

Clark Carmichael, a former preacher, turns his back on God and his faith. His sixteen year old son, Luke, meets an untimely death during a rafting trip and Clark holds himself and God responsible. By the hand of providence, Clark forms a bond with an eccentric hunting guide named Stanley Leopold. The relationship transforms the preacher and restores his faith in God. Alongside his guide, Clark learns the most important spiritual lesson - stand firm.

The Guide

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THE GUIDE



WHEN EVIL RUSHES IN,
THE FAITHFUL STAND FIRM

S. SCOTT JOHNSON

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

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1. Unguided

The Chattooga's ice cold waters blanketed our skin, but as the adrenaline pumped through our veins, no one voiced concern. The brilliant summer sun loomed above, warming our chilled bodies and created cascades of diamonds across the water's surface. Fueled by gravity and pure mountain springs, the Chattooga River calmly begins its flow down nature's geologically defined course. On that day, like every other day, it would gather its violent inertial forces, gaining strength and power with each mile. The calmness would eventually turn into a frothy, mad, turbulent stream which poured over boulders, resembling the claws of a great beast. Jagged rocks stared back like a mouth full of fangs as the river's saliva sprayed and foamed. A thing of beauty and worthy of great respect, the river proved itself over and over again. It never disappointed and always kept us guessing.

"Paddle right! Paddle right! Stop ... Stop paddling! Hold it ... Hold it ... Everyone—paddle forward! Paddle forward! Here we go! Left side—paddle back hard! Everyone—paddle hard forward! Hard forward—three more strokes! Awesome job guys! ...YES!"

"Let's paddle up there to the right and take a break. I need to size up the next rapid. This will be the last one for the morning and then that should take us to lunch. This last one's gonna be a challenge."

Forming the boundary between Georgia and South Carolina, the Chattooga's winding course is a Mecca for thrill seekers and nature lovers. The movie *Deliverance* was filmed there in 1971 which attracted paddlers from all over—some unprepared or unaware of the many hidden dangers. In 1974, Congress

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designated it as a “Wild and Scenic” river which protected and preserved the bordering wilderness areas. Nourished by streams and tributaries along the way, the Chattooga’s wrath-filled waters end as quietly as they begin. From its origins within the North Carolina Mountains, the river meanders some 57 miles and then joins the still waters of Georgia’s Lake Tugalo.

Paddling and floating all morning, we presented our air-filled vessel to the last rapid of Section III—the famous Bull Sluice. This rapid had a 14-foot drop followed by 6-foot and 4-foot successive drops.

Hopping out of our raft, we surveyed the scene thoroughly.

“Well, what do you think, Clark? You want to portage around?” My friend Dave Merwin peered at the rushing current. His voice expressed an edge of doubt.

“I think we can take it. The water’s moving faster than usual and ... ah, come on ... we’ve been down the Sluice several times. May have to paddle harder. Time things sooner, but we can do it.”

“Alright, Carmichael—if you say so.”

“Come on, Dave. What’s wrong?”

“Ah, nothing. Just got a weird feeling about this trip. Have you noticed how high the water is today? No, something just doesn’t feel right to me.”

“It’ll be okay. I assure you.”

“Like I said—if you say so.”

We would finish the morning with that final plunge and take a lunch break afterwards. Two rafts ahead of us, the other groups had completed a perfect run through the rapid. Most people portage around that point in the river, but not us. We loved the rush, the thrill of danger and the irresistible call, battling the raging blue vein of nature.

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Thrill seekers they were; I never knew a more daring and crazy set of men. Though I may have questioned some of their motives, I never questioned their courage and annual commitment to our trip. Keith Myers came for the danger and to prove that age had not reduced or reversed his masculine strength or endurance. Jeff Whatley came to spend time with his son, but also to avoid a long, largely ignored honey-do list. Jerry Larson was there for the camaraderie and support; he recently faced a nasty divorce just over a month before. Several were looking for a new challenge, a way to escape life's ruts and routines. Still, a few were simply there to check one more item off the bucket list.

Why was I there? Truth be known, probably for some of the reasons aforementioned, but I would never admit that to anyone. I loved rafting and how it made me feel inside. I never felt so alive and never felt so much control of my being, my joy and vitality. It was me against nature, and I liked to win.

"All right, Pastor Clark. Let's do it." Jake, one of our older youth, proudly swaggered to the raft. His lean muscular frame brimmed with raw energy; it was contagious. The young man's spunk inspired a last minute adrenaline burst. We launched the raft and floated toward the graceful chaos of the Sluice. The rapid's roar grew steadily—as did our speed—down the great churning, unimpeded stream. To our right, towered a mammoth boulder, and below the rapid to the left lurked Decapitation Rock.

"Okay. Aim the raft back toward Georgia. Left side—give me two forward strokes. One. Two. Now—all paddle forward four strokes!" Everyone responded perfectly to my commands.

Although not a pro, I had navigated this river countless times. Year after year, I brought our men and youth down this mighty course. Year after year, fathers and sons added to their

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scrapbooks and etched lasting memories in their minds. My old summer job as an Ocoee River guide had taught me well. The Chattooga was a good bit different however. It brought new surprises with each trip; nothing about that river stayed exactly the same. Yes, we had capsized before, but fortunately no one ever suffered loss of life or serious injury. Thank God. The famous rapid presently facing us was similar to many others, and I was sure of myself. A surety that bred confidence. A confidence that we would plow through unscathed.

“Okay, guys. Everyone—give me three forward strokes. Lean in toward the center and hold on.”

I studied the currents direction and steered our raft toward the rapid’s edge. The Sluice grabbed us, violently dragging the raft straight down the rushing waters. Committed. No turning back. Done. It was a perfect run, and before we knew it, we had caught up to the rest of our group who were resting and devouring their lunch along the bank.

Dave looked back at me, and I couldn’t resist saying, “You still got that weird feeling? Was that a blast—or what?”

Dave answered back, “I knew we could do it, but don’t forget we haven’t seen anything yet. That last section will be the test.” He just had to remind me.

“Okay, let’s not think about it for now,” I said. “Let’s get something to eat.”

“Sounds good to me. This old man could sure use a rest.” Dave wiped his brow and then his glasses. He tried not to show it, but the look of concern could not be erased.

Lunch lasted about an hour, followed by my traditional group devotion. Oh, the joy. Each year I savored this trip, especially the devotional time. Our annual adventure attracted fathers and sons, not only from our church, but from all over the

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community. Approximately ten years before, Dave and I had decided to make this trip an annual tradition. An annual quest. The first time there was only six of us and one raft. Ten trips later that one raft transformed into eight or around fifty-six people.

Nature abounded with messages about God and messages about man—some messages just have to be experienced. The Bible itself was littered with stories from the natural world. So it was important that I expressed my thoughts the right way, leveraging our outdoor setting and our experiences together. I couldn't have asked for a better setting or a better group of men.

“Okay, everyone gather around. Come on guys.” Using hand gestures and eye contact, I directed the boys and their dads to sit down and face me. This took time; the herding of cats might have been a little easier. Some were reluctant to participate, and some were surprised we even did a devotion. But I had them—where else could they go? In the corner of my eye, I spied one young man lagging behind the group. His tall, lanky frame stood out among the rest of the crowd. He moved slowly, as if he was dragging an invisible weight behind him.

“Okay men, time for the devotional.” I paused. “Come on Luke—you're holding up progress?” My son Luke broke into a trot with his usual playful grin. I tried to shoot him a patient glance as he quickly found his place in the group. He thought I hadn't noticed, but I always did. A pastor's son always lived to endure both suspicion and high expectations; it was a great duty. A duty fraught with many struggles.

Luke endured those struggles well, but not without some failures. Many pastors chose to ignore those struggles or wished them away, but I didn't. I had seen too many young men in Luke's position grow up resenting their fathers and living a rebellious life. Several families and ministries have been destroyed by a severe lack of priority and patience. Patience.

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Discretion. I tried to carefully exercise both with God's first gift from the womb. Luke was special.

Maintaining a deep devotion for God, the boy—or rather young man—modeled the Christian walk. A born leader, he was very active with the youth ministry. Every Sunday morning, he led the youth band and inspired the young people to worship God. An able guitarist, Luke possessed a natural talent on loan from the Most High. This talent had opened many doors for him to minister. It attracted many admirers. He made friends with most of the other boys and even reached out to the loners in the group—the outcasts.

“Hey! ... stop! Cut it out!” One of those outcasts looked back searching for a stealthy sweetgum ball thrower. “Whoever's doing that needs to stop. Those things have points on 'em—you know?” Some younger boys answered back with farting sounds blaring from their armpits. That raised some laughs from a few of the dads—including myself.

I brought two fingers to my mouth and whistled loudly. It worked. Silence—finally. The boys stared at me with their tired eyes, and I started into my mini sermon. Unlike my formal Sunday morning sermons, this one was informal, and I tried to tailor it to the audience of primarily young men. No need for flowery words or clever sayings. These young men needed an illustration, and the illustration had been roaring under them all morning.

“I'm very proud of all of you. Section III was a tough run, but we still have Section IV ahead of us. I see everyone made it through, and I assume everyone listened to their guides.” I glanced over and saw our professional guides, who nodded in agreement.

“I want to share an important section of scripture with you this morning. This first part begins in Romans chapter 7. I'm titling this devotional ‘O wretched man am I’.” That got several

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chuckles, as we all felt pretty wretched after five long hours negotiating the Chattooga. Several boys were exhausted and motionless, and I'd already lost two dads to an after-lunch siesta.

"As some of you already know, Romans is written by Paul. Many of you are getting old enough to face some huge temptations." I picked up a sweetgum ball and looked at the hiding troublemakers in the back.

"God promises us a way of escape. You just have to watch for it. It's always there. Sometimes the way is obvious and sometimes it's subtle."

"But," I paused and tossed the sweetgum ball to the troubled young outcast. "But the character that He's building inside you ... well, that may be your only escape at times. Romans talks about renewing that spiritual character. You must renew your mind."

I shared my thoughts for about twenty minutes and read through the entire chapter of Romans 7, explaining to the boys the many inner struggles they would encounter as they grew into manhood. I explained to them that even the great Apostle Paul knew the inner struggle between good and evil. He described it as the Law of Sin—a law we could not ignore or escape. But Romans does introduce a Law that can counteract it.

"Look behind you. See that great rapid we just came down? At some point, all these rapids have a point of no return." I picked up a stone and threw it into some still waters.

"You probably noticed that your guides stopped in the calm waters to survey the rapids ahead. I like to call these waters the 'pools of decision.' We all face decisions everyday of our life. There is no doubt—you will face temptations just as sure as we will face more rapids this afternoon. You must decide how you

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will face them, how you will escape them. God will show you the way if you're listening, if you're paying attention."

Our experience on the Chattooga formed a wonderful analogy. That great river was similar to life, drawing us and pulling us into some dangerous situations, leading us into some potentially messy outcomes. Just as nature slammed us with its violent, harmful forces, even so, fleshly forces and spiritual forces collided with us every day.

"You guys have seen and felt the forces of these waters. They are strong, and so you can't fight them; you must outsmart them. Listen to your guide. He directs where the raft is going to go."

"But, Pastor Clark ..." One of the young men interrupted me. "But, Pastor Clark where is your guide? I noticed that your raft doesn't have a guide." Several Dads busted out in chuckles.

"Ah, you're right, but I think you're missing my point. I have experience with these things, this river. I've been down it countless times. What I'm trying to say is don't follow where the currents lead you; follow your guide. Don't follow this fleshly body and fleshly mind. Men, we all face this situation, this raging river inside us. There is a way out."

As I concluded my talk, I decided to leave the boys hanging on verse 24 and one final question: "Would there be any escape from this quandary?" A quandary we are all born into.

"Okay, let's pray and when we get to the end of Section IV you'll hear..." I said in my best Paul Harvey voice, "... the rest of the story."

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