

A Soul's Reflection

You are trying to go to sleep,
And you find that your mind
Is stirring in all directions.

Finally, you drift off
Your spirit unsettled
Your dreams vivid...

It's been a long work day.
You drive wearily home
Clothes soiled, face dirty.

At home, you go to the mirror
Wanting to wash away
Some of the blemishes.

But, as you look, there is more
Than just a soiled body.
You see unsettled pain within.

You begin to wash,
But the dirt
Won't go away.

"Scrub harder," you think
As your hands begin to feel
sore.

"Why won't the stains leave?"

Suddenly, your beloved grand-
mother
Long gone from this life
Appears in the room.

"Dear," she says,
"What you see is not
Your normal body."

"This mirror reflects
Your soul that is
Stained with sin."

"There is only One
Who can make your soul
White again."

"You know who He is
For you obeyed His word
Many years ago."

"God knows your troubles,
And He wants to help
To make your soul clean
again."

Quickly, you wake
Realizing that this
Was only a dream.

You rush to the mirror.
Your face and clothes
Are clean.

Immediately, you pray to God
Asking Him to forgive
The sins you've committed.

You want to be whole again
To be clean again
His servant, once more.

With a believing heart,
You know He has heard
And forgiven.

Your life rededicated and clean,
You leave your home on this
morning
Happy to be one of His chil-
dren.

You remember that day
When you obeyed His gospel
And are thankful because...

Jesus paid the price
So your sins can be forgiven
So your soul can be unblem-
ished.

Next time you look into a mir-
ror
You will remember that
It's more than the outside that
counts.

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By the Ladies

Are You a Good Tree or a Bad Tree?

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In Hades, there was a large field with a fence down the middle. There were people on both sides, but the majority were sitting on the fence. Jesus and Satan came to either side and beckoned the people on their respective sides to follow them. When the people on the fence started to follow Jesus, Satan said, "Where do you think you are going? You had your chance to follow Jesus when you were on earth. Did you not know? I own the fence too. Come with me."

The people on Christ's side are those who follow His word and try to keep themselves as far away from temptation as possible. Those on Satan's side are those who chose to let temptation rule their lives. They never fixed the problem. The individuals on the fence are those who tried to put a limit on how far they could go without sinning. They thought they had chosen Christ's side, but they were going to see how close they could get to Satan's side. That is a terrible position to be in. By doing this, you have allowed yourself to be put in harm's way and be enticed. James 1:14 says "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed." James goes on to illustrate the chain reaction that happens due to us becoming enticed. Verse 15 states, "Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death."

We must avoid temptation with all our might. To do this, we must stay in the light. In James 1:17, the text clearly says that God is the "Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." With God, there is not even a shadow. First John 1:5 says, "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all." Riding the fence like those in the story is just like standing in the shadows. We cannot do that. If we do not want to sin, we must stay as far away from it as possible, like those on Christ's side of the fence. If you do not want to sin, abhor things that entice you. First Thessalonians 5:22 puts it simply: "Abstain from every form of evil." *EVERY FORM OF EVIL*. When you are in the shadows, you might as well just be in the dark. You will most likely end up there one way or another.

Think of yourself as a tree. In Matthew 7:16-17, Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but bad trees bear bad fruit." If you are in the shadows, do you think you are a good tree or a bad tree? We all know that trees need light. We need light which is God. What better way to live and grow than to not be hidden from the light at all; to not be hidden from God in any way. If you are in the shadows, you are de-

priving yourself of light. Like the tree, you will die. You are not keeping your mind on godly things.

Slowly but surely you will become desensitized to the light and try to avoid it altogether, going further and further into the darkness. One cannot “gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles.” Those in the darkness do not do good deeds. Therefore, do you wish to be cast into the fire as Matthew 7:19 says you will be? Because if you choose this path, that is what will happen. Are you a thorn bush? Are you beginning to shy away from the light? You can combat this! Get help now before it’s too late! We’re not guaranteed any amount of time. You could die before you finish reading this. Luke 12:40 says, “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” Think of how many people you know who have died unexpectedly. Do not think you are any different? Listen to the tiny voice in your head you keep ignoring. It is only trying to prevent your spiritual death. Train your conscience right. Stay in the light.

Richly Blest

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Ken Young is one the most popular songwriters of our time among Christians, especially among teens and young adults. One of the reasons I believe his songs are so popular is because his music and lyrics go together like “two peas in a pod.” On top of that, the majority of the songs he writes are *fun* to sing, which naturally attracts us. Although his music is very “attractive,” there is something else that I personally enjoy about his songs, something that makes the songs worth talking about: the words or lyrics.

“Bluest sky, cloudy day, whether it’s good or bad that tends to come my way...” Before we go on with the rest of the first verse, let’s just look at the first half of it. *“Bluest sky”*? *“Cloudy day”*? Why in the world are we talking about the weather in an encouraging, uplifting song like this? I don’t believe it to be talking about the weather, and I doubt you do either. Could this be a comparison between *“good or bad that ... comes my way”*? Let’s say you walk outside, look up into the clouds and see the prettiest blue skies you have ever seen (not a cloud in the sky). What do you think? *I* would think that today is beautiful and it’s going to be a *“good”* day! On the other hand, if you were to walk outside, look up into the sky and it was cloudy and dark, you would think that it’s going to be a *“bad”* day. I think that’s what Ken Young is trying to get to visualize: the difference between *“good and bad.”*

“From the highest hill or deepest valley I will claim His rest, for the One who loves me makes me richly blest.” *“From the highest hill or deepest valley ...”* Again we have this comparison of *“good or bad.”* But this time he is using hills and valleys. Why? Because sometimes when we are happy we use terms such as “high” to describe our happiness, or when we are sad we say we are “low.” *“I will claim His rest.”* What rest of our God are we claiming? Jesus says in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Jesus is telling us that if we are heavy laden, if we are

tired, He will relieve us. Tying it into the verse it's saying that, "No matter how I feel I will accept His help, *I will claim his rest.*" The fact that Jesus tells us "...Ye who labor and our heavy laden..." doesn't mean that He will give help to you if you are a couch potato. Jeremiah 6:16 speaks for itself: "Stand in the ways and see, ... And walk in it. Then you shall find rest for your souls..."

"Fresh delight, deep lament, whether in joy or pain I've learned to be content." We now have a new comparison dealing with *"joy or pain."* It's a joy to have delight in something, is it not? It's especially joyous to have delight in something fresh, something new. Of course, it's painful to lament over a loved one who has recently passed away. *"No matter how I feel though, I have learned to be content."* Paul described his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:24-28: "... five times I received *stripes* minus one." If you do the math that's, roughly speaking, one hundred and ninety five (195) stripes! He continues, "Three times I was beaten with rods (Acts 16:22-23; 21:32), once I was stoned (Acts 14:5, 19), three times I was shipwrecked(Acts 27:1-44) ... " And that's just the start of it! Paul went through *all* these troubles and he describes them as "... light afflictions ..." (2 Corinthians 4:17). Why does he describe all that as "light afflictions"? Because Paul learned to be content *"whether in joy or pain."* That's the way we should be my friends: content with what we have and how we feel because *"... the one who loves me makes me richly blest."* And you thought you had it bad that your mom asks you to take the trash out!

The second verse continues, *"For the One who fills me with His Spirit ...,"* obviously speaking about God *"... always knows what's best, and the One who loves makes me richly blest."* "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1:25). If our God is truly that much wiser than us, that even when He is at His dumbest He is STILL wiser than us! Then wouldn't you think that He would know what's best for us? And that we can trust that judgment? I think so. Our God *"... always knows what's best ..."* for us.

Then after all this we have the chorus, or it could just be a third verse. *"... And I know that life is like a ship that sails out on the sea, ..."* Have you ever been out on a boat before? Wouldn't you say that life is unpredictable? *"Sometimes cradled by the calm, and sometimes plunged into the fury."* You never know what life will throw at you next, whether sickness death, or peace and serenity. *"... But a peace within my heart provides a warm and sweet caress, ..."* But, oh that peace within my heart sure is nice! But what exactly is that peace that dwells in my heart? *"... for the One who loves me makes me richly blest."* The *"... peace within my heart ..."* is knowing that God, our Lord, who blesses us and knows our every need, is with us every moment of every day.

"... One who loves me makes me richly blest ..." The phrase that brings the song its meaning, the most important phrase in the entire song, has not yet been discussed. Why has Ken Young repeated this phrase seven times? **EMPHASIS!** Ken Young puts so much emphasis on that phrase because of its importance. You and I should know how richly blessed we are, not just because we have clothes on our back, or a roof over our

heads. We are blessed because we have God by our side and the ability to communicate with Him. Let me tell you that not everyone has that blessing.

Ken Young has many popular works such as, *Why Not Now?*, *Be With Me*, *Faithful Love*, *And Can It Be*, and many others. Many songs are being written and popularized in our day and time by Christians of the same faith, mind set, and goals. If we take time to understand and learn these new hymns, our worship, praise, encouragement, and edification *will* be strengthened.

The Power of the Pulpit

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Jerry Seinfeld once said, “The number one fear of all people is public speaking; number two is death. Death is number two? This means that if you had to be at a funeral, you would rather be in the casket than doing the Eulogy.” While this statement may be humorous, the reality of the situation is not so funny. Most people, young and old, are very uncomfortable doing anything in front of people. But while one may be able to get through most of school avoiding the spotlight, what happens when those same philosophies and tactics are applied to public worship?

Most men will start taking a “leader role” in public worship in their teenage years, but the services they perform range widely. Some may start with leading the opening or closing prayers then move to song-leading, or vice versa. Still others may never be bold enough to step up and take part at all, leaving the duties to be filled by other people. What does this say about the heart of the individual? It is understandable that some are more naturally inclined to get up in public and may be much more comfortable with it, but does that excuse the others to sit back? Assuming that you are in a position to lead a part in public worship in the first place, there are some things that must be understood when considering these roles.

First and foremost, it must be understood that the worship you will be leading is not about glorifying you, but God. In Acts 12, after Peter was released from prison by an angel, Herod stood up to deliver an address to the people. After his eloquent speech, praises rang out from the audience claiming Herod to be a god rather than a man. Herod reveled in this and, since he did not give glory to God, “immediately an angel of the Lord struck him...And he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12:23). It is granted that Herod was not standing in a church building when delivering this address, but the point remains the same: glory belongs to God. We may be the most eloquent, knowledgeable, and captivating presenter on the face of the earth, but unless we understand that God is the focus of our service, not ourselves, it will not be acceptable before Him.

There is a certain amount of intimidation, that comes from years of experience (looking at it from the audience's viewpoint), that is present every time a man steps into the pulpit. Looking at older and wiser men who have grasped its wooden sides and proclaimed messages of sober truth, it is sometimes intimidating to think that you will be sharing that same space, and wondering how you will lead the minds of the church in worship to

God. It is important to remember at this point that it is not the eloquence of the words spoken that will pierce the hearts of the people, but the Word itself. "All the kings of the earth will praise you, O Lord, when they hear the words of your mouth" (Psalm 138:4). It's not *our* words that will be praised, but God's. There lies at the heart of every great, sound sermon we hear and every great, sound song we sing God's word, which is given to everyone: young and old, experienced and inexperienced (reference Acts 11:18).

The manner in which we approach God and the worship of Him should be one of reverence and awe. "Praise the Lord...You who stand in the House of the Lord, in the courts of the House of our God" (Psalm 135:1-2)! Our service to God is, and always should be, done in a manner to magnify and glorify Him - worship that is worthy of His name. And while we must always keep in mind the seriousness of the situation, the last thing we should worry about is how we look in front of the congregation. Keep in mind that everyone sitting in the auditorium remembers what it was like to be 13, constantly repeating yourself with a cracking voice. No one will judge you based on what you do, but rather encourage you with every step you take into the podium. And even if, when you get back to your seat, your friends tease or joke about a mispronounced word or something equally small, know that God is looking down upon you well-pleased, as a person that is making the most of his talents (Matthew 25:14-29).

The Voice of Experience

A Few Things I Have Learned

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Knowing that it's always easier to give advice than it is to live it or to receive it, let me assure you that it is embarrassing to write about things that *I* have learned. I suppose I'm writing this article because I have reached an age when people *think* I know more than they do. If you're expecting something new and grand, you may as well quit reading now. For those who continue, here are a few things I have learned.

1. Do not neglect your children's Bible studies. Even if you haven't already started a family, make a solemn vow that you will diligently train your children in the word of God. Some of my fondest memories come from Bible studies with my children sitting around my feet, soaking in information like little sponges. A few minutes of Bible drills every evening allowed them, even before they were three years old, to meet Abraham, Moses, David, Daniel, Peter, Paul, and especially Jesus. They memorized the sons of Jacob, the Judges, and all the Kings of Israel and Judah before they were three. They could reel off Old Testament time-lines and other relevant facts before they were five. At times we had mock debates in which I would assume the role of devil's advocate. These informal discussions served them well later on in biblical discussions with co-workers and fellow students.

An older preacher once thought he could convert the world. When he knew that wouldn't happen, he decided to convert his community. When that failed, he thought he could convert his family. At the end of his life, he decided that he would be doing well to save himself. He contrasts sharply with a friend of mine who has preached for sixty years. He never participated in many out-of-town gospel meetings before his children left home. As a result of his commitment, he can now rejoice that all of his children and grandchildren and their spouses are zealous Christians. *Just being there* made a great impact on their lives.

For faithful Israelites, child-training was almost a full time job (Dt. 6:4-9). Paul admonishes fathers to *train their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord* (Ep. 6:4). It makes no sense to save others if you lose your own. Additionally, one of the greatest gifts you can give your children is to show them how much you love your spouse.

2. Do not neglect having fun with your family. Some of the saddest, most rebellious children had parents who were too busy to spend time with them. Some cannot slow down long enough to enjoy regular meals with their family. The parents may have thought they were doing enough just by providing them with the necessities of life. Later they learned the hard way that money and possessions cannot compensate for years of neglect. Every child needs to know that he occupies an important place in the heart of his parents. The lack of parental bonding makes a child vulnerable to those who offer the wrong kind of love. *Love your children* (Titus 2:4).

3. Do not neglect your personal studies. Even when Paul was old, in prison, and ready to die, he asked Timothy to bring him study materials (2 Tim. 4:13). Visiting, recreation, and relaxation all have their place, but they must not replace our personal private time with God.

Many years ago an older preacher advised me to pay particular attention to the Bible classes I taught. He assured me that the cumulative effect of this study over the years would produce the best return on my time and effort. I believe this piece of advice has helped me to grow more than anything I have done. Early on I made loose-leaf notebooks on every book that I taught. This eventually provided me with full annotations on every book of the Bible. Even after learning all I could on each passage, as years brought more maturity, I added additional information. Hesiod, the Greek poet, said, "If you add a little to a little and do this often, soon the little will become great." Horace Binney said, "A very large part of every man's reading falls overboard, and unless he has good indexes he will never find it again." The sum of both comments simply says that consistency and discipline are the key to growth. There is nothing more exciting than growing *in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (2 Pt. 3:18) and learning how to *handle the word of God accurately* (2 Tim. 2:15).

4. Do not lose your temper. *The wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God* (James 1:19-20). The angry person thinks with his glands, not his brains. Several years ago, someone unjustly accused me of teaching error. Since the charge needed no response, I managed to hold my tongue. I never thought that someone might be watching. Some time after this incident, a brother remarked that my ability to avoid retaliation

tion had affected him so much that he was determined not to lose his temper. What if he had witnessed an angry response instead of a controlled one?

Your influence is on the line. It takes years to build a reputation, but only seconds to destroy it. People are watching (Matthew 5:14-16). Retaliation gives enemies of Christ ammunition to harm His Cause and disappoints those who need a good example.

5. Do not let your guard down. *Be an example in word, way of life, love, faith, and purity* (1 Tim. 4:12). Realize, however, that exemplary people attract Satan's temptations. He does not need to focus his attention on the loose-living party people. He has them all tied up and ready to ship (2 Pt. 2:14, 19). Satan will work overtime to corrupt a committed child of God. He never apologizes for the pain he inflicts (read Job 1-2), but you can defeat him any time you want to (Ja. 4:7).

The hills are littered with the spiritual corpses of those who began well but did not finish the race. Focus on Jesus and keep on running (Hb. 12:1-4). Heaven will be worth the struggle.

Forgotten

The world around me is crashing.
I feel that I am all alone.

There's a murder here,
Words of hatred there.

The golden rule is all but forgotten,
As someone is hurt again and again.

The words "forgive them" are faded.
All that is wanted is revenge...

But I am not alone.
Someone knows how I feel.

He was beaten and mocked,
Yet not a word did He speak.

As they nailed Him and rejected Him
"Father, forgive them" were His words.

We are not worthy of His grace.
It is taken without thought or thanks.
Have we forgotten?

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