

Lou Shepherd thinks he understands Christianity, but when he meets a boy with supernatural power and people in town start dying mysteriously, he learns that nearly everything he thought he knew about his faith was wrong.

Obeying God Uphill

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When I shake hands with Dune, my hand feels like I just put it on one of the generators at Hoover Dam. There is no shock, no vibration, no audible rumble. But every fiber of my being tells me I stand in front of something massively powerful and extremely dangerous. Nothing in this boy's appearance intimidates, though. He looks like your typical twelve-year-old who has probably gone longer without a bath than what his mother would prefer. I wonder what to make of him. I ask myself, "Is he friend or foe? I hope to God he is friend because if he is foe, I am toast if he ever comes after me. I got nothing that can fight anything like this. I don't even know what to call what he has. I don't know if a name exists for this."

Dune looks up at me pleasantly and says, "It's good to meet you, Mr. Shepherd."

\* \* \*

"When Jesus walked this earth, young people were attracted to Him. When a place obeys God, it faithfully reflects the life and the love of Jesus, and young people are attracted to that place for the same reason they were attracted to Jesus. Why? Because His love for them was real, and it was selfless, and they could sense that. Plus, He had much truth to share with them, and most young people look for answers as they mature into adults. When young people desert a place, either the love of Christ, the truth of Christ, or the leadership of Christ is probably lacking there. Quite possibly all three.

"They need to be shown God's love. How? Show them you care about them. Show them you respect them as human beings. Show them you value and understand them. Show them you have answers for their questions and problems. Show them you are willing to sacrifice for their benefit. Show them these things, and they will be drawn to your sharing just like they were drawn to Jesus' sharing."



# **OBEYING GOD UPHILL:**

**How One Man Finds  
the Power of Christ**

OBEYING GOD UPHILL: How One Man Finds the Power of Christ

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# **OBEYING GOD UPHILL:**

## **How One Man Finds the Power of Christ**

**E. J. Smeltz**

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## Chapter 1

### Closing Down

As we arrive at church, asphalt spreads before us like an empty black sea. Not long ago you could not find a place to park fifteen minutes before service. Now the parking lot grows emptier each Sunday. It is less than one-quarter full for our one-and-only service today. We used to fill the lot twice each Sunday morning: not any more.

As I pull into a space, I see the district superintendent's car, a late-model custom red BMW, parked in the row ahead of mine.

"It looks like the pastor and elders are going to have another bad day today, honey," I tell my wife, Molly.

"Why do you say that, honey?" she asks.

"Do you see the red car just ahead?"

"Yes."

"That belongs to our district superintendent."

"How do you recognize it?" she asks.

I tell her, "Look at the license plate." It reads, "IMDS1."

"I see," she says. "Let's pray about it."

"I have been, but it does not seem to be doing any good."

"Louis Shepherd," Molly says in a low voice, "I would hope that the Lord would do *something* when one of His elders prays."

"Pastor says that praying to God is a waste of time if we ask for something He does not want us to have," says our fifteen-year-old son, Jody. Jody is our human tape recorder, having a photographic memory of everything he has seen or heard since around the age of five. Our pet name for him is "Tape."

"Let's hope then that the Lord agrees with this request," Molly says.

"How do we know anything Pastor says is true? Is he always right? Is he ever right? How can we tell?" asks our thirteen-year-old daughter, Jenny. She has a talent of being able to speak out things we all think, but have not yet found the words to express. Or maybe we have yet to



find the courage to express them. She has never lacked for guts. Good manners and good judgment, yes. Guts, no. The four of us leave the car and walk into the church without another word.

Today's Sunday service is the same as hundreds of others done here before. It starts out in the usual way with a hymn, a prayer, and the usual announcements. Pastor introduces a special guest: the district superintendent. No one wants to see him here, including Pastor. Everyone remembers the last time he came. We pass the collection plate during the second hymn. Pastor preaches the sermon. We sing the last hymn. Pastor gives the benediction. When he reminds everyone of the meeting of the elders, pastor and district superintendent immediately after the service, you can almost hear the groan rise out of the congregation. He dismisses everyone else.

I think to myself, "This is just fine. Everyone else gets to go home and have Sunday dinner while I and our ever-dwindling number of elders get to have the riot act read to us once again by the district superintendent." I ask the Lord, "Are the pastor and elders at the Second Avenue Church being punished for something?" Without listening for an answer, I enter the meeting room and shut the door behind me.

\* \* \*

Molly puts my lunch into the microwave as I walk through our front door and collapse into my favorite chair. Sensing something is wrong, she walks over to me.

"How was the meeting, honey?"

As I look up at her, I cannot speak. I have no words to say how I feel. Tears of frustration and hurt and anger well up in my eyes. Molly misses nothing. She gently puts her hand on my shoulder and patiently waits until I can talk. "They are shutting us down in three months if things don't improve," I say.

"Who is shutting us down?" she asks.

"The DS and those above him."

"Oh. But don't they realize this church has served this community for over a hundred years?"

“The DS said that it did not matter how long the church had been here if it can’t pay its own bills. He talks as if our church is nothing but a business to him, that all that matters is money. We have three months to prove to him and his superiors that we can make this congregation profitable again.”

“Or else?”

“Or else they are closing the building and selling it to a development company which will tear it down and construct an office complex on the land upon which it stands. The company has already approached them about buying the property. They say it is in a prime location for what they want to build. The DS says that this congregation, our congregation, has become a disappointment and an embarrassment to him and his superiors.”

“A disappointment and embarrassment? He used those words?”

“Yes, he did.”

The microwave sounds. Molly brings me my lunch. I eat in silence. She retreats to the kitchen. Although I cannot see her, I can hear her quietly choking back tears.

I think back on the things that have happened at that church and what it has meant to my family and me. My wife and I were christened there as babies. The two of us met in that church as children, in the now-defunct youth group. We were married there, had our own children christened there, met many of our friends there. Now the building that housed those heartfelt memories may soon be gone forever.

Jody breaks the silence. He looks sad, but it is for a different reason. “Dad?”

“Yes, son?”

“I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“It’s getting difficult for me to go to church any more,” he says.

“Why is that?”

“Because I listen and I listen, but I don’t get anything out of what is said there. I hear the words, but they don’t mean anything to me. They never did. They don’t do me any good, Dad. The whole thing is just a waste of time for me. Pastor has about four years’ worth of

sermons, two hundred and two of them, to be exact. He reads them in order each week until he gets to the end, and then he starts over. If you want, I can type out for you from memory word-for-word what his sermon will be next Sunday. I can give it to you in a printout that you can read during the next sermon if you want.”

“Son, that’s a serious thing to say. If you would, please, type out what you think he is going to say, and I will follow it during his sermon this coming Sunday.” I learned several years ago not to challenge Jody on anything he says he remembers. Verify, yes. Challenge, no. I lost every time.

“OK, will do, Dad,” Tape says. “Let me put it to you this way: how much would you want to go to church if you already knew everything that was going to be said and already knew it wasn’t going to mean anything to you?”

“I imagine I would lose any desire to go to church at all,” I reply. “There would be no point to it.”

Then Jenny chimes in with her standard question: “How do we know Pastor is telling us the truth?”

“Why do you ask that, Jen?” her mother asks.

“Because I see all sorts of people on television and on the web preaching all sorts of things, and a lot of it disagrees. How do we know we should even be listening to Pastor? How do we know that people who disagree with him are not right and Pastor is wrong? Has anyone in this family ever compared his sermons with the bible to see if they agree or disagree?” Jen asks.

Jody responds, “I have, and let me tell you that there is almost no agreement between what Pastor says and what the bible says.”

Molly questions, “Are you qualified to make a determination like that, Jody?”

Jody says, “I know what I have read in the bible, and I know what I hear in church. And let me tell you they got almost nothing to do with each other. Pastor bases his sermons not on the bible, but on his own opinions. That’s why he rarely quotes scripture: his sermons are so far away from the bible that he has trouble finding any verses that even appear to agree with what he preaches.”

“Why didn’t you say something to us about this before, son?” I ask.

“Because the question, ‘Who are you to judge?’ kept running through my mind and stopping me cold,” he says. “I did not know how to respond to it until just now. Therefore, I kept silent. I also had no desire to rock the boat. But the boat appears to be sinking these days, so rocking it does not seem to matter so much anymore.” All four of us fall silent to digest what we just heard.

As I toss in bed that night, question after question marches through my mind, haunting me. What went wrong? Where did we fall short? What can we do about this situation? Whose fault is this? What does it mean when the leader of a congregation has nothing but a collection of canned sermons to recite to his people? How do we know Pastor is telling us the truth? Does Pastor say anything worth believing or acting on? Questions come like an endless parade of firebrands which scorch my soul because I don’t know how to answer them. After several hours of this, I cannot stand it anymore, so I get out of bed and put on my street clothes.

“Are you going somewhere, dear?” Molly is barely conscious enough to ask.

“I’m going to drive around some, honey.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m OK to drive.”

“I love you. Hurry home.”

I slide into our Malibu and take off towards the local 24-hour department store to check out some DVDs mentioned in a sale flier earlier today. Half-way there, my car stalls and refuses to restart. I know nothing about car engines, and I forgot to bring my cell phone. And it’s 2:47 in the morning on a Monday. The streets are deserted. I’m stuck. Tears of frustration flood down my face.

“Of all the times to have car trouble. Father in heaven, my *car* is broken, my *church* is broken, I can’t sleep, and I have no clue what to do about any of this. Lord, please help me in Jesus’ name.”

I struggle to find more words, but I am too depressed to say anything else. As I sit there pondering what to do next, in the mirror I see a pair of slow-moving headlights. The car pulls up behind me and

stops. I think, “What a wonderful life this is. Now I am about to be mugged or murdered on top of everything else. It could be police, but not with my recent luck.” As I watch in the mirror, a person steps out of the car behind me and walks casually up to my driver’s side window. I look, expecting to see a gun or other weapon, but this fellow has nothing in his hands. He taps lightly on my window and then steps back a bit so I can get a good look at him under the street lamp. I’ve seen that face before. It’s my neighbor. I don’t know his name, but I definitely know the face. He lives on our street several houses to the north of us. With a sigh of relief, I lower the window so we can talk.

“Hi. I am Gabriel Angelo, one of your neighbors. You can call me ‘Gabe.’ I recognized your vehicle. Are you having car trouble?” he asks kindly.

“Yes, it stalled a few minutes ago and won’t restart,” I say. “By the way, my name is ‘Lou Shepherd.’ It’s good to meet you.”

“It’s good to meet you. Does the engine turn over when you turn the starter key?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have fuel?”

“Yes, it reads over three-quarters.”

“I might be able to help, then. If you are willing to pop the hood, I can take a look.”

I fumble in the dark for the hood release. The hood pops up.

Gabe grabs a flashlight out of his car and looks intently at the engine. After a few seconds, he reaches in, does something, and then backs out from under the hood.

“Try it now,” he says.

The engine immediately catches and idles smoothly. He closes the hood.

“Thanks,” I say. “What was it?”

“A wire came loose from your ignition system. I put it back in place. Do you need anything else?”

“No.”

As I reach for my wallet to give him some money, he says, “No need for that. Just chalk it up to answered prayer.”

I look at him dumbfounded. “‘Answered prayer’? What do you mean?”

“You prayed to the Lord for help, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but...”

“But, what? Where do you think your prayers go when you pray from a broken heart?” He asks these things not roughly, but with kindness and mild curiosity.

I just look at him. “Where were you going just now when you came upon me?” I stammer, not knowing how to respond to his question.

He smiles gently. “I was on my way to help my brother.”

“I didn’t know you had any family around here.”

“Some. Well, have a good night.”

I watch him as he gets in his car, turns around and heads back in the direction from which he came. Strange man. I thought he said he was on his way to help his brother, but now he’s heading home. Forgetting about the DVDs, I return home myself, not knowing what to make of these events or of this neighbor I just met. I go back to bed and fall into a peaceful sleep.

## Chapter 2

### A Peculiar Neighbor

Molly, Jenny and I sit at the kitchen table eating breakfast. Jenny pretends to be totally absorbed in a teen novel while she eats breakfast and listens in on her parents as they discuss the events of the night before.

"Molly, I said the man *knew* I had prayed to the Lord for help," I explain.

"How could he know that? When you prayed, who else knew you prayed?" she asks.

"Just me, honey."

"Just you?" Molly challenges. "Didn't your prayer *go* anywhere after you prayed it, or did it just sit there with you in your car?"

"OK, you got me. It went to the Lord. So a grand total of two parties knew I prayed. I knew and the Lord knew."

"All right. So in order for our neighbor to have known that you prayed, either you told him, or..."

"The Lord told him," I add. Stunned, we sit at the breakfast table and look at each other, not believing what we had just concluded.

Molly shudders. "I thought that God quit talking to people a long time ago."

I stare off into space. "That's what Pastor has taught for a long time in our church."

"In our nearly-dead church, you mean?" Jenny says.

"Oh, Jenny," I say. "I thought you were busy pretending to read while you fooled us into thinking you were not listening to us."

Realizing she has been discovered, she puts down the book and quickly finishes her cereal. She does have a point, though. I am beginning to wonder if our pastor's teachings were ever worth hearing. This has not been a comfortable Monday morning so far. "What scriptures did Pastor cite to show that God no longer talks to people?" I ask. "I don't remember any."

"Nor do I," Molly says.

I suggest, “Jody probably remembers.” I yell, “Hey, Tape, come on down. I got a question for that photographic memory of yours.” He comes running from upstairs. His shoes stutter across the floor tiles as he turns towards us. Molly flinches at all four chirps, imaging the abuse his knees and ankles must be taking.

Our son, feeling no pain, stands up straight and calmly offers, “Yes, Dad?”

I say, “I know you have heard many of Pastor’s sermons.”

“Yes, all two hundred and two of them. His eyes dart to the ceiling for a moment where a high-speed tape of our church services must be playing in his mind. Smiling, he meets my gaze and adds “Repeatedly.”

I ask, “When Pastor has said that God does not talk with anyone anymore, which scripture passages has he cited?”

Jody’s right cheek twitches, and the start of a snicker escapes his nose. He bites his lip to force a sober answer. “Scriptures?” Both cheeks twitch. He cannot keep a straight face because he knows I’m in for a hilarious disappointment. “Dad, you got to be kidding. The most scriptures he has ever cited in any of his sermons are two. He has gone for as many as eleven sermons in a row without citing any scriptures at all. He cites much more Shakespeare and Freud than bible.” Tape catches himself delighting in the report too much. He inhales and humbly concludes, “But to answer your question, he has never provided a single scripture to support his point about God not talking with anyone today.”

“So if Pastor is wrong about that, and God does talk with people today, that explains how Gabriel might have known.” I’m talking half to Molly and half to myself.

“Might have known what, Dad?” Jody asks.

“That I had prayed for help with the car last night, Jody.”

The school bus pulls up to the curb.

“Oh. Got to run. School beckons me.” Jody says with his arms opened wide to be mockingly dramatic as he and Jen rush out to catch the bus.

“You mean Sarah beckons you, don’t you, *lover boy*?” chimes Jenny.



"I told you not to mention my girlfriends around Mom and Dad, didn't I, you skinny twerp?" Jody takes off fast because he knows how much Jenny detests being called that. She pursues and punches him hard in the back as he reaches the bus. The rumble of the bus engine drowns their angry voices as they board. They do not hear when their mother objects to Jody skipping breakfast again.

I smile at Molly and say, "We can still take them back to Sears if you desire, hon."

She smiles back. "I think that guarantee ran out a while ago. We will just have to keep them around until they grow out of it."

"And how many more decades do you think that will be?" I say. Molly only smiles in reply.

I say, "Back to Gabe. Whether we fully understand what he did or how he did it last night, he treated me kindly. How about if you cook him a plate of those chocolate chip cookies everybody loves and we can take them over to him tonight as a way to say thanks?"

She nods. We kiss as I grab my lunch and leave for work.

\* \* \*

Gabe Angelo lives on our street seven houses to the north of us. He lives right beside the house of Doctor George Schaefer, who has the biggest oak tree in the neighborhood in his front yard. Doc Schaefer retired recently, but that doesn't keep anyone from calling him "Doc." He likes to call his big tree "General Sherman" in honor of the giant redwood by the same name out west.

The county seat of Brickman County in northeast Ohio, Marilla is a modest city of not quite 30,000 people. Our middle class neighborhood has existed since the early 1970's. The development was originally carved out of a natural forest; tall trees still surround the area and decorate back yards as well as front. Deer continue to live in this area, and they dine occasionally on the flowers which grow in our neighborhood. The houses around us are well-maintained, as are the lawns and trees. Both the old and the young live there, so the sound of children at play drifts around the neighborhood along with the scent of the honeysuckles which grow beside our home.

On summer evenings, the carillon at a nearby church plays familiar hymns. Right now it plays “Be Thou My Vision,” my favorite hymn. That hymn played at our wedding. This town is a place of peace and sweet memories for us. Molly and I silently count our blessings as we stroll hand-in-hand from our home to Gabe’s with the cookies she baked for him that afternoon. Just before we arrive at the door, Molly whispers to me, “I don’t want to stay long.” She glances at her watch. “My favorite Monday night program starts in thirty-five minutes.” I agree. This should not take long.

Gabe meets us with a smile at the door. I start the conversation. “Gabe, this is my wife Molly, and she baked some cookies for you to say thanks for helping me last night.”

He says, “Good to meet you, Molly. Come on in, and let’s have some of those cookies together. I *love* chocolate chip.” He opens the door; we enter his living room.

“Have a seat anywhere,” Gabe says. “You can put the cookies right there on the coffee table.” Molly and I sit together on the sofa in front of the coffee table. He disappears into the kitchen and almost shouts, “Do you folks want anything to drink?”

“Water will be fine for me,” I say.

“Me, too,” says Molly.

While Gabe gets the water, Molly and I look around the room. It is neat, clean, uncluttered. The furniture is sparser than what I would prefer, but it looks good, nonetheless. Wood tones prevail, and high levels of craftsmanship show everywhere in the furniture. These things make me wonder. “Do you work with wood, Gabe?”

“I sure do. I’ve been working for years to furnish my house by making everything from scratch. I’m not done crafting it all, but I am having a lot of fun in the process.” Gabe explains.

“Do you end up saving much money this way, building it yourself?” I ask.

“Oh, no.” Gabe reenters the room shaking his head. He places our water on the coffee table in front of us and sits in the chair opposite the coffee table from us. “By the time I drive all over God’s creation trying to find just the right pieces of wood in the right condition, and spend the many hours it takes to cut and assemble and carve them, I’ve spent

far more than what it would take to buy the items from a store. But then I wouldn't have as much fun, would I?" He flashes a toothy grin at us both. This man enjoys what he does.

"I suppose not," Molly ventures. She sees a synthesizer with keyboard sitting beside the computer in the corner of the room and asks, "Do you play the keyboard?"

Gabe says, "No, my wife Melissa is the musical keyboard person in the family. The boys and I stick to the keyboards with at least a hundred keys." He smiles.

Then Molly spots some pictures over the fireplace and motions to them. "Is this your family?"

"Yes. Over there is our wedding picture, and the pictures flanking that are our two boys. Right now the three of them are visiting some relatives in Kansas," Gabe explains.

"And you remain at home by yourself? That doesn't sound like much fun," Molly says.

"It's not bad. I got Methuselah for company." He looks around for his pet. "He's around here someplace, probably sleeping behind some furniture. Methuselah is our house cat. I had some things I had to take care of in town, so I encouraged Mel and the boys to go on to Kansas without me. Also, by my staying here, that frees them to stay out west as long as they choose. I do computer consulting work from time to time, and two of my customers needed me on-site recently."

"How old are your boys? In this picture they appear to be about the same age as our own kids."

"If I remember right, our boys are currently fourteen and twelve," Gabe says.

"I have never seen them around school. Do you home school?" Molly asks.

"Yes. We started home schooling them when they reached kindergarten age. It gives us some flexibility in what we teach the boys and how we teach them. The trip to Kansas is also a field trip for school."

"What are they studying out there?" Molly asks.

"Geography, culture, weather, power distribution and usage. Various things."

“Aren’t you concerned about tornadoes?” she asks. “The Kansas tornado season has started. I saw it on a television special about tornadoes last week.”

“Mel and the boys know what to do. I am not concerned,” Gabe replies.

While Molly chats with Gabe, I keep wondering how I can ask the question I want to ask. Words don’t come. I pray a quick prayer to the Lord for help. Gabe looks at me and says, “Lou, I suppose you are wondering about last night, how I knew you had prayed. Is that so?”

“Yes,” I reply. It shocks me that my prayer has been heard and granted so quickly.

“One of the gifts of the spirit is ‘word of knowledge,’ where the Lord tells someone things he would have no way of knowing otherwise. That gift was at work last night,” Gabe explains.

“I have never heard of that,” I say.

“That is not unusual, many Christians haven’t. What church do you attend?” he asks.

“*Oh my God is that your cat?*” Molly spies this monster of a house cat stepping out from behind the sofa. The cat slowly yawns, stretches, and then looks at us to size up these unfamiliar people in his home.

“Yes, that’s our Methuselah, all twenty-seven pounds of him,” Gabe says.

“Twenty-seven pounds? That cat is huge!” Molly exclaims. “And quite beautiful.”

Methuselah looks right at Molly as if he could not care less what she thought of him. He has a long-haired silver and white coat patterned like tiger stripes. He is a gorgeous cat. A bit of fading gray hair frames his face and makes him look somewhat old, but other than that, he is stunning to see. There appears not to be an ounce of fat on him anywhere. I ask, “How old is he?”

“We have had him for a number of years, but we don’t know how old he was before that,” Gabe replies. “He likes to stretch out on the sofa sometimes, but when he does, it doesn’t leave much room for anyone not already on the sofa.”

“I can understand that. Uh, what was I saying, Gabe?”

“Where you go to church?”

“Second Avenue Church of Marilla,” I admit.

“It makes sense, then, that you never heard about ‘word of knowledge.’ If I recall correctly, they don’t teach that sort of thing there.

Molly jumps in. “Then do you condemn them for not believing or teaching that there?” For some reason, my wife is spoiling for a fight.

“Oh, no, Molly,” Gabe says. “Where did you get an idea like that? These are my brothers and sisters in Christ. How could I possibly condemn people my Savior died to save? Let me explain what I mean. The bible is a huge book, over 31,000 verses. It would be easy for any of us, myself included, to neglect various parts of it. Depending on which parts we neglect, we will be weak in those areas because we will lack God’s truth. But no matter how neglectful people might be, I would never condemn them, nor even look down on them. If I condemned them for that, I would have to condemn myself for neglecting some other part of the bible I have not yet got around to studying or dealing with. The idea of the church is for us to work together, for your strengths to help me in my weak areas and for my strengths to help you in your weak areas. In the meantime, we should all put forth effort to grow up in Christ, to be more like Him. But every Christian has some areas which are weaker than others, including me.”

“Oh, I see,” Molly says. “Would that mean, then, that growing up in the Lord would eventually require each of us to grow in areas of scripture we had previously neglected?”

“That’s exactly what I am saying,” Gabe explains. “We cannot grow in areas in which we refuse to change. If we want to grow up in Christ, we must occasionally force ourselves to learn and to function in areas we might have ignored or shunned before.” Gabe gets a far-off look. “I remember years ago trying to share some scriptures with some of the leaders of the Second Avenue congregation, the pastor and some elders, as I recall. They politely told me that those scriptures were not compatible with their approved doctrine and that I should go elsewhere.” Gabe shares these things in a matter-of-fact way, as if he were a reporter recounting events which happened to some other person. He was not offended by what happened, just saddened. He continues, “I went peaceably, but later that night, I wrote in my journal

what the scriptures said was going to happen as a result of their refusal if they did not repent of ignoring God's word. I forgot about the matter until now."

This arouses my curiosity. "May I trouble you to have a peek at that portion of your journal?" I ask.

Gabe looks at me and says, "I generally don't allow anyone to read my journal since it is personal to me, as you can imagine." Then he grins. "Plus, my handwriting looks like it is closely related to early hieroglyphics. But I am willing to read that portion to you if you like."

"Yes, if you would, please," I say.

Gabe retreats upstairs to his bedroom and returns shortly with a thin bound notebook, a college lab book, it would appear. The date on the front of the notebook makes it about fifteen years old. The faded cover shows its age with dog-eared corners and circular stains on the front. They appear to be coffee stains. He says, "I remember the time frame because Melissa was pregnant with Johnny." He flips through the book as if looking for a cooking recipe. Then he stops and hands me the notebook. He points to a part about halfway down the left-hand page. He is right: I can make out a letter here and there, but it would take me quite a while to figure out what that page said, assuming I ever could. "See what I mean?" he says. I nod.

Then he takes the book back so he can read it. He pauses, and his eyes take on a sadness I had not seen in them before. Before he starts reading, he says, "Please forgive the direct tone of my writing. I strive to be brutally honest in my journal. Sometimes it is the only place I can be brutally honest without getting kicked out of wherever I am." He half-smiles and starts reading.

October Sixth. I went to the Second Avenue Church in Marilla for what appears to be the last time today. I met with their pastor and three of their elders to share some scriptures the Lord had brought to mind concerning them. They rejected those scriptures. I am saddened by this because that congregation contains some of my brothers and sisters in Christ, and they have chosen a hard road for themselves. I hurt for them.

When someone is that hard against the scriptures, pride and rebellion are always present. Because pride comes before destruction, and rebellion against the Lord reaps rejection from the Lord, I expect that one day the Lord will bring about the dispersal of their congregation and the destruction of their building. Because they are bent on treating the church like a business instead of a living organism designed and nourished and led by Him, their church property will probably end up as the site of some sort of business complex. I do not expect that this will happen soon, but after a decade or more of steadily declining each year, the congregation wasting away in their disobedience to him. As their rejection of God's truth has been a source of great disappointment and embarrassment to the Lord, that congregation will one day become a source of disappointment and embarrassment to their own denomination.

Tears well up in his eyes as he speaks; his heart aches so much for his brothers and sisters in Christ. He closes the notebook and looks up at me. "Last night when you prayed about your car, that wasn't the only thing you prayed for, was it?" Gabe asks.

"No, I prayed for my church as well," I say.

"How many of these words about Second Avenue have come to pass?" he asks.

"It appears in about three months, all of them will have come to pass," I say. "But how did you know? How in God's name could you write what would happen to my congregation fifteen years in the future?"

Gabe takes a long breath and closes his eyes for a moment. Then he looks at me and speaks. "They were not my words then, and they are not my words now. I simply asked the Lord to show me the truth of the situation, no matter how painful it might be. And He did. Those were His words about the consequences of pride and rebellion. I only paraphrased what He had already said about such things many years beforehand in His word."

"What can I do now?" I ask.

“You can love the truth with all your heart, seek the truth with all your heart, and do the truth with all your heart. That is all any of us can do. God always wants that of us,” Gabe says.

“How can I help my church, though? Can it be saved?” I ask.

“That depends on the hearts of the people in it. Hardness of heart can be difficult to overcome, especially when it has existed for a long time. At first, the hardness is merely a mistake. Then it becomes an ingrained habit. In the end it becomes an approved tradition, formally-accepted disobedience to God, in a manner of speaking. When a non-scriptural tradition has gone on for years, it becomes part of the people who hold to it. The people reinforce one another in their disobedience to God. They internalize their hardness towards His truth so much that they find it nearly impossible to think any other way. I’m not saying there is no hope, but you might find it wise to prepare yourself for the worst regarding your congregation.”

“Are you willing to teach me to see as you see and to hear as you hear?” I ask.

“Are you willing to develop a love of the truth no matter how painful it might be?” Gabe looks at me as if he were plumbing the depths of my soul.

“Yes,” I say.

He thinks for a moment, and then he says, “I cannot teach you myself, but I can take you to the scriptures, and they can teach you. I can take you to the Holy Spirit, and He can guide you into the truth. Unless the Holy Spirit teaches you the truth, whatever you think is true is actually garbage. Too many professing Christians today have been taught by other people instead of by God. Because of that, many of them have had so much trouble understanding the bible that they quit expecting the things of God to make sense. But it does not have to be that way: with His help we *can* understand His word. Are you willing to be taught by the scriptures and by the Holy Spirit?”

“I am,” I say.

“What about you, Molly? What your husband wants to do is difficult because it requires much humility and soul-searching. And at times it can be unsettling or downright painful. Not many people even



attempt what he is about to attempt. Do you love him enough to support him wholeheartedly in this?"

"I do," she says.

"So be it. Both of you be back here at 7:00 P.M. tomorrow."

"Why can't we start right now?" I inquire.

"Because I need time to get with the Lord to find out what He would have me share with you first. I try not to make a move unless I know I am in sync with His thinking. I got to get with Him before I can get with you." A smile creeps across his face. "I hope you understand what I mean."

"I understand exactly. You must get marching orders from our Commander-in-Chief before you can know which way to march," I say, smiling. Molly gives me that "it's-time-to-go-now" look. I add, "We have to run, Gabe. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Lou. Goodnight, Molly."

Lou Shepherd thinks he understands Christianity, but when he meets a boy with supernatural power and people in town start dying mysteriously, he learns that nearly everything he thought he knew about his faith was wrong.

Obeying God Uphill

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