

GOD IS PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

a short story

by J.W. Jepson

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1

The day had been bright and warm, but now the afternoon sun was resting on the edge of the western horizon. To Dwight Langford that first Friday in June had been a long and busy day.

The last of his finals seemed to belong to another world, a world remote in time as well as distance. He had been behind the wheel for five hours, and now the world that greeted him was the one he knew so well, the world he called “back home.”

Dwight had just passed the junction to Clear Lake. Jack Creek was about four miles down the highway. After that, two more turns in the road would bring him to the big oak tree at the corner of the farm. At the next driveway on the right he would be home!

Home...a ripple of excitement swept over him as familiar surroundings embraced him and thoughts of family and friends raced through his mind. Emotionally, he was “primed” for the welcome he knew was waiting just five minutes away.

Dwight had been looking forward to summer vacation for weeks. He had a job waiting for him at Doyle’s Feed Store. He had missed his family a lot—including Mom’s cooking. And there was Debbie, too. Debbie Kingsley.

The Kingsley farm was about half a mile down the road from the Langfords. Dwight and Debbie had grown up together, almost like brother and sister. They went to the same schools, attended the same church and took each other pretty much for granted. But for some reason Dwight had missed Debbie more than he thought he would. Now he found her sharing a place in his thoughts and feelings.

Though all of this had captured Dwight’s attention for the moment, something else had been bothering him deeply.

Dwight had been raised in the Hillside Community Church. As a boy he accepted Christ as his Savior. During high school a call to full-time service grew within him. It was during his senior year that he committed his life to God for the ministry.

After graduating from high school Dwight attended a nearby community college and completed his lower division studies there. His junior year at a state university was behind him now and seminary awaited only a school year and two summers away.

Dwight's education at the state university had challenged him. The intense exposure to ideas, thinkers and thought systems had made a profound impact upon his mind. His perspectives were broader; his thinking was sharper.

But something else had happened, too. Questions kept arising and confronting him—hitting him hard and shaking him. They were gnawing, persistent, demanding.

Oh, yes, Dwight read his Bible regularly. And he prayed often over these inner conflicts. Sometimes he felt God's reassuring presence; sometimes he didn't. But he knew God and he knew that what God had done for him and for others was real. Yet, there those questions were, and the young pre-ministry student could not gloss over them or brush them aside. His moral and intellectual honesty would not allow him to do that. *He had to have an answer.*

Suddenly the sight of the big oak tree brought him out of his reverie. A fresh wave of excitement surged through him.

Home!

The reception was even bigger than he expected. Supper was ready and everyone was on hand for the welcoming. Debbie was there, too. As they all sat around the table, Dad offered thanks. As soon as the "Amen" was heard, conversation shifted into high gear again.

Several times during supper, Dwight and Debbie found themselves exchanging glances. He noticed that she wore her rich auburn hair in a new style. The freckles around her nose were barely visible. The early summer sun hadn't had time yet to bring them up to full color. But they were there, just the same.

The evening went by quickly and soon friends were on their way home and family members were saying "good-night" to each other. A tired but happy young budding theologian pulled himself up the stairs and opened the door to his bedroom—*his own room*, with his own comfortable bed beckoning him.

His bedside prayers were little more than "mattress mumbles" and within thirty seconds Dwight was sliding in between the sheets. "Ah, delicious," he whispered as he felt the caress of the pillow under his head. For a few moments he listened to the familiar night sounds of the country. Soon he was asleep.

The busy activities of the summer were a refreshing break from months of study. Dwight's job at the feed store took up much of his time. Then, too, he had his share of the chores around the farm to do. He attended every service at Hillside, involving himself in as many activities of the church as possible. All of this didn't leave him much spare time.

But the summer evenings were long and as soon as the hot sun settled down behind the hills, cool evening breezes began to glide up the valley. By the time August arrived, Dwight and Debbie found themselves sharing more and more of these pleasant moments together.

And with the day's work done, these were the times that Dwight had a chance to think—think about the questions that had troubled him so long.

Perhaps that's why Debbie was the first to notice. It seemed to happen almost every time they were together. They would talk for a while. Then Dwight would just drift into silence. Maybe it would be for just a moment and she would notice only that he failed to catch her last quip or question. But sometimes he would be in deep thought. When that happened, he would just sit there and stare at something—the ground, the oak tree at the distant corner of the Langford farm.

That's the way it was one mid-summer evening. The two young adults who had grown up together—who had known each other so well, and yet so little—sat together on the Kingsley lawn, near the old pear tree that great grandpa Kingsley planted long before either of the two youngsters were born.

Hardly realizing that it was happening to *them*, they had been caught up for weeks now in the sweet experience that comes to every young couple who, under God, take life and its decisions seriously—the process of intense soul-searching that prepares the way for the deep soul-body unity that follows closely behind and lasts for life.

After reminiscing for a few minutes over some of the events they had shared in childhood—events that seemed to mean more now—Dwight started staring at the ground again.

At first Debbie was puzzled, her usual reaction when this had happened before. For a moment she, too, fell silent, her eyes studying the intensity written on Dwight's face. "If only I could share..." Suddenly her mood changed. *Share!* She almost said it out loud. Whatever it was that was bothering Dwight, she *had* to share it! Her eyes narrowed as she looked at the face of the youthful minister-to-be who had become such an important part of her life. Just being with him this summer had worked a subtle yet permanent change in her. No longer did she feel like a little girl. The educational growth Dwight was experiencing brought an intellectual maturity into their conversation that she found appealing. The image of a young woman was awakening within her.

The pure pleasure of being alone with Dwight had grown within her, too, and now a “third party”—the thing that was occupying his mind—was intruding itself into their private world, and that was just too much for her. *I might be a ‘tater-fed country gal, she thought to herself, but I’m not going to sit here like a dummy. God gave me a brain, too, and I can use it!*

Suddenly she heard the sound of her own voice shattering the silence— “Dwight Langford! What’s the matter with you!”

3

The sound of Debbie’s voice and her emphatic tone brought Dwight out of his meditation with a start. “Wha...?” he muttered, staring at her. Her bouquet of freckles were in full bloom now and for a second he thought he saw the little girl next door, the one who, years earlier, refused to return his football for a half hour when it had mistakenly come over the fence and hit her doll buggy.

“What are you thinking about?” she demanded, her eyes not moving from their target.

“Oh, nothing,” he offered lamely.

“*Nothing!*” she retorted, “why, you’ve been moping around like old Noodles. And you say it’s nothing?”

Over on the porch the old family dog raised his head at the sudden mention of his name, blinked his eyes, and carefully returned his jowls to their resting place between his front paws.

Dwight caught the feeling of frustration so apparent in Debbie’s voice, and something inside him seemed to reach out to her. Here was a special person in his life. They had come to mean so much to each other, had grown so close. Little by little each had explored the other’s heart and mind. And now she stood at the door to the inner sanctuary of his soul, knocking.

In long silence their eyes met. Her mind was so clear and uncluttered, he mused, her faith so pure and simple. She had not yet heard of Descartes, Hegel, Feuerbach, or Nietzsche. In high school her interests were in Home Ec and things like that. Oh, she had spoken up during occasional discussions about evolution in Biology. But she had never sat for hours, listening to sharp Ph.D.’s challenging, challenging, *challenging*, with everything you know to be true being squeezed through the wringer. Could *she* have an answer? Would *she* understand how he felt, or even *why?*

As these thoughts tumbled around in his mind, Dwight sensed an intense yearning to let Debbie step into his deepest thoughts and feelings.

All at once he realized he had been just staring at her. Embarrassed, he dropped his eyes.

“Yeah,” he sighed, “something’s been really bugging me lately.” Already a slight feeling of release stirred inside. Debbie’s eyes begged him to go on.

At first Dwight found it difficult to express freely what was on his mind. But the warm sympathy of his audience drew him out.

For nearly an hour she sat and listened to the avalanche of words that cascaded from Dwight’s lips. At times his ideas seemed a little abstract. Some of his questions disturbed her. But she listened sincerely, responding now and then with a gesture or a few words.

They seemed to lose track of time in the strange magic of the moment. Inside, Debbie was experiencing a variety of emotions—sympathy at first, then admiration, a touch of bewilderment, and then...then something she couldn’t quite identify. Only, somehow, she felt much more of the woman stirring within her. For here was a man in her life who had opened his soul and let her in. She felt needed, accepted. Though she had said little, she felt she had contributed much. After all, she was *there*, listening. And that was important to *him—right now*.

As the shadows of twilight grew, he began winding down. “Dear Lord,” she prayed in her heart, “what can I say to help him? I don’t want him to think he’s been talking to a fence post.”

As the last of her prayer rose from Debbie’s heart, she heard Dwight’s voice stop. The silence hung heavy. A tightness crept into her throat.

“Y’know, Dwight,” she began, her voice a little hoarse, “you should talk to Pastor Carlson about this. He knows a lot, and I’ll bet he could help you.”

Mentally and emotionally spent, Dwight looked over at his private audience. A sheepish grin spread across his face. Good old Debbie! Sure enough, she didn’t have the answer he was looking for. But she had shared his mind. And right now, that’s what seemed to matter the most.

His cheeks blushed as he reached over and took her by the hand to lift her up. “I’d better go before I get run off with a shotgun,” he quipped.

As she jumped up, her auburn tresses fell gracefully around her shoulders. “You’d better,” she retorted with mock severity. “Papa doesn’t want me out with strangers. Good-night!”

He watched as she ran nimbly up the front steps. She paused momentarily to rub her fingers through Noodles’ fur, then disappeared through the door with a final wave of her hand.

As he walked home, for some reason, Dwight felt a little taller, his heart a little lighter.

4

Dwight's heart pounded a little and the palms of his hands were moist as he paused before the familiar birch door. He stared at the "Pastor's Study" sign, wondering if Pastor Carlson would understand, would have a "key" to his dilemma. Dwight was only six years old when Pastor Carlson accepted the call to Hillside Community Church. Everyone in the congregation loved him—everyone, that is, except a couple of old soreheads. And the community had total confidence in him as a man of God.

Dwight had thought of bringing his problem to his pastor, but for some reason he hadn't. Anyway, it was Debbie's suggestion that prompted him to request this afternoon appointment.

Dwight knocked, and immediately a voice invited him in.

From behind his desk Pastor Carlson rose to welcome his young guest. He had shown a special interest in Dwight's education, for as a young man his own formal preparation for the ministry had been cut short for financial reasons. But that imposed no handicap on him now as a mature minister, for Pastor Carlson was a life-long scholar. Shelves of books covered an entire wall, reminding him that a pastor's office is called a *study*. As Dwight was soon to discover, Pastor Carlson had a depth of spiritual perception that came not merely from books or institutions but from walking close to God in the communion of His word and His Spirit.

Dwight shook the older man's hand and settled down in a nearby chair offered to him.

The conversation began with the usual "this-n-that"—how things were going at the feed store, was he looking forward to his senior year, and a reminder that they would all miss him, especially a certain young lady. Dwight caught the spark in his pastor's eyes at the reference to Debbie. Pastor Carlson hadn't buried his eyes in his books and periodicals. No, sir! This shepherd had been watching his flock!

Soon the pleasantries were over. Dwight shifted his gaze to the floor, cleared his throat, and began the speech he had rehearsed.

"Pastor, the reason I came to see you this afternoon is...uh..." he faltered. "Well...*I have a problem.*"

The minister sat forward, his soft eyes fixed attentively on his young friend. “What’s your problem, Dwight?” The tone of his voice was reassuring.

“Well...I’ve been doing a lot of thinking, Pastor,” Dwight began.

“That’s good,” responded the minister, filling in as Dwight paused for words.

“But some things are really bugging me, Pastor Carlson, and I’ve got to find the answer.” With that, the top came off the smothered volcano that had built up inside him.

“Pastor, *why did God make man?* Just think...before He created Adam and Eve and put them into the garden of Eden He knew they were going to sin. He knew the human race would rebel against Him and follow their own selfish ways. He saw ahead of time all the sorrow man’s sin would cause, both now and forever.”

As he spoke, thoughts of war, hate, injustice, and human selfishness sent a sharp pain of anger through Dwight. His words came easy now.

“Pastor, think how much neglect and abuse God has suffered for thousands of years from billions of sinners. Think of the misery people have brought on each other. And...” Dwight’s voice trembled slightly. “And the penalty—man, *think of the penalty*—billions of people suffering *forever!*”

The minister listened quietly as Dwight released his mental and emotional frustrations. The verbal flow continued.

“Certainly, Pastor...certainly God must love each individual with an infinite love, and He must be grieved beyond human comprehension over each lost soul. So, why did He create the human race, knowing beforehand that the majority would be lost forever? I can’t figure it out.”

Wisely, Pastor Carlson let Dwight “pour it all out” before responding. But though quiet, he was listening with keen interest. The minister’s silence prompted Dwight to continue.

“And God knew it would cost Jesus, His own Son, total humiliation and a horrible death on a cross just to save a few...a...a minority. Pastor, God saw ahead of time all that would happen, yet He went ahead and created man. *Why?*”

The minister sensed that the monologue was over. The time for dialogue had arrived. He leaned back in his chair, fixing his eyes on the ceiling. Slowly, deliberately he began: “You know, Dwight, God is after something tremendously valuable.”

“Whatever it is, it must be priceless!” Dwight reacted, almost impatiently.

“*It is!*” the pastor continued, the emphasis in his voice amplified by the sudden forward thrust of his body and the intensity of his eyes. “It is. In fact, its worth far outweighs all the evil and misery that God knew would happen because of man’s sin.”

Dwight felt his irritation giving way to a growing interest. “But, Pastor, what could be so priceless? And why couldn’t God secure it some other way?”

The minister reached for his Bible. He turned to the eighth chapter of Romans and began reading verses twenty-eight through thirty:

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.”

The minister looked up from the page before him and studied his young guest. As he spoke, his words seemed solemn, measured: “Remember, God had a perfect kingdom. All the angels, including Lucifer, were in their places. But Lucifer rebelled and took many of the angels with him. Dwight, *God’s perfect kingdom failed Him!*”

“Why?” Dwight asked.

“Because it had one unavoidable weakness. *It had not been previously tested,*” the pastor responded. “Anything built to last must be made of tested materials. When God’s first kingdom was challenged, part of it collapsed. But—and this is important, Dwight—*God is going to have a kingdom that will not fail!* God *must* be glorified. His infinitely valuable interests *must* be secured. And He *must* have someone to lavish His great love upon—someone who will appreciate and cherish it fully and forever in close, loyal communion. And, too, those of God’s first kingdom who stayed true need a fuller revelation of the heart of God to strengthen their loyalty.”

Dwight’s keen mind kept churning up questions as it processed what his pastor was saying. “Why didn’t God just create more angels to replace the ones that fell?” he queried.

“He could have,” came the minister’s reply, “but that would have been building with previously untested materials—the unavoidable weakness of the first kingdom.”

“Then, why not create beings that have no power of choice? Wouldn’t that make disobedience impossible?” The upperclassman wasn’t quite sure of the logic of his own question, so he sensed the answer before it came.

“Oh, yes,” came the expected reply, “but it would make loving obedience impossible, too. No, Dwight, God doesn’t want robots, mere machines. Real obedience and love must be voluntary obedience and love.”

“So then,” Dwight broke in, “to build an everlasting kingdom upon willing love and obedience, God had to make man with a free will, even though He knew that so many would abuse the power of choice and suffer the consequences!”

“Right!” the older man continued, “but this time, instead of starting at the top, God started at the bottom. He is redeeming lost sinners at the terrific cost of Calvary. Then He is allowing them to remain in this hostile, rebellious world for life to be tested, pressured, tried, proven!” Reverend Carlson was every inch the preacher as he spoke. “And He is with them with all the resources of Heaven to make them more than conquerors. He gives them all-sufficient grace to stand and fills them with His Spirit to provide power in their lives!” His hands gestured vigorously as he spoke. But now he paused and looked earnestly at the young man before him. “Dwight, why didn’t God take us to Heaven as soon as we were converted?”

The suddenness of the question caught Dwight off guard. “Uh...well...I guess He left us here to be witnesses.” It was the only answer he could think of at the moment, and it did sound evangelical.

“But that’s not all, Dwight.” His pastor was back in full swing again. “He left us here to bring us through a process. He’s developing us into the tried and true material He’s building an everlasting kingdom out of—a kingdom that will *not* fail.”

The picture became clearer to Dwight as he listened, and he began to feel a tinge of the same excitement that now animated his usually reserved pastor. “I think I’ve got it!” he exclaimed. “Love...and obedience...and faith that will never fail because it has been forged in the fires of trial and testing—*that’s* the priceless objective God is after! Right?”

“That’s it!” the minister rejoined, “and for *that* God is willing to let the unavoidable evils happen, terrible as they are.”

The two men were communicating freely now. “Giving man a free will sure is risky business,” Dwight observed, his eyes focused in concentration on the corner of the desk.

“It sure is,” agreed the minister, “but that’s the only way God could accomplish what He is after. If there had been a better way, He would have chosen it. So He has taken the wisest route possible. Paul declares, ‘Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!’”

Silently Dwight reflected on the reference to Romans 11:33. The more he thought about the whole thing, the bigger it became in his soul. “Y’know, Brother Carlson, most Christians haven’t even begun to realize the importance of the eternal integrity of our love and the stability of our obedience to God.”

“That’s so true,” the minister mused with a sigh, “so true.”

Then Dwight’s philosophical mind began exploring a related avenue of inquiry. “Does that mean we’ll still have freedom of choice in Heaven?” He knew his question was valid and he wanted a straightforward answer.

“Oh, yes,” responded the minister without hesitation. “I believe we will always be free moral agents in Heaven. If we weren’t, all the efforts of the Holy Spirit within us now and all the trials and testings here on earth would have no purpose. We’ll love God forever with a willing love, ‘because He first loved us.’”

The quotation from 1 John 4:19 was a familiar one to Dwight, of course, but he *still* didn’t have the complete answer to his last question. “But, what guarantee is there that somebody won’t sin in Heaven and we’ll have this same mess all over again?” he asked.

“Ah, that’s the beautiful part of it.” The tone of the pastor’s voice expressed his joy as he spoke. “That’s the sublime assurance of Revelation 22:3. ‘...and His servants shall serve Him.’ God views eternity and declares that there will be no more sin, no rebellion, no failures! He foresees that His grace can so save and keep the elect now in the midst of the pressures of the world, the flesh and the devil, that when these three sources of temptation are removed, He will have a proven kingdom that will never fail!

“You see, Dwight, nothing takes God by surprise. Before God created the universe He foreknew that He could win your heart. He foresaw that He could produce in your soul a faith that would lay hold on His all-sufficient grace. He is able to keep you from falling. And so, before ever a star twinkled in the sky, God made His elect a part of His eternal kingdom, laying out for them eternal plans lavish beyond imagination!”

“But what about babies;” Dwight wondered aloud, “they haven’t been tested.”

The old scholar thought for a moment, then replied, “Well...in Matthew 19:14 Jesus said ‘Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.’ This indicates to me that babies who die go to Heaven, all right. There they must enjoy all the basic glories of Paradise. And I believe that just learning what God did for us when He gave us His Son will give them a comprehension of the love and character of God that will cause them to love Him forever.

“However,” the pastor continued, his finger stabbing the air for emphasis, “God will not be able to entrust to the person who died in infancy the same position or degree of usefulness that He will to someone who walked with Him faithfully through years of testing here in this world.” The minister paused for a moment, then lowered his voice as though to let his listener in on a secret. “Some people might call it coincidence,” he confided, “but I’ve been planning to preach on this very subject this Sunday morning.”

Both men grinned as Dwight realized why the whole subject had been so fresh and soul-stirring to the shepherd of Hillside Community Church.

“I read my text from Romans chapter eight to you already; remember?” Dwight remembered all right as he watched his pastor pull the rough draft of his unfinished sermon notes from his Bible. “Here are some more scriptures I plan to bring out Sunday,” Pastor Carlson continued with undisguised pleasure. “Listen carefully.”

“The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling...” (Ephesians 1:18)

“That in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:7)

“Who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.” (2 Timothy 1:9)

“Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:2)

Dwight listened attentively, body leaning forward, his chin resting in the palm of his hand. The pastor looked up from his notes and his eyes again met the gaze of his audience. “In 2 Peter 1:10 the apostle urges us to make our calling and election sure. And in 2 Corinthians 6:1 Paul warns us not to receive the grace of God in vain.”

As his pastor’s voice filled the room, Dwight was thinking of people he knew who seemed interested in only barely getting into Heaven. “Such spiritual near-sightedness!” he commented to himself. “True believers are motivated by a far higher purpose than that. People who really love God want to be the very best they possibly can be, now *and* forever.” His critique of others was brief, however, and soon he was examining his own heart.

Dwight was thoroughly enjoying the new dimension of fellowship he had found with his pastor. But a glance at his watch told him that he had been there an hour and twenty-five minutes, and there were chores to be done at the farm! He apologized for staying so long, but as he rose to go, Pastor Carlson detained him for a word of prayer.

The minister stepped out from behind his desk and walked over to where Dwight was standing. As the two shook hands, the older man rested his left hand on Dwight’s shoulder. His eyes searched the youthful face before him as he spoke his parting thoughts: “Dwight, never lose sight of the supreme importance of God’s eternal purpose in you as a Christian. Sin should be repulsive to us. Backsliding is unthinkable. Total commitment to Christ must be our minimum standard, love for Him our pure motive and the fulfillment of His will within us our holy ambition.”

As they prayed together, Heaven seemed a little nearer...and a lot more real and meaningful.

Dwight drove home from the church in deep meditation. The presence of the Lord seemed so near as he rode along. Soon he was praying aloud. “O, God, help me to yield myself so fully to You that You can develop in me the full potential of Your

grace! Perfect the fruit of the Spirit within me. Please, Lord, prepare me for Your highest service and glory forever!”

6

It had been Dwight’s day off at the feed store and he had used it for his visit to Pastor Carlson. But Debbie had put in a full shift at Lyman’s grocery store and she was tired as the two of them strolled over to the old pear tree and settled down on the Kingsley lawn. She noticed that Dwight’s attitude was different this evening. The troubled look was gone from his face. His voice sounded relieved and cheerful.

“I had a long talk with Pastor Carlson this afternoon,” he announced, almost matter-of-fact. Suddenly a weary Debbie was fully alert, listening.

As briefly as possible Dwight relived for her his conversation that afternoon with their pastor. She listened carefully, responding now and then with questions and comments as they occurred to her perceptive mind.

The evening went by quickly and before they knew it the sunlight was gone from Baldy Peak. Their conversation had been subdued, serious. But all of a sudden Dwight reached over and snatched a shoe right off Debbie’s foot!

“Hey, gimme back my shoe!” she squealed, grabbing for her footwear. In a flash Dwight was up and halfway across the yard, holding her sneaker out in front of him.

“Make me,” he teased. “Just make me!”

Debbie forgot her fatigue from the day’s work and bounded after him. For a couple minutes they frolicked around the lawn—he leading the way, laughing and dodging—she hobbling close behind, protesting all the way. Even Noodles came off the porch and joined the excitement. Faces appeared at the front window of the Kingsley house.

Suddenly Dwight tripped over the old dog and went sprawling on the ground. Taking advantage of her opportunity, Debbie retrieved her shoe and ran for the house.

“Dwight Langford! You’re mean!” With that she whirled and marched up the front steps, trying like everything to act indignant.

But before the screen door slammed shut, Dwight did manage to get in a parting shot: “Pastor Carlson’s going to preach Sunday morning on what we talked about tonight!”

Once inside the door Debbie slipped her shoe on. She caught what Dwight had said and wanted to ask him a couple of questions. But she wasn’t about to change her little drama right now.

Mumbling an embarrassed “good-night” to her family, she raced upstairs. They had witnessed the whole thing and now they all stood there in the living room, grinning at her.

“Good-night!” they answered, almost in chorus. A younger sister’s giggle followed Debbie to her room.

It had been a full day and Debbie welcomed the thought of a good rest. As she closed her eyes for the night, she kept thinking about the last thing Dwight had said. “Sunday morning...” she muttered to herself. For some reason she felt an unusual sense of anticipation.

7

Dwight had been stopping by for Debbie on his way to church the past few Sundays and today was no exception. As he opened the car door for her, Debbie stepped down the front steps and moved gracefully toward him. He watched her as she approached, her auburn hair shimmering in the morning sunlight. Inside, he felt a strange glow. A lump began to form in his throat. As the summer days had passed, his fondness for her had grown. But he had never felt anything quite like this. “She’s beautiful!” he sighed under his breath.

A gleam of mischief twinkled in her eyes as she slipped into the front seat. “Hi!” her escort greeted her. “Still mad?”

“Course not, silly,” she chided. “But you’d better leave my shoes alone if you want me to sit with you in church today.”

“Okay, I promise,” he vowed with a grin as they drove out of the driveway and headed for their destination.

8

The service was moving toward its close. Pastor Carlson was in the heart of his message. Dwight and Debbie sat next to each other, listening intently. The minister gave special emphasis to some of the points that had seemed especially important to Dwight in his preview in the study and as he had shared them later with Debbie. Occasionally she glanced up at Dwight. Each time he returned her gesture with a nod of his head to acknowledge that he, too, had caught the point.

Dwight noticed, too, that Pastor Carlson was bringing out some things he hadn't mentioned in their private discussion. Dwight leaned forward in concentration as the speaker stressed verse twenty-nine of his text in Romans chapter two.

"Notice, we are predestined 'to be conformed to the image of his Son'—to be like Jesus! To experience in our nature the full and beautiful development of the fruit of the Spirit! Oh, how patiently the Holy Spirit, the Master Sculptor, works within us to form the image of Christ in our character, our personality! Be careful, folks. Let nothing—no sin, no un-Christ-like attitude, no carnal indulgence mar or retard His glorious work within us.

"But to be like Jesus, we must know Him," the minister continued. "But to know Him, we must spend time with Him and His word. In Philippians 3:10 Paul tells us that he yearned to 'know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.' Colossians 3:10 says that we 'have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.' And 2 Peter 1:4 declares that we have been given 'exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.'

"Yes, friends, God is determined to make us like Jesus. But He needs our participation. He can do a much better job if we cooperate intelligently. That means stopping when you feel like losing your temper, and saying 'No! The Holy Spirit is forming the image of Christ in me, and this thing that tempts me to anger isn't worth it. What really counts is God's eternal purpose in me and I refuse to hinder that purpose.' 'Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.'"

As he quoted 1 John 3:2 and 3, the veteran pastor leaned over the pulpit, his eyes moving across the congregation from face to face.

"This is the great work and the deep desire of the ministry," he continued, his voice lower now. "Ephesians 4:11 through 13 says, 'And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.'

"What does your pastor long for?" His voice wavered a little and he paused momentarily to regain his poise. Then in answer to his own question he continued: "At the judgment seat of Christ, when this congregation is presented before the presence of His glory, your pastor's joy will be to say, 'Lord, they have received Your word; they have been teachable and responsive; I have watched them grow, and now here they are. I'm thrilled with them. They're just like Jesus!'"

The minister slowly placed his sermon notes back into his Bible and closed it. Then, almost as a post-script, he threw out a challenge that left a deep impression on each listener: "So ask yourself, 'Am I just drifting along, spiritually lazy, not taking eternal things as seriously as I should? When He gave His Son to die on the cross, didn't God have much more serious and important values in mind than those that have motivated me? Doesn't the Son of God, Who agonized and died for me, deserve a greater commitment than I am making? Do not God's great investment and high purpose in me take preference over every other consideration?'"

"Oh, that God's purpose would become ours! Oh, that our hearts would catch the rhythm of the heartbeat of God as He mobilizes His great resources and deploys them to secure His great purpose in His saints! Let His will for us, for both time and eternity, become the great program of our lives. Away with trifles! Let's feel the passion, share the dedication and make the commitment of the great apostle, recorded in Philippians 3:13 and 14: '...one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.'"

After prayer, the congregation began drifting toward the exit. As they went out, the minister and his wife greeted them one by one. There was less conversation than usual among the people. The impact of the message lingered and small-talk just seemed out of place.

Dwight and Debbie stayed behind deliberately so they could be the last to greet the pastor and his wife. At the door Dwight grasped his pastor's hand in both of his. "Thanks, Pastor," he said in a grateful tone, "thanks for the message...and everything. *God is putting it all together, isn't He?*"

The minister looked on fondly as the two young people walked hand-in-hand down the steps of the church. "He certainly is," he whispered slowly to himself. "He certainly is."