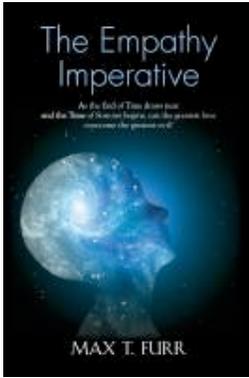


# The Empathy Imperative

As the End of Time draws near  
and the Time of Sorrows begins, can the greatest love  
overcome the greatest evil?



MAX T. FURR



*As the biblical Tribulation begins, and even as world disasters increase in frequency and strength, Jeff Hale, Professor of Evolutionary Biology, remains an unrepentant skeptic. His only concerns are to educate his students, resolve his romantic ambivalence, and come to terms with the death of his estranged, fundamentalist father. Yet, even after religious and political forces align themselves against him, he will become the focal point of events unparalleled in the history of the universe.*

# The Empathy Imperative

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## **The Empathy Imperative**

Fix reason firmly in her seat, *and call* to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must approve the homage of reason rather than of blindfolded fear. (Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Peter Carr, 10 Aug. 1787, Lower case "g" in "god" retained)



# **The Empathy Imperative**

Max T. Furr

## Chapter 9 Atonement

(Two years later)

For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul. (Leviticus 17:11, AV)

Peter John Latterday was troubled. *It can't possibly be true*, he thought as he watched the news in the office of his Florida mega-church. *It's a fantastic coincidence!*

On the screen, FCNN's Ted Robertson was reporting on TiConGlobal's sweeping acquisition of the last six multinational corporations in existence. The buy-out created one global corporation comprised of seven divisions, including the parent division, TiConGlobal itself.

*The beast with seven heads. Surely it can't be!* Latterday thought.

On the screen, Robertson gushed with enthusiasm that TiConGlobal will now control virtually every aspect of human wants and needs in all nations except for Muslim theocracies.

He gave a brief description of the Corporation's new organizational structure. Each division will continue as before in their particular field of activity: agriculture and textiles, construction, pharmaceuticals and health, transportation and shipping, energy, communications and security. TiConGlobal itself will function as the administrative, financial, and legal arm for the entire corporate body, as well as provide for government interface. Its previously competing functions will be distributed to the appropriate divisions.

Robertson turned to the large monitor behind him that was streaming video of three guest panelists. He began to question each of the three. He wanted to know what impact the merger would have on the world's economy, and about what changes might TiConGlobal bring to the United Christian States of America.

As the crawler at the bottom of the screen drew his attention, Latterday barely heard the questions. He mouthed the words as they

moved across the screen, "Antony Kareen Jordan, President and CEO of TiConGlobal, announced this morning that the Corporation will bring the nations of Islam into the global community as equal members, and there will be prosperity, lasting world peace, and freedom for all nations."

"A lie," Latterday hissed at the screen. "The only way you'll control Muslim countries is to kill all the Muslims, and I expect after they take out Israel, you will!"

He thought of the increasing number of brushfire wars around the globe and the war still raging in the Middle East, threatening to expand into a regional conflagration centering on Israel.

"The liar talks of peace when anyone with ears and eyes understands that war and hunger are tearing this world apart."

The war in the Middle East is essentially asymmetric, with the advantage favoring the Muslims. InterSeF's air force is grounded most days of the month by the ever-present ash cloud. When they did fly, it was at an altitude low enough to come within range of ground fire, which left almost no warning time to evade surface-to-air, heat seeking missiles.

The Muslims claim that the detonation of the Aira Caldera, which created the ash cloud two years ago, is proof that Allah is with them. Never mind that they are having their own share of disasters.

Latterday counted the letters in Jordan's three names. There were six in each. He flipped open his bible and thumbed to Revelation 13. Skimming down the page, he found the eighteenth verse: "*Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.*"

"No!" he mumbled at the page. "That really means nothing. Ronald Reagan's names were composed of six letters each and it meant nothing." *Or did it?* He thought. *Wasn't it the Reagan presidency that began the march to deregulation, to globalization, and to an unfettered free-market—policies that made the eventual rise of TiConGlobal possible?*

The thought occurred to him that Reagan and Jordan could be the same entity—the beast. He dismissed the thought as absurd and listened again to the interview. They were discussing Jordan.

The male panelist called him a walking mystery, noting that he was wholly unknown to the world just three weeks ago and seemed to have come from nowhere. Indeed, his name came to prominence only when Santerra Ag, the last holdout multinational corporation, acquiesced to TiConGlobal's buyout offer.

"The deal was reached," the panelist reminded the viewers, "yesterday morning at an unscheduled meeting of the Santerra Ag board of directors. Jordan was present with a final buyout offer. The meeting followed the apparent suicide of fifty-eight year old Milo Hampton, former president and CEO of Santerra Ag.

"Hampton had been the major obstacle to TiConGlobal's bid. His son, Ted Hampton, had been an outspoken opponent as well until his father's sudden death. Although the circumstances and timing of the apparent suicide raised suspicions, according to the InterSeF report, there was no evidence of foul play.

"Milo Hampton's wife, Monique, said he awoke about twelve thirty yesterday morning and rose from the bed. She asked him if anything was wrong, but he said nothing. He left the room, and minutes later she heard a loud noise downstairs. Investigating, she found him in his study.

"The report did not elaborate on the cause of death, but I got it from an anonymous source that he apparently killed himself with his antique, frontier Sharps buffalo gun. He had a substantial weapons collection, but the Sharps was his favorite.

"After questioning Mrs. Hampton and others, it was apparent that no one had any idea he was depressed.

"The other members of the board," the panelist continued, "apparently knew nothing of the death until the meeting was convened, at which time it was announced by Ted.

"Oddly enough, a move to postpone merger negotiations was nixed by Ted, saying that his father would have wanted the meeting to proceed. It did proceed, but didn't last long. According to my source, the persuasiveness of Jordan's oration was nothing short of phenomenal, swinging every board member to favor the buyout."

At first glance, Jordan appeared to be a rather unlikely person to have acquired such a position with TiConGlobal. He was thirty-two

years old—astonishingly young—Greek-god handsome, about six foot four, impeccably dressed, carried a toned body of medium build, and exuded a personable manner that could alleviate the deepest of one's anxieties.

On the screen, one of the women panelist, apparently an opponent of TiConGlobal's unbridled power voiced her doubts about Hampton's suicide and cautioned that Jordan's rhetoric could seduce any and everyone who listened with an innocent ear. "We should beware of him," the panelist said. "We know nothing of him except what the Corporation released. I can find no record of his past from any independent source. I have a bad feeling about him. He's too perfect and he's too smooth. No one can say 'no' to him, unless somehow Milo . . ."

She was cut short by the other panelists, all loudly talking at once. They attacked her as just another paranoid liberal, hatching conspiracy theories.

The male panelist bully-voiced the others into silence as he stated loudly and with admiration that Jordan possessed an uncanny ability to remember everyone's name and the names of their family members. "One person I interviewed—a Jon Wilmore—said Jordan stopped him as they passed in the hallway, called him by his name, put his hand on his shoulder, and asked with obvious sympathy how his son, Daniel, was doing in the hospital.

"Wilmore was mystified at how Jordan knew his name, his son's name, and that his son was in the hospital. Wilmore said it was 'downright spooky.' He said there is no reason why Jordan should know him, because he was not a prominent figure at Santerra Ag. In fact, he was one of thousands of middle managers from deep in the accounting department, and it was the first time he had ever seen Jordan in person. The man is absolutely phenomenal."

The other woman panelist, an apparent corporate insider, said the most frequent comment she heard from those who made his acquaintance is that they felt as though they had been close friends with him all their lives.

"What's not to love?" she cooed as she slowly shook her head. "And he's oh so drop-dead handsome. And by the way," she said, giggling, "he's single."

Latterday watched the presentation with increasing apprehension. One panelist spoke of the Corporation's Paris celebration. It was obvious that plans for the gala had been in the works for months, because it commenced within an hour after the final acquisition concluded.

The panelist said that it was a celebration, the likes of which were unmatched in the history of the world. All of Paris came alive in merriment. Champagne flowed like a river as men in tails, with carts laden with hors d'oeuvres and wine, appeared on virtually every major street corner. Restaurants threw open their doors. Orchestras and bands played throughout the city, throughout the evening. All of this was provided free of charge, courtesy of the Corporation.

People danced, drank, and partook of all manner of pleasures, even to acts of a lascivious nature in theaters open to the public. The panelist was quick to add that he'd obtained the report from a "reliable source," who had added that at least one such event broke down into a drunken orgy.

To Latterday, the debauchery was bad enough, but to add to his alarm, the panelist then stated that during the evening the earth experienced an unexpected and intense meteor shower during which many fireballs, at a rate of six to eight a minute, lit up the night sky directly over Paris and all of north-central France. People everywhere shouted with glee that this was a sign that even God was pleased with Jordan.

Latterday thumbed to Revelation 13:13 *"And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men."*

He looked back at the screen, searching his mind for more evidence. He recalled TiConGlobal's advertising campaign featuring the latest, erotically beautiful rock star. So brilliantly choreographed were the ads that her skimpily clad body in seductive dance became almost synonymous with the Corporation. *Could this be the Whore of Babylon riding the Beast?*

Max T. Furr

*Of course not. Damn it! I'm getting a bit daft—beginning to believe my own preaching.*

He thought of turning off the television, but could not. He listened again to the panel. Under Jordan's leadership, a new corporate logo bearing Jordan's full name would soon adorn almost all clothing—sometimes on an inside tag, but most often as a monogram, embroidered on the outside.

The corporatist female panelist happily reminded everyone of the wonderful fact that from now on, there will be only one credit card, and it will bear TiConGlobal's logo, as well as the name "Antony Kareen Jordan" in beautifully stylized calligraphy. It will be issued by the World Bank, the financial arm of corporate headquarters.

The move is on to make the card the only means of financial transactions throughout the world. There will be no more need of paper or metal money. Instead, the Corporation will issue Corporate World Credits, held in personal accounts at the World Bank, and people will conveniently purchase, anywhere in the world, whatever they wish.

Latterday's eyes dropped to Revelation 13:17 *"And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name."*

"Television . . . deactivate!" he forced himself to say. The screen went black. He opened the bottom right drawer of his desk. "I really need a drink," he said, listening to the anxiety in his own voice. He pulled out a bottle of Jack, plucked up a glass, and pressing the neck of the bottle firmly against the rim to steady his shaking hands, poured it half full.

He took a long sip, closed his eyes, and sat back. Feeling the liquid heat flowing down his throat, he tried to calm himself, to think clearly, to use reason.

He recalled the first event that gave him pause. Two years ago, the Aira Caldera on the island of Kyushu exploded. Over twenty million people died from the initial blast, the tsunami, and from the scalding ash that fell over southern Japan and eastern China, and the earth is still experiencing the devastation caused by the ash cloud—a

cloud made worse by volcanoes of lesser size erupting at ever-increasing rates on every continent.

Latterday took another long sip and closed his Bible. He considered these things in concert with other disasters around the world in the past two years, ever increasing in strength and frequency. There is no money left for aide, and too many disasters to address. The tsunami generated by the Japanese super volcano was rather mild once it hit California's west coast, killing or washing out to sea three hundred sixty-three people.

Then San Francisco was devastated six months ago by an earthquake measuring 8.85 on the Richter scale. Even buildings built to withstand quakes as great as the one in 1906 collapsed into rubble, many toppling over onto smaller buildings. Fifty-three thousand people lost their lives.

At first, he'd passed it all off to natural events and fought against any other conclusion than fantastic coincidences. Yet as the frequency of disasters increased, he felt his own End Times sermons eating away at his skepticism, leaving behind the hollowness of uncertainty.

Latterday was a showman, living the very meaning of divine decadence. He had fine cars, a twenty-million dollar home on the ocean near Cape Canaveral, and a six-million dollar estate in the North Carolina Mountains. He had a corporate jet, a yacht, diamond rings, Rolex watches, the finest clothes, and the most beautiful, voluptuous wife—his happily sad, weeping sidekick—money could buy. Of all he had, he considered her his best investment. The money that flowed into his coffers every time she shed her golden tears on his television network had boosted his net worth several times over.

"God has blessed me," he would tell his pious flock, and they—many of them poor and needy—marveled at how much he was blessed. They gave him money they could ill afford in hopes God would bless them too. Latterday promised them He would, though if not on earth, then in Heaven. He didn't think of it as selling snake oil.

As he reasoned with himself, he was selling them something they sorely needed. He was selling them hope, and that was priceless.

Every Sunday his mega church would fill with true believers. Latterday knew many of them came seeking a moment's respite from the sorrows and drudgery of everyday life. He would give them that. He knew others came to satisfy themselves that their past sins were absolved so they could get a fresh start sinning again on Monday. But there were those, too, who came to be healed by faith through Latterday's laying-on-of-hands. He knew, as well, that all came to placate their insecurities.

He thought of how much he was adding to their faith with what he thought of as his "healing show." Every Sunday there would be supplicants with a variety of physical woes. His wife would greet them as they arrived at the entrance. Those desiring to be healed would invariably mention their names, ailments and other details, which she secretly recorded. Then she would leave them with some doubt that they would be among those healed, and have them join the congregation gathering in the pews.

During each sermon, Latterday would periodically pause, lower his head, place a hand on his forehead, and then announce to the congregation that God had requested a specific person, whom he would call by name, to come forward. The surprised supplicant would rise and come forward, nervous and awed that Latterday knew her name and specific malady. It was obvious. God was speaking to him. She and the audience just knew it to be true.

But it wasn't the voice of God, of course, it was the voice of his wife backstage, transmitting to the hidden receiver in his ear. But the tension building in the supplicant, knowing that she had garnered the attention of the greatest power and authority in the universe, ensured that when Latterday shouted, "heal," or ordered that the "demons depart," and popped her on the forehead with the palm of his hand, or blew in her face, she would obligingly faint dead away.

Latterday was born Peter Bradford Drummond, and from his earliest childhood, his parents faithfully immersed him in the blood of Jesus. Upon reaching school age, they enrolled him in a Christian

academy where, with careful nurturing, he excelled. Upon graduation, he matriculated to a theological seminary, from which he graduated with honors—and disbelief.

The disbelief had come as a result of his earnest and uncompromising desire for intellectual honesty. Beginning his seminary schooling as a serious believer, he strove to strengthen his faith with evidence in order to convince others of the Truth.

He studied the religious philosophers and the theologians, and he studied the counter arguments available to him in the seminary library and on the Internet. It was on the Internet that he came across a rogue site allowing the viewer to read banned books. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* was one of those offered, and he was fascinated. He had heard and read a great number of derogatory remarks about Dawkins throughout his education, and here was firsthand knowledge of what this prominent atheist thought. Not daring to download the book for fear of detection, he read it online, and it shook his faith.

The arguments of the unbeliever forced him to probe deeper into his theology. In his drive to find objective truth, he acquired a working knowledge of Latin, Greek, and ancient Hebrew in order to study translations. His driving force was the unbeliever's claims of numerous misinterpretations, not the least of which was the mistranslation of the ancient Hebrew word "*alma*," which means, "young woman," in reference to Mary, Jesus' mother.

He found that Dawkins was correct. In fact, it turned out to be a well-known error. When the old Hebrew word "*almah*" was translated to Greek, the word "*parthenos*" was used, which means "virgin." He could find no evidence whether this was an honest mistake in interpretation or a deliberate deception to make Jesus' birth a miracle. In either case, the translation was wrong.

Drummond found it difficult to understand why teachers of Christianity didn't consider this a rather significant error, for it placed in serious doubt a major cornerstone in the foundation of Christian theology. It is quite likely that Mary was indeed a young woman when she conceived, but stating so in prophesy would have been irrelevant and unnecessary. Ancient Hebrew scholars, such as Isaiah,

were meticulous in specificity. If Isaiah had intended to prophesize the miracle of a virgin birth, then he would have used the word, "*Bethulah*," which meant, "virgin."

During this period of objective research, Drummond discovered numerous other problems, including factual errors and contradictions. It was all quite devastating. What he was taught as a child simply was not true. It was a fabrication about which theologians and erudite preachers simply do not tell. The obvious next question was; Could *any* of the details in biblical stories be trusted? How could anyone possibly know with certainty?

Drummond was on the horns of a dilemma. He had a decision to make. Either he could refocus his life in another direction, throwing out all of his expensive theological education, or he could continue to walk his planned path and keep his discovery to himself.

For Drummond, to be a deceiver was unacceptable. Yet he had come so far, and tens of millions of people find abiding comfort in believing as he once had. Still, to continue to pursue a career in Christian theology would have him living a lie. And there was a more immediate, and overriding, issue to consider. He was deeply in debt to the Corporation for student loans. He simply couldn't afford to start again.

Deciding to seek help, Drummond took his dilemma to the headmaster. After voicing his quandary, the old professor sat silent for a moment, looking with furrowed brow down at his folded hands. "Peter," he said at last, looking up, "when I was a student, I made the same discovery as you, and to tell the truth, I'm quite sure all scholars of Christianity have as well. A few chose to disbelieve the translations were in error, and ignore the other problems, devising arguments in defense of what they had been taught—willful self-delusion, you might call it.

"Nevertheless, I accepted the mistranslations, the contradictions, and the invalid historicity, for what they were. I chose, as have, I suspect, most biblical scholars, to perpetuate the deception as a Noble Lie—very much as Plato suggested.

"Peter, where would the poor, the tormented, the lonely, and the down-trodden be without hope of salvation? How would they find

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their way in the darkness of an uncertain and unforgiving world, without a guiding light? Given man's insensitivity and lack of empathy for his fellow man, it is obvious that the world isn't going to change. Should the hopeless be offered no hope at all?

"Peter," he continued, "it is for us who know these things, to hold the lamp of hope high, to strengthen their belief in that wonderful world to come. Think of it. They've bound themselves inextricably to their belief in the hereafter, and in a Master who truly loves them. They hold that belief deep in their hearts. It gives them comfort in times of sorrow. To tear that belief from them would be to destroy their last thread of hope, indeed, to destroy their very lives. Besides, even if Christianity is wrong, it doesn't mean there is no God, and the evidence, as I see it, nebulous as it may be, favors a universal Intelligence.

"Thus, we who know, believe it is an honorable thing to perpetuate Christianity. What possible harm can it do?"

"Peter, what would you say to a dying person, especially a child, who calls out to you?"

Peter didn't have to think twice about that. "I'd tell a dying person, especially a child, whatever he wants to hear that might give him comfort."

"Even if it were a lie?"

"Yes, even if it were a lie."

When Peter left the office, the decision was made. He opted to continue with his theological education, convinced that he would bring hope to the lonely, the sick, and the hopeless by the propagation of the Noble Lie. It was the highest of virtues, greater even, than truth itself.

After graduating at the top of his class, he accepted an invitation to join the seminary staff. He taught comparative theology for two years, and on Sundays, filled in as a substitute pastor for local churches.

Peter found that he had a natural talent for the pulpit, and soon there was standing room only wherever he preached. Because he chose to baptize folks in the river rather than the baptismal pool in the church, believers likened him to their concept of John the Baptist.

He liked that. In addition, because the bulk of his sermons concerned the End of Days, some folks began to call him Reverend Latterday. It caught on, and he liked that too.

Thus, at the end of his second year of teaching at the seminary, Peter resigned. He changed his name to Peter John Latterday, and began a traveling tent revival throughout the South and West. The positive response from the folks in every town was nothing short of extraordinary.

It was in those days that Peter began to change. He found that the more fire he breathed into his sermons, the more money adorned the plate. Preaching soon became more show than a craft of compassion, and the nobility of his mission diminished inversely proportional to the rising level of his coffers, awakening in him the demon of hedonism—the demon of self indulgence.

He evolved a taste for finer things, and his budding wealth convinced folks that he was a man blessed by God. After all, a man blessed by God, is a man God blesses with finer things. It was called Prosperity Theology. The Book of Job was proof enough.

His stage became more posh—red-satin drapes everywhere, a shiny, golden cross on the pulpit, and an ornate throne upon which he sat as the curtain rose at the beginning of each show.

After four years working his traveling faith show—as he thought of it—he arranged to have a church built in Florida on the beach near Cape Canaveral. To garner a much larger audience, he founded his own television ministry.

The church would be large and impressive, such as to inspire a greater number of true believers to swap cash for absolution, and the television ministry would extract cash from a far greater audience. Once the church was built, he shut down his traveling faith show, purchased a lavish estate, set up his TV ministry, and proceeded to build his fortune.

Now, as Latterday watched the news and thought of the biblical events foreshadowing the End of Days, it seemed to him that it was all coming to pass.

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He rose from his desk and paced the floor, considering, reasoning, rejecting, accepting, then rejecting again the possible truth of Revelation. With each thought that it was true came a feeling of foreboding so deep, his very soul rebelled against it. "It can't be!" he said repeatedly.

The phone on his desk intoned a call. Moving to it, he noticed the blinking red light on the receiver, indicating the call was encrypted. He punched the appropriate line button, and keyed the speaker.

"Yes? Latterday here," he said, halfheartedly.

"Dr. Latterday," came the voice of a man obviously anxious about something. "Thank God I got through to you. I'm Foster Johnston. I'm a Computer Program Engineer at NASA. I've been to your church . . . several times lately, but that's not why I called.

"Have you heard about the mission NASA's mounting; the one they say is taking supplies to the moon base? It's on the news, but they don't know what it's really about—the real mission, I mean. The secret mission."

Latterday was interested. He plucked up the receiver. "What's the secret mission?"

"Uh, I'm not supposed to be telling anyone about this, but I know you to be a man of God and won't tell anyone . . . but I have a question first. I have to know . . . is this the End of Days . . . I mean, you know, the end of time? You've been preaching that it's very near—signs and all that—that we're even now in the tribulation with all that's going on around the world and that something big will happen soon."

Latterday was becoming impatient. "Yes, yes. I've been preaching that. What's the secret mission?"

"Well, do you recall about two years ago, the robotic mission to the comet Apophis? The news release said it was going to make a close flyby for a scientific study of its composition."

"Yes, I recall hearing something about that."

"Well, the mission was not to study Apophis, Dr. Latterday . . . it was to study Dolos, an asteroid. The asteroid's on a collision course with us . . . with earth! They sent the probe to determine its

composition and precise trajectory so they could decide how to deflect it.

"They already knew its size—fifteen kilometers in diameter . . . that's a little over nine miles! The one that killed off the dinosaurs was just a bit smaller, though this one isn't quite as dense, but it will still be capable of blasting a hole in the earth several miles deep."

The caller paused, but Latterday said nothing. He was stunned to silence. He no longer doubted that this was indeed the End of Days.

"That's the reason for the mission," said Johnston. "They've determined how to deflect it. They're going to try a kinetic impactor deflection. The vehicle now on the pad is the mother ship. It's going to orbit the asteroid, then launch a one-ton missile to crash into it. If that fails for any reason to move the asteroid enough, the mother ship will move in close and detonate a one hundred megaton, full-yield nuclear device in an attempt to either vaporize it, or shatter it into small pieces."

Latterday still found no words.

"Sir, if they can't deflect the asteroid . . . if the mission fails, Dolos will destroy at least a third of everything on earth—humans included—just like the Book of Revelation says. What's not destroyed immediately by the impact, the rain of fire from debris thrown into the atmosphere will come back down and burn hundreds of millions of people to death.

"Dr. Latterday, this is the End of Days, isn't it? God won't allow Dolos to be deflected, will He?"

Still holding the receiver to his ear, Latterday slowly rounded his desk to his chair and sat down hard. His mouth was dry. He felt weak and nauseous.

"Isn't this the End of Days?" persisted Johnston.

"Yes . . . yes . . . I think . . . I think so," Latterday heard himself say as his mind sank into the very bowels of self-loathing and remorse. *This is the final piece of evidence*, he thought. *It's coming! It's all true, and I have not believed. My God, I did not believe you!*

The caller fell silent, waiting for him to say something.

Latterday collected himself. "Thank you," he said softly, feeling tears welling up. "Thank you for the information. And no, I won't tell anyone, and I certainly won't give anyone your name."

"Thank you, sir," came back an equally soft voice. "If you need to call me for any reason, I can give you my cell phone number."

Latterday said he did, and the engineer gave it. He wrote it down.

"I'll . . . I'll see you in church this Sunday," said Johnston.

"I appreciate that," said Latterday. "I'm looking forward to meeting you in person. Please come to my office after service. I'll tell security to let you pass." He heard the engineer thanking him again as he returned the receiver to its cradle.

Feeling numb, Latterday sat back, staring at the phone. After a long moment, he looked up at the gold cross on the wall to his right. It was the one from the podium of his traveling faith show. He'd insisted that it should be polished daily, and it was. Yet, now it seemed to radiate brilliance greater than ever.

He thought of his riches and his expensive possessions. When did he lose the nobility of his mission, the only possible redeeming fact of his nonbelief? He'd never noticed its departure. He thought of the mansions he built for himself—his treasures on earth. He thought of his lust, not love, for the woman he married. He thought of the arrogance of his disbelief.

He thought of the poor who'd doled out to him what they could ill afford. He did give them hope. He did strengthen their faith. But for him, God would not be pleased. What God valued most was what truly dwelt within one's heart, and his heart held only himself. His remorse was fathomless.

Tears filled his eyes. As he arose from his seat, a glint from his Rolex caught his eye. Anger and self-loathing overwhelmed him. He ripped the watch from his wrist and slammed it hard against the desktop. Its very presence was yet another testament to his accursed fraudulence.

He looked at the bloody wrist from which it was torn. It hurt, and he was glad. He wrenched the diamond rings from his fingers and threw them across the room. He tore off his coat and ripped open

his shirt, sending buttons flying. Tears burst from his eyes as he threw himself prostrate before the cross.

"My God, My God! I have not believed!" He sobbed as he beat his fists against his head. "How can you ever forgive me? My Jesus! I have denied you in my heart. You commanded me to help the poor and the lost, but I took from them to gather my wealth. How can I ever atone? How can I atone for my sins? What will you have me do? I will die for you! Guide me! Give me strength! Make me your servant! Please let it not be too late!"

For a while, he remained prostrate, weeping and trembling. Presently, exhausted, he pulled himself together and began to relax. *I must open my mind and my heart, and Jesus will give him the answer.*

It came to him slowly, a piece at a time. *NASA's mission to Dolos will fail. It must fail. Jesus touched Johnston and had him call me. Why? To tell me about the asteroid. To tell me about the mission. Why would Jesus have him tell me? For atonement? So that I might stop the mission? Yes! That's got to be it. But, how? "My Lord," he said aloud, "please tell me how."*

Only a second more elapsed before Latterday found his answer. *Johnston is a program engineer, he thought. He can stop the mission with a simple change in an algorithmic sequence—a simple change of a number. That's it! That's got to be it!*

Latterday leapt up, grabbed the receiver, pressed the "scramble" button, and punched in Johnston's number. Only two rings elapsed before Johnston answered. "Hello," he said. "Foster here."

"Mr. Johnston, this is Latterday."

"Yes sir, what can I do for you, reverend? Ask me anything."

"You said you're a program engineer. Do you run programming instructions for missions—for the rocket?" asked Latterday.

"Uh, yeah. I'm one of the programmers." His voice dropped a bit. He sounded cautious, as though he were anticipating what Latterday was going to say.

"Foster, listen closely. This mission to deflect Dolos must fail, and you will be the tool that God uses to make it fail. Think about it. You are God's point man to see that this mission fails and the

asteroid hits. Jesus is waiting to return, and you, Foster, you will assist Him."

Except for the faint hum of some device in the background, Latterday was met with silence on the line.

"Foster Johnston. Did you hear me?" Latterday felt his heart thumping.

A short pause followed.

"Uh, yeah. I heard you." Johnston lowered his voice almost to a whisper, as though someone was close by and he didn't want to be overheard. "But I can't do that. I can't sabotage the mission. There are back-ups for everything, including me. Another programmer will be watching the data. He'd put a hold on the launch and fix any anomalies. And they would know that I was the one who entered the incorrect data. So it won't work!

"Besides, why would God need me to do His work? Shouldn't be a problem for a being that can create a universe. If He wants the mission stopped, He wouldn't need a man, He'd just make a circuit short-out or hit the damned thing with lightenin' or somethin'. No man can make it succeed if He wants it to fail."

Latterday was undaunted. "Foster, God uses people all the time to execute his plans. I think you know that. Think about it. Why did you call me? It was God who had you do it. It's clear that He wants to use you to stop the mission."

"If that's so," reasoned Johnston, "if He really wants me to stop the mission, then why did He have me call you? It seems to me that He wants to use you, not me. No. I can't do it, and it wouldn't work even if I tried."

Latterday paused. He was daunted. *Why did God have him call me? If he wanted Johnston to stop the mission, wouldn't He simply move him to do it? Why me?*

"Okay," Latterday said with a tone of resignation, "I understand. I only hope you made the right decision. There must be another answer—another way. I don't know. Thanks again for the information, Foster. By the way, when is the mission scheduled to launch?"

"Tomorrow morning at 0600 from Launch Complex thirty-nine-A," Johnston said, allowing his voice to increase in volume. "You should be able to see it go. Can we still talk on Sunday?"

"Sure. We can talk after service, as I said. And, thanks again. Take care and God bless you." Latterday hung up. *There must be another way.*

He leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and prayed aloud. "My Lord, my God, please show me the way." He let his mind relax. He tried to think of nothing. The image of the mission vehicle on the launch pad came to mind. It was obvious that after launch, there would be no way to stop the mission.

"How could I stop the launch?" He asked himself. "Blow it up? How would I do that? It would have to be hit with something." His eyes opened wide. "A missile! Milton Baxter!" he shouted to the room.

Latterday recalled that Baxter was a devout member of the church, and the commander of a local militia group. He had told Latterday how happy he was to hear that the United Christian States' new Constitution had been rewritten to conform to Biblical laws. Latterday had secretly deplored the event, but Baxter had been gleeful, especially because the changes included provisions that could be interpreted to legalize stoning in some cases, as prescribed in the Bible.

The initial plan appeared instantly in Latterday's mind. He sat forward. "Computer, activate," he commanded. "Internet search, detailed map of Cape Canaveral Space Center."

The computer obliged, and he noted the location of Launch Complex 39-A. "Computer, zoom out, elevation five thousand feet." He scanned the area, making mental note of the cape's orientation. He felt success in the air.

Opening the top right-hand drawer of his desk, he retrieved a small phone book of members of his congregation. He located Baxter's number. After setting the scramble mode, he punched it in. It occurred to him that the computers at InterSeF just might be able to unscramble the call. No one really knows these days, but if God was with him, it is likely they could not.

"Hello," came a male voice.

"Milton Baxter?" asked Latterday.

"Who are you?" the man demanded.

"Peter John Latterday," he said. It was his habit to give his full name. He still liked it.

"Oh, hi Reverend. Yes, this is Milton. Sorry, I didn't recognize your voice. What can I do for you?"

Latterday first reminded Baxter of the End Times events he had preached for years. He concluded by listing the latest world disasters and telling him of the incoming asteroid and NASA's mission to deflect it. It took only seconds to convince him that the impact would bring about the end of the tribulation—the final blow that would trigger the return of Jesus to collect the faithful from the four winds.

"Milton, the mission must fail, and I need your help to make it fail."

"How can I help, sir?" Baxter sounded like a private snapping to attention in response to a command from his platoon leader. Latterday felt encouraged.

"You have weapons. Do you have, or can you get hold of, a heat-seeking missile and launcher?"

There was no hesitation. "Got three of 'em. Latest Pakistani Stingers—very accurate—even better'n the Raytheon five ninety-two," said Baxter proudly. He correctly guessed where Latterday was going. "They got almost a three mile effective range, but NASA's security's gonna be tighter than a chickadee's ass . . . uh, sorry, I mean it'll be tighter than ever. The only way I could get close enough would be from the sea, and I'm not really sure even then, I could get within range. There'd be fast Coast Guard boats in the water and interceptors in the air. Which pad will it be launched from?"

"Thirty nine-A," said Latterday.

"Well, I know where that is. It's certainly within range from the water, but uh, I donno. My unit has an old Swift Boat," he said, chuckling. "We've joined Xe, ye know—the old Blackwater outfit from back in the early days of the Iraq war. They changed their name 'cause of a lotta heat they were gettin' for . . . uh, doin' their job. They're now a part of InterSeF, so we can get pretty much what we

want. That's how we got the boat and the Stingers. 'Cept ours ain't faulty." He chuckled again.

His voice became serious. "It's a pretty fast boat, Reverend, but they'd see me comin' and I'd be blown out of the water with a missile or a Vulcan Phalanx before I'd ever get within range. Them new Vulcans can spit out five thousand rounds a minute—sounds like a lawn mower at full throttle and ya can't even see a gap between the flying tracers. Besides, before I could shoot, I'd have to be completely stopped in the water and fire at the very moment of the launch, or that baby'd be gone."

Latterday thought quickly, and then it came to him just as though Jesus himself were whispering in his ear. "It'll work! It'll be a two pronged attack," he said excitedly. "I have a private jet, and I have my pilot license. You come in fast from the sea—from due east. Be in place ready to fire at exactly 0600. I'll come in from north northeast, just off the beach, fast and low, under the radar at 0559. Whichever one of us they see first will become a diversion, and the other will follow through and accomplish the mission."

"Uh, I donno," said Baxter, backing off. "Security's mighty heavy and tight. Likely, they'd see us both, especially me, 'cause I'd have to be inside their security zone several minutes before launch. Uh, besides, if God wants the mission to fail, then cain't He do it Hissself? I mean, He's all powerful and all that."

For the next five minutes, Latterday gave Baxter the best glory-sermon he'd ever preached on redemption and atonement. It was also the first sincere one since before his traveling faith show. At the end, both men were in tears, convinced that God was behind them all the way and that they would spend eternity in the loving arms of their savior.

After Latterday hung up, he called the pilot service at the airport to check on the weather. Some days the airport shuts down because the ash cloud is too low. He was in luck. The cloud is expected to bottom out at two thousand feet. *That's low, but certainly flyable. It's another sign!* he thought.

He left the office and stopped off at the bank before heading home. He'd need to call his personal pilot and get to bed early.

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Latterday arose well before dawn Saturday morning. Having filed a flight plan for Jacksonville, and having given his pilot instructions to have the jet prepped, fueled, and ready for take-off at 0515, he made his way to the airport as a faint grayness in the eastern sky foretold the coming of dawn.

As he drove, he noticed a rather bright glimmer of light in the east, and after determining it was not an airplane, but the planet Venus, he was thrilled. The ash cloud had apparently thinned unexpectedly, allowing Venus to hang like a diamond in the eastern sky, its true brilliance slightly blunted. Still, it was lovely to behold.

To Latterday, the unusual clarity and beauty of the morning was another sign from God, specifically for him. He felt another thrill as he strode through the terminal and out onto the tarmac, where his jet was waiting, its twin engines whining in anticipation of a rare skyward leap. His pilot stood by the boarding steps.

"Thank you Mike," he said, handing the man a cashier's check. "I'll take it from here."

"Uh, Yessir," said Mike, taking the check without looking at it. There was concern in his voice. "But, you're supposed to have a copilot. You sure you don't want me to . . ."

"No thanks, Mike. I won't be up but a few minutes. I want to feel the thrill, alone."

Just as Latterday mounted the steps, he barely heard his pilot exclaim, "My God!"

Latterday chuckled. Obviously, no one had ever given the man a cashier's check for a hundred-thousand dollars. He had left his wife a check for three million. The rest he had bequeathed to a children's charity. At least the money would do some good until the end.

As he activated the step retraction and reached to close the door, he saw his pilot standing in the same place, gaping up at him. Latterday smiled and waved the back of his hand as though warding off a fly. The pilot began to back up, still staring at him, as the door closed.

Latterday made his way to the cockpit, seated himself, and strapped in, he checked the clock on the instrument panel. It was 0515. All was going well.

*Max T. Furr*

Milton Baxter was a big man, strong of body, strong of opinion, and strong of will. Having dropped out of school after the ninth grade, he'd worked in various low-wage service jobs until he was seventeen, and obtained a general education degree along the way.

It was during this period that the ever-present InterSeF ads hawking the adventure, honor, and challenge of combat, sparked his imagination and tugged at his yearning to go places and to be somebody.

He began to fancy himself one of those soldiers he saw on billboards—those rugged and fearless men with muscular biceps, fighting the Muslims for God and country. This is what a real man does. So, with eyes filled with glory, he enlisted. After basic training, he opted for special warfare school and ranger training—that was what real men did.

He quickly adapted to the authoritarian way of military life. He found that he liked the challenge, the danger, and the intensity of blood and guts combat. He felt himself destined to achieve a high place of honor among his countrymen.

Yet, it was not to be. On the first mission of his third tour of duty, he was wounded during an extraction from Babol Sar, Iran. The helicopter had barely risen to treetop level when the Revolutionary Guard broke from the tree line and opened fire. Bullets ripped away his right cheekbone and shattered his right femur. The crippled chopper barely made it back to safety.

It was during convalescence that he met Linda, a nurse on staff at the Veterans Hospital. He was thoroughly smitten with her. It was the first time in his life that he found himself caring deeply for anyone. After a short courtship, they were married, and he left the service. Their son was born a year later.

Baxter worked in construction for a short time, and eventually formed his own company contracting with the Corporation to lay concrete driveways for homes and businesses.

He was doing well for a high school dropout, and for the first few years, he was happy. He had cheered when the neocons regained total power in Washington, and was happy to see the purge of liberal teachers and college professors. He was pleased to see needless and

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wasteful, socialist programs and governmental departments abolished or privatized.

Yet all those promises of prosperity through smaller government, deregulation, and an unfettered free market proved to be false. Instead of the government, the Corporation had become the oppressor, manipulating the market and forever increasing its profits at the expense of workers and consumers.

Deregulation of the Corporation's food industry and the subsequent loss of government oversight, had resulted in ever increasing mass food poisonings, causing him to be wary of what his family consumed. In spite of earlier promises of lower prices in a market deregulated and united under one, unifying company, prices had been skyrocketing ever since the Corporation became the last man standing in international trade.

Still, Baxter wasn't too concerned. The Corporation's buyout of all public institutions of learning resulted in a hefty tuition requirement to place a child in any school at any age, thus driving millions of families from the educational process. Consequently, the boom in available labor became a boon for Baxter's company. Wages were falling even more, so he had his pick of the best workers, and the wealthy were building larger mansions, which called for longer driveways.

So, he was doing just fine. The plight of others was simply the price of freedom. If people couldn't make it on their own, as he had, that was just too bad for them. It was their fault. He and the Corporation had to make a profit, and for a while, he accepted the Corporation's excuse for increasing prices and fees. There were wars to be fought, and the ash cloud caused much shorter growing seasons everywhere. Besides, he was among the self-made, fortunate few who could still afford to live an upper middle class lifestyle, send his son to school, and buy the higher priced but safer food from the local farmers' market and fishing docks.

But, then, the police force and the fire department were privatized. His taxes went down significantly, true enough, but the fees for those unregulated services were rising rapidly, far more than wiping out the gain from reduced taxes. Indeed, the Corporation had

recently informed homeowners that their insurance would no longer cover the cost of the fire department. They would have to buy a separate fire insurance policy. That made him angry.

Since the Veterans Administration was abolished just a year ago, he was forced to purchase private health insurance for his family from the TransWorld Biometrics, now the health industrial arm of TiConGlobal. He could afford it, but the policy would not cover the problems he was developing as a result of his war wounds because the Corporation would not cover preexisting conditions. That, too, made him angry.

Then the Corporation informed him that the price of his construction material would almost double in the coming months, and his family's health insurance premiums would increase by fifteen percent next year. To boot, his deductible would increase as well, just as it did last year. Yet the corporate elite continued to receive billions in bonuses every year. Baxter couldn't imagine someone having such an income. That made him angrier.

Thus, even as Baxter's income slowly increased, at the end of the month, he found that his discretionary cash decreased. And although he had saved a considerable sum in the bank, he finally realized that he was just one serious illness away from bankruptcy. His income was entirely dependent on his health, despite the high premiums he was paying for insurance.

So Baxter was frustrated, suspicious, and angry. He was ready to strike out at something, or someone. Latterday not only provided the target, but a promise of an eternal utopia in the hereafter.

He had intended to slip out early without awakening Linda, but things didn't go as planned. He arose quietly, and in the dimness of the nightlight, slipped into his clothing. He stood by the bed for a moment looking at her. He wanted to lie back down and feel her beside him one more time, but he thought of his mission, and suppressed the emotion.

He left the bedroom door ajar as he left the bedroom, flipped on the hall light, and went to check in on Devin, his five-year-old son. The child was asleep. He moved to his bedside and looked at him for

a long moment. That was when the first doubt formed in his mind, and it was heavy.

*What will happen to him after I'm gone? What will become of Linda? Latterday didn't say how long it would be before the asteroid hits, and if I'm killed in an attack on the launch vehicle, the Corporation won't pay off on my life insurance. And, we may not even succeed. Dolos might be diverted after all.*

He thought of how happy Devin was playing catch with him, and wrestling together on the living room floor. He could hear the giggling. It was a beautiful sound. He thought of the fishing trip they had taken just last week. It was Devin's first, and he recalled how glad he was when Devin caught the biggest fish. He recalled how much he was looking forward to taking him on his first hunting trip when he turned six. He would teach him gun safety and wildlife conservation. He would teach him how to survive on his own in the woods. Should Devin not experience those things, even if there isn't much time left?

He felt the hollowness of anxiety deepen as he looked down at his son's innocent face. He closed his eyes, suppressing the wave of emotion that was bringing him close to tears.

Steeling himself, he thought again of the mission. He thought of Latterday's words of redemption and the glory of being an instrument of God's will. He turned and left the room. He'd see his son again in paradise.

Milton returned to the bedroom where his wife slept. It was chilly outside, and he'd forgotten to get his winter coat. The air would be cold out on the water. He quietly slid open the closet louvered doors and retrieved the coat. When it closed, it bumped. With his mind so focused on the mission, he'd forgotten it always did that. He'd been meaning to fix it for years.

Linda awakened. "Darling, where are you going?" She lifted herself up on an elbow, her eyes squinting against the shaft of light from the hallway.

He moved to the bed, sat on the edge, bent over and kissed her on the forehead. He ran his fingers through her hair. He gazed into her eyes for a brief moment, and then held her face in his hands.

Anxiety returned with a vengeance. "God," he said, shaking his head slowly. "I love you so much." Involuntarily, tears seeped from his eyes. After nine years of marriage, he did indeed love her dearly, and never had he felt it more than at this moment.

Her eyes widened. "What are you going to do?" she asked with alarm.

"Just a training mission," he lied. "The men and I are taking the boat out for training. It's somethin' I have to do. Now, go back to sleep."

He knew she didn't believe him. He wasn't given to emotional departures before training exercises and he'd always told her of them well in advance. But as he gazed into her eyes, knowing he may never see her again, he could not contain himself.

She became frantic. "You're going to do something bad, aren't you? What are you going to do?" She threw her arms around him and pulled him down to the bed. "Whatever it is, don't, please don't do it! It'll work itself out without you." She began to shudder and cry. "Please don't go! I won't let you go! I won't let you go!"

"What's the matter mommy?" came a child's frightened voice from the doorway.

Latterday felt the usual rush as he set the brakes and powered up for an instrument check at the end of runway 27. After testing the flight controls—the ailerons, elevator and rudder—he lowered the wing flaps thirty degrees to provide additional lift for take-off. Glancing over the instruments, he set the altimeter to zero. Just habit. He really didn't need to fine-tune it. He would be flying by sight, and after the initial climb-out, he would have little care for what it said. He scanned the instrument panel. The aircraft was flight ready.

He slipped his headphones on, keyed the mike, and he gave his tail number. "November Juliet-seven-three-five-Charlie-Tango ready to roll," he told the tower.

"November Juliet-seven-three-five-Charlie-Tango," came the voice of controller Dallas Redman, "you're cleared for runway two-seven to an altitude of one-five-zero-zero feet. Be advised ash

altitude is two thousand, winds eight knots northwest, squawk four-two-zero-zero.

"Also be advised extended flight restrictions are in force due to operations at Cape Canaveral. You have a restriction variance for headings no less than two-zero-zero degrees and no more than three-zero degrees after you pass the outer marker. Enjoy your flight, Reverend, and God bless you."

Latterday took a deep breath as he set his transponder to the assigned squawk frequency—a frequency enabling Air Traffic Control to identify him and his flight characteristics on their radar.

"God bless you, Dallas," he said softly into the mike, knowing those would be the last words he would ever say to anyone on earth.

Powering up to maximum thrust, he released the brakes and the jet leapt forward, pressing him back in his seat. The runway rushed by. Easing back on the yoke, he felt the instant the wheels left the runway. He flipped a toggle on the instrument panel to retract the landing gear. Seconds later, he retracted the flaps, and felt a moment's decrease in gravity from the reduced lift.

Climbing straight out, he watched the southern end of South Lake slip beneath him. At fifteen hundred feet, he powered back to cruise velocity, leveled off, and set the trim. A light blinked on the instrument panel, accompanied by a series of beeps, indicating the outer marker. He banked right to a heading of 30 degrees, toward the ocean. Having cleared the coastline, he turned off his transponder, breaking the electronic link with Air Traffic Control, then pushed the jet into a short dive, feeling the floating sensation caused by the loss of gravity. He leveled off at what he guessed was a safe distance above the waves. He felt proud of his performance.

About five minutes out, he banked left, made a wide arc, and straightened out on a westward heading, back toward land. Banking left again, he came to a heading of 190 degrees, directly toward the cape, and Launch Complex 39-A.

A voice startled him. "November Juliet-seven-three-five-Charlie Tango, this is Titusville Control, do you read?" There was a short pause, then a repeat with increased volume. The voice was laced with anxiety. "November Juliet, seven . . ."

He turned off the radio, removed the headphones, and tossed them to the copilot's seat. A serene calmness washed through him. The view from his cockpit window seemed surreal as fishing boats appeared, and then vanished to the right and left beneath him. He made slight adjustments in his course so as not to fly directly over the boats, as the wall of air built up by the passage of his jet could be disastrous for smaller ones.

The beach was filling with people early, as many had anticipated the NASA launch. It was likely many of them were there as a result of the conspiracy theories about the mission that have been clogging the Internet. The most popular—spurred by, and linked to, a report of unusual activity in the launch of a probe two years ago—was that an asteroid was heading for a collision with the earth, and this mission was an attempt to divert it. It had proved a boon for Latterday, as the amount of cash in church collection plates had skyrocketed, along with gun sales and survival gear.

That particular hypothesis was augmented by the fact that Russia and China were known to be mounting missions of their own. How much the Corporation was involved no one knew, but it seemed clear that something serious was afoot, and the public was getting nervous.

Back at Air Traffic Control, Latterday knew that emergency operations would already be under way. Search and rescue aircraft would soon be taking off. Did they contact NASA? Would the interceptors be waiting for him? Would Baxter make it through if he didn't? Was Baxter in place? He looked at the clock on the instrument panel. It was 0558. Baxter should be in place by now.

He looked southeast and strained his eyes across the waves. There were boats on the horizon and one about two miles away, under power, and moving in his direction, but in that position, it couldn't be Baxter. He would have been much closer and not moving. It had to be a patrol boat.

Looking forward toward the cape, he could see Launch Complex 39-A and the mission vehicle, poised for launch. He wondered if the nuclear device would detonate on impact. Tens of thousands, perhaps even a million, would die. Didn't matter. They would die with him. Can't be helped. Everyone but the chosen will soon be dead anyway.

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He wondered, too, if the launch might be on hold. That didn't matter either. It would take them a long time to assemble another vehicle, and since God moved him to attack this one, He would move others in China and Russia to attack theirs.

He glanced across the water on his left. Baxter wasn't there. He would surely see him by now if he were.

Latterday's heart sank as a solid line of tracer bullets flashed past the cockpit window. Ignoring the tracers, he looked back at the launch pad. It was growing larger by the millisecond.

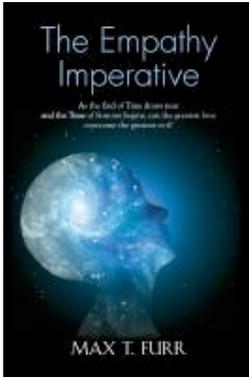
There was movement high in his peripheral vision. He glanced up and left—to his ten o'clock position. Two black specks moving toward him quickly grew into interceptors. He saw the corkscrewing white smoke of four missiles, and at the same time, heard the rapid thump of bullets perforating his fuselage.

He looked back at the launch vehicle, now only seconds away, rapidly filling his windshield. "Oh God," he prayed. "Oh my savior, into thy hands I commit my . . ."



## **Part Two**





*As the biblical Tribulation begins, and even as world disasters increase in frequency and strength, Jeff Hale, Professor of Evolutionary Biology, remains an unrepentant skeptic. His only concerns are to educate his students, resolve his romantic ambivalence, and come to terms with the death of his estranged, fundamentalist father. Yet, even after religious and political forces align themselves against him, he will become the focal point of events unparalleled in the history of the universe.*

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