

Josh Mason is the pastor of a small, rural church. He's content with his quiet life of serving his church and community. Then vagabond Dave Johnson challenges Josh to spiritual warfare. In a short time, Josh questions his sincerity as a follower of Jesus, understands a need to mature more spiritually, and rediscovers the heart of faith in Christ.

The Pure in Heart

by Mark Miller

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THE PURE IN HEART



A Novel By

Mark Miller

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CHAPTER 1

I

The Reverend Joshua Mason sat in his office enjoying the Monday morning. Mondays were normally easy days for Josh because he did not feel any pressures on that day of the week. He was not worried yet about preparing for the Wednesday Bible study, writing an article for the bulletin, getting a Sunday school lesson ready for the youth class, or putting his Sunday sermon together. Other than reading the passages for the Bible study and sermon, he would start working on those things on Tuesday.

But on Mondays he did catch-up work. He looked at last week's unopened mail, finished reading *Newsweek* and different Baptist newspapers, reflected on the worship service the day before, and spent the afternoon visiting, writing letters, and making phone calls. It was his most leisurely and stress-free day of the week.

This Monday, though, Josh received a phone call that not only changed his whole routine, but also caused him to examine his commitment to Christ.

Josh got to the church around ten that morning—he had to collect the church's trash as well as his own and take it to the recycling center, like most Mondays. Once in his office, he sat in his big, black, cushy desk chair, and looked over his calendar: the free medical clinic board meeting tomorrow morning; Thursday was the two year anniversary of Bobby's mother's death, so send

a praying-for-you note; read with East Aiken Elementary kids Friday morning; and senior food delivery Saturday morning. It was a typical week with some things scheduled, but not too much.

Next, Josh checked out the Sunday school attendance: 56, and the church offering: \$1,385.00. He thought the numbers were okay but tried to remember who was not there yesterday. *The Jacksons, the Greens, Edna, Tom, Mrs. Evans, Mrs. Phillips. That's 13 more*, he thought, using his fingers to count. *The Simpsons, 16 more. We could've had, uh, 72 in Sunday school. Man, we never have everyone. We could easily average 65 or 70 in Sunday school. It's always something.* He tried to estimate the number in the worship service. *The Fosters, the Johnsons, the Meggs, John, Mr. Davis were there but didn't stay for Sunday school. So that makes 65 in worship. Not bad. But if the others had been there, it would've been 80, 81. The place would've looked packed. That'd be sweet.*

Josh then started to put away yesterday's bulletins, which he saved for his parents and in-laws, but decided to read his article instead. He liked to look over what he wrote in the bulletin and imagine different church members enjoying it:

Old-School Christians

I was looking through a Hallmark gift book that someone had given me and came across this: "Top Ten Ways to Tell You're an Old-School Christian." I didn't like their list, so I came up with my own. Here's my "Top Ten Ways to Tell You're an Old-School Christian."

10. You speak in current English but pray in King James English.
9. You believe the pastor ought to always wear a black suit and tie, even at pool parties.
8. Your favorite hymns are "The Doxology," "Shall We Gather at the River," and "Bringing in the Sheaves."
7. You know what sheaves are.

6. The closest you come to liquor is the rubbing alcohol in your medicine cabinet.
5. You believe the pastor's Bible ought to be the size of a large pizza box and as thick as the New York City phone book.
4. You believe the pastor ought to carry his Bible with him everywhere he goes, even to pool parties.
3. You sing from the hymnal, not that dadblasted big screen.
2. You name all your children after Israel's kings. And not the good ones but Nadab, Zimri, and Pekah.
1. You're suspicious of the pastor going to all those pool parties.

Josh set the bulletin on the desk and thought, *That's pretty good. That's David Letterman quality. I wonder how you get a job writing for him. That would be cool, just sitting around trying to think of funny things all the time.*

It popped into his head, though, that some people did not like his humor or think he was funny. Once, after another preacher told a bunch of humor book jokes, a woman came over to him and said, "Why don't you tell jokes like that? He's funny."

And he thought, *Because I'm trying to be original.*

Another time, a woman introduced him to a friend and added, "He thinks he's funny." She did not say he *is* funny but said, he *thinks* he is funny. *Yep, that's pretty much my comedic reputation,* he thought as he shook his head.

Then the phone rang. He snapped out of it and answered, "Hickory Hill Baptist Church."

"Can I speak to the pastor?" the man asked in a hoarse, gruff voice.

"This is he speaking," Josh said rather chipper. No one was going to discourage his sense of humor.

The man on the other end of the line asked, "I was wondering how I can be saved?"

Josh was taken aback for a second or two. He thought someone was messing with him, maybe a fellow minister. He had friends who would do that kind of thing to him. One time a friend called and disguised his voice, and said that he was thinking about killing his wife and committing suicide. Josh started to go into counseling mode until the friend gave himself away. He was more cautious with phone calls after that.

Besides, yesterday Josh preached a sermon on the story of Philip helping the Ethiopian become a follower of Christ. In the sermon he pointed out that Christians were probably not going to have too many people come up to them with a Bible in hand and ask, “What’s this scripture mean? Show me how to get saved.” And now the man on the phone asked, “How can I be saved?”

Josh asked, “Why do you want to know that?”

“What?” The voice on the other end sounded aggravated. “I want to know how to get saved. Can’t you preachers give me a straight answer?”

“Well, I was just wondering what was going on in your life that would cause you to ask that question,” Josh replied, less suspicious.

“What difference does that make? Don’t you have a Bible there.... Can’t you read me the scriptures I need to hear to get saved or something?”

“Yes, I have a Bible. But I don’t like to do it that way.” Josh felt the call was real now. “I’d like to get to know you, find out what’s going on in your life, see what passages speak to your story. Uh, do you live in Aiken?”

“I don’t have a home. I travel all over the place. I live on the street. I’m a street person.”

“Are you working anywhere?”

“No, and I don’t have any money to give you, if that’s what you’re after.”

“No, I’m just trying to find out a little about you.”

“Why?”

“So I can personalize God’s plan of salvation for you. Salvation isn’t a four-step process like fixing a flat tire or something. Salvation comes by hearing the good news of Jesus and believing in him, you know, following him.”

“So tell me the good news.”

“Well, I will, but I want to know a little more about you, first. Maybe there’s someone in the Bible you can relate to that has a story like yours. And what they did, maybe you can do that too.”

“You mean there’s someone in the Bible whose wife screwed around with a preacher and then ran off with him while taking most of the husband’s money?”

“Well, not exactly,” Josh answered a little rattled. “Not exactly. But, uh, I can’t think of anyone like that or a passage right off. But if I had more time, maybe I could.”

“This is useless. All I want to know is how to get saved, and I have to go through all this. You know, you’re the fifth preacher I’ve called today. And none of them would tell me how to get saved, either. You preachers don’t care about anyone but yourselves and how you can make some money.”

“Now, hold on. Hold on. I want to help you if I can, but I really don’t want to do this over the phone. Can we meet somewhere?”

“Yeah, if you want to. But I don’t know what good that will do.”

“Look, it’s about lunch time. Maybe we could go to lunch together, my treat.”

“I’m not asking you to do that.” The harsh voice seemed to soften a bit.

“I want to. Where are you?”

“Downtown Aiken.”

“What restaurant are you close to?” Josh asked.

“I don’t know. I just got here yesterday.”

“Umm...you know where Wendy’s is?”

“No.”

“Umm...where exactly are you? What street are you on?”

“Uhh, Third Street.”

“Okay. Stay on Third Street and umm...just walk toward downtown. I’m not sure where you are on Third Street, but just walk toward town and you should run into Third Street Baptist Church. It’s a big church, you can’t miss it. I’ll meet you there. Just ask someone which way to Third Street Baptist Church, and they’ll point you in the right direction. Let’s meet in front of the church in say, half an hour,” then realizing he needed more time to get ready, “or 45 minutes. Okay?”

“All right.”

“Hey, do you have a Bible?”

“No, I don’t have much of anything.”

“Is it all right if I bring you one?” Josh asked with enthusiasm.

“Whatever.”

“I’ll see you in a little while. Let’s make it noon,” Josh said. He realized he needed still a little more time to get there.

“All right.”

“Wait a minute, what’s your name?”

“Why do you wanna know that?”

“Come on, we’re gettin’ ready to meet. I’m Joshua Mason, but everybody calls me Josh.”

“Okay, I’m Dave Johnson.”

“Okay, Dave. I’ll see you in a little while.” And he hung up. “Dave Johnson. Dave Johnson,” Josh said as he wrote it on a slip of paper.

II

Josh sat back in his chair and swiveled around to look out the window. His office was also the church office, so it was a little cramped. His desk faced a wall so he could swivel to his left and face people who came in without the bulky desk in the way. On the wall above his desk hung a Rick Novak print of a tropical seascape. Two double windows provided different views. One view looked past several huge pine trees to the next door neighbor’s yard, house, and cornfield beyond, and the horse farm across the

road. The other view looked out the back of the church at the picnic shelter and, in the distance through a grove of pines and hardwoods, the softball field. The wall between the two windows was covered with a bookcase from ceiling to floor, the shelves stuffed with Josh's seminary books and commentaries. On the wall left of the door hung an Anna Talbott pen and ink print of the last chapters of the Gospel of John in the image of Jesus praying in Gethsemane. Also in the room were two file cabinets, one for Josh and one for the church, a copier, a typewriter, and a storage cabinet. To complete the picture, Josh's graduation diplomas from college and the seminary, and his ordination certificate, hung on the wall behind the open door.

The sun began to really send out the heat on this late September morning hour. Josh looked at the horses in the pasture across the road and prayed silently. *Lord, help me here. I know you've sent him to me. Give me the words to say and the right spirit to say them so that you can reach him. You know I'm not very good at this, so please help me.*

Personal evangelism was not Josh's strong suit. He struggled somewhat when it came to visiting people and talking to them about believing in Jesus. Josh actually knew how to talk to people and witness to them, but he was on the introverted side. He felt more comfortable spending hour after hour in his office studying scripture and commentaries, reading literature, praying, and writing instead of visiting people he did not know very well. Most of the tasks of the ministry were enjoyable, but not personal evangelism. He wished he was more evangelistic, but it was not his spiritual gift.

One summer in college he tried to sell insurance but hated it. He was assigned a neighborhood and was required to make cold calls door-to-door. Sometimes he drove around for an hour, hour and a half, and tried to get up enough nerve to knock on a stranger's door and make a pitch. More than once he parked his car in a deserted lot and sat there for an hour or two, then called it quits for the day without knocking on the first door.

When he was in the seminary, and then again after the seminary, he took the Myers-Briggs personality assessment. He tried to answer the questions so that his results would indicate he was more extroverted. But the tests found him out and showed he leaned toward introversion. This tendency was a major weakness in his ministry, so he worked hard to overcome it.

Josh felt God wanted him out of the study more and often beat himself up until he went visiting. It was funny, though, he always felt better after seeing people. He worked himself up until he went, feeling nervous and apprehensive, then returned feeling more than glad he had gone. He had helped quite a few people become Christians and had gotten better at it, but he still had a hard time making visits.

So he felt overjoyed to have an opportunity to lead someone to Jesus. The man had come to him and was already interested in what the Bible said, so Josh would not have to break the spiritual ice. He would only have to think of the right scriptures to use. He tried to think of someone in the Bible who had a similar story to Dave but could not think of anyone right off. Then it hit him—Hosea.

He stood up, picked out a Bible to give Dave, and read the first few chapters of Hosea to familiarize himself with the story. Then he wrote down several scripture passages in the front of the Bible for Dave to read. He selected stories where people were saved: Zacchaeus, the parable of the Prodigal Son, the woman at the well, the man born blind, the Ethiopian, and the Philippian jailer. Josh liked stories and thought they best communicated the gospel because they showed, more than told, the good news. However, he did write down several passages that told of salvation in Jesus: John 3 and the Roman Road to Salvation. And he wrote down his phone number. Finally, he checked the clock, picked up the Bible, and left to walk to his home.

III

Josh, his wife, Lisa, and their three-year-old son, Jacob, lived in a mobile home next to the church. They did not have enough money to buy land, so they asked the congregation if they could move a mobile home onto the church's property. The congregation unanimously voted "Aye," so the Masons bought a 16x80-foot single-wide and situated it a hundred yards or so off the country road. It was partially hidden on all sides by clusters of tall, straight, pine trees that had branches mostly on top. Josh kept the pine woods bush-hogged so that they had little undergrowth and looked neat with a ground covering of pine straw. Their home was white with black shutters and a black roof and had azalea bushes wrapped around it. In the middle of their small strip of a front yard was an island flower garden with a bird bath.

As Josh walked to his place, he smelled the baking pine straw, which always made him think of a freshly cleaned room. The bald spots had come back in the lawn and he grumbled about it out loud. They had sowed grass in the spring, but the pine trees around the house did not let it live. With pleasure, he noticed the yellow mums that his wife had put on the front steps a couple of weeks ago. Josh also noticed the mold coming back on the white siding and hated to see it. He would have to scrub it off pretty soon, which was awkwardly tiring work. But overall he was happy with the place, even though he wished it was not a trailer and was on his own land. He liked how his wife landscaped the yard, usually keeping something in bloom, and felt it was a nice place to come home to, very bright, colorful, and cheery.

Josh heard his wife and son in the backyard and walked to them.

"Hey," he said after he rounded the corner.

"Daddy!" His son dropped his toy lawn mower, then ran and hugged Josh around the legs.

"Good to see you too, Boy Boy," he said as he hugged him back. "Are you and Mommy working hard?"

“Mommy cut her finger, and it bleded.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I poked it on a pine cone. I’m trying to get them up so I can mow. What’s up? Why are you home so early?”

“Oh, I’m going to run to town for a little while,” he said, and walked into the house with his wife and son behind him.

“Why?”

Josh and Lisa stayed in the kitchen for a moment, but Jacob hurried to the living room to watch TV.

“Well, this guy called up and wanted to know about getting saved,” he said and set the Bible on the kitchen table. “So I told him I’d meet him in front of Third Street Baptist around noon.”

“Why didn’t you tell him over the phone?”

“I don’t know. I don’t like to do things like that. I don’t know. I’d like to meet the guy, since I’m going to talk about his eternal destination.” Josh walked into the bedroom and stopped for a second to admire, for the jillionth time, their newly purchased print of Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, which hung on the wall above their bed. Then he went to his bedside table, grabbed his wallet, and looked in it for money, but did not find any. “Do you have some money?” he asked as he put the wallet in the back pocket of his pants.

“Yeah, in my purse,” she said, and walked in the bedroom. “What do you need with money?”

He went to the bathroom to pee, and Lisa followed him. “I thought I’d treat him to lunch. He said he didn’t have any money.” As he relieved himself, he let a loud one.

“Really? I’m standing right here.”

“Hey, this is where you *can* do that.”

“Yeah, but I’m right here. That’s gross.”

“Oh, don’t worry. It doesn’t stink. It smells like that blueberry jam I had for breakfast this morning.”

“I don’t think so.” She returned to the bedroom and sat on the bed. “Why do you have to take him to lunch?”

"I thought we could sit down together and eat and talk about salvation. You know, kind of friendly like," he said while washing his hands.

"This isn't going to be like that one lady that kept calling up asking for money, is it? And you *kept* giving her \$20 of our *own* money."

"No, no, no," he said as he walked into the room, "I've learned my lesson on that." When Josh saw Lisa sitting on the edge of the bed in a tank top and shorts, and her legs crossed, he thought she looked desirable. So he attacked her and knocked her on her back. He nestled beside her and kissed her neck and ear.

"Come on, get off me." She pushed at him. "I'm sweaty and nasty."

"I know." He pulled her to him. "I like it that way."

"Come on, stop it." She kept pushing at him. "Jacob's in the other room."

"Dang it." He hopped off the bed. "Where's your purse?"

"On the bar in the kitchen."

He went to the kitchen to get her purse. Josh knew she did not like him rummaging through it, so he grabbed it and fumbled with it in an exaggerated way.

"Get your fat fingers out of there," she said as she entered the room. He handed it to her, and she asked, "How much you want?"

"Oh, twenty'll do."

"Well, don't give him anything else," she said as she handed him the money. "You know how you can't say no to anyone. You can't even hang up on salespeople."

"I like to hear their line. Look, I'm not even gonna take my wallet." He put his wallet back on his bedside table and returned to the kitchen. "Besides, that woman needed that money."

"Yeah, well, we needed that money too. I think if it was up to you, you'd give away what little money we have."

"Oh, we're all right." He grabbed the Bible and walked to the door. "Come here, Jacob. Give me a kiss and a hug." His son ran

to him from the living room and kissed and hugged him. “You be a good boy, now.”

“Where you goin’, Daddy?”

“Just into town for a little while. I’ll be right back.”

“Be careful,” his wife said. She kissed him. “Who is this guy, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Some guy passing through town.”

“Be careful, Josh. I hate when you do these things,” she said with a concerned look. “Remember that time you gave that guy a ride home...all the way to Ward, in the pouring rain, late at night? I worried myself almost sick. That guy could’ve killed you, and no one would’ve known where to begin to look for you.”

“Okay. Okay.” He stepped outside and stood on the deck.

“And just the other day,” she followed him outside, “some guy showed up at the church and wouldn’t leave, and you stayed and talked to him way past midnight. That was stupid too.”

“Ahhh, I’m just trying to do what God would want me to do.”

“He doesn’t want you to be stupid, does he?”

“I’m going to be all right. I didn’t even think of this guy being dangerous until you said something.”

“I know. That’s why you’ve got me.”

“It’s gonna be okay.”

“I hope so. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Don’t even think about it.” And he headed for his car.

“Be careful.”

“I will. I will.” He got in his car and left. As he drove past the church sign, he noticed the message and smiled: *What Would Jesus Want You To Do?*

IV

The drive into Aiken took about 15, 20 minutes. Josh used the time to collect his thoughts and prepare for the meeting. Driving time was for thinking, and he did a lot of thinking because they lived in the middle of nowhere. Rarely did he turn on the radio. Mostly

he used the time to prepare sermons or go over them, pray, make plans for the church's direction, day dream or reminisce about a good time, work up a comedy bit. Sometimes he set up arguments with opponents and wrestled with his thoughts on different issues. Today, though, he concentrated on Dave and drifted only a little.

He felt a combination of anxiety and gladness. Josh was nervous because he was not sure how the meeting would go. Even though he knew the direction it needed to go, he was not sure how it would actually turn out. The feeling was like being nervous before a basketball game. Even though he could hold his own with most ballplayers, he did not know if he would be on or off, or what might happen during the course of the game. Or like being nervous before preaching. Even though he knew where the sermon was going, and had gone over it many times, he did not know if he would mess up or forget something, or how the congregation would respond, or what.

He was mostly glad, though, to be meeting with the homeless, lost man. Josh was always looking for ways to do what Jesus would do or do what Jesus wanted him to do. At the end of most workdays he went into the sanctuary and prayed and meditated on the stained-glass window of Jesus hanging on the cross. He asked God to help him, to show him how to be more like Jesus. How could he not do more for the one who suffered and died for him? And he asked God to forgive him and thanked him for Jesus. Then he walked home, ate supper, put Jacob to bed, watched TV, went to bed with Lisa, and got up the next day and did about the same thing over again without really changing. But this day was different. Today he was actually doing something Jesus-like.

A story from a Will Campbell sermon came to him. Josh went over in his head how he would preach it. *I love what Will Campbell said in a sermon one time. Will Campbell used to be a civil rights leader, but now he's a preacher to rednecks. He said he'd like to see a revival service end where the preacher doesn't invite people to come down the aisle, but instead, he tells them to go to Jesus. "Don't come to me, go to Jesus. Don't come down*

front to make a decision, go visit Jesus. Don't come to the altar to pray, go help Jesus." The church would then say amen and leave.

About a half hour later the phone at the police station starts ringing off the hook. The first call's from the nursing home. The guy says there's a bunch of church people there asking to visit Jesus. "I told them we don't have a Jesus here. All we have are a bunch of old people. But they keep saying, 'We want to visit Jesus! We want to visit Jesus!'" "

The next call comes from the jail. The guy says that there's a bunch from the church over there demanding to be let in, so they can see Jesus. "I told them we don't have a Jesus here. We just have a bunch of criminals. But they keep saying, 'We want to see Jesus! We want to see Jesus!'" "

The next call is from...umm...who? How's it go? From somebody. Oh, I could make it up; that's what Campbell did. I know, I'll say the next call comes from the homeless shelter.

Josh then said it out loud as though he was preaching to his congregation, even making hand gestures. "The next call comes from the homeless shelter. The guy says there's a bunch of church people down there wanting to help Jesus. 'I told them we don't have a Jesus here. We just have a bunch of bums. But they keep saying, "We want to help Jesus! We want to help Jesus!" ' "

He thought that would be a good story to end a sermon. *I could preach on the parable of the Sheep and Goats. And he ran it over in his mind to see how it fit with the Campbell story. In the end, Jesus will return and separate people like a shepherd separating sheep from goats—the sheep on the right, the goats on the left. Then Jesus will say to the sheep, "You all have it made, enter into my Father's kingdom. Because, when I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink; when I was a stranger, you did something for me." Uhh... Well, I'd read the passage before the sermon. "Naked, you gave me clothes." And then the sheep will say, "Baaa."*

Josh laughed out loud. "No, but that would be funny." He continued with the parable in his head. *The sheep will say, "When did we do all these things for you, Lord?" And Jesus'll say, "Whatever you did to the least of these, who are my brothers and sisters, you did to me."*

Yeah, talk a little about the parable then end with the “Go to Jesus” story. That’s good.

Then Josh remembered a story Tony Douglas told him and preached it out loud to see how it felt with the scripture and the Campbell story. He loved to tell and retell stories, even if it was only to himself. “One time a friend from my seminary days, Tony Douglas, told me something I’ll never forget,” he said as if preaching to his congregation again, continuing with the hand gestures.

“Tony used to help a young man who was severely handicapped. (I don’t remember his name, but I’ll call him Steve.) Steve was wheelchair bound and couldn’t communicate, or do much of anything else. My friend, Tony, would take care of him for a few hours at a time, a few days a week—sometimes took him to the pool at the seminary to swim.

“Another seminary student saw Tony with Steve and asked him if he’d witnessed to Steve yet. If he’d seen to it that he was baptized. You know, made sure he was going to heaven. And Tony said, ‘No, Steve’s all right. Steve knows Jesus in ways you and I will never know.’ Yep. That’s right. That’s right.”

Yeah, that fits pretty good, Josh thought. I could start off with the parable and explain it a little bit, not too much, it speaks for itself. Then work in the Tony and Steve story and close with Campbell’s “Go to Jesus” bit. No, you got to be careful about building a sermon around an illustration. You want to build a sermon around a passage of scripture. You’ve done it the other way lots of times, but that’s not right. You don’t want people to remember the sermon; you want them to remember the scripture. The scripture’s what matters, not the sermon.

You don’t want to be like those preachers that hand out their sermon outlines so people can remember them. “Here, the scripture doesn’t matter so much but look how clever my outline is. Hang on to that, because I’m big time. And I’ll sign it if you want me to.” No, don’t be like that. Take the scripture and preach its message, not what you want it to say. It doesn’t matter what Josh

Mason says; it matters what God says. He remembered saying that in a sermon one time.

Christians are already getting away from the Bible more and more, he continued to think. *More people know what the Bible says than have actually read it.* Josh was proud of coming up with that one. *If we keep heading the way we're going, we're going to end up with a Bible-less Christianity. Yeah, that's pretty good—a Bible-less Christianity. I can see it.*

But maybe I could work in that observation I made about the homeless when I worked at that place, he skipped back to his thoughts on the sermon. “During my last semester at the seminary,” he preached, “I worked at a homeless shelter in downtown Louisville. I helped with the breakfast and ran the clothes closet. I’d open up and let the guys in, and they’d get a cup of coffee and a doughnut and sit around and talk. Some of them would take a shower, some would get clothes from me.

“I enjoyed it at first, you know, new experience, something different. But then it got to be a pain—having to get up early and be there when I needed to study, or write a paper, or get a sermon ready. But I’d remember what Jesus said, and look at each of the guys, and I’d think I was helping Jesus. And I kept helping out there until I moved down here.”

Thus Josh drove to Aiken to meet with Dave. Passing by him on both sides of the road were ubiquitous pine forests sprinkled with turning hardwoods broken up by tanning pastures, surprising cotton fields, and clusters of houses.

He drove through rolling olive-beige horse pastures with round shadowy hay bales along the back fence line. The first time he and his wife drove to the church from Louisville, they did not think South Carolina looked anything like Kentucky, until they got near the church. It was surrounded by rolling horse farms and looked like home to them. For some reason he liked to share this with neighbors who had recently moved into the area.

Josh drove through green fields with a dusting of bursting snow cotton. He had not gotten used to seeing them. Neither he nor his

wife had ever seen cotton fields, and thought they were sharing a strange snowy dream when they drove by one for the first time.

He drove through patches of dark pine forests with splashes of rusty golden hardwoods here and there. Then a line of single-wides and double-wides, a few big houses, one far off the road, a country store with a couple of gas pumps. Then a small community with a handful of businesses, a Baptist church with three crosses out front. And on and on he drove to town. But Josh did not notice much of this today; he was focused on his mission: help Dave know salvation through Jesus.

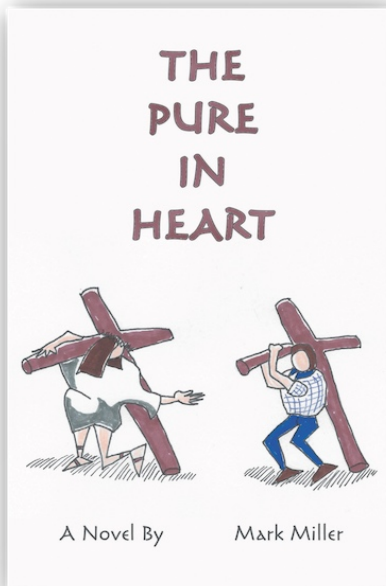
CHAPTER 2

I

After his phone conversation with the preacher Josh, Dave looked at the clock in his Holiday Inn room to see how much time he had before his meeting. There was almost an hour, so he settled back in bed and collected his thoughts. He shook his head in amazement. Originally, he had decided to go after a different pastor, someone who was a real jerk. But he had made one more phone call, and now it was this one. It was funny how things worked out like that sometimes. He thought Josh sounded young and enthusiastic—probably eager to save the world—probably thought he was the only one who had it right, and all the other preachers were phonies.

Dave had seen Josh's kind before and had had no problem taking care of them. He could play off Josh's sense of doing right, find his weakness and go in for the kill. Actually, sincere preachers were easier for Dave to take than insincere ones. Sincere preachers were gullible, quick to trust, and soft to help out. But insincere preachers were suspicious of everyone and unwilling to give help without conducting a FBI-type background check on a person.

Dave always went into a job with an open mind. He liked to play it by ear and be flexible. With pride, he thought back over his last six years. He had scammed around 20 or 30 preachers. Dave did not know the exact number because he had stopped counting. When he wanted the pastor canned, he used nearly the



Josh Mason is the pastor of a small, rural church. He's content with his quiet life of serving his church and community. Then vagabond Dave Johnson challenges Josh to spiritual warfare. In a short time, Josh questions his sincerity as a follower of Jesus, understands a need to mature more spiritually, and rediscovers the heart of faith in Christ.

The Pure in Heart

by Mark Miller

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