

THE UNWANTED CHILD

It's not easy being the only child. After all, all your parents' hopes and dreams of having this wonderful child who accomplishes great things has only you to make come true.

The burden of this is especially intolerable, if you, like me, are just an ordinary person without the wildest hope of ever excelling in anything.

In fact, it was because of my parent's failure to be able to conceal their disappointment in me that I turned to a life of rebellion.

My father was a successful lawyer and my mother was a former model. Unfortunately, I inherited my dad's looks and my mother's I.Q. I can't tell you how many times I wished it had been the other way around. My father was exceptionally intelligent, but very unattractive in appearance and my mother was extremely good looking, but not extremely intelligent. When people would tell me I looked just like my dad, I would cringe inside. I would feel horribly guilty for despising my father's looks, but at the same time I resented the comparison. But unfortunately it was true.

I also had the feeling from very early childhood that my birth was not a planned event. I suppose a lot aren't, but I used to think that maybe my parent's would have been a lot happier if little Tommy Jr. never came on the scene. Then one night when I was eleven years old, I woke up around one o'clock and had to go to the bathroom. I was walking towards there when I overheard my mother and her sister Tonya talking in the living room and my ears perked up when I realized they were talking about me. I had just gotten my most recent report card and my mother was expressing her extreme displeasure. Here they had spent a fortune to send me to one of the finest private schools and my grades were always mediocre at best. It was rather apparent that I was never going to be a lawyer or a doctor. I felt very hurt that I was being put down and at the same time, I felt ashamed that I had let my parents down.

But then my worst suspicions were confirmed. Even though I felt unwanted and unloved, I was still unprepared for knowing as a fact that those fears were real. I felt like I must have been dreaming when I overheard my mother say to her sister, "You know we never wanted to have children and I wish with all my heart he had never been born."

The rest of the night was spent with hot tears and a broken heart.

It's funny when I think about how people really envied me because of my family's wealth and prestige, but with all that, I had nothing. I deserved pity, not envy.

After that my grades slipped further and I became withdrawn. My parents didn't know quite what to make of it, but they knew that I was troubled. That's when I started seeing Dr. Thompson, one of New York's finest psychiatrists.

Of course I never confided in him about why I was such an unhappy and troubled child; it took many years before I ever shared that pain with another person. He thought my problem was that I lacked self-esteem. He would try to convince me that deep down inside I was a very special person with unlimited potential. He wanted me to learn how to love and accept myself. I couldn't help but notice that his nails were bit to the quick. I felt he had nothing to offer me. I was a kid aching for someone to love me and all the positive thinking I could do in the world wasn't going to make that happen.

But at thirteen, I met a girl that I thought was going to fill this void in my life. It was my

first brush with infatuation. We went to school dances together and movies and for the first time in my life I felt happy. But Donna's father lost his job and her family moved to California in search of a better life. I felt devastated, like the only chance of happiness this world had to offer me had just been snatched away, leaving me worse off than before. I was like a starving animal which had been thrown a crumb.

I was angry and frustrated with life and wanted to lash out at whatever or whomever because I was unable to change my circumstances. I was so tired of being a victim. If there was a God in heaven (which my father adamantly denied), then He certainly didn't love me.

I became such a menace at school that they finally ended up kicking me out. I laughed to myself when I saw how humiliated my father was to have such a reject for a son. I thought if he thinks this is bad, wait until he sees what pain I'm going to cause him. I planned on committing a crime like armed robbery someday just so the famous lawyer's son could end up in jail. It was the only thing I could think of doing that somehow might break his heart like he had mine.

When I started going to public school I met a lot of kids like myself that were misfits and malcontents, but I had one thing that very few of them had, which made me instantly popular and that was money. When I was sixteen, my dad bought me a Corvette. I knew that nothing he did for me was out of love, so the more he gave me the more I resented him.

And mom was so busy with her society friends that my friends became my family and because they drank and took drugs, I started doing the same. But no matter how drunk I got or how many drugs I took, I still couldn't make the unhappiness in me go away.

My relationships with girls seemed so shallow. I knew the only reason I was popular was because of my car and because most of the time I supplied the drugs and alcohol. But in my heart I knew that even though they were using me, I couldn't put them down. Most of them seemed as empty and miserable as me.

I was in and out of trouble and I had the feeling my parents were looking forward to the day I graduated from high school and was able to go out on my own.

But then all of our lives took an unexpected turn. I came home from school one day to find my dad sitting on the living room couch with a very distressed look on his face. I figured he must be sick because he was never home during the day. When I asked what was wrong, his eyes filled with tears and he said, "I'm sick, I'm very sick."

My stomach turned over because I had never seen my dad act like this so I knew it must be really serious. So I said, "Dad, what's wrong with you?"

He hesitated and said, "I was having a little stomach trouble so I figured I might have an ulcer, but the doctor just got back the test results and it's ..."

"It's what, dad? Please tell me."

"It's cancer."

As soon as he said that dreadful word he lost control and buried his face in his hands and started crying. I had no idea how to respond. I was in a state of shock because of the news and my first instinct was to go over and put my hand on his shoulder. But we never had showed any affection to one another and I couldn't get up the nerve to start now, so I just stood there speechless.

After a few minutes my dad composed himself and said, "The doctor says it's inoperable. He wants to give me chemotherapy right away, but he told me it won't save my

life; it will only prolong it."

I studied my dad's face. For the first time I saw this tough no-nonsense type guy with a really frightened look on his face. He was facing death and he was scared stiff. I had never seen him in a situation where he wasn't in control and I began to feel an immense pity for him. I wanted to throw my arms around him and tell him I loved him. But as soon as I thought it he started composing himself. As he wiped the tears from his eyes, he said, "I've faced bad situations before and won." Then with a look of determination on his face, he said, "And I'm going to beat this too."

Three months and six days later we buried Dad. I grieved more over the fact that he never once told me he cared about me than the fact that he was gone forever.

After his death I started thinking more about the purpose of life. My dad had devoted his life to being a successful lawyer, but then it all came to an end and what did he have to show for all his years of hard work? Life just seemed meaningless.

Something inside of me told me there had to be more, but I didn't have the foggiest idea where to start looking.

One night when I was particularly bored and there was nothing good to watch on T.V., I turned to the religious channel. I was really fascinated to see people acting so weird and yet so apparently sincere. I was trying to figure out if they were really serious, or if it were just some con job. People were telling stories about having something seriously wrong with them and having a miracle happen to them after they prayed to Jesus to heal them. At first I thought the whole thing was ridiculous, but the longer I watched the more I found myself thinking there really could be something to this. When I went to bed that night I wondered if this could be my answer to the question I had as to what purpose we have on this earth.

I decided to watch some more the next night and after I did I decided that it wouldn't hurt to call the number they gave to talk to a counselor. The person seemed genuinely interested in me and my relationship with God and asked if I would like to invite Christ into my life. I didn't have the foggiest idea about what she was talking about, and not wanting to show my ignorance, I said I needed to think about it. She then offered to send me some literature and told me of a church I could attend in my area.

At this point I started getting nervous. I wondered if maybe I was going off the deep end. But at the same time I was very curious and wanted to know if there was reality there or if these people were out on a limb.

When the literature she sent me arrived, I sat down immediately and devoured it. I was intrigued by the testimonies of people who claimed to have had their lives instantaneously transformed by a simple decision to give Christ the control of their lives. I studied the faces in the pictures of the people who gave their testimonies and they did look radiantly happy. So I decided to attend the church she told me about and at least see for myself these people who supposedly had found what I was looking for in life.

My mother had a very strange look on her face when I told her I planned on going to church. After her initial surprise, she said, "You're a big boy now and you can do what you want." Actually I wasn't asking her permission, I was simply stating a fact and I felt like saying, "Thanks mom, but when did I start asking your permission for anything?" but I refrained myself.

I must say that Sunday morning was interesting. I had never met more friendly people in my life. Many people came up and introduced themselves and made me feel

genuinely wanted and that certainly was a new experience for me. Actually, it was because those people seemed so loving and sincere that I was willing to overlook a lot of the weirdness. They seemed hung up on Satan and all the supposed evil he was causing. It seemed foolish to me to hear about demons being cast out of people because they were being rebuked in Jesus' name. But after an hour of hearing about the warfare between Satan and God, I was convinced that these people were sincere; misguided, I thought, but sincere.

It was after I had watched T.V. that week and went back to church the following week that I felt I was willing to take that leap of faith for myself. As soon as I had left church, I drove into the country just so I could think. After observing these Christians, I was becoming more and more aware of how lonely and unhappy I really was and of how much I wanted to experience the love of a God for myself. So after about an hour of driving, I stopped the car in an isolated spot and walked a short way into the woods. It was there I said, "God, if you're for real, then I'm asking you to take over my life and make me into the person You want me to be. I want Jesus to come to live inside my heart."

I really wasn't prepared for what followed. Without any expectation of such a thing, I started to speak in what seemed to be a foreign language. At the same time I was engulfed in the greatest feelings I had ever had. They couldn't even compare to the feelings I had experienced on drugs. I was overwhelmed with what seemed to be wave after wave of feelings of indescribable joy and peace. I felt whole. And I wept for joy.

It was later that I found out about spiritual gifts that God gives His children, one of these gifts being tongues. I was told that it was not a foreign language, but a heavenly language that I had spoken. But at that point, all that was important to me was that it was real and I had experienced it.

My friends all thought I had lost my mind when I told them about my new life in Christ. I found that I no longer wanted the alcohol or drugs; I was on a different kind of a high and I wanted my friends to experience it too. Although it hurt my feelings for them to ridicule me, I kept sharing Christ with them and warning them of the consequences of their rejection of Him. But they were willing to put up with only so much from me and it wasn't long until they cut me out of their lives.

This only proved to strengthen my ties with the people at church. The youth minister, a young man named Dave, took a special interest in me. He had been a Christian since he was a child and had been a youth minister for several years, so I really appreciated his spiritual maturity and started looking to him as a role model. He would take me out on a regular basis to talk to people about God. We would stand on a street corner and stop people passing by. We would give them pamphlets that told them unless they turned from their sins they were going to go to hell. I could always see how weird people thought we were, but I felt pity for them because they were the ones who were deceived.

One day when we were out there preaching our message of salvation, a young black man, who introduced himself as Howard, stopped to speak with me. When I asked him if he was saved, he without hesitation responded, "Yes." Then I invited him to come to my church. But after a few minutes of conversing, I realized that he wasn't interested in hearing about my church; his concern was whether I was saved. To be honest with you, I was offended that he could even question such a thing. After all, I had an experience and I told him so. But he asked me what I was depending upon to get me to heaven; he wanted to know if it was Jesus alone or was it Jesus plus the good that I was doing. I looked into

his shining face, with his shining eyes, trying very hard to suppress my irritation, and said, "I know I'm going to heaven because of Jesus. He died for me and I've given Him control of my life. He's my Lord and Savior."

Undaunted by my reply, he said, "Did you know that the Bible makes a distinction between having Christ as your Savior and having Him as your Lord?" I never had heard that before and it sounded totally unbiblical, but I didn't feel competent to really discuss this issue with him, so I called over my friend Dave.

Howard explained to Dave and me that the Bible teaches that the way to go to heaven is by trusting Christ alone to get you there, plus nothing we do. The purpose for works, he said, was to serve the Lord, which results in receiving rewards in heaven, but that works had nothing to do with going to heaven.

I could see my friend Dave was a little more than irritated and in response to what Howard was saying, Dave retorted, "The Bible says, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.'"

"Yes, it does," Howard responded calmly, "but that is speaking about Jesus being God when it speaks of Jesus being Lord. It doesn't say to make Him Lord of your life."

Dave came back with, "What you are teaching is 'easy believism.' Christ called us to a life of devotion to Him. He didn't just say, 'Believe in Me and you're all set.'"

Even though it was obvious that Dave was getting hot under the collar, Howard remained cool and collected. Calmly, he answered, "Well, actually, that's exactly what He taught. Jesus said in John chapter six, verse forty-seven, 'He who believes in Me has everlasting life.'"

I could see that Dave was losing patience with this guy and his voice conveyed that when he responded, "Yeah, but that's not all He said. He also taught repentance."

In my heart I was standing firm with Dave and I felt like Howard had missed the boat as far as Christianity was concerned. But he didn't even flinch at Dave's response. It was apparent that Howard had had similar discussions before. He answered, "Yes, Jesus did teach repentance, but did you realize the word 'repentance' in the Greek means a change of mind? God is not asking the unbeliever to change his way of living, but rather his way of thinking. Most people imagine God as Someone who takes good people to heaven and sends bad people to hell, not realizing that according to the Bible no one is good. If we could have gotten to heaven by being good, Jesus never would have had to die for us. It's because we can do nothing to get ourselves to heaven that He did everything for us. Ephesians two, verses eight and nine say, 'For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.'

"When Jesus spoke of going to heaven, the only condition He gave was that a person trust Him alone to go there. But after a person has believed in Him, then that person is a child of God and God wants him to serve Him. But whether a person serves God or not can't effect someone's eternal destiny. Jesus said in John chapter six, verse thirty-seven, 'the one who comes to Me I will never cast out.' So although it is impossible to lose our salvation, a believer can lose out on having God bless his life and also he can lose out on getting rewards in heaven."

Dave then asked, "Are you saying a person could believe in Christ and then go out and live a life of sin and still go to heaven?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, but please let me explain. When a good parent has a bad child, he doesn't tolerate that behavior. He doesn't kick him out, he straightens him

out. The Bible says that whatever a man sows that shall he also reap, so that means that there are consequences for one's behavior.

"If a person believed in Christ and went out and sinned up a storm, that person would either have something happen to him or he could have his life cut short. God does not condone sin in His children's lives."

Dave opened his Bible to the Book of Revelation and put his finger on a certain verse and said, "You'd better believe God doesn't condone sin. Look at this verse right here." He then read Revelation chapter twenty-one, verse eight, which says, "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murders, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."

Touche! I thought. I felt like Dave was a warrior who had just dealt a death blow to the enemy. But again I could see Howard was undaunted by the verse. He calmly took the Bible from Dave's hand and pointed out the last verse in Revelation chapter twenty-one, which says, "And there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defiles, neither works abomination, or makes a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Then he asked us, "Did you realize that according to this verse absolutely no sin is going to enter heaven? And sin isn't just committing acts of murder, adultery, and lying and so forth. Sin is anything that defiles and according to what Jesus said in Matthew chapter sixteen, a person's thoughts can defile him. Remember when Jesus said that if a man so much as looks upon a woman to lust after her, he has committed adultery in his heart?"

When Howard said that I felt a definite twinge of conscience. Although I no longer craved alcohol and drugs, I had not yet conquered impure thoughts. I was wondering how Dave was going to respond.

After a moment's hesitation, he responded, "Of course no one is perfect, that's why Christ died for us. But we have to ask forgiveness for our sins in order to go to heaven."

"But," said Howard, "those verses don't say that sinners who ask for forgiveness go to heaven, it is saying that no sin will enter heaven. The whole point is that we all fall into that category. The only way to have our sins not held against us is to believe in Jesus. Jesus said in John five, verse twenty-four,

'Verily, verily, I say unto you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life.' According to the Bible, the one sacrifice of Christ took care of all of our sins, past, present, and future. So when a person trusts Christ as his Savior, all his sins are paid for. Therefore he could never face hell for his sins; Christ already did that for him."

In a thinly veiled mocking voice, Dave said, "I guess we'll just have to wait until we stand before the Lord to see who's right."

With real concern in his voice, Howard responded, "It will be too late then. If what I'm saying is not according to the Bible, then please show me where I'm wrong."

I was waiting for Dave to show him a long list of verses to expose his doctrinal heresy, but instead he said, "Our minister has spent years studying the Bible and I really do trust his conclusions. I'm sure he'd be happy to talk to you."

I felt really let down. I regretted that I had so little Bible knowledge because I wanted to show him the error of his way.

My respect for Dave dropped a few notches that day and I determined that I would study the Bible for myself so that I would be equipped to answer people who believed false

doctrine. I didn't want to be dependant upon another person for my Bible knowledge.

It was shortly after this that I signed up for Bible college. My mother had been tolerant of my new found religion up to this point, but when I told her of my intentions of going to Bible college in the fall, she about hit the roof. She firmly reminded me that I wasn't going to receive any inheritance money until I was twenty-five, and if I decided to go to this Bible college I had better plan on supporting myself until then.

Leaving home was not hard for me because I was not leaving a loving parent. I got a job pumping gas and started saving for my education. Dave let me move into his apartment for the summer. I signed up for a Bible college in Missouri and was quickly accepted. But as the summer passed and the time drew near for me to go to college, I saw my enthusiasm waning and it really bothered me. Sometimes when I would be in my room speaking in tongues, I would have thoughts come into my mind that what I was doing wasn't real and that I was only babbling. When that would happen I would consider it a work of the devil and would rebuke him in the name of Jesus. But instead of having my thoughts vanish, I would find myself doubting if rebuking Satan was a valid thing to do. I felt afraid to express my fears and prayed that God would give me a sign to confirm my faith.

Those feelings of joy and peace that I had initially experienced were simply a memory now and I wanted that fire in my soul rekindled. I was thankful that our church was going to have a revival and thought maybe there my prayers would be answered.

The guest evangelist had a stirring testimony and by the time he had finished speaking, some of my old feelings had been rekindled. But the second night after the service was over, a very attractive young woman came who told some of the people in the church about some spiritual problems she was having and after the evangelist heard about it, he was convinced that her problem was demons. Several of the men from the church, including the evangelist, put their hands on this woman in an attempt to cast out the demon or demons. But I could tell she was very uncomfortable with where and how they were placing their hands and she asked them to stop. Instead of stopping though, the evangelist proclaimed in a very loud voice to the rest of the congregation, "I'm afraid that this woman has a very resistant demon." Then he addressed the demon who was possessing her and in a very authoritative voice said, "I command you, oh foul and unclean spirit, to leave this woman's body right now!"

By this time the woman was desperately trying to pull herself free from the grip of these men. I was shocked by what I was seeing. I wanted to go to the woman's aid and pull those men off her, but I was too afraid, She began sobbing and pleading with them to release her and finally after a few minutes the evangelist yelled out, "Thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus," and let her go. All the other men drew away leaving the woman a sobbing heap. I felt revulsion by what I had just witnessed.

When I drove home that night I was trying to sort out my thinking. I just couldn't fit what had just happened into my understanding of the working of God. My friend, Dave, hadn't attended that night, so I was anxious to go home and tell him about it.

Instead of the indignation that I expected from him, he defended these men as being men of God and told me I was guilty of judging. I was really angry at him for his blind acceptance of these men. And then I thought that now was probably as good a time as ever to ask a question that had been bothering me. I knew that I had a problem with lust and I had seen Dave several times act in an overly affectionate manner to some of the teenage girls in his youth group, so I asked, "Do you ever have feelings towards the girls at

church?"

"What kind of feelings?"

"You know, lustful feelings. The kind Jesus said were sinful."

He immediately became defensive and said, "Look Tom, God made us men and put in our hearts the desire for women. If we get carried away sometimes, it's only because as Christians we have so much love in our hearts."

I felt like I could have vomited. What did the love of God have to do with carnal love? I knew enough of the Bible to find his answer outrageous.

That night I had problems going to sleep. I felt like someone who had been the brunt of a cruel practical joke. Was everything I had believed a big lie? Was I just deceived? I begged God to help me make sense of what appeared to be nonsense.

Because I had spent a lot of time that summer studying the Bible and the many reasons there are for knowing that the Bible is true, I never doubted the veracity of the Scriptures. It was my understanding of the Bible that I was questioning. I also started questioning whether it was God's will that I attend Bible College. I decided to wait upon the Lord and trust that, in time, my questions would be answered.

That following Sunday night, one of the women in the church stood up and spoke in tongues. A few seconds after she had sat down, a young man in his early twenties, stood and interpreted her message. He said, "My child, I know that you have had many questions and doubts. Fear not, I am with you. Continue being faithful and your work will be rewarded."

I had no doubt that word of encouragement was for me. So I again looked forward to attending the Bible college.

The week before I was to leave, I went to a Wednesday night prayer meeting and because I got there late I sat in the back where two young men were seated whom I didn't know. One of them was Oriental. Several times they would whisper to each other, so I wondered if they were confused by what they were seeing and hearing. I knew that to someone not acquainted with tongues-speaking, it can really seem scary or even crazy, so I planned on talking to them before they left. But after one of the men in our congregation rose and spoke in tongues, the Oriental man, with a very distressed look on his face, said to his friend, "Let's get out of here!"

They quickly walked out of the building and I followed them and stopped them on the sidewalk and said, "I'm sorry if something you heard upset you, I would like to explain to you about spiritual gifts. You see, God gives some of His children the ability to speak in a heavenly language and to others He gives the gift of interpretation."

The Oriental man looked me straight in the eye and said, "I'm Chinese, and the last man who spoke in there was speaking Chinese."

I was flabbergasted. I said, "I had no idea that God gave people the actual ability to speak in foreign languages."

Instead of acknowledging that he had just witnessed a miracle, he answered, "He doesn't."

Now I was totally confused. I said, "But you told me that you just heard him speak in Chinese."

"I did. But I didn't tell you what he said."

As soon as he said that I had a feeling in the pit of my gut that I wasn't going to like what I was going to hear. The young man continued, "That man in there was cursing God in

Chinese."

My mind was racing, trying to make sense of this. Bewildered, I asked, "But...but, how can that be?"

Both those young men looked at me with kindness in their eyes and asked if I wanted to talk over coffee. We walked to a coffee shop down the street and the young Oriental man introduced himself as Danny and said his friend's name was Mark.

As soon as we sat down, they told me that before we discussed the subject of tongues, they first wanted to talk about salvation. They asked me what I thought a person had to do to go to heaven. Within a few minutes I realized that these two believed the same doctrine as the young black man Howard, who had spoken to Dave and me a couple months earlier. They explained to me at the restaurant that to think I had to give my life to Christ was placing my faith in a "by-works" salvation; instead of a by-faith salvation because I was trusting in my giving instead of trusting in the One Who gave. The more they spoke, the more I realized that I was trusting in my unfinished works, rather than the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ. As they pointed out, Jesus didn't say, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever gives his life to Him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life." No, Jesus said that God is the One Who gave and the way we receive the gift is by believing in Him. He said, "Whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

They also explained that asking Jesus to come into your heart is totally unbiblical. Jesus didn't say to ask Him in, He said to believe in Him. They showed me in the Bible that Jesus automatically does come in when a person believes in Him, so it wouldn't even make sense to ask.

Everything they explained to me was making sense until they got to what they said was the last point. Mark asked me if I thought a person could commit suicide and still go to heaven. I reasoned that since a person who killed himself would be unable to ask forgiveness after he did that, then that meant he would go to hell.

When I expressed that to them, Danny asked, "But where in the Bible does it say you have to ask for forgiveness to go to heaven."

I sat there for a minute racking my brain for a verse. I thought for sure there must be one. Then I remembered First John, chapter one, verse nine, and I said, "The Bible says, 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'"

Mark asked, "Is that verse a condition to receive salvation, or is it addressed to those who already are God's children so they can have fellowship with Him?"

I figured from his question that he must have already known the answer, so I asked him to explain. He showed me verses which proved that what he was saying was supported by the Word of God. He showed me where it said the way to receive forgiveness to enter heaven is by trusting Christ alone. The moment a person does that he is born into the family of God and is eternally secure. Because Christ paid for all sins, it is impossible for one who has trusted Him as his Savior to go to hell. But as a child of God, he stands in need of a family forgiveness from his Heavenly Father. The verse I had quoted wasn't talking about going to heaven, but how to have God's friendship here on earth.

The more they talked, the more sense it made. What I would have considered heresy a couple months earlier I was beginning to recognize as being the truth. Whereas I had believed that a person had to make Christ the Lord of his life to go to heaven, I now

saw that as a message of works.

I could feel a tremendous weight being lifted off my shoulders. Before talking to Danny and Mark, I had this horrible fear of ending up in hell because I might someday fall away from the Lord, but now I saw the impossibility of ever losing salvation. My salvation rested upon the Lord, not my feeble efforts. What liberty!

But how did all this fit in with my experience of speaking in tongues, I wondered. Because I felt that these two guys were very knowledgeable of the Word, I told them about what happened to me that Sunday afternoon when I had asked Jesus to take over my life and I spoke in tongues.

They both listened attentively as I related my story and after I had finished they were both quiet for a minute. I could tell they were really thinking. Finally Danny said, "Tom, were you trusting Christ alone before we talked to you this evening?"

"I guess not."

"Then that means you weren't God's child before tonight, right?"

I found it very hard to respond honestly. Because I could see where he was leading me and I didn't want to admit that I hadn't had a legitimate experience from God, I hesitated and said, "But I did believe in Christ."

"Yes, but did you think He did absolutely everything to get you to heaven, or did you think you had to do your part too?"

I admitted that I thought I had to do my part.

"And Tom, didn't you think it was possible to lose your salvation? If a person thinks he can lose his salvation, he isn't trusting what Christ already did for him on the cross, but rather he is trusting in his future goodness."

I knew what he was saying was true. So I said, "I see what you're saying."

"So if you weren't God's child, that means you didn't have the Holy Spirit, so could your experience have been from God?"

They could tell by my distressed look that I was having problems accepting the logical conclusions of what I was seeing. Danny gently asked, "Tom, how do explain that man at your church speaking in Chinese and cursing God?"

I knew there was really no other explanation than that it was the work of the devil and I expressed that to them. Then they asked me, "But don't you think that man is convinced he was praising God in some heavenly language?"

"Yeah."

"So doesn't that mean he was under a delusion of Satan?"

"Hmm, but why would Satan deceive people into thinking they had received something from God? I thought Satan wanted to turn people away from God."

Danny answered, "Tom, if Satan can deceive people into thinking that they have the truth, when they are really believing a lie, he has accomplished his purpose. Satan is the prince of darkness, but it says in Second Corinthians chapter eleven, he disguises himself as an angel of light. Satan doesn't mind giving people a heavenly way to go to hell and he doesn't care if people believe in Jesus, just not the Jesus of the Bible."

"What do you mean?"

Looking me straight in the eye, he said, "I hope you don't mind if I'm blunt."

"No, I want to know what you think."

I could tell he was being cautious in how he was expressing himself. He then asked, "Wasn't it because you had an experience that you thought you had been accepted by

God?"

"Yes."

Danny made a face as to express his concern about how I was going to handle what he was about to say. He continued, "But in reality weren't you headed for hell?"

As much as I didn't want to admit it, I knew everything he was saying was true and I nodded my head. So he continued, "The reason you were headed for hell is because you were believing in a Jesus who didn't do everything to get you to heaven. But the Jesus the Bible presents is One Who accomplished all the work necessary to get us to heaven; He didn't leave us our part. Do you see what I'm saying?"

Again I nodded in agreement.

"And as long as you were accepting your experience as being from God, you weren't seeking truth, you thought you had already found it."

I could see exactly what he was saying and I was amazed.

Mark then said, "In Second Corinthians, chapter four, verses three and four, it says that Satan is the god of this world and that he blinds people to the truth of the Gospel. Later in that same book it says that he transforms himself into an angel of light and his ministers are ministers of righteousness. In other words, when a person claims to be a minister of Christ, but he is preaching that you get to heaven by being good, then that person is a minister of Satan."

After we finished talking, Mark and Danny gave me their phone numbers and invited me to call anytime I had a question. Mark invited me to a Bible class he taught and I took his card.

But as I drove away that night, what had been abundantly clear started to turn hazy. I was filled with doubts: had I really been deceived? was I being tested?

I was thankful that Dave was home and I told him about what had transpired that evening in church. He was taken back that one of the members of our church was speaking in a foreign language and cursing God. But after a few minutes of having a perplexed look on his face, he said, "You know that the Apostle John told us to try the spirits, so this is just an example of a spirit that is not from God."

"But that man didn't know that and neither did I or anyone else in the church. How can you try the spirits if you can't even understand what's being said?"

"I guess you'd just have to observe that man's life. We'll probably find out that he's living in sin or something."

His answer failed to satisfy me. But I went on to tell him about the conversation that I had had with Danny and Mark. He couldn't hide his displeasure and said, "Tom, you have to beware of those who say that the gift of tongues is the work of the devil. Just because that man had a demon spirit doesn't change the fact that God gives His children the Holy Spirit so they can speak in tongues. Those guys are guilty of blaspheming the Spirit and you know the Bible says that's an unforgivable sin."

I wanted to defend my new-found friends, but I didn't know how to answer his objection. So I closed our conversation at that point and determined I was going to give Mark a call the next day.

The next morning I spent about four hours reading the New Testament and I couldn't believe how it was opening up before my eyes. I could clearly see that the Bible makes a distinction between grace and works. The word grace means undeserved kindness and it is by God's grace we are saved. But the Bible teaches works, not for salvation, but for

rewards from God. Passages that had left me baffled were as clear as day. I knew that I finally had found the truth, not because of an experience I had, but because my beliefs were now based on the Word of God.

When I read about the blasphemy of the Spirit, I didn't know what it meant, but I did know it wasn't saying what Dave was saying. Around noon I gave Mark a call and told him what Dave said. He said that if I looked at Mark chapter three, verses twenty-nine and thirty, that I would see the answer for myself. He pointed out that Jesus was casting out demons and the religious leaders couldn't deny they were witnessing a miracle, but instead of acknowledging that the Spirit in Jesus was the Holy Spirit, they said He was Satan. So the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit was calling the Holy Spirit within Jesus, Satan. Since Jesus isn't on earth performing this miracle today, it is impossible for us today to commit it. After listening to him and looking at it myself, I agreed with what he was saying.

I spoke to Dave again that evening and his main objection to the Gospel was that it would lead to loose living. He couldn't understand why someone would serve the Lord if he already had absolute assurance of heaven.

I spoke to him a little about chastening and rewards, but I could see he was resistant to the truth. I knew the time had come for us to part our ways.

I decided to use the money I had saved up for Bible college to get a place of my own and the next day I started looking. I found a little efficiency that I could pay for by the week. I also decided it was time to find a better job. After a good deal of looking I got a job at Motorola.

Since I didn't want to leave my church without first trying to reach them with the Gospel, I decided to go to church that Sunday and bring up the subject in our Bible class. I honestly believed I would get a different response from them than I did from Dave.

But I was wrong. I was really taken back by how adamantly opposed they were to the idea of a salvation that was free and undeserved and that never could be lost. After church the minister approached me because someone had obviously told him about what had taken place that morning and he said he felt obligated to set me straight. His major argument was that God was never the author of confusion and a message of getting to heaven no matter how you lived was confusing. It just didn't make sense to him and he thought I should share his indignation at what he called a "cheap grace gospel." If I was feeling indignation, it certainly wasn't toward the message, but toward him and the others at church who were basing their eternal destiny on what seemed reasonable to them instead of what the Bible clearly taught. I was getting very strong feelings that I should leave this church and have nothing more to do with it. I could see that Satan really is a deluder. I was so thankful that I had seen the light.

But I had no idea what I was in for. I was soon to discover that Satan is not only working hard to keep unbelievers blinded to the truth of the Gospel, but that he is also working hard in the lives of believers to keep them from serving the Lord. The main reason for this is because in order to serve God, a person must be involved in the work of spreading the Gospel, and by so doing, that person is thwarting Satan's work of blinding the minds of the unbeliever; hence the attack by Satan.

I soon found myself inundated with temptations I had never even faced before. Because I was not good looking, I never had girls beat down the doors to become romantically involved with me. But as soon as I started getting involved in trying to reach others with the Gospel, it was really strange how many times that very attractive girls would

show a real interest in me. I think that the only reason I was able to resist is because I knew Satan was the one behind it and also I really thought if I bit into that forbidden fruit, it would end up being poison. I knew that God had a perfect plan for my life, and I didn't want to do anything to gum up the works.

I started regularly attending Mark's Bible studies and was really excited by all the things I was learning about the Lord and His Word. One of the obvious differences I saw between what I had been taught about serving the Lord at the church I used to go to and what I was seeing in the Word of God, was that at my church undue emphasis had been placed upon the Holy Spirit. We were constantly talking about the Holy Spirit and His gifts to us, like tongues and healing, but according to the Bible the Holy Spirit doesn't bring attention to Himself, His purpose is to glorify Christ.

Another thing that surprised me was the unwillingness I saw on my part to obey God. When I was an unbeliever and out with Dave spreading a false gospel, I never saw anything in myself that offered any resistance. But when I became a believer and started to tell others the Gospel, I found that something within me just didn't want to submit. It seemed so confusing to me that it was easier for me to tell others a false gospel than to tell them the true one. After wrestling with this for a couple of weeks, I decided to talk to Mark about it.

He explained to me that all of us were born into this world with a fallen nature that is in opposition to God, but when a person trusts Christ as his Savior, he is born again and given a new nature. So a believer is a person that has both a fallen human nature and a perfect new nature. If it is the believer's habit of life to yield to his fallen nature then he is what the Bible calls carnal. But if he habitually yields to his new nature, then he is spiritual.

He showed me in Galatians chapter five, verse seventeen, that there is a battle that rages between these two natures, which means that when a believer seeks to obey God, his fallen nature will fight his doing that. So that explained to me why I was experiencing a battle when I went to share the Gospel and why as an unbeliever there was no battle.

Mark also explained to me that although the young Christian has to force himself to do the right thing, the benefits accrued from obedience are fantastic. On the other hand, if the believer gives in to his old nature, and doesn't obey God, the result will be misery.

Romans 6:8 says, "To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace." Death here means that if a person chooses to live under the control of his fallen nature, he is separated from God's fellowship. But on the other hand, if he gives control of his life to the Lord and is thereby yielding to his spiritual nature, his life will be characterized by his having an abundant life and peace.

I was discovering these truths first hand. It became very evident to me very early in the Christian life that serving the Lord involves engaging in warfare against the old nature, the world system, and Satan. But I also realized that God has supplied us with everything to be victorious against these three adversaries; He has given us His Word and His Holy Spirit. In the Bible the Lord not only let us know what we are up against and how to resist the wiles of the Evil One, but He has also provided us the power to win the battle. But only the believer who takes the time to acquaint himself with man's greatest enemy and his tactics has any hope of being victorious against the attacks of the Deceiver.

When Satan was in the Garden with Eve he told her that God was trying to hold something good back from her. God had told her and Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil because to do so would result in their death. Satan, on the other hand, told her that she wouldn't die and that the reason God didn't want them to eat

from the tree was because He knew the day they did they would be like God, knowing good and evil.

Satan tells men lies and if they believe them, the good that God wants to do for them is obliterated. Satan is like a man who promises a woman the world and then hands her a globe. He wants God's children to think that God really doesn't have what's best for them, but to think that by living for this world they will find happiness. That illusive dream is really just an illusion. Because I had come from a family of means, I knew that money was not the key to happiness. It saddened me to see believers reject serving God so they could pursue the pleasures of this world.

From reading the Bible, I was beginning to see things from God's viewpoint. I could see how short our lives are and how important it is to invest our precious time in things that will last. Jesus said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust do destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... (Matthew 6:19,20).

And the benefits of a life devoted to God not only result in gaining future rewards in heaven, but also in receiving present blessings, such as having God's friendship, His peace and joy, and answered prayer. One verse that really inspired me was Psalm 37:4, which says, "Delight yourself also in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart."

So I could clearly see that God has called us to a life of good works, but He promises to reward those works both on this earth and in heaven.

And just as the Bible clearly discloses what the future holds for believers, it just as explicitly spells out what the future holds for unbelievers. Although many deny the existence of hell, they will not find support for their unbelief from the Bible. Just to give one example, Revelation 14:10,11, say, "He himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. And he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever: and they have no rest day or night..." Undoubtedly, all those who never trusted Christ alone for their salvation will spend eternity in mental and physical torment in a place called hell.

If I hadn't really believed this was the destiny of unbelievers, then I never would have devoted myself to getting out the Gospel. I was convinced intellectually that I had the only message that could save a person from this fate. But in spite of the struggle, as I began faithfully sharing the Good News, something began to change about me. I started having feelings for people I had never had before. I felt love and concern for people I didn't even know. I saw in the Word of God that what I was experiencing was actually God's love being produced through me. And whereas I had been sharing the Gospel because I knew it was my duty, it now became the passion of my soul. I really cared whether people went to hell or not, and I was willing to devote my life to spreading the glorious Gospel.

I never went back to street corners to stop people with Gospel tracts; I realized that was a repugnant way to try to reach people. I didn't want the way I went about reaching people to offend anyone. Instead I went to neighborhoods and would look for people who weren't busy and approach them and told them I talked to people about the Bible and then I would ask if they ever wondered if they were going to go to heaven. It never ceased to amaze me how many people really were interested and then I found out that one of the rewards for faithfully sharing the Gospel is the promise that many people will believe. So it

was no accident that so many were receptive to the message.

One day, when I was out in a neighborhood, I approached a young black man who obviously was very sad. I thought he looked familiar and after I introduced myself and explained why I was talking to him, he said, "Oh, I already know I'm going to heaven."

I thought this young man may have been like me before I trusted the Lord. I had mistakenly thought I was going to heaven because I had made Him the Lord of my life and I wanted to make sure he wasn't under the same misconception. When I asked him some questions to make sure he really had heard and believed the Gospel, I realized that I was talking to a fellow believer.

Then all of a sudden, I realized that this young man was Howard, the very first person I had ever heard the Gospel from. But he was only a shell of the man who had talked to me that day. I remembered how his face was beaming and his eyes were alive and shining, but now all that I could see was a spiritual darkness in that face.

I explained that I had talked to him on a street corner a while back and he said he vaguely remembered the occasion. I knew I was looking at a brother who was like a lost sheep and I prayed for wisdom concerning how to deal with him.

I asked him if he still talked to people about the Gospel. When I did I could see that he felt very uncomfortable to be seen in this state. He told me that he talked to people occasionally, but that he wasn't out seeking people like he knew he should.

After talking for a few minutes, he opened up to me and explained that he had been going through some hard times. He had lost his job and didn't have money for food or his bills. He couldn't understand how God could do this to him, knowing how weak he was.

I could really see and hear the bitterness he had for the Lord. He was blaming God for his circumstances. It was really ugly to see.

I was praying whether the Lord wanted me to help him out. I thought it was funny in a way that I was even seeking direction about this because I always figured if you saw a brother in need, you automatically helped him if you could. But something was telling me that I wasn't to offer him anything.

About two months after that I ran into him again, but it was obvious that Howard was a man whose life had been restored to fellowship with God. He was beaming from ear to ear and he invited me to join him for lunch. He told me a tale of how he was refusing to be submissive to God and one thing after another went wrong in his life. But instead of submitting to God and getting things straightened out, he became more resistant and bitter. He was so far removed from reality that he was actually blaming God for his circumstances instead of placing the blame where it really lay, which was on himself. He had squandered his money on foolish and sinful things and when he lost his job, he wasn't able to pay his bills. Facing the prospect of becoming a street person and at the same time finding no comfort from God because he wasn't seeking it, he planned on taking his own life. He told me the day I ran into him that two months earlier was the very day he was planning on committing suicide. The only thing he needed was a few dollars which he planned to use to buy an over the counter medication so that he could take an overdose. He thanked me profusely for not giving him any money.

I was really overwhelmed when I thought about how important it is to be in tune with the Lord. I shuddered as I thought that I could have given Howard the money that would have been used in his suicide attempt.

Then he told me that running into me that day had actually proved to be the turning

point in his life. He could see how happy and at peace I was and he longed to have those things true in his own life once again. He finally stopped resisting the Lord and asked for His help. That very day he got a job as a waiter in a restaurant and he had no doubt that God had had mercy on His prodigal son. It was wonderful to see how God had worked in his life.

And it was wonderful to see how He was working in my life. I was so happy serving the Lord that I couldn't even imagine ever not doing it. It was like God was opening the windows of heaven and showering me with His blessings. I had found everything I was looking for in life, except the love of a good woman, and I was assured from Scripture that God, in His time, would bestow even that blessing upon me. I was content to leave the matter in God's hands.

When a person starts serving the Lord, he begins as a baby in the faith, but as he applies the Word of God to his daily life, he grows. It takes time to become a mature believer, but every day I could see myself getting stronger and my knowledge and love for the Word increasing. I was pressing on to maturity.

Everything was going wonderful in my life until I got a very bad case of the flu. I was really sick and was housebound for almost three weeks, two of which were spent in bed. My whole body ached and I had a pounding headache. My eyes were so sore I couldn't even read, so to help pass the time and take my mind off my discomfort, I spent a lot of time daydreaming. I realize now that I should have spent that time meditating on the Word of God and praying, which would have strengthened my new nature. Instead I was feeding my old nature. After I was able to get out of bed, I was still too weak to go out witnessing or go to work, so I started watching T.V. Normally, I would have considered it a waste of time, but because of my physical condition, I thought the Lord didn't mind. I was really taken back by how violent and gross a lot of the shows were. At first I would watch in disgust, but after a few days of a steady diet of movies, sit-coms and soap operas, I began thinking about what I had seen that day on T.V. when I lay in bed at night trying to go to sleep.

When I finally recovered my strength physically, I found out I was very weak spiritually. It wasn't until I started to resume my normal life that I saw how much damage had really been done. I had no idea that one could lose so much ground so fast. I was back to battling to do the right thing and I could see that my love for God, His Word, and people, had grown cold. I became very miserable and depressed. Romans 6:8 says, "To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace." Death here means that if a person lives under the control of his fallen nature, he is separated from God's fellowship. I had become the carnally minded believer and I was experiencing the alienation that comes from disobedience.

Most people who never have served the Lord would probably assume that finding myself in that condition, I would immediately get things straightened out between myself and the Lord. But it isn't that easy. One thing a person who serves the Lord finds out quickly is that there is a BIG difference between knowing what is right and doing what is right. If knowledge would produce obedience it would be wonderful, but in the real world there exist the enemies of man's soul: the world, the flesh, and the Devil. When these three have had free reign in a believer's life, they are not going to let the believer go without a colossal fight.

And unfortunately I just didn't feel like fighting. One night I came home from work extremely tired and knew that I should spend some time reading the Bible. Instead I turned

on the T.V. and let my mind be taken away with a movie. After it was over I changed the channel and saw a beer commercial. I could not believe the craving I had for a nice refreshing drink of beer. I knew it was wrong, but so was it wrong for me to have just sat there and wasted two hours of my time feeding my old nature. But at that point all that mattered to me was that I was weary and felt that a beer would make me feel better.

I drove to the Seven-Eleven, all the while experiencing an horrendous battle. I knew that it was wrong, but my desire to have it was overpowering my desire to please God. I felt horribly guilty purchasing that six pack and I hoped no one I had talked to about the Gospel would see me.

Now I knew that the Bible doesn't say it is a sin to drink, it is only a sin to get drunk. But the Bible also teaches that we should never do anything that unbelievers or believers would consider sin. In other words, any liberty we have to do something should always be governed by love. I wouldn't be showing love if I did something that would cause someone not to listen to me talk about the Bible. That's why it was sin for me to drink.

As I sat there watching the late movie and drinking beer, I started to feel so guilty that I was afraid that God was so angry with me that the roof was going to fall on my head or that the T.V. was going to explode. I told God that night that I was sorry for my foolishness and that I had no intention of a repeat performance.

But at work the next day, I knew that I was a different man than I had been before I had gotten sick. I had lost the peace and calmness in my life that I had just come to take for granted as permanent qualities of my personality. I was impatient with my co-workers and little things began to grate on my nerves. To put it simply, I was miserable.

Usually after work I would drive through some neighborhoods looking for people to talk to about the Gospel. But now I started going directly home. I just didn't feel like putting forth the effort to reach people and I was seeing that the less I did for the Lord, the less I felt like doing. I even stopped going to Bible classes. I knew I was putting myself in a position to commit sin, but I just lacked the get up and go needed to correct my situation.

Whereas serving the Lord had been the only thing that had made sense to me, it now seemed distant and unreal. I was becoming more and more ensnared with this present world system.

My Christian friends put forth a noble attempt to rescue me, but it was obvious I was on a road to destruction. I soon replaced my godly friends with those who were more on my level.

Before my falling away from the Lord, I had had a taste of what it meant to be chastened by the Lord, but I had never been so bad and rebellious my entire Christian life, so I really never knew what it was like to have a severe beating from the Lord. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when I started having one problem after another. My misery was becoming so great that I could hardly stand it. Before, because I was serving Him, when I did have problems, I knew they were for the purpose of testing, and I always found comfort from the Lord in the midst of my pain. But now, I not only knew that my problems were a form of chastening from the Lord, but I also knew I couldn't turn to the Lord for comfort. I was beginning to see why Howard had contemplated suicide.

I began the futile attempt of trying to dull my pain with alcohol and drugs. Finally, after about six months, I had hardened myself to the point that serving the Lord hardly ever even crossed my mind and I was totally engrossed with the here and now. Even though I wasn't happy and I lacked peace, life was at least tolerable and I even thought I could find

meaning and happiness in the world.

My search for a meaningful relationship had begun.

Now I had plenty of girlfriends in my life, but I was looking for that one special person that I could really share my life with.

Shortly after my search began, I heard about a new girl at work named Anne. My friends and I had lunch with her to welcome her to her new job. She was about 5 feet, four inches tall with blond hair and blue eyes. Even though she wasn't exceptionally pretty, she did have a kind face. And I was soon to find out she was a very kind person.

One day right after I got off work it started raining so I started running to my car only to slip and fall on the pavement. My co-workers were laughing hysterically and if it hadn't been for my embarrassment, I would have been groaning in pain. But then I felt a very soft hand on my shoulder and I looked up to see Anne. With real concern in her voice, she asked if I were alright. She was the only one not laughing.

After that I started to join her for lunch at the cafeteria at work and for some reason she took a liking to me, which I didn't mind a bit. I finally asked her out for dinner and a movie and we started to share things about ourselves with each other. I had never met someone that I felt so free to express what was on my mind.

One night we started sharing our most safely guarded secrets with one another. Tears were streaming down her face as she related to me how that her uncle had sexually abused her as a child. I held her close, as she, for the first time, had ever shared this with anyone. I was so moved by her pain that soon I was crying along with her.

Then, if that hadn't been enough, she shared with me that she was an unwanted child. She had an older brother, whom her parents adored, but it was painfully clear to her that they didn't feel the same way about her.

When she told me that I started crying harder, I was not only weeping because of her pain, but because of my own. She had hit a raw nerve in my soul. This was the one thing I had never shared with anyone and had tried so hard to bury. Finally, I knew I must face it and I told her of the conversation I had overheard between my mother and sister when I was eleven years old. I was shaking with emotion when I told Anne that my mother said she wished I had never been born.

We spent almost the whole night talking and I could not believe how good I felt afterward. I had finally faced up to all the repressed anger and hurt that was inside me because I too had been an unwanted child.

Another thing I confided to Anne was that I was going to inherit over a quarter of a million dollars when I was twenty-five. I explained that the reason I wanted it kept a secret was so that I wouldn't have to question people's motives when they wanted to be friends with me. I knew I could trust her with that secret and all my secrets. I knew I was falling in love.

As the months went by, our relationship deepened and I was considering asking her to move in with me. But that all changed the day she didn't show up for work. I was really worried and I called her place several times during the day and she never answered. As soon as I got off work, I headed straight for her place because I thought she might be really sick.

But when I got to her place and she met me at the door I could tell she wasn't sick, but really upset.

"What's wrong, Anne?"

Instead of answering me she walked over to the couch and sat down and started crying. I immediately sat next to her and tried to put my arms around her, but she wouldn't let me.

This really confused me so in a tone that demanded an answer, I asked her again what was wrong.

"I'm pregnant."

I wasn't prepared to hear anything like that so my mind was reeling for a moment. Then I said, "Anne, you know I love you. You know it was just a matter of time until I was going to ask you to marry me." I hesitated waiting for some kind of response and when I didn't get any, I asked, "Anne, will you marry me?"

Amidst her tears, she said, "Tom, I don't want to get married because I have to!"

"But you don't want to be an unwed mother, do you?"

Almost scornfully, she responded, "Believe me I have no intention of doing that."

She could tell by my confused look that I didn't know what she was getting at, so she explained, "Tomorrow I plan on getting an abortion."

That's when I started crying. I said in a pleading voice, "Anne that is our child, you just can't wipe it away as though it didn't exist."

"Tom, it's not a child, it's a fetus."

"It is alive, it has a heart beat, it can feel pain, and if you let it grow, we'll have a son or a daughter to love and to hold. You have no right to kill our baby."

Angrily she said, "I have a perfect right to do whatever I want with my body."

"But it's not your body you'd be aborting, it's our baby's."

A look came over her that I had never seen before. It was hard and cold and I could see that she was not to be reasoned with.

But I was in so much pain that I couldn't stop trying to talk her out of having an abortion. I even told her I would keep the baby if she didn't want to marry me and reminded her that in a couple of years I would be financially well off.

My words fell on deaf ears.

My world had just fallen apart. The woman I wanted to share the rest of my life with was going to kill our baby and there was nothing I could do about it. The sense of frustration and anguish I felt was almost unbearable.

She didn't want to discuss it anymore and she asked if I would leave.

After going home and vomiting, I went into the deepest depression I had ever experienced. I felt like something inside me had died. I couldn't stop thinking about my child. I had suffered so much because my parents hadn't wanted me, but now I wanted Anne to have our child so I could give it the love and affection that I had craved so badly. The thought of that tiny life being ripped out of her body was too much to endure.

While I had been serving the Lord, I had heard some lectures about abortion and had heard that at many of the abortion clinics they dispose of the bodies of the babies that are aborted by putting them in a large garbage disposal. Now it was my child that was going to meet that fate and I just couldn't stand the thought of it. I spent the night without sleep. I was so desperate that for the first time in a long time I prayed. I asked God to please do something to change her mind.

Eight o'clock the next morning, I called her and begged her to change her mind. She hung up on me.

I was so grief stricken that I couldn't even go to work. I called in sick and told them I

had the flu. That way they wouldn't expect me back within the next few days. I needed time to think and to sort out my feelings.

I just didn't know how Anne and I could go back to having any sort of relationship after what had happened. I felt so hurt and angry and didn't know if I could ever forgive her for what she had done.

As I waited for her to call, I was thinking about what I would say to her to let her know our relationship was over. I wanted to hurt her so badly I had a speech prepared that I thought would really inflict pain, but she never called. Finally three days later, I started really missing her and wanting her in spite of what she had done. I was so torn between my anger against her and my longings for her, so I decided to give her a call. I was met with a really cool reception. It was obvious that she didn't want to renew old ties.

The next few months were the loneliest I have ever spent.

It was torment to see her at work and to act like we were merely acquaintances. I had given her my heart and now she had broken it. The final blow came when I went to a diner near work at lunch time. The booths there were separated by a red colored plastic so you couldn't see the faces of the people sitting in the booths next to you. I was lost in thought when I heard a woman sitting in the next booth talk about Anne and Tom. I listened intently to hear if she was talking about me. She soon said enough to let me know she was. Then she said something that plunged a knife into my soul. She said, "You'd think that if he has all that money coming that he would at least invest in a nose job." The woman with her laughed heartily.

I sat there until they had left and I walked out of that restaurant feeling betrayed and dejected. I had trusted Anne and she had betrayed my trust. And oh how painfully aware I was that I had an ugly nose. I felt like driving my car into a wall at an hundred miles an hour. Was there no end to my misery?

I went back to work and quit and got a job at Bendix. I wanted to be someplace where no one knew me and where I wouldn't have to see Anne.

After about a month of working there, I asked one of the girls out for dinner. Nancy was nice, but she was no Anne. But I was aching for companionship and at that point something seemed better than nothing.

Nancy seemed really interested in spiritual things so I finally told her about how that God and the Bible had once played a major role in my life. And I explained to her that even though I still believed the same way, I just didn't have what it took to be a disciple.

Nancy explained to me that she believed in reincarnation. She thought the evidence was overwhelming to support that belief because of the information that people had given under hypnosis when they were supposedly regressed into past lives. She told me about Edgar Cayce and how he would go into a trance and give information concerning people's medical conditions. These were people he had never even met and he would let them know what things to do to alleviate their condition. She told me it could be verified that he was responsible for hundreds of people being cured.

I told her I didn't believe any of that nonsense. It was just too far out and bizarre.

That's when the books started coming. Nancy inundated me with what she thought would verify her beliefs as being true. I actually started reading these books just to humor her. My feelings for her were growing and I wasn't about to let something as inconsequential as her strange beliefs hurt our relationship.

But what simply began as a means of pacification started to awake something

within me. The more I read, the more I could see that there were reasons to accept reincarnation. The documentation was overwhelming and a lot of the source material came from the studies of scientists and doctors.

I was at a loss how to reconcile my belief in the Bible, which I knew was true, and the belief I was coming to have in reincarnation. The one big question I had was if reincarnation was true, then why the Bible didn't teach it.

When I told Nancy what I was wondering about, she explained to me that the Bible had been changed by the church and all references of reincarnation had been removed. Then more books came. It all became very confusing to me until I didn't know which way was up.

After about four weeks of an intense struggle, I gave up my "orthodox" Christianity and succumbed to Nancy's way of thinking.

You would think that would have led to a better relationship between us, but I found that I was becoming increasingly miserable.

That's when Nancy told me about transcendental meditation.

Nancy could see that I was a miserable, uptight person and that I was destroying myself with over-consumption of alcohol and drugs. I was touched by her concern for me.

She explained to me that TM wasn't a religion, but a scientific way of achieving peace of mind. She told me she heard about it on a talk show on T.V. and that a lot of famous people claimed that it really helped them to relax. She had roused my interest.

She gave me a book on the subject and after reading it, I felt like this might be what I was looking for. We found out where they were holding meetings to teach TM and I paid the \$400 fee for both of us to attend. The initiation rite struck me as being a little wacky, but I was desperate for peace. We were told to utter certain sounds which they called a mantra, which we were told to keep confidential. We were assured that if, for twenty minutes a day, we continually repeated these special sounds and tried to block everything else out of our minds, we would begin to experience increased creativity and relaxation.

I found that the more I engaged in TM, the more peaceful I began to feel. I found this very encouraging.

But then strange things began to happen. I had this weird feeling that there was someone else with me in the apartment even though intellectually, I knew I was alone.

One night I woke up and opened my eyes to see this huge personage walking toward me. It reminded me of the grim reaper with a glowing purple aura around him. I had never felt so terrified in my entire life and I gave out a loud howl, and the thing disappeared.

My heart was pounding so hard and so fast that I thought it was going to beat out of my chest. Although it was only three-thirty in the morning, I had no intention of going back to sleep.

As I sat in the living room smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee with every light on in my place, I pondered what was happening in my life. I felt like that horrible beast I had just encountered was somehow related to my involvement with TM and I determined that I was going to go to the Christian book store the next day to see if they had any information on the subject.

I found a book that seemed like it would be informative and I hurried home after work and devoured it. It not only dealt with TM, but also reincarnation. I was shocked, to say the least, by what I found out. What had been presented to us as being non-religious, was in fact Hinduism to the core.

The mantra that we repeated over and over didn't consist of harmless sounds; we were actually praising a Hindu deity, which, the book I was reading convinced me, was a demon.

The initiation rite which I had thought was so weird was actually a Hindu ceremony in which Hindu deities are worshipped and the initiate offers these gods sacrifices of fruit, flowers, and cloth. After the ceremony, the initiate is given a mantra to meditate upon. I was ignorant of the fact before I read this book that the "American Heritage Dictionary," defines "mantra" as: "A sacred formula believed to embody the divinity invoked and to possess magical power. It is used in prayer and incantation." The Maharishi, who is mainly responsible for introducing TM to the West, has admitted that the use of the mantra invokes gods and spirits from the spirit world.

Now I understood what had happened to me the night before. Even though I didn't realize it, by practicing TM, I had been summoning a demon and apparently my call was heard and I got a visitation. Whether this was something real or something my mind had produced, I felt that either way, I had been playing with fire and had got burnt.

The book also explained that reincarnation is a belief that never had been accepted by the early church. The idea that the Bible once contained references to it were skillfully refuted. Instead of teaching that man can pay for his own sins by coming back to earth again and suffering for them, Christianity teaches that man can do nothing to pay for his sins. That's the reason that Jesus had to come and die for our sins.

One by one, all the reasons I had for accepting reincarnation were being shown to be false. I could see that I had fallen for one of the delusions of Satan. It was not the spirits of dead humans that had spoken through people like Edgar Cayce, but rather fallen spirits. They were Satan's angels.

I finally faced the fact that my belief in TM and reincarnation were not the only delusions of Satan that I had fallen for. I had looked for meaning and happiness outside of the will of God and I was reaping the consequences of my futile search. I was a broken and disillusioned man.

As I thought about how far I had strayed from my Heavenly Father, I felt a tremendous amount of sorrow and remorse. I grieved as I thought upon the fact that I had even gone so far as to have been engaging in the worship of a pagan deity. I felt disgusted and ashamed. For the first time my hard heart was beginning to soften and I started weeping.

Everything I had been looking for in life I had once found, and through rebellion and disobedience, I had lost it all. What a fool!

Now I was plagued with doubts as to whether God could even use someone who had strayed so far from Him. I figured that one way to find out was to call my old friend Mark from Bible study and see what kind of reception he gave me. I figured if he brushed me off, then that was probably how the Lord felt too. And I couldn't blame Him. I was the one who willfully turned my back on Him.

It had been almost three years since I had talked to Mark and I couldn't even remember his number, so I had to look it up in the phone book.

When I said "Hi," he didn't recognize my voice so I quickly introduced myself.

In a very friendly voice, he asked how I had been doing. When I told him that I was tired of sowing my wild oats and that I wanted to get back to serving the Lord, he could not have been happier. He asked if I'd like to go out for dinner that night. We met at a quaint

restaurant and he let me know, in no uncertain terms, that I was being welcomed back with open arms.

The one big question that was on my mind was if God could ever use me to the capacity that He once would have if I had never stopped serving the Lord.

I already knew that all believers are going to have to stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ and be rewarded for the work they did for Christ. I knew that I was going to suffer loss of rewards for the years that I had wasted, but I wondered if I could still receive the crowns that God promises those who remain faithful to Him? Or had I blown that too?

Mark explained to me that many of the Corinthian believers had also blown it, yet Paul told them to get busy serving the Lord because they could still obtain a crown. I felt a tremendous sense of relief.

But could I still be used to the same capacity?

He explained that sometimes when a person falls away from the Lord, he makes some choices that can affect his whole life, even if he does come back. Then he asked, "You aren't married are you?"

He was happy to hear that I wasn't and he explained. "As you know, next to trusting Christ as your Savior, and then deciding to serve Him, the next biggest decision you can make is who you are going to marry. I've seen many believers marry outside the will of the Lord and have to live with that mistake the rest of their lives."

I could see what he meant. I thought of what my life might be like if I had married Anne. Who knows what misery I would be suffering.

I only hoped and prayed that my life hadn't been marred permanently because of other things I had done.

I went home that night and went through my apartment and threw out all my cigarettes, drugs, liquor, and books that I had accumulated in my disobedience. I sat down to read the Bible and still felt like something else needed to be removed. I pondered for a minute, then it struck me like lightning that the T.V. had been the beginning of my sin. I immediately unplugged it and put in the closet. Since it came with the apartment I wasn't at liberty to get rid of it, but I knew that the Lord wanted it out of my sight.

As I read that night, I got great comfort from reading the Psalms. Psalm 51 particularly applied to my situation. David wrote this after he had fallen into great sin and finally came to his senses and in this psalm, he asked God to mend and restore their broken relationship. I prayed along with David when I besought the Lord to "restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation."

Many people can't understand how someone as close to the Lord as David was could ever commit such terrible sins as adultery and murder. I was once one of those people myself, but now I knew from personal experience how easy it is to fall into sin.

Someone once said that idleness is the devil's workshop, and I believe that is true. When David should have gone out to battle, he stayed home instead. Second Samuel 11:1, says that "It came to pass after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab... And David tarried still at Jerusalem." It was then that he laid eyes on Bathsheba and ended up committing adultery. When they found out that she was having his child, he had her husband killed in battle. All this could have been avoided if David had been where he should have been.

We are either feeding our old nature or our new nature. What feeds and strengthens the one, starves and weakens the other. When a person serves the Lord, he is feeding his

new nature and as he continues being obedient, it becomes easier and easier to do the right thing. Serving the Lord becomes to this person the joy of his heart. But to someone who is feeding his old nature, any attempt at serving the Lord is, at first, drudgery.

I knew I had slipped into this condition and that serving the Lord was going to be an uphill battle for me. But I was willing to go through the growing pains again to get back the peace and joy I had once known.

One of the biggest problems I knew I had to face was ending my relationship with Nancy. We had become really close and we were romantically involved. At first I contemplated whether I should ask her to marry me, but the more I thought about it and what Mark had said to me about marrying outside the will of God, the more I realized that it would be highly unlikely that someone I found in my disobedience would be the Lord's first choice for me. I thought I had better get on my feet, spiritually speaking, before I made any major decisions for my life.

It wasn't easy breaking up with her. But afterwards, I did feel like a load had been lifted from my shoulders. The Lord was letting me know I was making right decisions.

I really couldn't believe how easy it was to get back into the swing of things. Some old friends from Bible study called me up and arranged to take me out witnessing with them. Everything that I thought I had forgotten, quickly came back again. By the end of the day I felt like that past three years of my life had been a dream and I had just woken up to the real world.

I'm not saying I didn't have struggles on my way to getting back on my feet, but they were short-lived and incidental compared to all the suffering I had experienced in my disobedience. I would a thousand times rather suffer knowing I am in the will of God than suffer as a consequence of my sin. Paul wrote that the sorrow of this world produces death. Boy, did I know that from experience. I had been dead as far as my relationship with God was concerned and now that I had returned to my Heavenly Father, I was alive. The prodigal son had returned home and he was greeted by a Father Who was longing for his return. I was not an unwanted child!

Mark gave me a cassette tape by Larnelle Harris entitled, "I Can Begin Again," and he asked me to listen to the song by that name.

I wept as I listened to this beautiful voice sing the words,

"Alone again in a crowded room
 Cornered by the questions in my mind
 It's so hard to understand, how the life that I had planned
 Stole my joy and left me far behind

Though all I have is lost it seems
 In the shadow of a dream that used to be
 I can look beyond the skies, deep into the Father's eyes
 And see that there is hope for one like me

I can begin again
With the passion of a child
My heart has caught a vision
Of a life that's still worthwhile

I can reach out again
Far beyond what I have done
Like a dreamer who's awakened
To a life that's yet to come
For new beginnings are not just for the young

I face the dawn of each brand new day
Free from all the doubt that gripped my past
For I've found in trusting Him that everyday life starts again
As I look toward the things of life that last

I can begin again
With the passion of a child
My heart has caught a vision
Of a life that's still worthwhile"

I'll never stop being amazed at the love the Lord has for His children. No matter how far we stray, He is always waiting with open arms for our return. What joy it brought to my heart to know

I CAN BEGIN AGAIN!