not in the best of moods. I had started off feeling as low as I thought I could ever get and now I was even lower.

When I had grown too exhausted to be quite so peeved, the thought came, *What if God has beaten me to it and has already provided what I need in this garden?*

I instantly rejected the ridiculous notion. I had every right to be mad at God. There was no denying that I had done all that praying and believing and despite my great need, God had turned a deaf ear. *Any fool knows that!* I told myself.

Out of nowhere came the thought, ***Only*** *a fool knows that*, but that was just my smartass brain messing with me – wasn’t it?

I reverted to languishing on the ground, not bothering even to open my eyes. Time dragged on; every torturous moment compounding by despair.

Eventually I recalled that this garden had seemed to have curative qualities. *If ever I’ve needed healing from shock, it’s now.* Forcing open my eyes, I looked in dazed despair at the once-glorious garden. Not a thing about it had changed and yet everything had changed.

Having nothing better to do, I staggered to my feet and laboriously trudged, as if what had once been a carpet fit for the grandest king had degenerated into deep sewerage. I tried to absorb the beauty around me. With a toxic cocktail of anger and depression clouding into a noxious smog smothering my senses, it was quite a battle. I breathed deeply, trying to savor the fragrances. I let my mind float with the melodic calls of the birds. I still felt gutted but maybe slightly better.

As I plodded on I looked at my hand and made the surprise discovery that despite all I had gone through I was still clutching that cup. I peered inside. It looked as if I had not spilt a drop. *How weird!*

I suddenly felt famished. *What an outrageous time to feel hungry!* I sniffed the thick, nectar-like contents and was seized by a peculiar compulsion to fling caution to the wind and scoff down the contents. I had only just commenced when, noting how rich it tasted, I quickly modified my plan and settled for a sip. I immediately felt myself physically reviving, although my spirits remained abysmally low.

Almost oblivious to my surroundings, I slunk past a bush and sensed something peculiar. I was so down that almost all curiosity had drained from me but there turned out to be just enough of it sloshing in the bottom of my tank for me to move a couple of paces and then slump onto the carpet. In just that short distance, leaves that had previously seemed to be reaching out to me were now facing away from me. As I languished there, my suspicions that had first begun with other bushes were slowly confirmed. Were the leaves moving at a barely discernible rate? After about ninety seconds, they ended up pointing toward me. It was preposterous but I seemed to feel something radiating from the leaves that somehow lifted my spirits. In a place of stunning beauty there was nothing about the leaves visually that would account for it.

It had been incremental but by now there was no denying that I was feeling markedly better through the accumulative effect of this garden. I began to marvel at how I had somehow managed to conclude that the infinite Lord had no other option than a spider. As I pondered it, I found myself in awe of my own stupidity.

Despite knowing that God declares in his Word (several times, in fact) that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, I had railed against the Perfect One; exposing myself as a fool who had not so much as begun the steep road to the wisdom that Scripture insists is so important.

The gist of parts of *Isaiah* pierced my mind. I’ve looked it up so that I can cite them more precisely but my recollection at the time was close enough to stab me: “All who are incensed against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced,” (Isaiah 41:11) and “all who rage against him [God] shall be put to shame,” (Isaiah 45:24).

I had long been well aware that it is appallingly common for today’s Christians to abuse God’s extraordinary patience by treating the Supreme Lord of the universe flippantly; acting as though the one who judges our eternal destiny is worthy of little more fearful respect than the most formidable human authority. And yet here was I, having shamed myself with an impertinent outburst against the incomprehensibly powerful, terrifyingly holy God.

By disrespecting the Almighty, I who had prided myself on being so smart and having way above average Bible knowledge had, by the Bible’s own definition, not so much as begun the long journey to wisdom.

I plunged into an analysis of what had led me to show such disrespect. I emerged with the conclusion that behind my foolishness was doubting God’s loving wisdom. When the chips were down, I had failed God by failing to maintain the belief that the good Lord always has our best interest at heart – infinitely more than we do – and that he ceaselessly devotes all of his infinite intellect to bringing this about. I had disgraced myself by forgetting that God is not only my all-powerful Judge (which should have been enough to temper my outburst) but is always good and always right and so always worthy of my highest respect.

Have you ever felt driven to scratch an itch that keeps getting itchier every time it is scratched? I’ve already used this analogy but I cannot come up with a better way to describe how I was beginning to feel about this topic. On and on I went.

I saw with chilling clarity that anyone unafraid of showing disrespect for the Almighty’s wisdom ends up showing all of heaven the depth of his own folly. “Before they call, I will answer,” says Isaiah 65:24. I cringed in shame that the one who is “able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20) truly had beaten me to it and provided in this garden all I needed, even at the very time he was not answering my pitifully short-sighted prayers for a spider.

I was coming almost to enjoy beating myself up over my failure. It was pushing me to meditate on profound spiritual truth and I was even making new discoveries. And I deserved to be severely chastised. And perhaps succumbing to morbid lamentations would impress on my mind the gravity of my blunder so that I never do it again. It all felt so right.

But I had followed similar paths far too often not to know where they lead. If I kept on being hard on myself, instead of it making me more determined never again to make similar mistakes, I would sink into depression and then despair and finally defeatism. What chance of victory does anyone have who keeps seeing himself as a hopeless loser? With, as Scripture says, the supernatural enemy of our souls on the prowl like a lion stalking its prey, it is too dangerous to let oneself be vulnerable even for a moment.

We instinctively shrink from anyone we suspect might be mad at us or disappointed with us. So letting myself think God might feel this way about me is that I would inevitably, though perhaps unconsciously, drive me to keep at least slightly distant from my Shepherd and only protector. That would be a huge mistake, when God warns in his Word that a superhuman beast of prey is lurking ready to pounce when least expected. To counter this, I desperately needed to embrace both my Lord’s forgiveness and his victory. That would do more than flood me with joy. Being certain of his loving forgiveness would remind me that he feels warmly toward me. This would safeguard me by keeping me feeling drawn to my Protector. And awareness of his victory on my behalf on the cross would keep me realizing how empowered I am by him.

Thankfully, driven by bitter past experience, I had preemptively memorized certain pertinent Scriptures. Having found them to be powerful antidotes to the deceiver’s attempts to infect me with one of his deadly strains of condemnation and/or defeatism, I was determined not to lose them again. Before slumping any further, I needed to dose myself up immediately. Here’s what I keep in my spiritual medicine cabinet, as I remembered them (I wasn’t too good at recalling the exact chapter and verse, but it was truth, not numbers that I most needed):

Micah 7:8 Rejoice not against me, O my enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me.

Somewhere in *Proverbs:* for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again . . .

From *Psalms:* Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivers him out of them all.

Again from *Psalms:* The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delights in his way. ***Though he fall***, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholds him with his hand. (Emphasis mine.)

To this I added two other snippets, not quite as well memorized:

From somewhere in *Psalms*: “those whose strength is in you . . . go from strength to strength”.

And from one of Paul’s epistles, something about being more than conquerors through him who loved us.

I needed to dwell on those Scripture for a while but that re-focus pulled me back from the cliff edge.

Despite all the incomparable things in this garden, however, what truly restored me was when I began praising God and these Scriptures proved just the incentive I needed.

Have you seen a movie where someone is alone and wounded and his survival hinges on the hero performing surgery on himself without anesthetic? Sometimes, praising God can almost seem that hard, and (though we too rarely think of it in these terms) that heroic.

I began thanking God for delivering me from those evil beings. I recoiled in horror at the thought of ever again having to face anything remotely like what I had just suffered. Nevertheless, I had escaped. Even when I was too numb and terrified to hear God’s whispers, he must still have been giving me wisdom despite me feeling unforgivable and it seeming he had left me. If he could save me when things seemed so hopeless, he can save anyone in any situation. All it takes is to keep clinging to him. So I praised him for that.

Despite praise being such a hard slog and initially seeming useless, I kept forcing myself. I praised my wonderful Lord that he had been with me and given me revelation and tactics for spiritual warfare, even when I had been too torn up to feel his presence. I thanked him for what he taught me with those ‘sparklers.’ That experience had proved critical in this latest victory. My praise was not nearly as eloquent as in that forest but I kept persisting anyhow. Eventually, I began to notice it lifting me until, to my surprise, praise turned out in some ways still more healing than anything in this garden had been.

I marveled to realize that not only had I not needed that spider bite, my greatest need was miracles accessed not by special plants but through praise. Despite sometimes seeming perplexingly irksome, praise remains within our grasp anytime, anywhere. It felt strangely satisfying to know that even in this medicinal garden, the most powerful means of recovery was something available to every earthbound human.

Suddenly, I welled up with shame over having left praise until now. Anyone can praise *after* deliverance. That takes no faith and achieves little. How much easier would my battle have been had I kept praising God while it seemed he had left me?

I concluded that magnifying God in my mind needs to be top priority. And no more so than when fiendishly clever beings are trying to shrink my view of God until I even begin to doubt the Almighty’s ability to save. I had needed, like never before, to build up my faith in my Savior; expanding my awareness of the greatness of his faithfulness, his eagerness to forgive, his power to save and his love for even his enemies, by continually praising him for having these attributes. I had previously learned in this very garden that praise sensitizes us to spiritual reality and builds our faith and is the too-often neglected element in successful spiritual warfare. I was appalled to realize that never had I so much needed the spiritual benefits of praising God and yet in the confusion of the battle I had lost all awareness of its critical importance.

I decided that it is when we least feel like praising that we most need to praise. We particularly need the power of praise during hard times but unless we work on entrenching praise as a habit during easy times, this powerful weapon will probably slip from our grasp when we most need it.

In my latest battle I had praised so little but escaped anyhow. Once again, my gracious Lord had rescued me despite me failing to do what he had taught me. I sensed he had been merciful because I was still learning but that there is a strict limit to how much laziness God will allow without dire consequences. Our Lord loves us too much to let us squander our spiritual potential. If we do not learn the easy way, there is a more memorable way to learn.

I was now certain that faith is not about feeling positive or feeling God’s presence. Faith is not about feelings but simply holding on to Christ when doubts rage like tsunamis, and everything within us screams that God has abandoned us and that all is lost forever.

I didn’t feel fully restored but forcing myself to praise God had done so much. It even revived my curiosity and ability to appreciate this garden. I walked with a new spring in my step. In a while, as I glided past a quite different type of bush, the sweetest perfume caressed my senses, so captivating me that I seemed almost to lose the ability to think. I stopped, closed my eyes and breathed deeply through my nostrils, savoring the fragrance. I felt transported. Never, have I known a scent to have such an effect. In fact, nothing else has ever touched me this way.

The aroma seemed to permeate every cell of my body; calming, refreshing and invigorating me beyond my sweetest fantasies. Time seemed to vanish as I stood there entranced. It was as if every care – even cares I had no idea I had – drifted away like stains lazily dissolving in warm, soapy water, leaving everything pristine. My mind floated to a place of calm it had never known. Even my hyperactive curiosity that had once been ramped to the max by the incessant stimulation of exotic worlds, stilled to a deathlike quiet that was strangely comforting.

Even as I write, I not only flood with a special peace as I re-live the moment, I’m inspired to lift my faith. I wince as I wonder how much we miss out on, just because we settle for the mundane rather than look in faith to God for the extraordinary when we need it. We don’t have to leave our planet for the Unstoppable Lord’s to become the one who “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.”

It gripped me with new force that divine miracles happen because God is omnipotent, not because the people performing, receiving or witnessing them are omnipotent. Likewise, what matters with miracles is not whether we are special but only that God is special. As our frailties do not undermine the Unstoppable Lord’s power, neither does our being ordinary nullify his ability to do the extraordinary in and through us. He does not even need our faith, though he pines for it, just like he aches for our love, despite him being able to survive without it. I cannot speak for you, but I know I need to lift my game when it comes to expecting great things from the great God who has made our very bodies his home.

I have no idea how long I was lost in this exquisitely refreshing sensation of peace, but eventually, like someone who had feasted on the finest cuisine until he could eat no more, I again became aware of my surroundings.

There can be no denying that I cannot find words sufficiently vast, reverent, otherworldly and superior to describe what that bush did to me. Nevertheless, the truth remains that as priceless and staggering and spectacular as that experience was, combined with all the other healing wonders in this special place, it was still my labored attempt at praise that delivered the greatest healing.

My trial, however, was far too short for me to be any kind of role model. If people I admire, and whom all of heaven cheers had, as it were, to endure interminable years climbing terrifying mountains in blizzards, all I have faced is a lump in my mattress. No matter how much we praise and how powerful and critical it is for a breakthrough, trials are often agonizingly prolonged. Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” refused to budge, not only despite the great man of faith praying three times, but despite him loving and praising God, affirming that his Lord’s grace is sufficient. There was no miraculous deliverance. The oppressive trial dragged on and on. The proof of great faith is revealed not by the deliverance, nor the shortness of the trial, but by how long we keep holding on despite all the misery.

While continuing to throw open every one of my senses to all the healing properties this garden seemed to ooze, I resumed my walk and my contemplations.

On thinking back to those insidiously deceptive angels, I noted how although with other angels there had been a hint of femininity, with these it was ever so slightly accentuated. It was also barely detectable but there seemed a degree of sensuality about them that was not present with other angels. My blood pressure rose at the realization that their elevated femininity and sensuality seemed carefully calculated to be subtle enough to slip under my defenses without triggering an alarm.

My mind slumped into wondering if I really had accepted worship and lusted after those evil beings. I was deeply grieved over that possibility but were all those accusations merely bluff? At the time I had thought I was still dazed and working out what I should do. Did those beings reveal their true identity so quickly because they sensed I was about to reject it all? I truly do not know.

On thinking back, it seemed that the very presence of those insidiously deceptive beings somehow affected my thinking. Never having taken alcohol or illicit drugs, I can only guess their effect. Mentally, however, I had felt a bit akin to what I would imagine it might be like being a little high on dope.

I sighed in contentment, however, that I do not have to waste my life agonizing over trying to ascertain the extent of my guilt. Like every believer, I had no need to try to justify myself because Christ justifies me. He treats me as innocent, not because my sins are somehow excusable, but because the scope of his forgiveness is inexhaustible.

I had been strolling along, deep in thought, while simultaneously striving to keep absorbing every healing wonder in this ever-so-special world. I paused to enjoy my surroundings for a moment, then resumed both my stroll and my thoughts about sin and the miracle of forgiveness.

I was not for a moment slipping into the delusion that sin does not matter. I recalled once hearing of a pirate who killed a man. It upset him so much that he could not sleep for days. He kept killing, however, and reached the point where he could murder someone, use the corpse as a pillow and sleep soundly all night. That, I feared, is how numb to sin we humans have become through having been continually surrounded by sin and committing countless thousands of them since before we even knew the difference between right and wrong. Our sin-hardened hearts are in total contrast to the holiness of God. He is absolute moral perfection and has lost none of his acute sensitivity to sin. Though kicking and screaming all the way, I felt compelled to the conclusion that any sin that to me seems so inconsequential that I dismiss it as nothing must shock and appall and devastate and infuriate him.

Not only is God’s holiness terrifying, I mused, so is his love. If a teen I cared little about, ruined his future by not studying, I would be unconcerned, but I surmised that if that teen had been my child, it would stir me profoundly. The extent of our love for someone determines how much that person’s actions affect us. Surely the infinity of God’s love drives him to see the ‘least’ of us as a priceless, living, feeling masterpiece that he has emotionally invested his entire being into creating and sustaining. The ‘least’ of us is the darling of his heart, the irreplaceable work of art whose perfection and astounding potential is ruined when we commit the ‘tiniest’ sin. (I feel the compulsion to use quotes because the Infinite Lord sees none of us, nor any of our sins, as being of lesser significance.) Moreover, almost always, our sin not only ruins us, but hurts another human – someone who means more to our Savior than his own life. If, as hardened as ‘earthlings’ are, the most sensitive, love-filled mother could be unmoved while a sadist tortures her darling child, there might be the remotest possibility that the God of love could tolerate the ‘smallest’ sin.

Still recovering from the most vicious spiritual attack I had ever known, I needed no reminding that sin matters. It grieves my Lord. It tormented my Savior to the extreme of death. Upon analyzing the horrendous guilt I had so recently felt, I realized that the ghastly feeling was manipulated by evil in a monstrous attempt to seduce me into doubting God’s forgiveness. Nonetheless, I concluded that it was a mere shadow of the real magnitude of the ‘smallest’ sin. Like never before, I found myself rejoicing that no sin, no matter how gross or repeated, need keep anyone from God. All that it takes is to regret our misdeeds enough to be willing to be freed from them and to ask Jesus to save us from our sin.

But do I actually want him to save me? No matter how strongly I am attracted to sin, that attraction is merely temptation. Nevertheless, no matter how much I love a particular sin or try to sugarcoat or excuse it, the wages of *any* sin is death. Regardless of how ‘small’ I fool myself into thinking it is, any sin I do not want God to save me from has the power to banish me eternally from God’s presence.

A chill ripped through me at the realization that the sins each of us love are just as spiritually deadly as the sins we hate. Did I want Jesus to rescue me from my favorite sin or did I prefer to stay in my sin? Did I have the audacity to expect the Holy One to have suffered on the cross so that I could keep on sinning with impunity? Did I really think he was tortured to death so that I could willfully continue my suicidal commitment to keep on sinning and suffer the eternal consequences?

Regardless of how much I might kid myself otherwise, to not want Jesus to rescue me from the pet sin I want to hold on to, is to not want Jesus to be my Savior. As I pondered the terrifying implications, not even my exquisite surroundings stopped my heart from thumping.

Although I would have expected this entire subject to be depressing, it felt liberating, even exhilarating. It was like shining a light on a dark, hauntingly scary corridor and the mere presence of the light suddenly banished all fear. It was like no longer having to skulk through life hiding from the truth; no longer being burdened by an oppressive guilty secret; no longer having to pretend to be someone I wasn’t. It was like confessing something horrific, and instead of the expected condemnation, finding warm acceptance. I could not have felt more liberated if I had finally stared down a bully that had hounded me all my life and saw him flee.

My academic knowledge of trauma now seemed far too shallow. My studies had been enough, however, to make it clear it was ridiculously too soon to know the long-term effects of my recent trauma. Symptoms could take weeks or longer to manifest themselves. Additionally, other than pathetically superficial possibilities, such as being a temporary distraction, I could think of no reason why trying to gain God’s perspective on sin should aid healing. Nevertheless, it seemed to me as if it were speeding my recovery. In fact, my mind (or was it my spiritual discernment?) seemed unusually sharp.

So, while continuing to do all I could to draw upon all the healing benefits of my glorious surroundings, I prayerfully let my mind play with this matter. My nagging fear of boring you compels me to maim this by pruning it to a bare outline, but at the time it seemed the most fascinating and important subject in all creation.

Suppose I were in a burning building that is about to explode. If I were foolish enough to love being there so much that I refuse to be dragged to safety, obviously I would go up in flames when it explodes. The thought emerged that this must be how it is with the God who longs to save each of us from the sin that will destroy us. If we love our sin so much that we refuse to let God save us from it, then we are in the gravest of all dangers. God loves and respects us so much that he will abide by our decision, even though our refusal to let him drag us from our sin will break his heart, as well as destroy us when it all explodes.

I tussled with such questions as: if the Lord offered me a life in which temptation remains as agonizingly strong as ever but I could never again have access to sin to satisfy my craving for it, would I choose such a life or would I choose to continue having access to sin? If I would choose sin rather than my Holy Savior, then no matter how much I deceive myself into telling myself I am godly, wouldn’t I be rejecting his salvation and serving sin rather than God? Would it mean God is not my God; sin is? To genuinely want the holy Lord as my Savior, must I be willing to let God save me not just from the sins I hate, but from the sins I love; not just from the nasty aspects of sin but from the seemingly desirable aspects of sin?

I decided that no matter how attractive and ‘necessary’ the deceiver might make sin seem, I genuinely want God to rip it out of my life, and I am willing to endure whatever temporary pain and feeling of loss that entails. For divine forgiveness, I don’t have to prove myself by doing anything – that would be works. All that the God who knows my heart asks is for my permission. That way, God saving me from my favorite sins is an act of love, not some form of abuse in which he forces himself on me against my will. God is love, not an abuser of his unlimited power.

Then, erupting from the depths of my being, a song I had never before known bubbled out of my mouth expressing the wonder of my holy union with God.

 I need the Lord, my Maker,
 As rivers need to flow;
 As flowers need the sunlight;
 And seedlings need to grow;
 As marksmen need a target,
 And arrows need a bow.
 I’ve feigned my independence,
 But failed to improvise.
 I need the One I’m made for,
 As eagles need the skies.
 You’re my breath and my light,
 My food and my wine.
 I’m the brush, you’re the artist,
 I’m the string and you’re the harpist.
 Tune me for your glory.

 I need the Lord, my Maker,
 As falcons need to see;
 As the clay needs a sculptor,
 And a lock needs a key.
 As a ship needs a rudder;
 And coral needs the sea.
 I’m done with empty living;
 Success that’s make-believe.
 I need the One I’m made for,
 As creatures need to breathe.
 You’re my strength and my hope,
 My peace and my shield.
 I’m the hands, you’re the healer,
 I’m the sword and you’re the victor.
 Wield me for your glory.

 I need the Lord, my Maker,
 As an arm needs a hand;
 As a babe needs its mother;
 And a dove needs to land;
 As a car needs a driver
 And a glove needs a hand.
 I’m tired of ‘great achievements’,
 Of life that’s just a game.
 I need the One I’m made for,
 As deserts need the rain.
 You’re my life and my joy,
 My truth and my guide.
 I’m the song, you’re the Singer,
 I’m a well and you’re the water.
 Fill me for your glory.

The words moved me so deeply that I sang them over and over with ever-increasing awe. How the song came to me was a mystery, let alone why I can still recall it word perfect after all these months.

While I was singing I had such a revelation of the wonder of a union with the divine that, on the one hand, it seemed forbidden, audacious, almost unthinkable, and yet at the same time it felt so right, so mysterious, so transcendent and so sacred.

Suddenly a noise high up in a tall flowering hedge startled me. In a frenzy, my consciousness rushed back to my current environment, returning me at breakneck speed to hyper-alert.

# Chapter 22: The Walking Handbag

I craned my neck in time to see an animal scamper down. Once it hit ground level it stopped motionless; staring at me quizzically. I had never imagined a creature could look so comical. Its big, floppy, almost unkempt ears were enough to set me laughing. It had the cheekiest-looking face I’ve ever seen. Suddenly it took a flying leap at me, landed on my chest, and began tickling me! The next instant I was sprawled out on the floral carpet, thrashing around, laughing and laughing. If the plant with leaves that followed me – and so much else in this place – had somehow drained me of the negative, this cheeky ball of fur was filling me with the positive.

During this friendly attack, the ‘cup’ had spilled on to the ground during the commotion. I had been too distracted even to think of it until I saw the animal gobble it up. Apparently, some of the contents had poured on to the ‘carpet’ because he carefully licked it. In two seconds everything was pristine again.

At last, I found my feet. The creature leapt back on me and gave me the biggest hug. It sounds embarrassingly unmasculine but, to be honest, I felt I needed it. With my new friend cuddling me, I continued to wander and wonder.

Suddenly my heart almost left my chest as this clown of an animal shocked me breathless by leaping off me and bolting up a hedge that towered above me. From there he proceeded to pick fruit, some of which he scoffed hungrily but some seemed to vanish. His movements were so fast as to be almost a blur. Then he dived onto a bush and, despite it looking so dense as to be impenetrable, he somehow managed to slip his fingers into it. This time, some berries were swallowed and again some seemed to vanish, but it was all too quick for me to be sure. By repeating this on various other hedges and bushes he found several varieties of fruit, berries and nuts. Until then I had been unaware of any food sources in this garden, other than the cup of nectar. When he finally headed back toward me I immediately noticed his bulging, lumpy stomach. I was amazed at how he must have gorged himself.

As he drew near, his forearm touched his tummy and in an instant there was fruit in his hand. *Is this a clown or a magician?* Eventually, I figured it out. He had a pouch, rather like a kangaroo’s, stuffed with the uneaten food he had just collected. Then I remembered that only female marsupials have pouches. *Is ‘he’ a ‘she’?* It was only then that I realized I had originally referred to this creature as ‘it.’ How quickly this rascal had won my heart!

My cuddly companion handed me some of his/her collection. Of course, I knew rationally that just because they were edible for this alien did not mean they were safe for humans, but there was something peculiarly disarming about his/her generosity and mannerisms. In fact, as totally irrational as it is, I did not have the heart to disappoint my new friend by declining his/her kindness. After a little hesitation, I found myself cautiously tasting what turned out to be the best fruit and nuts I had ever eaten.

My benefactor quickly emptied the pouch and the next instant was zooming in and out of shrubs and hedges again, refilling the pouch with another mouth-watering assortment of gifts for me.

The nuts had soft edible shells that were a distinctly different but highly compatible flavor to the nuts they housed. I enjoyed a few of one variety before it dawned that although they tasted salty, no one had added salt. It was their natural flavor. One nut had a sweet-tasting liquid in the center that sent me hunting for more of this type in the mixed assortment that had been left for me.

Most of the fruits had several layers, with each layer being a different texture and flavor. One, for example, was structured a little like an apricot, with a delicious, thick skin quite different in taste from the flesh. At the center was a ‘stone’ that melted in my mouth like chocolate, but tasted more like honey. Another fruit had flesh slightly reminiscent of grapes with soft seeds flavored remotely like macadamia nuts. My attempt is akin to saying snake tastes like chicken but how can anyone describe a unique taste?

As I thanked God for this delightful creature-cum-handbag and for exotic food that transported my taste buds to new territory, I returned to lamenting not having been more thankful to God earlier. I recalled from a well-loved psalm how, unlike the way I treat him, God knows my every thought and is always thinking about me. Instantly, I saw an obvious link I had never noticed before. God knows my every thought *because* he is always thinking about me.

Could the reverse happen? Could it be that the more my thoughts are on God, the more I’m likely to know his thoughts? If so, and God’s thoughts are unsurpassably profound, important and wise, how can I even conceive of how much I am robbing myself – to say nothing of robbing God – when my thoughts drift from God for hours at a time?

Then another question queued up for attention. If I regularly think of earthly things ten times more often than heavenly things, will that make the mundane seem ten times more real to me than the supernatural?

I was just beginning to puzzle over these possibilities when a bubble drifted by. It was so unexpected that I stared in astonishment; even more so when the gentle air currents caused it to almost dance. Where did it come from? For an insane moment I almost expected to find a child blowing bubbles but the source eluded me.

As I proceeded along the walkway, with my furry comedian playfully clinging to my chest, more and more bubbles of varying sizes greeted me, arousing my curiosity still further. As far as I could determine, a species of plant was producing the bubbles. That raised more questions than answers.

As I relished the sight, I marveled at how in this world, like in many of the others I had ended up in, I was a child again, bristling with questions and wide-eyed wonder. A simple stroll was the adventure of a lifetime. I felt rejuvenated. The crispness of a pristine new world had aroused my senses. They had been jolted awake, however, not just from the jaded emotions created by my recent trauma but from the sleepy haze induced by years of exposure to earth’s sameness.

There was something peculiarly special about the solitude but, with so many unanswered questions, I wished I had a knowledgeable guide. Or would that have spoilt the childlike wonder I felt?

Even without answers, however, I found the bubbles rather fascinating and enjoyable, especially as they gently spiraled, plunged, soared and wobbled in the delicate air currents.

As I snuggled into the sights, sounds and scents of this surreal wonderland, my thoughts reverted to that maddening verse: ‘Rejoice in the Lord always.” As I kept mulling over it, I found that although “always” was unsettling, “in the Lord” was actually beginning to make sense. Life is filled with unpleasant circumstances but I am not asked to rejoice in them but simply to rejoice in the ever-good and ever-thrilling Lord. We can rejoice always because no matter how many tragedies we suffer and no matter how much God might sometimes seem to have abandoned us, he is always with us and always scheming astonishing ways to turn the evil that has assaulted us into something that ends up doing us good.

For the first time ever, I saw a link between this verse and *Colossians*, where we are exhorted to set our minds on things above, not on earthly things. When earthly circumstances are bad, our ability to rejoice depends on whether we focus on the temporal or the eternal; whether we dwell on the depressing circumstances or on the God who remains perfect and more exciting than any madly in love man feels about his bride on his wedding night.

*Hey! With my focus continually slipping from God to circumstances, it’s no wonder I have difficulty rejoicing “always”! This actually is making sense!*

As I kept following the flower-carpeted path I drew near to what looked like a regal armchair. Like others I had discovered here, it was composed of flowering plants but alongside this one, the seats I had seen before were more like a park benches.

I would like to reveal what I felt as I sank into this living, functional sculpture but I fear your ridicule. Permit me to ease both you and me into this self-disclosure.

Do you understand that feelings are not rational thought? I am still coming to terms with this myself. I find it hard to let feelings be what they are. I keep wanting to force my feelings to submit to cold logic and reject in red-faced shame any that would dare try to wriggle free from that iron straightjacket. I must face the truth that, even though feelings seldom accurately reflect objective reality, they are still a part of our God-given humanity. As fleeting and fickle and frustrating as feelings are, they are part of what lifts us higher than machines. I do not have to believe my every feeling – and I often should not – in order to be fully human. But neither should I deny their existence or run from them in shame.

So after this preamble, can I trust you not to ridicule me for having feelings that defiantly rage against the confines of logic? As I eased myself into that living chair I felt as if I were on a throne that hugged me and thought the world of me. Now you know why I spent so long preparing you for this. I felt pampered, honored, valued and loved. My heart was warmed and uplifted but instead of inflating with unhealthy pride, I felt humbled in a reverent and yet refreshing way. Holy awe filled me and I flooded with almost overwhelming gratitude to Christ who made me worthy of such treatment by pouring out his love to the extreme of swapping places with me, letting himself be tormented on the cross to bear the terrifying punishment my offenses deserve.

With my fury friend snuggling into me, I resumed exploring until I became aware of a voice. I wrenched my eyes off the enticing beauty of a flower to look in the direction of the voice.

To my surprise, it was the very angel I had been thinking about earlier – the one who had been distracted by the beauty of a flower. Kokbiel had what seemed like a piece of paper in his hand. He glanced at it, then said in a bold, dignified voice, “*He’s* not here.” He had another go, “He’s not *here.* He is not here. He is *risen.*”

I put down my furry friend, feeling the need to focus intently on what was being said. While Kokbiel was speaking I noticed three angels walking toward him. They stopped abruptly and looked quizzically at each other.

Kokbiel, with his back to them, seemed unaware of their presence. Using different intonation and gestures he repeated, “He’s not here. He is risen.” After a pause he had yet another attempt. This time in a grand gesture he swept his hand around, followed by the rest of his body. “He is not –” Suddenly he was far enough around to see the other angels. “Oh – ah – didn’t notice you.” Do these noble entities get embarrassed? I chuckled to myself at the possibility but was it just his reaction to being startled?

“What in heaven are you doing, Kokbiel?” asked Meurel.

“Oh – um – just practicing my lines.”

“Fair enough,” said Gabriel, laughing, “that’s the greatest announcement the universe will ever hear.”

Kokbiel seemed taken aback. “Yes, I guess it is. I never thought of it like – Oh, dear! I’d better practice some more!” He moved on slightly, gesturing and silently mouthing the words again.

“That empty grave will knock them dead!” said Meurel, excitedly.

“What do you mean?” asked Gabriel, in his usual dignified manner.

“Everyone will *have* to believe when the Son rises from the dead.”

“No one ever *has* to believe,” replied Gabriel rather soberly.

“They can’t deny the facts.”

“They’ll find a way.”

Meurel sounded mystified. “How?”

“They’ll dismiss it as a hallucination.”

“No way!” protested Kairel, “. . . spread over forty days with five hundred witnesses?”

That caught Kokbiel’s ear. “*Five hundred?*” he asked.

“That’s how many the risen Lord will appear to” replied Kairel, “And his disciples will touch him and eat with him. Some hallucination!” They all laughed.

“And that still doesn’t explain the empty grave,” added Meurel.

“They’ll say the disciples stole the body,” said Gabriel.

Meurel laughed. “The religion with the highest conceivable morals, based on the biggest swindle in human history? You’re joking! Simple fishermen putting one over a hundred generations?” Meurel, who had earlier fooled me when he acted as if hurt by the boomerang, began walking on his toes in a delightfully comical way. “Tiptoed past blind guards I suppose!” I burst into laughter.

“Oiled the stone so it wouldn’t be heard!” added Kairel, rolling on the ground in hysterical laughter. The others laughed even harder.

“Who could believe that not one of the five hundred, even when dying a martyr’s death, would let it slip that it was all a hoax?” said Meurel. They sobered a little.

“In it for the fame I suppose!” jested Kairel. “They’ll be in big demand all right. The Jews will be demanding their lives. The Romans will be demanding their heads. Christ’s yellow-livered deserters taking on the Jewish leadership and the entire Roman Empire – and all for a sham!”

“Maybe they’re in it for the money,” sniggered Meurel. “They could make a fortune teaching people how to win popularity contests!”

Kairel added, “Or they could write a best seller: *How I earned My First Million Bruises.”*

“With books like that they could earn enough to keep them in bandages for weeks!” replied Meurel, laughing, then quickly turning serious.

“Cash is cold comfort when you’re looking death in the face,” added Kokbiel, gravely.

“If they want money they’ve got a much easier option. Christianity is set to explode. If the Jews think they’ve killed their problem they’re in for a shock. They’ll soon be running scared. They’d pay big money for someone to prove it’s a hoax,” said Meurel. “No, Gabriel, no one could believe they’re in it for fame or fortune. And if they’re into fraud, the first thing they’ll change is their own account of their actions. Those dull-minded disciples would be so wise and holy in the gospel tradition they leave posterity. If truth’s not important to them then the denying, deserting disciples would in their gospels be loyally supporting the Son when he’s sentenced to death. The Sons of Thunder would portray themselves as calmly in control. Loudmouth Peter would ensure he’s the epitome of diplomacy in the revised version. Self-seeking liars don’t paint themselves as bumbling idiots!”

“Gabriel, no one could deny that those scatter-brains are sincere.”

“They’ll say the Son was merely unconscious when they took him down from the cross,” said Gabriel.

All except Gabriel burst into fits of laughter.

“So he survives a horrific flogging, followed not only by crucifixion, but a spear driven from below his ribcage into his heart,” replied Meurel. “He convinces experienced Roman executioners that he’s dead. Then he fools his mother and followers who’d give anything to find a sign of life as they prepare his body for burial. No breath. No bleeding from his open wounds. Then, without them noticing, he manages to breathe through nearly a hundred pounds of spices and tightly bound grave clothes. Next, he somehow bursts through his bonds, and with nail-crushed hands single-handedly rolls back a stone so massive that several women pushing in unison couldn’t budge it.”

“And the Son was on the *inside*,” added Kairel.

“Hey, that’s right!” exclaimed Meurel, “This gets better by the minute!”

“I don’t get it,” said Kokbiel, a slightly puzzled look on his face.

“A gravestone is like a solid wheel chiseled out of rock, designed to roll downhill at right angles to the grave,” explained Kairel, “and, of course, its purpose is to fully seal off the entrance. You don’t want odors escaping. From the outside, people trying to move it, push against the rim. From the inside there’s nothing to grip.”

“That settles it! Escape was humanly impossible!” Kokbiel looked triumphant.

“Skeptics will say that by some miracle . . .” Gabriel managed to say no more.

“Skeptics who believe in miracles?” declared Meurel.

They erupted into hysterical laughter. Meurel was bent over, holding his tummy. Kairel was rolling on the ground. Kokbiel was on his back kicking his legs in the air. At length, they began to calm down.

“Okay,” said Meurel, trying to be serious, “by some inexplicable means, what must have been the world’s strongest man and greatest escape artist staggers out of the grave . . .”

“Not bad for someone so mutilated *before* his crucifixion that he couldn’t drag his cross even to avoid another beating,” interrupted Kairel.

Meurel continued, “Then he eludes armed guards, somehow hobbles out on nail-pierced feet, gaping wound in his side, back flayed, bruises and lacerations from head to foot, blood dripping everywhere –”

“If you could imagine blood left in that tortured frame,” said Kairel.

“Looking the most pathetic human wreck, he staggers all the way back to the upper room, breaks through a bolted door and in his emaciated condition manages to convince even the most skeptical of the disciples that he’s conquered death!”

They were all in fits of laughter.

“Finally,” continued Meurel, “he gives his followers the slip and manages to die in such a way that his body is never found. The world’s greatest moral Teacher becomes the world’s greatest con artist? I think not!”

“They’ll say it was simply someone who looked like the Son,” replied Gabriel.

“Oh no! It’s getting worse!” protested Meurel, “Not only the Son’s closest earthly friends, but his own mother was just inches from him when he died. Then they prepared his body. Soon they’ll be handling the risen Lord, examining the nail holes, speaking with him and eating with him over a period of forty days. And his own brothers – brought up with him from infancy – who didn’t believe him before his death, will suddenly become believers after his resurrection appearances. That’s not mistaken identity, that’s insanity!”

He had them in fits of laughter.

“You’re right, of course,” said Gabriel, “but many will still refuse to believe.”

“Why?” asked Kokbiel and Meurel almost simultaneously.

“I know you’ve never visited earth, Meurel, but I’m sure you’re familiar with the reports of the Son’s teaching,” replied Gabriel. “The Son told the people, ‘If anyone desires to do God’s will, he will know whether my teaching is from God . . .’ You remember that don’t you?”

They all indicated that they did, then Gabriel explained. “Spiritual truths are hidden from everyone unwilling to obey God. It’s insane, but these people close their minds to reality because they would rather be enslaved by their favorite sins than enjoy intimacy with their loving Creator. They prefer ignorance to truth.”

“Even though that truth would fill them with never-ending joy and eternal fulfillment?” quizzed Kokbiel.

“Yes, Kokbiel, even though it’s the most exciting truth in the universe.”

“Like the Son said, ‘Men love darkness rather than light for their deeds are evil,’ ” said Meurel.

“Exactly.”

“Then why is the Son doing all of this, Gabe?” asked Meurel.

“Because some will be willing to face reality – to admit their need of their Maker and Sustainer – and to let go of selfishness long enough to discover the matchless joy of knowing the Great One. Some will be willing to exchange a life of shame and mediocrity for eternal glory and divine excellence.”

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be redeemed . . . !” said Meurel wistfully.

Gabriel looked at him. “There are indeed so many wonders awaiting them. They are destined to rule over us, but to be redeemed you’d first have to be deceived . . .”

“Oh!” interrupted Meurel with a shocked look on his face.

“And you’d have to sin . . .”

Meurel uttered a peculiar groan and seemed almost to shudder in disgust.

“. . . and be alienated from the Holy Lord until forgiven,” finished Gabriel.

“Of course!” groaned Meurel, “How could I have overlooked that? Nothing in all of heaven would be worth doing that to our glorious Lord!”

There was a pause, then Gabriel said, “Hey, Kokbiel, it’s almost time for your announcement!”

Kokbiel, looking flustered, vanished.

Then everything vanished.

A voice boomed. It seemed to come from everywhere at once. It sounded regal and charged with excitement. Slowly I became aware of my surroundings. I seemed to be back in that endless ‘palace,’ except that the sky was no longer like a rainbow. I guess the closest earthly equivalent of the sky would be dawn.

 “What’s this?” asked the voice.
 “The tomb is vacant.
 The vanquished has vanished.
 The corpse walks.”

Myriads of heavenly beings erupted in thunderous cheers. Eventually they quieted sufficiently for the voice to continue. It paused after each line and, as impossible as it seemed, at each pause otherworldly masses raised their jubilation to yet another level. He had begun in a tone more thrillingly triumphant and authoritative than I had ever thought possible and with every line this infectious passion in his voice kept building and building until I wondered how I could contain the awe and exhilaration welling within me.

 The cross has lost.
 The nails have failed.
 The One impaled has prevailed.
 The crucified has defied.
 The tomb is doomed.
 Seals break. Demons quake.
 Death has fled.
 Justice is done.
 Right has won!

 Holiness has crushed depravity.
 Defeat flees his majesty.
 Innocence bled; now demons see red.
 They railed but failed. So hail
 The Lamb who slammed
 His foes and rose
 From horrendous strife to endless life.
 The scourged to death
 Has surged through death.
 The One brought down
 Now wears the crown.
 Hell’s plaything, now ruler of everything.

 From Victim to Victor;
 From judged to Judge;
 From cursed to first,
 From death he’s burst
 From grave of stone,
 To Great White Throne.

 The Lamb has roared.
 From hell he’s soared;
 Jesus is L-O-R-D!

As that final word rang out, the superhuman throng exploded in a rapturous cheer louder than anything I have ever experienced. I want to call it deafening or ear-splitting but, despite the outrageous volume, it neither deafened me, nor hurt my ears. Instead, it reverberated through my entire being in a way that made those sparklers seem like a mouthful of sugar compared with a banquet. It was as if the energy from that explosive sound entered my body and became my new power source. I was certain I was engulfed in the most stupendous victory celebration the universe has ever known.

The supernatural beings turned cartwheels; flipping and gyrating as only they can. Their feverish excitement was so contagious that within seconds my emotions were on overload. The sky erupted in a burst of color. I know it remains almost incomprehensible, but my best attempt to describe what I experienced is that it seemed the very air was somehow charged with emotion. I recall thinking it was surely on the edge of human tolerance to remain conscious.

Nevertheless, I have one last recollection that pushed me over the brink. When on the very edge of my endurance, I was flabbergasted to realize that what I had thought must be the ultimate was but the faintest echo of what was to come. I was witnessing merely a private, scaled-down rehearsal for the real event. All the beneficiaries of the Victor’s heroism – astonishing numbers of liberated prisoners of war from every ethnic group on every corner of planet earth – had yet to join the festivities. What a time it will be when millions upon millions of not just redeemed but glorified humans who had been worthy of nothing but destruction add the depths of their gratitude and outrageous joy to the victory extravaganza!

# Chapter 23: The Stuffy Room

Even by my old, earthly standards, the room was stuffy, dingy and crammed with people. To be blunt: the stench of sweat mixed with cooking odors and burning lamps was uncomfortably strong. How so many people managed to pack into one room bordered on the ingenious. I was reminded of the way large families in parts of Asia manage to ride on one motorcycle. I recognized a few of those in the room from the crowd listening to the Jesus’ teaching, and some from the crowd at his crucifixion. Most, however, were new to me.

“I’m telling you, Jesus is dead. D-E-A-D,” a man spelt out, “and dead men stay dead.”

“Oh, Thomas, you’re not still going on about this are you?” replied someone rather impatiently.

“Yes, I’m going on about it! It’s a full week since you claim you last saw Jesus. Isn’t it about time you all came to your senses? And especially you, taxman. John floats around with his head in the clouds and Peter’s got a mouth big enough to swallow anything, but I expected more of you, Matthew. I always thought of you as a hard-nosed facts and figures man, and here I am, still waiting for you to ditch your ghost story and snap back to reality.”

“Thomas, these eyes saw him,” said Matthew, pointing to his eyes. “With my own ears I heard him as we spoke with him for perhaps thirty unforgettable minutes!”

“Oh, sure! He walked right through a locked door!”

What this place lacked in breathable air, it made up for in tension.

“That’s a breeze compared to opening that tomb from the inside. No human could do that.”

Thomas looked at Matthew hopefully. “Now you’re talking, taxman! At last you agree that we’re talking impossibilities here. I tell you, I was really worried about you!”

“Thomas! The body’s gone – despite all those guards. How – and why – would anyone steal his body?”

Another man spoke, “And the grave clothes were removed and left behind, neatly bundled up. Who in their right mind would take such care – with the guards there and everything?”

“We’ve seen him, Tom,” said another, “and we spoke with him – in this very room.”

“An apparition – a vision!” Thomas snapped back.

“We all simultaneously had the same hallucination?” asked Matthew incredulously.

“Well . . . mass hysteria!”

One of them, chest out, moved closer and stuck his big brown nose in Thomas’ face, “Oh, I’m emotionally unstable am I!” His voice was raised. “I’m a blubbering nut-case?”

Thomas, seemed a little nervous about this man’s aggression. “Well, not exactly hysteria, James – sort of auto-suggestion.”

James, prodding Thomas on the chest with his finger, said, “I’ve got a suggestion for you, egghead!”

*Was James one of the Sons of Thunder?* I wondered. Part of me wanted to rush off and bury myself in a Bible for a few moments to find out, but I was too enthralled to dare blink an eyelid, much less look in a book, even if I had one.

“Cool it, James,” ordered Matthew, “it does sound incredible.” A few moments later he added, “But Thomas, it’s not just us who saw Jesus, some of the women –”

“Women! Those emotional wrecks couldn’t see for tears!”

One of the women, hands on hips, moved closer, and in an indignant tone said, “Well, *thank* you!” She was short, plump and fiery. Each word oozed sarcasm like a sponge soaked in lemon juice. Thomas seemed taken aback.

“They touched him, Tom.” Matthew was calm. “They held his feet.”

“Yeah? Did *you* touch him?”

“N . . . no – but I saw his wounds.”

“He breathed on me,” said another man.

Matthew’s eyes lit up. “Yes, that’s right. I felt his breath. He told us about God’s Spirit and *breathed* on us. Hallucinations don’t breathe.”

“What about when he walked with Cleopas and his friend to their house in Emmaus?” an older woman said.

“Sure! Walked seven miles on feet that had had nails driven right through them!”

A couple of the people groaned. Matthew shook his head. “But Jesus is healed,” said another. “He’s risen!”

“Rubbish!” said Thomas.

“Jesus broke bread with them,” said a young voice. With eyes that had been adjusting to the dim light, I peered into a dark corner. In response to the crush of people, a teenaged girl was perched on someone’s knees. In her arms was what I presumed to be a baby sister.

“And he ate with us,” added Matthew.

“Look, you can talk till you’re blue in the face –”

Matthew, looking around the room, said, “Where’s Peter? He’s unusually quiet!” There were occasional other conversations going on in the crowded room but this one was certainly the most animated and held center stage. Matthew beckoned to the burly man I remembered seeing on my first visit to this era, “Hey, Mouth!” The man began squeezing past others and slowly made his way toward us. He was going bald, making his large head look even bigger. Matthew put his hand on Peter’s shoulder. “Set this guy straight, will ya? Explain the new understanding of the Scriptures Jesus has given us.”

“Hey, before you do,” said a man, “new thoughts have been spinning round my head lately. Can I try them out on Thommo?”

“Go for it, John!” said Peter. His dark bushy beard made his teeth seem whiter as he grinned.

“The way I see it, the whole sacrificial system instituted by God has death and resurrection built into it.”

“Eh?” said Thomas.

“Well, take the Day of Atonement,” continued John. “Two goats are chosen. They’re innocent. They have done nothing to contribute to human sin, yet one is slaughtered for our sin and afterwards the other is presented *alive* before the Lord for our atonement. We need a substitute who will die in our place, but after that sacrificial death we need a living substitute to complete our cleansing from sin.”

“Then there’s the ceremonial cleansing of a leper. Two clean birds are taken. One dies and its blood is poured out. The living bird is dipped in this blood and then released, bearing the marks of recent death upon its wings. Is it just me? That sounds like death and resurrection to me. And only after both the death of the bird and the release of the living one can the now-cleansed leper join God’s people.”

Thomas looked at Matthew. “What’s he raving about?”

“The sacrificial system foreshadows Jesus because Jesus is the final – the ultimate – sacrifice,” said Peter.

“How dare . . .” Thomas was getting flustered, “that’s blasphemy! *Human sacrifice!* Scripture categorically forbids it. It’s an abomination to God!”

“That’s because anything worthy of sacrifice must be without blemish. Except for Jesus, all humans are defiled by sin and so their sacrifice would be a senseless waste of human life and an insult to the holiness of God. But Jesus was unlike any other human – perfectly sinless. A normal human sacrifice –”

“A *normal* human sacrifice! I can’t believe I’m hearing this! Ghost stories are one thing, now you’re talking like pagans!”

“Scripture over and over shows that human sacrifice is a concept close to the heart of God,” continued Peter.

“Oh, come on!”

“Who asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac? Satan? Pagans? It was *God’s* idea.”

“You can’t bring that up! The Lord planned all along to stop Abraham from going through with it. He intervened and Isaac lived.”

“And after Jesus’ death,” said Peter, “God intervened and Jesus lives.”

“*Oh!*” uttered Thomas in disgust – or perhaps frustration.

“You can squirm as much as you like, Thomas, that whole episode in Abraham’s life was initiated by God. And what’s circumcision if it isn’t the shedding of human blood to seal a divine covenant?” said John.

“This principle is woven into the very fabric of creation,” added the feisty plump woman. Even she, however, seemed a little embarrassed as she continued. “Our Creator made us so that the binding covenant of marriage is sealed through the shedding of virgin blood.”

“And the new covenant the Master spoke about during the supper we had just a few days ago could only be sealed by the shedding of innocent human blood,” said Matthew.

“What about God’s ruling on anyone guilty of manslaughter?” Peter asked. “They are confined to the city of refuge, unable to leave year after year, until the high priest dies. Nothing but the physical death of the high priest can secure their pardon.”

“And Jesus is our high priest, whose death –” the woman began.

“You’ve flipped!” said Thomas. The woman fumed. Her head covering slipped a little, revealing graying hair. She seemed a little young to be going gray. If they had any way of blackening hair back then I guess it was less common among the poor.

“Don’t let him get to you, Mary,” said a female voice I could not locate.

*So she’s Mary.* It was such a common name among Jesus’ followers, however, that the name did not tell me nearly as much as I had hoped.

“What about in Elisha’s day when Moab was attacked?” There was excitement in his voice. Peter clearly loved telling a good story. He quickly had everyone’s attention and reveled in it. “The king of Moab knew there was no escape. He was surrounded, hopelessly outnumbered and the invading army was closing in for the kill. In desperation that pagan king grabbed his firstborn son,” Peter seized one of the disciples and acted it out, “and slaughtered the lad before the eyes of the enemy, then used that boy’s carcass as a sacrificial offering. Suddenly, all the invading soldiers lost interest in fighting and left in peace. The Moabites were saved.”

Thomas retorted, “The army withdrew in disgust, horrified at such a godless act.”

“Maybe so, but it worked. Countless lives were saved because of a ritual human sacrifice.”

“Oh . . !” said Thomas, with obvious disgust.

“Haven’t you ever puzzled over why the Lord recorded that incident in Holy Scripture? Was it because he planned to one day sacrifice his own Son so that multitudes would be saved?

“And remember how Jesus spoke about the sign of Jonah and applied it to himself. When Jonah was in the fish’s belly, Scripture speaks of him being in hell, and after three days he emerged alive and because of that thousands of people were saved from God’s judgment. That’s just like Jesus rising from the grave after three days and saving from God’s judgment all who believe in him.

“And then there’s Isaiah’s ‘Man of Sorrows,’ wounded for our transgressions; made an offering for sin.”

“That’s referring to our nation!” protested Thomas.

Others groaned. Some shook their heads. “But it says this ‘Man of Sorrows’ was righteous!” said one.

“Isaiah said there was no deceit in him,” said another.

“Israel wasn’t innocent!” added the first.

“Even if Isaiah were referring to Israel,” continued Peter, “– surprisingly innocent Israel – it’s still *human* suffering and death as an offering for sin.”

“And the ‘Man of Sorrows’ definitely dies!” said John. “Isaiah says he was cut off out of the land of the living. He poured out his soul unto death. He made a *grave* with the wicked, it says, and with the rich *in his death*. But then it says he shall *prolong* his days.

“If that’s not death and resurrection of a sinless human for the forgiveness and salvation of God’s people, I don’t know what it is!”

“Yes, Tom, explain that!” said James.

“And then there’s that marvelous Scripture –” said Peter.

“Ah! I’ve had all I can stomach, Rockhead! Scripture calls human sacrifice an abomination and that’s the end of the matter.”

One of the women raised her voice, “Thomas Didymus, you’re stubborn, conceited –”

“And have the brains of a mud brick!” added John.

The others cheered.

James, with his index finger less than an inch from his thumb, put them under Thomas’s nose. “And you’ve been about this close to having your head –”

“James!” chided a woman.

“How could the death of animals remove our guilt?” asked Peter. “Sure, we desperately need a substitute, but it’s *humanity* that’s sinned. It’s humanity that faces the death penalty. And no one who himself is under the death sentence could bear the penalty for someone else. Earth needs a sinlessly holy human, willing to trade places with sinners. How could anyone or anything be an effective intermediary between God and man except Jesus, the sinless sacrifice?”

The others cheered and clapped. “Good on ya, Rock!” said one.

“You tell him, Mouth!” said another.

“What’s happened to you lately?” pleaded Thomas, scanning faces, hoping for some sort of support. “We used to be on the same wavelength. Now you’ve suddenly become know-alls.” There was silence for a few moments. “Look, you’ve been under a lot of stress, you had your hopes –”

“So we’re all grief-stricken fools then?” said James. “We’ve cracked? Is that it?”

“We can’t tell the difference between a ghost and a real person?” added another.

“Or in three days we forgot what Jesus looks like, and confused him with someone else – someone who not only looks exactly like him and has his voice, but someone with his wisdom and gentleness and mannerisms?” said Matthew.

Peter said, “Or we’d been on a drinking binge when we thought we saw Jesus?”

“Yeah, Thommo,” James was getting worked up again, “just what are you accusing us of?”

“Look! I told you before and I’ll tell you again,” his brown eyes glared stubbornly, “unless I hold him with these arms, put my finger in the holes in his hands and put this fist in his wounded side, I’ll *never* believe!”

Suddenly, Jesus was in the room. There was no sound or movement; no opening of doors or crashing through walls; no gradual materialization. One moment that part of the room had a little space; the next blink Jesus was there. My heart pounded in shock, and yet there was something about it that seemed almost natural. Maybe it was my flitting from place to place – all over the universe for all I know – that created this sense of it being natural for someone to instantly appear. Thomas had been standing fairly close to the wall, facing inward, in eye contact with the others. Jesus had appeared behind, and just to the right of him. Thomas continued talking, oblivious to what had just happened. “I’m not into distorting the holy Word of God. I’m not into superstition. I’m not into emotionalism. I’m not into making a fool of myself –”

Most of the rest were as wide-eyed as me, staring straight at Jesus. A couple motioned to some others, speechlessly drawing the attention of those who had not been quite looking in Jesus’ direction. The place grew as quiet as death. Thomas, mystified by their behavior, turned to see what everyone was staring at. For a long couple of seconds he was expressionless. Then, reaching over, he gingerly touched Jesus.

“It’s . . .” But that is all he could get out. He fell in worship at Jesus’ feet. The others giggled.

“Thomas,” Jesus placed his hands in front of Thomas’s face, “put your finger in these holes. Put your hand in my side.”

“Jesus, my Lord and God!” gasped Thomas.

There was a reverent awe for several minutes, then Jesus, a big grin on his face said, “Let’s have something to eat!”

Everyone suddenly came alive. Some laughed. Some cheered. Some come up to Jesus and joyfully embraced him. Some shook his hand. Others slapped his back.

Jesus took some food, had a bite and with the remainder still in hand said, “You’ve heard my teaching. You’ve seen my miracles. You’re witnesses to my victory over death. I now appoint you to go to the ends of the earth, telling everyone, so that they, too, may believe and have eternal life.”

Then to my astonishment, Jesus began to – well we would call it rap.

 “As the Father sent me, I’m sending you.
 My time on earth is nearly through.
 I take my Spirit and I give him to you.
 You have my word, to the word be true;
 It’s life and peace, and fresh as the dew,
 Filling your heart with joy ever new,
 Giving you light and all wisdom, too.
 My life in you makes all things new;
 Empowered and holy, the world needs you.
 You’re my body and I need you.

 As the Father helped me, I’m helping you.
 The things I’ve done you’ll surely do.
 I have all power and I hand it to you.
 Believe my word and I say to you;
 There will be signs, and not just a few:
 Raising the dead is what you will do.
 You’ll speak in tongues with words ever new,
 With mighty works and healings, too.
 Demons and evil will flee from you.
 You can do it, ’cause I’m in you.

 As the Father loves me, I’m loving you.
 Complete my joy – love others, too.
 I give you life and I’m praying for you.
 You have my power – it will see you through –
 So speak the words I’ve given to you,
 Spreading my name to Gentile and Jew;
 Living my life as I told you to,
 They’ll see my light come shining through.
 Whatever the trial, you will come through:
 By my Spirit, I’ll be with you.”

# Chapter 24: What I Didn’t Want to Hear

I have no explanation as to how it happened, but the next thing I knew, I was outdoors. The fresh air was as welcome as a sea breeze in a heat wave.

It was a beautiful sunny morning – as far as earth’s mornings go. I seemed to still be in First Century Palestine and Jesus was addressing a crowd. Unlike when I first witnessed such a scene, I was wearing my Twenty-First Century clothes. (Some might say my dress sense belongs in the previous century but that’s another matter.)

In an insane craving for time to travel in what I had devoted a lifetime to regarding as the proper direction, I clawed at the hope that this was still after Jesus’ resurrection. Having finally progressed to that point in history, my mind recoiled from the thought of flipping any further back in time.

I had been stubbornly maintaining a theory that I must have been thrust back to the First Century when first arriving at that endless palace and that ever since I had been moving in the same comforting direction (if not speed) that I had come to expect from birth.

For time to travel in just one direction is measly compensation for someone who was almost two thousand years away from home. Nevertheless, I found myself clinging with irrational desperation to this fragile semblance of normality.

One terrifying leap backwards in time, then zipping from one corner of the cosmos to who knows where, and even losing consciousness for unknown periods, was alarming enough, without lurching back and forth in time willy-nilly like an out of control rollercoaster. Such was my fear, that even if my theory had more holes than Swiss cheese at a shooting range, I think I would have still clung to the brain-frozen hope that any divergences from the theory were but minor aberrations that would disappear if I knew all the facts.

For saner people, that ‘nursery’ experience when I saw the resurrected Lord might have smashed the theory. I guess my mind had so recoiled from the implications of what was virtually other people’s hallucinations that I had dismissed that ‘nursery’ into the ‘does not compute’ category. Then there was repeatedly going back to the palace, but that, too, had a different feel about it. At least one of the revisits seemed more mental than physical and maybe angelic celebrations continue for an outlandishly long time, or perhaps there were several similar gatherings.

As a kid, I discovered old reruns of the original *Star Trek.* Imight have idolized Mr. Spock but my shorter ears have let me down horribly. I had fallen so humiliatingly short of Spock’s cold grasp of logic that I can barely understand myself, let alone expect anyone else to. From the cozy security of a twenty-first century armchair, I myself would have expected me to have handled it better.

All of this was exposing an embarrassing quirk that had never surfaced before these zany events began. Reality has a nasty habit of stripping to shreds one’s arrogant presumptions, until smug assurance turns out to be nothing but delusions of grandeur. It might not be pretty, but I’ve proved first hand that it is one thing to imagine being in a situation far beyond my most off-the-wall experience; it is quite another to actually be there. Whether you could have handled it better, neither of us is likely ever to know.

My hang-up might be as illogical as a fear of confined spaces but, to my consternation, I do not even know how embarrassed I should be about it. You might think I should have been over this by now but none of us has anyone to compare me with. And there are certainly no scientific studies to consult as to how humans cope even with controlled, informed time travel, let alone being uncertain if they really have travelled in time and, if so, to what era, nor (and this is the big one) have the vaguest idea of how to return. My reaction might have been perfectly normal. It might even have fared better than most would. I keep worrying, however, that my reaction was not normal and that it means I’m a wimp.

That hundreds were listening to Jesus did not entirely scuttle my hopes that this was post-resurrection. I knew that *1 Corinthians 15* mentions the resurrected Lord appearing to over five hundred people at once.

I was beginning to hear words that sounded a little like those recorded in a gospel as delivered prior to the Messiah’s death but who says our Lord never repeated himself to get his message deeper into people’s memories hearts and for the benefit of those not present earlier?

For a split second I felt strange. It was almost as if there had been some kind of slight jolt (an earth tremor?) but I did not feel it in my body and I heard nothing. It affected only what I saw. It was as if Jesus’ arm and the angle of his head were instantly in a different position. He was seated with his legs crossed but I could not recall them being crossed before. A large bird of prey was flying in the background that I had not noticed a moment ago. I had been focusing on Jesus but in my peripheral vision I imagined I detected vague changes among the crowd.

Everything was now normal. It must have been my imagination. Or had I nodded off to sleep for a second and then suddenly wakened? I was not aware of being tired.

Jesus continued talking, but a few moments later I could no longer focus on what he was saying. I was way too alarmed by noticing that everything had instantly changed. The crowd was completely different. On closer inspection I recognized a small portion of faces from before but even they were in totally different positions to where they had been a moment ago. It had been sunny; now it was overcast. Everyone seemed dressed more warmly, but I felt no temperature change. We were in a totally different location, but I had detected not the slightest movement.

Not long afterwards, everything in front of me dissolved. I was now in a glorious park.

“I would like to thank Gavreel for his excellent editing.”

I looked behind me and it was the Lecturer and a sizable group of angels. Everyone cheered, apparently expressing their appreciation of the “editing” – whatever that was.

“What prompted this was Meurel’s insightful question. Let’s replay it for the benefit of those who have just arrived.”

Sensing a slight moment where I had previously been looking, I turned back to see if anything was happening there. To my astonishment, before me was what seemed to be the Lecturer standing in front of a small group of angels. There were now *two* Lecturers, one in front of me where Jesus and the crowd had been, and one behind me. I looked back and forth, comparing the Lecturers. One was in the same position as he had previously been but now his eyes were focused on what looked like an identical Lecturer standing many paces in front of him with this new group of angels sitting between them. Among these heavenly beings was Meurel. The massive, golden-skinned nonhuman stood and began to speak. “Why is it that Christian leader after leader after leader in this era is falling into adultery, financial fraud, deception, jealously and so on? Of course, even the Son’s prayerfully selected twelve included Judas Iscariot, and the Apostle Paul wrote that he who stands should take heed lest he fall. But why are things even worse than back then? Is it just an appalling coincidence or is there something fundamentally wrong with the message they are believing and teaching?”

There seemed such a familiar ring to reference to the moral falls of Christian leaders that I wondered if Meurel were referring to the First Century or to the era into which I had been born (and, by the way, hoped sometime to return to).

The new Lecturer and the smaller group of angels dissolved and I was looking at the park again. The Lecturer standing behind me resumed, “So that’s the question we are addressing. One of the greatest challenges any earthling faces is the accepted views and values of the society they have been immersed in since birth. It’s essentially a brainwashing process. Appallingly, even the most devout of them manage only partially to see through the false concepts that the rest of their society has accepted as right. This obviously brings immense shame to them and not only disgraces their Savior but breaks his heart.”

It was if someone had thumped me in my own heart. Being called an earthling vexed me almost to the point of nausea, but I was alarmed by something far more disturbing. *He’s saying* ***everyone*** *is guilty of this!* I felt gutted. *How many things have I considered ‘acceptable’ just because everyone close to me accepts them? In what atrocious ways have I shamed my Savior and broken his heart by doing things that I have regarded as ‘normal’?*

The Lecturer continued, “There will always be an enormous difference between those whose hearts are growing increasingly like the Exquisite One and those who merely imagine they are like him. And throughout their lives, those whose minds are being continually renewed by the Spirit become increasingly different from the others. Earthlings keep looking to the external and superficial, supposing that is what distinguishes true Christians from others, but it isn’t. It is always a matter of the heart.

“Human traditions that earthlings regularly exalt above the Timeless One’s heart include church traditions – even ones that years before were associated with revival, spiritual reformation, and so on.”

His words were a meat axe hacking through my complacency. I flooded with shame. I knew I was too much a product of my society not to be guilty of what he was saying. Alarmingly, however, I was unable to see exactly what self-deception I had fallen into. I was too blinded by pride and my own hypocrisy, and too hoodwinked into the false security of the sheer numbers of sincerely mistaken people acting just like me.

Paul’s words to Timothy flew like arrows into my heart. “For the time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine. Instead, wanting to have their ears tickled, they will gather around themselves teachers to suit their own desires.” At the time, I couldn’t recall the exact words, but my recollection was enough to be appalled by the gist of it.

I panicked. *Lord, help me truly repent. Open my eyes to all my foolish arrogance.* Part of me was certain that I desperately needed to know all my errors. Disturbingly, however, another part of me seemed equally desperate to cling to the suicidal ‘bliss’ of ignorance.

Suddenly I heard Jesus. I looked where he had previously been and he was teaching a crowd again. He was decrying the love of money. I was lost in his words when an alien exclamation almost made me jump. “Teeeeeoool!” I did not see who had uttered it. My attention had been riveted on Jesus, and now I was even more captivated because something had happened to Jesus and his hearers. It was as if they were frozen in time. They were utterly silent and motionless. The angel who had apparently uttered that sound continued, “They tithed fanatically and yet still were lovers of money! How creepy! Self-deception is scary!”

The sound of other angels murmuring in agreement reached my ears. I, however, continued to stare dumbfounded at the sight of Jesus and those around him. They did not so much as blink.

“Yes,” responded the Lecturer. I looked back at him again and, unlike Jesus, his lips were moving as normally as ever even if, as usual, they did not match the words I was hearing. “We’ve seen in Gavreel’s montage of the Eternal’s earthly teaching that no one can serve two masters. Everyone attempting to do so will end up loving one, and despising the other. The Lord of Glory immediately applied this to loving money. Upon hearing this, the Pharisees, who loved money and tithed assiduously, sneered at their would-be Savior. The glorious Son retorted that they are the ones who justify themselves in the eyes of humanity, but the All-Seeing Lord knows their hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in the sight their holy Judge.”

“Let me make it clear,” continued the Lecturer, “that I am so glad I am not humanity’s Judge. No earthling is wrong about absolutely everything and no earthling is right about everything.”

“What a mess!” commented one of the angels.

“Exactly!” He pointed with his finger.

With my eyes following his finger, I saw Jesus sitting on a log in an olive grove, chatting intimately with a small group that I recognized as his disciples. He was just completing a parable, “ *‘ . . .* And throw that unprofitable servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ”

The scene changed but Jesus was again addressing his disciples. “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, should say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we’ve only done our duty.’ ”

The scene froze and the Lecturer took over. “Of course, only those of us who had earth missions to that era and country have been appropriately equipped linguistically. For the rest of us who are hearing a translation of Jesus’ discourse, let me point out that Jesus was using the same word to describe both classes of servants – both those who will be cast into hell *and* those who will enter heaven. To the One we worship, *<I>every</I>* earthling is an unworthy, unprofitable servant.”

My heart sank. If the highest status any of us can achieve is that of “unprofitable servant,” what right have I to be critical of anyone?

The Lecturer kept talking. “Of course, their defilement renders every earthling atrociously unworthy of serving the Holy One in any capacity. Their inadequacy, however, extends even further. Even after being totally cleansed by the glorious Son doing infinitely more for them than they deserve, they remain disqualified. Not even the best of them obeys perfectly for long. So none of them meets the minimum requirement for an adequate servant. Nevertheless, there are varying rewards and punishments,” continued the Lecturer.

I felt numb.

Jesus appeared again, saying, “The servant who knew what his master wanted and didn’t prepare himself or do it will be severely beaten. But the one who did not know and did what deserved punishment will receive a light beating. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required.”

The scene changed. This time, Jesus was saying, “ ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you gave me five talents. See, I’ve earned five more talents.’ His master answered, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.’ “Then the man who had received the one talent came. ‘Master,’ he said, . . . [I detected a jump] . . . ‘I was afraid and went off and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.’ ”

There was another jump. “ . . . ‘You evil, lazy servant! . . . Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance, but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.’ ”

The scene faded and one of the angelic audience spoke. “Teeeeeoool! He rewards them, even though the highest achievers are unprofitable?”

“Yes,” replied the Lecturer, “There are earthlings who fervently try, but none of them actually *helps* the All-Sufficient One. Everything they do, would have been done better had the Perfect One done it himself. Their mistakes continually blacken his name. They are always an unprofitable investment to the Most High. Even earthlings can plant a seed and at harvest time reap more seed than they had sown but the Almighty can never receive back from any earthling nearly as much as he has sown into that person’s life. There are so many things that the Lord of all can make a profit from, but not earthlings. He always makes a loss with every one of them.”

“Teeeeeoool!” interrupted another of the listeners. The voice sounded familiar. “Why does the Wise One allow it?”

“Oh, Kokbiel!” responded the Lecturer, “The Exalted Lord is not a capitalist!”

At that, they all erupted into prolonged laughter. As they kept rolling in laughter, I puzzled over why it was such a joke.

Eventually they settled and the Lecturer resumed, “Love keeps no track of the cost. Love gives not to get but simply to bless the receiver. And, of course, our Glorious Lord is love. Despite knowing that they will all mess up to varying degrees, he keeps granting them the privilege of engaging in assignments of divine and eternal significance, solely because of his unfathomable love for them. Their failures break his heart, but because of his boundless love, it brings him stupendous joy to honor them with challenges of stupendous significance. Interacting with them thrills him so much that he considers it worth the costliest imaginable sacrifice. He keeps giving them opportunity after opportunity to grow more like his perfect Son and, despite falling short, many of them actually progress a little in that direction.”

*Whew! What a rollercoaster!* It was exhilarating hearing of God’s love for us all but to be stripped of my illusions and have my inadequacies exposed was appalling. I at last had an inkling of how much I had been living in denial; vainly trying to prop up my ego with self-deception, when my only genuine hope of joy and fulfillment is to take my eyes off myself and focus solely on the perfection of my Lord. He and I are one and, through that mystical union, his perfection and achievements are mine. Without him, I am nothing, but I am not without him. I can delight in him and boast in him, and such boasting will withstand the most rigorous scrutiny.

In what I presume was still part of “Gavreel’s montage,” I saw several instances of Jesus casting out demons. Each time he silenced them just as they were about to publicly proclaim who he was (e.g. Mark 1:34; Mark 3:11-12).

Next, I saw with my own eyes several distinct and quite moving instances of Jesus healing people. Each time, he ordered them to tell no one. There was the girl he raised from the dead, a leper, a deaf man, a blind man and, on yet another occasion, two blind men. So touching was Jesus’ tenderness and compassion during the healing process that in each instance I was taken aback by his intensity when strongly insisting that they keep secret that it was he who had healed them. He truly meant it.

(I had previously, of course, known that Jesus had told certain people to remain silent. Only after recently hunting through the Gospels, however, have I confirmed just how often he had done this.)

Then I saw the disciples walking up a mountain and finding Jesus. I think he had been praying. “Everyone is looking for you!” they told him. He replied, “Let us go somewhere else.”

In another scene I saw a huge crowd wanting to make Jesus king and he withdrew from them.

I think I might have caught the tail end of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mount, like the last rays of what must have been a glorious sunset. My glimpse was as overwhelming as an intolerable surge of electricity through my entire being. Despite part of me feeling the need to instinctively recoil for sheer survival, another part of me yearned to see more. Nevertheless, I had no say in the matter. It seemed that everything was for the benefit of the celestials and that I was languishing somewhere between the status of a peeping Tom and an invisible intruder. I sensed that seeing his glory was normal for the angelic observers. Instead, the editing focused on Jesus stressing that the disciples must tell no one about it until after his resurrection.

Then came several other instances when the disciples began to realize that Jesus truly was the Messiah, and he insisted that they tell no one (e.g. Mark 8:30; Mark 9:9).

This was followed by the uproar Jesus created by telling a crowd they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. By the time it was over, even previously devoted followers had turned their back on Jesus and only the twelve remained. Like never before, it struck me how Jesus made no effort to keep them onside. Surely he could have rephrased his statement or explained it to make it more understandable or palatable, but instead, he let them walk away in disgust.

In another scene one of his disciples asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” Jesus replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father did not plant will be uprooted.”

I saw Roman soldiers in a large hall. Jesus, his hands tied, was standing between some of them, facing some type of official. (It later dawned that he must have been Pontius Pilate.)

Jesus said, “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my Kingdom is not from here.”

Everything froze. No one in front of me uttered a sound or even blinked.

“We’ll pause here.” It was the Lecturer. I looked behind and the angels were obviously not frozen.

“For Jesus, it’s never about popularity or self-promotion; it’s all about the Father. And, of course, his message faithfully reflected this. More than perhaps any other era, however, the Twenty-First Century is an ‘all-about-me’ society.”

*Wow! He mentioned the Twenty-First Century!* You have no idea how comforting that felt. I was so excited, I almost missed the reference to an all-about-me society. Since returning to earth, however, those words have stalked me.

The montage came alive again. I’m disinclined to think of it just as an astonishingly sophisticated hologram. It seemed that if I were to touch the people in it they would feel flesh-and-blood real. Whatever it was, however, it continued; this time at almost dizzying speed, as it kept flitting from one of Jesus’ statements to another and another, some of which were uttered in different settings.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. . . . Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. . . . Be careful not to perform your righteousness acts before people, to be seen by them. Otherwise, you have no reward from your Father in heaven. . . . But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness . . . When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt about sin and righteousness and judgment.”

Then the Lecturer took over. “More than in many other eras, for so many dwellers on twenty-first century earth, it’s all about feeling good, not *being* good. They crave not to be morally good but merely to have pleasant feelings. Not just drug addicts but almost everyone would sell their soul for a few nice feelings. In such a corrupt world – and one in which popularity is worshipped as a measure of achievement – many preachers cave in and consciously or unconsciously modify their message.”

My mind again flashed to *2 Timothy*: “Preach the word; be urgent in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine. Instead, wanting to have their ears tickled, they will gather around themselves teachers to suit their own desires.”

“Then they start believing their own distorted message,” continued the Lecturer.

As with the previous quote, only now that I have access to the Bible can I cite it accurately but the essence of a passage in *2 Peter* hit me: “In their greed, these false teachers will exploit you with deceptive words. . . . For by uttering empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the sensual passions of the flesh, they seduce people who have just escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption, since people are enslaved to whatever defeats them. For if, having escaped the corruption of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in it and are overcome, their last condition is worse than their former one. It would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy command delivered to them.”

“Instead of dying to self,” added the Lecturer, “they live for self. Instead of crucifying the flesh, they exalt the flesh. Instead of putting off their old self, they deck themselves out in it; proud of what they should be ashamed of, and marketing the Gospel accordingly.”

I was aghast.

The montage resumed with Jesus saying, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are savage wolves. You will recognize them by their fruit.”

Then came a summary of the many times Jesus referred to hell and judgment. For the first time ever, I was alarmed at just how different it is from today’s preaching. If boredom strikes, I’d prefer you to skip it than lose interest. I have even placed it in one long paragraph to make it easier to know what to skip. Besides chilling me, however, this particular compilation of Christ’s teaching was so unlike modern preaching that it sent me reeling at the difference and puzzling over the implications. And even without this disturbing contrast, I had seen such a warmth and tenderness about Jesus that I found it clashing with his emphasis on hell in the most baffling way.

I cannot recall the exact order of the scenes but it went something like this:

“Whoever will say, ‘You fool,’ will be in danger of the fires of hell. . . . If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having your two hands to go into Gehenna, into the fire that never goes out. . . . If your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is never put out. . . . For whoever wants to save his life will lose it . . . For what does it benefit a person if he gains the whole world but loses or forfeits his very self? . . . But the ones who should have been in the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. . . . They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. . . . Then the king told his servants, ‘Tie him up hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ . . . He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. . . . And throw that worthless servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. . . . There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves are thrown out. . . . I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will warn you whom you should fear: Fear the one who, after killing, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! . . . They will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life. . . . The people of Nineveh will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here! The Queen of the South will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here! . . . Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable in the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. . . . But I tell you it will be more bearable for Sodom in the day of judgment than for you. . . . I tell you that on the day of judgment, everyone will have to account for every careless word they have spoken. . . . In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. For I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham said, ‘Remember, my son, that in your lifetime you were given all the good things, while Lazarus got all the bad things. But now he is comforted here, while you are in pain. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ So the rich man said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, so they won’t also come into this place of torment.’ . . . Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children. . . . Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’ ”

There was a pause.

Then Jesus continued, “Woe to you, scribes and you Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous and you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we wouldn’t have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ . . . You snakes! You brood of vipers! How can you escape being condemned to hell? . . . So upon you will fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth . . .”

The scene froze. The Lecturer commented, “They were convinced they honored the prophets and in their arrogance could not so much as imagine ever killing them. Not only would they have done so, however, they accused their Messiah, greater than all prophets, of being demon possessed and had him crucified.”

I heard a sound that I presume was a collective groan from the otherworldly audience.

“Human nature has not improved one iota since,” continued the Lecturer. In subsequent eras, most claiming to be followers of Jesus have just as arrogantly and foolishly said, ‘I’m not like the Bible scholars and Pharisees who crucified our Lord.’ ”

Before I could react, the montage recommenced. “Hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to make one convert, and then you make him twice as fit for hell as you are!”

Immediately Jesus was addressing another crowd: “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will announce to them, ‘I never knew you! Depart from me, you evildoers!’ ”

Then I saw another crowd and someone in it said to Jesus, “The only Father we have is God himself.” They all murmured in agreement. The scene jumped. Jesus replied, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not uphold the truth because there is no truth in him.”

Despite my familiarity with these sayings of Jesus, I was struck like never before by the staggering predicament he was describing. How could people so devoted to the true God get it so wrong?

Then Jesus appeared, telling another crowd, “You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. Hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied correctly about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; teaching as doctrines human commandments.’ ”

Somehow that triggered an avalanche of Scriptures within me. It began with words from one of the Prophets. (I have since located it in Ezekiel 33:30-31.) “. . . Your people are . . . saying . . . ‘Come and hear the message from the Lord.’ My people . . . listen to your words, but they do not do them. With their mouths they express love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain.”

Next tumbled the gist of something I thought was also from one of the Prophets. This time, the vagueness of my recollection made locating it for you unusually difficult. It would be just my luck if you don’t want the reference. Nevertheless, my obsessive tendencies kept incessantly nagging until I found Jeremiah 8:8. It poses a question which, for conciseness I will paraphrase: how can you claim that having God’s Word makes you wise when your teachers twist it into lies?

Then Paul’s words crashed around my ears: “For I can testify that they are zealous for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God *and sought to establish their own*, [emphasis mine] they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Romans 10:2-3).

That seemed to dislodge his message to Timothy and this plummeted down: “in the last days people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, . . . unholy, unloving, . . . lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

The Lecturer burst through my thoughts. “Many supposed Christians leaders are not only ungodly but they commit the ultimate blasphemy of using the name of God to justify their own ungodly behavior.”

An enormous stir erupted among the angels. They seemed utterly flabbergasted. I myself was too shocked, however, to analyze anyone else’s reaction.

Seemingly oblivious to the havoc he was inflicting, the Lecturer kept plowing on. “They are anti-Christ and yet preach Christ; twisting his message until they even convince themselves it is Christlike to have hearts that are the exact opposite of Christ’s. And most are so sincere they have no idea this is what they are doing.”

A chilling silence gripped the entire audience. I was so stunned, I think I momentarily stopped breathing.

Then suddenly my Lord was a twisted wreck, sprawled out on the dirt, stripped and bloodied. Underneath him was that grisly cross. Soldiers grabbed blood-splattered spikes that had more in common with crude stakes than modern nails. I shudder at the thought of how often they had been used before. The brutes began savagely pounding through his flesh those blunt, rusty hunks of metal.

I turned away in horror and plugged my ears, but to no avail. His screams seemed to rip through me like those barbaric nails. Between harrowing screams he shouted, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

Seized by the latter part of that cry, my mind fled to *1 Corinthians* where it says, “None of the leaders of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” Then my thoughts bolted to a reference to apparent Christians in *Hebrews:* “They are crucifying the Son of God again and exposing him to public disgrace.”

The Lecturer’s words had been tearing me apart; threating everything dear to me. I’ve ached to hold every ministry in the highest esteem. How could the catastrophe he described ever happen? Was I guilty of it? I was determined to cling to the Lecturer’s every word as if my eternity hung in the balance – and maybe it did.

“I’ll explain the how and the why of this tragedy and then move on to even graver concerns about many who suppose they are following Christ. These matters are the greatest source of grief to the King of Glory. Even now, they keep the Triumphant Lord what Isaiah calls ‘a man of sorrows’.”

Like a blizzard of daggers, grief exceeding anything I thought possible shredded me. Suddenly not just my mind but emotions within me I never knew even existed were screamingly aware of my Lord’s pain. He who for each of us has already suffered unspeakable agony on the cross, is still reeling in grief over people he loves, and not even all of heaven’s joys can temper it.

Never in my life have I yearned to hear anything as much as what the Lecturer was about to reveal. Everything within me strained to absorb the full impact of what was to come from his lips. He opened his mouth and spoke.

To my consternation, the Lecturer kept right on speaking – same voice, same volume – but I could understand nothing. I have never heard such bizarre and yet melodic sounds. My eyes latched on to his lips. Unlike what I had grown accustomed to, his mouth seemed to match the sounds I was hearing. I presumed there was some type of technical glitch in the translation system. I felt like tapping something, like one might do to an old radio if the reception suddenly turned to static, but to my annoyance there was nothing to tap.

Ordinarily, I might have found this glitch intriguing. I might even have been lulled into switching off my hyperactive brain and letting myself enjoy the beauty of the sounds. But this was so such occasion. I had been hanging on to every word and now it was obvious that the importance of what he was saying was about to skyrocket. The timing was more than just disturbing: I felt betrayed.

Then the light and sound began fading. In just moments it was pitch black and total silence. *What’s happening?*

# Chapter 25: The Final Shock

I found myself lying face down, peeved beyond words at having been whisked away at that crucial moment. I wish it were no more upsetting than being infuriated at having a dangling carrot ripped away from me. What was particularly vexing, however, was the crushing suspicion that I had been dismissed as unworthy to hear vital secrets about to be unlocked in the rest of the lecture. Especially galling is that they were not just heavenly mysteries but I was being denied access to information about matters of grave concern to my era and my planet. I guess I was confirming yet again how self-obsessed I am, but I worried that if I cannot be trusted with such information, what sort of failure must I be?

Desperately trying to calm myself, I tried to be more positive. As I lay there with my eyes closed my thoughts slowly gave way to other matters. *Funny how I pass out almost every time. What mysterious adventure am I in for now?*

Nearly all sense of danger had evaporated. I had been kept safe every other time I had been flung from one place to other. I opened my eyes and turned over. *Surely not!* In a flash I sat bolt upright and hastily scanned my surroundings, my heart pounding. *Oh, no!* I had never felt so cheated.

Not since these outrageous events had begun had I been surrounded by such chaos. Yep, I was back in my own bedroom. More disturbing still, I had been tucked up in my own bed. *How could all that possibly have been a dream?* I strained to recall the last things I could remember before all this started. To my deep annoyance, I remembered going to bed. I was furious. *Why hadn’t I remembered earlier that going to bed had preceded all these surreal experiences?* Then another thought came. *This is ridiculous! How could so much be crammed into one night? How could that happen without some massive temporal anomaly?*

I flicked off my bed lamp and flopped into my pillow, hoping I could go back to sleep and wake up to discover that what I had experienced had *not* been a dream.

When next I opened my eyes, there was total anarchy wherever I looked. It was my embarrassingly untidy room alright. After the perfection of some of the places I had visited, it seemed more of a shambles than ever. My clock confirmed it was still the middle of the night.

*Hey! I switched my light off, didn’t I? How can I see so clearly?* There was something peculiar about what was lighting up the room. I rolled over and nearly jumped out of my skin. Chebon was standing before me; his glowing body illuminating the room. He looked as regal as ever, despite his head being bent awkwardly to avoid scraping the ceiling.

He looked at me. “Man,” he said.

That’s all it took. I began to tremble. Strength drained from me. You never realize how small a room is until one of those monsters tries to cram into it. Nevertheless, being addressed by Chebon was unsettling for more reasons than the room preventing me from being my usual thirty or more feet from a celestial.

I had become somewhat anesthetized to illustrious nonhumans treating me as if I did not exist. Being the focus of their attention, I was quickly discovering, was an entirely different predicament. The contrast was as stark as having seen numerous documentaries of ferocious sharks and suddenly finding myself in the water with one. Yes, I had endured the horror of interacting with what I had presumed to be fallen angels. Nonetheless, this roaring blast furnace of glory made fallen ones seem like dying embers. I shuddered as I recall overhearing one of these holy ones speak longingly of annihilating all of humanity.

“Help!” I cried, as I began to slip into some sort of faint. He reached out to me. I’m so thankful he did not touch me – I doubt I could have coped with that – but I felt strength coming from him and flowing into me.

“You live too aloof from God, little man. You don’t treat him as your constant companion and confidante. You rob yourself of more than you can even imagine; squandering your life thinking to yourself instead of communing with the One who is warmer and more exciting and amazing and uplifting than your most extravagant hopes.

“You treat the ineffable Lord more like an occasional visitor than the One who is your life, your wisdom, your strength, your joy, your glory, your all. Rather than cherishing his companionship, you settle for pathetically less. You are too content to be fascinated by his trinkets, distracting yourself, instead of delighting in the endless richness and matchless beauty of who he is.”

I was reeling under his barrage but he kept pounding away with at least as much sensitivity to my feelings as a battleship.

“Like someone so enthralled by wrapping paper that he never discovers the gift inside, you let yourself be intrigued by things he has made rather than by the Maker himself. You try to survive on stale crumbs when God himself is the extravagant banquet that is yours for the taking.

 “By your side, hanging on to your every word and thought, aching to be included, is the most fascinating, stupendously desirable person who is infinitely more devoted to you than anyone else is even capable of. And most of each day you spurn him, treating him as if he is not even with you.

*This guy has no idea when to stop!*

“You let yourself shrivel into a tiny, self-obsessed shell of a person, instead of growing into the magnificent, ever-expanding being that continual Christ-centeredness would make you.”

Although I had barely the faintest idea of what I must be missing out on, he left me feeling I must be the biggest fool the universe has ever seen. I was even temporarily distracted from my angst over what I had thought to be the greatest adventure of my life turning out to be nothing more than a dream. *But hang on! If it were just a dream, how come right now there’s a supernatural being towering over me, turning my own bedroom into a doll house? Man, why does everything have to be so confusing?*

I was denied time even to vent, however. Motor Mouth had not the slightest intention of slowing. “My primary mission,” he said, “is to remind you that you have merely seen a vision – a doctored portrayal of reality.”

“What?” I said, rather loudly.

“Allowances have been made for your intellectual and spiritual limitations.”

“My *what?*” I was more than a little indignant.

“And do you think the Son rapped?”

“Oh,” I said, deflated. *What a blockhead! Of course Jesus would not have rapped, any more than he would have played a violin or worn a top hat. How could I have missed something so obvious? I really must have been in a trance to have been so stupid.*

“I figured out that what I saw was being translated,” I said rather proudly. “From what you say, certain liberties must have been taken with the translation, but what I *saw* must have been genuine . . .”

“Do you think a gigantic scorpion really attacked the crucified Son?”

“Well . . . no. I thought –” Actually, I don’t know what I thought.

“And there were other divergences from reality.”

“Those sparkler things – surely they were real? What about the sand that always stayed on the beach? What about –”

“I am not permitted to say.”

“Fat lot of good that is!” Annoyed and disappointed, I had momentarily forgotten whom I was addressing. Fearing Chebon’s reaction, I quickly tried to placate him with an attempted justification of my outburst. “I’ve just had what I thought was the experience of a lifetime, only to discover I don’t even know what’s real and what’s for my entertainment, or whatever!”

“Your confusion is for your well-being.”

“For my *what?*” I was raising my voice again.

“You have a great susceptibility to pride.”

“Oh!” *Actually thanks to your tender coaching, I think my humility is coming along quite nicely, now.* I didn’t dare say that out loud but he probably read my mind anyhow. It is hard enough keeping one’s mouth shut when angry. How does one keep one’s thoughts shut?

“Well, *you’re* real!” I retorted.

“Maybe.”

My self-control was wearing dangerously thin.

“It’s pathetic how many simplifications and distortions had to be made to pander to all your weaknesses,” he added.

Did he delight in twisting the knife? Anger and disappointment fought for supremacy in the seething cesspool raging within me. *Had I been hurled from world to world like a human canon ball, or was it all an illusion?*

“Not saying.”

*That infuriating ogre* [I’ve since repented of that expression] *was definitely reading my mind!*

I think the most invasive medical examination would be preferable to being in the presence of this overwhelmingly holy messenger. Being eyed by someone whose laser vision could see through my every thread of clothing might be humiliating, but he was turning humiliation into an artform. I sensed he was peering into the most private parts of my innermost being; able to expose my most embarrassing secrets with such clinical precision as to discern shameful failings that not even I knew were there.

My thoughts returned to what he had been saying. “So I’ll never know?” I finally spat out.

“Not likely, your side of eternity.”

I was thoroughly peeved. As I look back now, however, I see a glimmer of hope in those words. “Not likely,” is crushingly disappointing but it does not mean impossible.

At the time, however, I recalled how the apostle Paul had learned things during a heavenly visit that he was not permitted to tell a soul. Before I could even formulate the question in my mind, Chebon interrupted my thoughts.

“See what I mean about pride?” He laughed and laughed. I thought it was rather rude.

“What secrets worthy of the name do you suppose you could be trusted with? Have you been given the tiniest hint of any aspect of your future, or any future earthly events, or as much as glimpsed the splendor of glorified humanity?”

With each sub-point, I slumped still lower, despite thinking it impossible after the previous sub-point.

“Unless you learn to die to self, you cannot truly live.” Then he added something that hit even harder. “Everything worth knowing that you have received is already preserved in the Bible for all to delight in – in the very book you falsely pride yourself in knowing.”

“Well – er . . .” Then I remembered what had precipitated his latest tirade. *He’s definitely been reading my mind!* I wanted to slither under the carpet. *Would God let me feel so bad about myself? Could this be that diabolical angel returned to deceive me by disguising himself as Chebon?*

Motor Mouth revved his gums again. “What makes you imagine that you have anything beyond the most pathetically rudimentary conception of the beauty and splendor and perfection of the glorious King of all? Why do you have the blind audacity not to realize that your understanding of the awesome Lord is so crude as to be an insult to the majesty of the Unbounded One?” He laughed almost hysterically.

My dizzy plans for adjusting to spiritual superstar status upon my return were sobering up splendidly.

He kept on laughing.

 “Okay, I get it! You can stop laughing now,” I shouted. It wasn’t that I was angry (well, I was a bit) but I had to raise my voice to have any chance of being heard over the incessant roar of his laugher. He kept on and on but I think he heard me because he was now laughing even louder.

*Is this an act? Am I so susceptible to pride that I need this?* Then I remembered in horror about how Paul was tormented by a “thorn in the flesh” lest he fall into pride after his apparently far superior vision. I have no idea what that torment involvedbut maybe I should settle for the inferior before being deemed to require something equally unpleasant.

What I was seeing and hearing certainly seemed genuine, even if not exactly my idea of how angels should act, as he kept on laughing and I kept on feeling less and less impressed with myself. He might have been acting like a drunk but I had definitely sobered up. *Maybe when my story gets out, some will treat me so much like a celebrity that this will keep me grounded.* That thought was quickly countered by *Who’d believe me anyhow? I have not a shred of proof that I’m no spiritual con artist.* He was still laughing, so I had plenty of time to think of such things. To be honest, it was getting boring.

*Still, whatever has happened, I’ve been entrusted with something special,* I consoled myself. Chebon quickly calmed down and looked at me with what almost seemed disgust. “Have you not read in the Holy Word how Thomas saw the glorious Son risen from the dead? Did not the One who is True tell Thomas that those who are genuinely blessed are the ones who have *not* seen and yet believe?

“Love never envies, nor does it exalt itself. Love revels in ever-increasing joy because it delights in the blessings of others as if they were its own. Can you imagine how thrilling and fulfilling that is, little man?”

I’m unsure whether it was coincidence but a vague picture flashed in my mind of sports fans ecstatic over their team’s big win, even though they were merely spectators and had achieved nothing. Their names will never be in record books. They will never be offered lucrative deals or have media interviews. Nevertheless, they celebrated so wildly it is hard to imagine how the real heroes could possibly be happier.

Then I thought of a little boy beaming with pride as he boasted to his friends about his Daddy’s job. Next, I thought of parents over the moon with pride simply because their baby had taken her first step. They were more excited than their baby!

What if it were possible to multiply that a million-fold by delighting in *every* Christian’s achievements?

“Nevertheless,” continued the giant playing sardines in my bedroom, “if you insist on impoverishing yourself by envy, making yourself miserable when you could be on what you earthlings – er humans – call Cloud Nine, at least choose the great achievers. If you must envy, the ones to be envied are those who believe without special encounters or revelations. They are the ones heaven rightly honors forever.”

He mercifully paused as I tried to process this. Then he was off again: “Nevertheless, you will share the throne of the Supreme Ruler. You humans – are destined to rule worlds and galaxies; reigning in splendor forever. We celestials will bow to your every command. And why, little man? Because you are one of those for whom the eternal Son of God – the Boundless Lord of Glory through whom all things exist – shed his blood.”

Then he vanished.

Too much was going on for me to realize until later that unless this monster were less physical than he seemed, that was an appropriate exit. Not only would he have looked most undignified attempting to squeeze through the doorway, I shudder to think of the repair bill had he succeeded.

At the time, however, I was in no mood for such trivia. I flopped back into bed; angry, shocked, confused.

Despite having no idea how I could have managed it, I was determined never again to as much as think about what had happened. I failed. My annoying brain was no more willing to let go of the memories than a dog with a dirty bone.

Even minutes after my resolution to push it all from my consciousness, Chebon speaking of fearsome celestials bowing to my every command replayed in my head. At that, my thoughts shot to that terrifying clash with that monster who had claimed to be my master.

As I lay on my bed, compulsively trying to make sense of the crushing blow Chebon had just delivered, my mind wafted back over all the astonishing adventures I had thought I had had. I could not stomach calling them a dream. They seemed too real; too life-changing.

I recalled the ‘sparklers’. Until that first ‘sparkler’ hit, I had spent much of my life yearning for marriage. Would I now spend the rest of my earthly existence yearning for those ‘sparklers’? I marveled that I had survived those astounding sensations ripping through my body. It seems our pre-resurrection bodies are not designed for such sensory overload. I smiled. By surviving those ‘sparklers,’ I had not only cheated death, it felt like I had pulled off the most daring robbery in the universe and stolen some of heaven’s treasures.

My grin broadened. What wonders are ours for the taking! What daring exploits we can achieve if only we abandon faith in our abilities and supposed goodness, and drive our faith deep into the bedrock of the living Christ. But it’s Jesus’ victory. He didn’t *cheat* death. He paid the full horrific price.

I pondered for a moment Christ’s power to vaporize impossibilities, his eternal glory, his unapproachable perfection, and the matchless beauty of his moral courage as love propelled him to endure inconceivable torment for those who detest him. *These inexhaustible riches, and so much more, are all there for the taking for everyone who heroically clings to faith, and refuses to waste what the eternal Son paid such a stupendous cost to make available to us.*

I despised my pride as I recalled the exalted Lord of glory, the majestic King of kings, on his knees and then flat on the ground, romping with children – no, not even children; entities many of us in our arrogant ignorance would drag several notches lower than that. In my mind’s eye I saw again their glee and how, though devoid of sophistication, such uninhibited delight in him is the highest praise.

Then the memory hit of that dizzying experience that left me floundering in indecision as to who is privileged and who is not. Truly, when all is revealed, all our rantings against God’s temporary tolerance of injustice will come crashing down and we will stand in naked embarrassment at our unfounded accusations against the One who is forever good and forever right. He is always kind, always unselfish, always wise. What joys, what moral heights, what endless fulfillment await those who yield to his perfection!

My grin faded as I recalled my not-so-impressive escapes from those beastly angels. They had promised to return. Was that threat cancelled now that I’m back on earth? I thought for a moment and guessed that if they considered there were as little as a ten percent chance of conning me into being their slave, they would give it a go. I took to heart Peter’s warning, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” I relaxed a little, however, at the memory of Paul’s words, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” It might be tough and it might be scary but that’s how it will end for those who keep clinging to Christ.

Like a frenzied bird in a cage, my mind kept darting back and forth over all I’d recently witnessed. My thoughts flashed back to the angelic song that had wrung tears from my hardened heart as it opened my eyes to the ecstasy of discovering more of the boundless wisdom of God.

I had barely recalled lamenting lost opportunities to deepen my understanding of God’s ways when my mind whizzed forward to me squandering prayer and Bible time in that round room. I determined to do better from now on.

Before I could dwell on that, my mind was off again; this time almost overwhelming me with memories of the unexpected elation I felt when harmonizing with nature in that amazing forest. Losing my legs could hardly be more devastating than losing that wondrous connection with the rest of God’s creation.

Then my mind bolted to the entrancing beauty of that vast aquarium. It was just a flash because the next moment I was savoring the memory of that garden that seemed to have special healing powers. I had never been so alive. In a split second the words, “For me to live is Christ” came bounding into my consciousness. Then my mind fled to another of Paul’s famous statements, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far . . .”

How could I ever again be content with this grimy planet I was doomed to languish on for who knows how many years?

# Chapter 26: Still more Twists!

The story is over, right? The previous chapter was even conveniently rounded off with a few remainders of what had happened in earlier chapters. If you think you have figured it out, you know as little as I did.

It certainly seemed the end of the book – not just the end of exciting things to tell you about, but the end of any hope of this book ever being written. Someone had been playing hanky-panky with my mind. I was resolute in my determination to keep as hidden as a guilty secret anything to do with that. Since being floored by the mother of anticlimaxes, however, epiphanies and surprises have kept crashing into me.

Several times so far in the saga I had thought I would no longer see that evil beast who wanted to be my master. He kept turning up anyhow. Likewise, since Chebon tore my soul to shreds I never thought epiphanies and the unexpected would keep happening but they have. Being sure that the Chebon bedroom invasion had terminated that wild roller-coaster ride of excitement and shocks, I could not believe or even imagine how many stunners were ahead.

Unless you skipped the prologue to the book, you will know that after finding myself back in my bedroom, nine months dragged by before I finally began writing this account. As you might expect, by many measures, those months have been exceedingly mundane. By other measures, however, they have been more startling and profound than all of my exotic experiences combined. Likewise, you might be lulled into thinking this chapter is the dullest in the book, when something unexpected sneaks up on you and suddenly turns it into the most exciting chapter of all.

Every undreamed-of development has been so revolutionary that I am itching to say each twist turned my whole world upside down. No matter how expressive, however, part of me is too much of a literalist to let me get away with that sloppy wording. Everyone knows that once something is turned upside down a second time it is returned to its original state. I, on the other hand, am certain that after not one of these surprises will I ever be the same again.

What for month after dreary month seemed mind-numbingly dull proved to actually be mind-bogglingly important and thrilling. I was not smart enough to expect those staggering reversals, but I am finally learning to be less surprised when it turns out God is good and right after all, and when crushing blows somehow morph into jaw-dropping blessings.

In the weeks after Chebon proved himself to be the ultimate party-pooper, my mind kept incessantly reviewing all my bizarre experiences. In doing so, I found myself repeatedly struck by all those times away from earth when I had been needlessly on edge or even afraid. In the early days of revisiting those indelible memories, I was riled by the realization that the Lord could so easily have reduced my terror by providing just a teeny bit of information. Regardless of what was really happening, it was bone-chillingly real to me at the time. God might have known I would be fine but I did not know and he had kept me in the dark about it.

The Almighty could have used any of a number of means to tell me beforehand that, for instance, that enormous spider was harmless. In fact, he could have let me know that everything in that world was safe. What a relief that would have been! On and on I could rave about how effortlessly God could have spared me so much nerve-racking stress and fear without even the slightest change to the events. I guess it made things more exciting but it seemed a cruel trick – perhaps even a dirty trick.

To be honest with myself, I was ticked off not merely because of those experiences but because they highlighted what feels typical of how God seems to have treated me for as long as I have known him. Not only *could* an omnipotent Lord have made life and faith easier for me, I keep hearing glowing testimonies from people saying how God has done it for *them.* There are even highly successful godless people for whom everything seems to fall effortlessly into their laps – at least when compared with my life experiences.

It’s hard to know one’s own heart but I don’t think my annoyance is because I am such a wimp that I recoil from a challenge and a little hardship. It’s not even that I am so mean-spirited that I begrudge others being blessed. What sends me reeling like a sinking blow to the stomach, however, is the thought that God sees me as less lovable or less worthy or less special than certain other people. Obviously, for purely selfish reasons, that’s a big deal for me. It’s hard to know one’s own heart but it seems to me, however, that what disturbs me even more is what God’s attitude says about me is what it says about God.

If the holy Lord is moved by fickle feelings and plays favorites, it niggles a worry about God’s integrity. Our planet is crammed with people who let self-centered things like emotions, physical attraction and vested interests move them to play favorites. Is God just as fickle? Does he have no loftier morals than them? Even if I were the one who got all the breaks and blessings, it would still leave me with an unsettling aftertaste. It would gnaw away at me, undermining some of my enthusiasm for God and some of the excitement I would feel about devoting my life to serving someone who in every way is perfect.

We cannot possibly reach our highest potential if what we hold highest in life is inferior. Ideally, we should adore and be head-over-heels in love with not just an all-powerful and super-intelligent being but one who is morally flawless and in every way perfect. We need as our inspiration someone who is infinitely superior to us in every admirable way.

My annoyance at God for not doing enough to stop me from being needlessly afraid in what seemed to be alien worlds was slowly displaced by thankfulness, as I began discovering something astonishing. I am freer from fear than ever before! I am not entirely sure why, but I sense my new-found peace is somehow interconnected with the fears I experienced.

Psychology talks of exposure therapy, but I suspect more than that was involved. I have somehow learned to relax and trust God more. It’s liberating!

I used to think of inner peace as miraculous and effortless. Although, more than ever, I see the peace I am growing in as a precious gift from God, I also see it as a thrilling achievement; the fruit of a victory that comes through courageously cooperating with God in facing fears and building faith. God is in process from start to finish and yet he lovingly gives us the privilege of playing a role such that, as dependent as we are upon his grace, he kindly allows us to be worthy of a “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

I note all the times in the Bible that God and angels told people not to be afraid. Instead of flooding them with peace, sending them into La-La Land, like some supernatural dose of tranquilizers, he left it up to them. Would they choose to believe what they had just been told, or would they let doubt continue to feed their fear? It is not God being lazy, much less that he is hard-hearted, but giving us dignity by letting us play a role. In fact, though he has every right to hog all the glory, it allows us to share in his glory.

Put entirely differently: the view when standing on one’s fears is exhilarating. The benefits go way beyond any fears my dream – or whatever it was – directly reduced. Having been granted a taste of victory, I am beginning almost to relish prayerfully hunting down fears and squishing them under my feet. I cannot pretend to have arrived but I am closer than I ever dared imagine.

Finding peace in such an unexpectedly fulfilling and empowering way drove me to reconsider Chebon’s pronouncement that one cannot really live unless one dies to self. Could dying to self be as challenging and yet rewarding as facing my fears? An enticing blend of curiosity and hope drew me to this possibility like a humming bird to nectar. Finally, my incessant wondering, praying and seeking began to give way to discovering how astonishingly freeing it is to die to self. Who would have thought such treasures were wrapped in what seems such dreary packaging?

When Chebon finally left, I was so distraught I was sure that if I had any say in the matter I would sooner cuddle a cactus than ever let that cold-hearted killjoy invade my personal space again. Like any nightmarish trauma, I wanted to never as much as think of what that horrifyingly holy intruder had said. As you know, however, my untameable mind refused to stop obsessively revisiting the memory. After months of almost daily reliving his intrusion, I am beginning to view that dreadful confrontation quite differently from my initial reactions.

I think Chebon’s fearsome appearance and sledgehammer bluntness had prejudiced me against him, blinding me to who he truly is. As awful as that time with him was, I sensed he was actually motivated by compassion. He was delivering home truths so that heaven might be my home forever. Despite not coming even close to regarding any of these formidable beings as a friend, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend,” bounces around in my mind.

I’ve actually come to welcome uncomfortable truths and to see doing so as the height of wisdom.

I guess I always thought we could have spiritual escapades of the highest order without visiting exotic worlds. Proving it in these last few months, however, was peculiarly satisfying. It seemed some sort of compensation for being earthbound.

My roller-coaster ride over my supposed return to the mundane has shown me something critical that too few of us grasp: a huge part of our on-going adventure is repeatedly discovering we are wrong. Not only does spiritual life begin by realizing we have been appallingly wrong, it is what keeps firing us higher and higher in God.

We rightly fear falling from truth but we need to equally fear falling short of the full truth. Half-truths are half lies. If truth sets us free, lies enslave us.

If at one point in time we had a miraculous or moving experience, surely it is God urging us to continue our pursuit of more of God and his truth, not his signal for us to slacken off.

When life is rough, we are tempted to display biblical ignorance by questioning God. “Don’t you love me?” we often ask him at such times. In reality, when life is bliss we have more reason for concern, asking, “Don’t you trust me? Do you think I’ll let you down unless you pamper and baby me?” Pause to ponder that. That change of perspective will revolutionize your life.

So here’s just one example of spiritual advance hinging on finding one’s error: the person who discovers he is mistaken in believing that life should be easy for Christians, is the person whose spiritual journey suddenly moves to warp drive.

The more I grappled with all of this, the more it seemed to me that these bizarre experiences have nudged me in the right direction in several areas of life. But it is a mixed blessing. To whom more is given, more is required. With each nudge comes the responsibility to keep pushing forward. Unless I keep putting in the effort, I will begin rolling backward and lose not only every bit of progress but could end up further behind than ever.

After months of prayerful attempts to come to terms with whatever I should call my experiences, I am still puzzled but less exasperated and more thankful. I find a slither of solace in the great apostle Paul’s confusion over whether his experience was “in the body or out of the body” (2 Corinthians 12:3). I cannot say that every trace of disappointment has vaporized but it has largely given way to gratitude for having been granted whatever it was – even if, as Chebon insisted, people spared such experiences this side of eternity are even more privileged.

More importantly, I have gained an increased capacity to tolerate being mystified. In fact, I have almost come to enjoy it.

Do I actually want to understand everything so fully that nothing fills me with wonder? Do I want everything to drain of excitement by there being nothing beyond my understanding and nothing new to discover? Do I want to sink into being so foolishly blinded by arrogance as to think I know everything in the infinite mind of God?

I’ve found a new contentment in being human and a new delight in God being infinitely bigger and smarter and more wonderful than me.

Something I fashioned years ago means more to me now than when I first wrote it. Here it is:

Basking in Infinite Love

Embraced by divine love, your life will be tinged with mystery but aglow with glory.

Tucked in the heart of Scripture sleeps a tiny psalm of precious truth (Psalm 131). The singer confessed that as a mother denies her baby access to her milk when it’s time for her darling to be weaned, so God sometimes denies us things we crave. Yet as a weaned infant lies warm and secure in its mother’s bosom, our soul can nestle into God, not knowing why we have been denied that which we have clamored for, but content to draw love and comfort from the Father’s heart.

As the heavens soar far above us, high and unreachable, so is God’s wisdom (Isaiah 55:8-9; Psalm 139:6; 147:5; Romans 11:33-34; Job 11:7-9). Our tiny minds may understand the Father’s ways no more than a babe understands its mother, yet still we can rest in him, bathed in the certainty that when the omnipotent, omniscient Lord lets the inexplicable touch a child of his, it is a manifestation of unfathomable love. In the hands of the One who wouldn’t so much as break a damaged reed or snuff a smoking wick, you are safe (Matthew 12:20).

I have also discovered there must have been something else mysteriously therapeutic about some of my experiences. I have never felt so – I don’t know how to put it – whole. I have no idea whether that word conveys to you even a fraction of how different I feel. It is as though I had previously been a hollowed out shell of a person. It seems I can now get in touch with the inner me, whereas previously I would have sooner held a red hot iron. Much emotional pain has vanished.

Inner pain had been such a constant companion that for a while I feared not having it. I worried that without it continually prodding me, I would become spiritually lazy or fall into pride or some other unforeseeable disaster would befall me. So far, I have seen no evidence of that. In fact, I seem more empowered. I sense, however, that my previous hang-ups had served a purpose, but I no longer need them. I think of it as like how someone with a broken leg needs crutches for a while but then reaches the point where he is better off without them.

My disappointment dissipating due to the thrilling discovery that the adventure is not over by returning to this time and planet; the adventure has simply taken on a new guise. And it is as available to you as it is to anyone in the universe.

Had God given up on me by returning me to earth without entrusting me with rare diamonds of spiritual revelation? Or is the highest revelation what is available to all who seek God through his Word? In fact, does great spiritual achievement look even remotely like what we expect? Is it to rule galaxies from a celestial throne or is it to win eternal honor by transforming the mundane into an opportunity from which to glorify God? Is the Almighty impressed by our giftedness? Are not our gifts not ours but God’s? In the eyes of the one who knows our darkest secrets, the greatest of all is the servant of all.

Have I been banished to earth or have you and I been entrusted with a challenge of divine proportions? Is this my opportunity to spurn the sludge of ease, lethargy and mediocrity and rise to levels of faithfulness that will delight my King? Are we called to follow the path of glory carved by Christ who languished in obscurity, cut off from technology and even from political power?

# ***Epilogue***

Burning within me is the yearning that I not let the end of this account be the end of my spiritual escapades. My passionate dream is that by continually pressing forward I not cease making exciting new discoveries that keep transforming me so that I might, by supporting and inspiring others, bring ever-increasing glory to the astonishing Lord who alone is worthy of all praise. And my prayer is that you will not just join me but surpass me.

I commenced this book revealing that it is the cry of my heart that through reading the book you be taken on a glorious vacation from which you would return, effortlessly transformed. God has immense compassion on those who are burned out or frazzled, and in Christ he has already done everything for us. What makes my heart’s cry such a big ask, however, is that what keeps most of our generation from divine greatness is spiritual laziness.

“To those who by persisting in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. . . . Never lag in zeal, but be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. . . . We want you . . . not to become sluggish, but be imitators of those who through faith and perseverance inherit the promises. . . . For you need endurance, so that after you have done God’s will, when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised (Romans 2:7; Romans 12:11; Hebrews 6:12; Hebrews 10:36).”

In this book, spiritual treasure is hidden in dirt. Accurately discerning between the two is humanly impossible. You certainly cannot trust me to do it. You can trust God, however, provided you remain passionately committed to seeking his heart.

A key goal of this book is to shatter preconceptions so as to challenge you to settle for nothing less than your own divine revelation. The method God chooses to reveal this to you will probably seem more ordinary than visions or visitations. Who cares how a million dollar gift is delivered? Just keep asking him to open your eyes to whatever startling, ego-crushing truths you need to know in order to maximize your astounding potential in God. The result will bring both you and your King eternal glory.

For you, the adventure is just about to commence.

Your very fallible servant,

Grantley Morris

PS: If God has touched you through this book, consider passing on the blessing by asking him what he would have you do to encourage others to read it.

If you would like to personally give me feedback about the book, you may do so by emailing novel@net-burst.net

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# ***Appendices***

**Appendix 1**

*The Messiah’s ancestry is filled with still greater scandals.*

Ruth, King David’s great-grandmother, became another of God’s chosen in the Messiah’s family tree. She was a Moabite – despite the Law of God saying no “Moabite or any of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the assembly of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 23:3). Yet another acclaimed by the gospel (Matthew 1:3) as Christ’s ancestress pretended to be a prostitute in order to conceive through her father-in-law (of all people) a baby who ended up in Jesus’ genealogy.

If a further example is excessive, ignore the next sentence. Bathsheba, conceived an ancestor of the Messiah, only because David committed adultery with her and then arranged her husband’s murder to try to hide his atrocious sin (Matthew 1:6; 2 Samuel 11:3-12:24). Despite all attempted cover-ups, the Bible exposes everything.

The discerning reader will find that the New Testament begins with highlighting these instances. It is just an inkling of the astonishing, profoundly moving discoveries awaiting those willing to dig deep enough into the boring parts of the Bible.

**Appendix 2**

*As emphatic as the Bible is that divine acceptance is readily available to everyone living on earth prior to Judgment Day, it is equally adamant that after death, everything changes.*

A full list of Scriptures confirming this would be huge and over-the-top but for any doubters, here is a sample of references: Proverbs 1:23-31; Matthew 25:10-13; Mark 13:35-37; Luke 16:22-26; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Hebrews 2:3; 3:13-19; 9:27; 2 Peter 3:3-14.

For a tiny explanation, see Appendix 3

**Appendix 3**

*Why everything changes on Judgment Day.*

Forgiveness comes at a humongous cost, not only to God but to victims. An offender might be relieved about getting away with inflicting pain and suffering on others by lying, cheating, gossiping, slandering, robbing, or whatever, until finally seeing the error of his ways and seeking forgiveness. We have all been offenders and benefitted from this. It would hardly be paradise, however, if tolerance of ungodly acts continued forever. Who would want to share an eternity with people who can inflict evil on each other, with all of its inescapable suffering? Sinning must end for heaven to begin. Since forgiveness means being able to get away with sin, the time for forgiveness must also end.

Sin is selfishness and it inevitably ends up hurting people. We would all like to excuse our version of selfishness and label the hurt we inflict as minor, while condemning someone else’s version. A holy judge, no matter how loving, can be partner to no such hypocrisy.

Once death hits, no one will ever again rail at God for tolerating evil and not executing justice. Then, evil and all of its associated suffering will be eliminated. Our quandary is that, relative to divine perfection, all of us are evil.

We shrug our shoulders, mumble, “No one’s perfect,” and try to shift the spotlight off our guilty conscience by pointing an accusing finger at other people’s sins; trying to tell ourselves that they are worse than our own. We might fool ourselves, but never the all-knowing Holy One.

All who think themselves a cut above the rest either detest the Bible or live in denial of its insistence that it takes just one slip from perfection to render us spiritually dead. No one can get any deader than dead. Once dead, no one – no matter how much you look down on him – can be in a worse predicament than you. It is a soberingly level playing field if, as the Bible insists, “All have sinned and fallen short . . .” (Romans 3:23).