

# 40 Years In The...

AN AVERAGE PERSON'S  
"LEARNING EXPERIENCES WITH GOD"

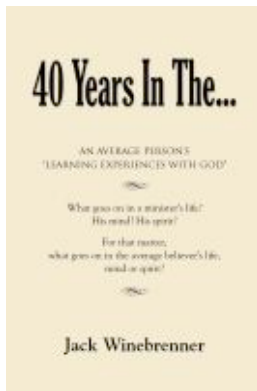


What goes on in a minister's life?  
His mind? His spirit?

For that matter,  
what goes on in the average believer's life,  
mind or spirit?



**Jack Winebrenner**



*What goes on in a minister's life? His mind? His spirit? For that matter, what goes on in the average believer's life or mind or spirit? This memoir follows the life of a person before, during and after his time as a minister. Perhaps, in following details of his less pleasant incidents, you will be armed to deal with your own life's experiences better than if you had not read about his blunders and scrapes.*

## **40 Years in the...**

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**An Average Person's  
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**Jack Winebrenner**

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## CHAPTER 1: It Was 40 Years ...

I don't know whether it was like being an Israelite wandering in the wilderness or as Moses metamorphosing in the Midian desert.

Some who knew me during those forty years would say, "Definitely, it was the wilderness!"

Perhaps they are right. I did have some missteps. Okay, that's an understatement. Maybe I *was* in the wilderness.

At times I'm sure I was so far on the fringes of the camp that I lost sight of the cloud that led the way.

***But since I am doing the writing ...***

I think it was more like Moses running away from his calling and into the desert in Midian.

Either way it was forty years.

The path I did take was certainly not the one Moses took when he led the children of Israel through the wilderness. In that instance, Moses was appointed by God to lead. In the Midian desert he was transformed, over time, into a more usable vessel for God's work.

Think about it. Moses was raised in the household of the ruler of Egypt. He was used to the good life. Work was done by servants and slaves.

In Midian Moses no longer enjoyed the luxuries of Egypt.

Nor did he lead any of God's people while in Midian. He led sheep. Hot and weary days. Cold and lonely nights. Not what he was used to at all.

*Jack Winebrenner*

He was out of God's good and acceptable and perfect will. God still had a plan for him. But his headstrong actions caused his fellow Israelites to suffer another forty years while he, himself, slowly ripened into the leader that God intended him to be.

What we choose to do, outside of God's will, often causes us, or someone we love, to suffer.

### ***The Journey Begins***

I began to pastor a church the summer before my senior year in Bible School.

They refer to them as universities or colleges or even seminaries now. Back then we called them by the name that described what we wanted to do: study the Bible. God had called. We wanted to prepare. So we went to Bible School.

I had not gone home for the summer. I didn't exactly have a home to go to — but that's another story altogether. Besides, that would have been a long 250-mile drive from eastern Pennsylvania to western Maryland, not to mention lots of gas, which was beyond my limited finances.

I stayed at the dorm. I was the school electrician, which took care of my room and board while I attended the college. And since I was working on the school's electrical system it was quite okay with them if I slept in my old dorm.

I had some projects I wanted to work on while no one else was around. I hated to upset someone's routine by cutting off power or tramping around in the buildings... especially the girls' dorm.

### ***Man In the Hall***

That latter item was problematical when I first started performing my electrician duties. It was up to me to find out what caused fuses to blow

or to replace a blackened duplex outlet. Seems like that was always in the girls' dorm.

When a male student went up the stairs to the girls' section he had a strict protocol to follow. When he got to the top of the stairs, he was to rap loudly on the door, then open it just a crack. He definitely was not to open it far enough to be able to see any of the girls at this stage.

Before opening the door more than a fraction of an inch, he was to yell out, "Man in the hall!"

The instant result would be sounds of scurrying and screaming by seemingly hundreds of female students racing into their rooms. (It was generally not even a dozen.)

After I was in their territory for a short time a few brave souls would open their doors and then ease out into the hall to resume their ironing.

I guess there was more room for that sort of thing in the halls. But I think they really did it so they could get caught up on the latest details about who had latched onto which of the eligible boys.

Understand, I wouldn't want to be accused of eavesdropping but it's not possible to block out much during all the chatter. And that ensued in earnest within minutes of my becoming part of the background.

Those girls. They did great things for a guy's ego. I had not gotten past my third or fourth foray into their territory before it happened.

"Man in the hall!" I shouted, as always.

The squeals and scurrying started and then came to an abrupt halt.

"Oh, it's only Jack," one of the ironing board mavens said.

*Jack Winebrenner*

In an instant the halls again filled with a bevy of housecoated beauties, hair in curlers and all that. From then on no one even had to say a thing. They had come to recognize my shout.

### ***A Calling***

So, for the summer, I had no such distractions... no one to interrupt my work routines.

Somehow the founders of a church some fifteen miles away learned that a Bible student was at the campus. They sent a delegation of one and he asked me to come to preach the following Sunday morning. Their pastor was away.

I interrupted the man before he finished his brief invitation. Of course I would come! That's why Bible students went to Bible School.

When Sunday finally arrived, I encountered no problem at all in finding the small country church.

I enjoyed a strong anointing from God as I preached. They asked me to come back the next week.

When I showed up the following Sunday I was fully prepared. If they thought the first sermon was edifying, just wait till they should hear me this time, I thought. I was going to bring the house down with my preaching.

After the preliminaries (meaning the song service, offering and announcements) I grasped my well-worn Bible and strode confidently — no, boldly — to the pulpit. I plopped the Bible down and briskly opened it.

In my few preaching opportunities, mostly during a four-year stint in the Navy, I had decided I would always start with prayer just before preaching. This time that practice turned out to be a providential praxis.



When I had opened my Bible it was not at the passage from which I was going to preach. My notes, on a thin, half sheet of paper, were somewhere in the Bible. Where, I had no idea, because my mind had gone totally blank.

My opening prayer was a sincere and humble plea for God to settle in upon us... to “fall fresh on me” (as the song goes). And I meant it. The Lord knew that. And He did settle upon the congregation. Lovingly, His Spirit did fall on me, too. His presence was so full and wonderful we didn’t need a sermon that morning. But I preached anyway.

As His Spirit had settled in upon me, the anointing that had fled from my proud spirit came back full force. I suddenly regained my memory. The Bible yielded to my touch and opened right to the lost passage, with my notes still in place.

I learned an immutable law for preachers: let *all* the glory go to God.

Preachers are human, whether neophytes or old timers. Paul, for example, was an old timer. He admitted that he constantly had to hold himself in check.

You get an inkling of this when you read 1 Corinthians 2:4, “My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom.”

It is not the great orator who moves people to come to God for salvation or to yield to His will. It is fully the work of the Holy Spirit.

I have no recollection now what that “lost” passage was or what topic I preached on at either service. The church leaders asked me to come back to preach for the third Sunday. Then they asked me to stay and be their new pastor. Apparently, the former pastor did not plan to come back.

*Jack Winebrenner*

During the next several months membership doubled. We had a growing group of men who came every Saturday night to clean the church. Then we spread out through the sanctuary to pray over each pew — and the soul that would be sitting there the next morning.

Soon, the men were coming over on Saturday mornings, also, to dig out the church basement and build much needed new Sunday School rooms.

## CHAPTER 2: Another Lesson

A few years earlier I had to learn an equally hard lesson. Strange, isn't it, that we don't learn what we thought we had learned from hard lessons in life?

I was still in the Navy then. I was asked to preach for another pastor for his three-Sunday leave of the pulpit. I had preached at out stations for the church I attended while in high school. I had ministered with the quartet at a church near airmen's school in Oklahoma. I filled in for the pastor at my church home while in Memphis. Each time I was asked my answer was immediate. The only problem I ever saw was that I wasn't asked often enough.

Now I was stationed in Brunswick, Maine. The church I attended was nearly an hour away in Auburn. I almost always brought a sailor buddy or so with me and that seemed to have an effect on the growth of the youth group in the church. We soon had our own service which was an hour before the Sunday evening service. Somehow I wound up being the youth leader.

About 75 miles away from the church in Auburn, the sister of our pastor's wife ministered with her husband in a small church in Rockland. They rarely got to go on vacation. Smaller churches that are far flung like theirs was, found it hard to get another minister to fill in for them. But I did say it was the sister of my pastor's wife, right?

So sister called sister. Guess who was handed the phone so they could *beg* me to come preach for them. They must have spent almost five seconds to persuade me to fill in before I practically knocked them over to get to the Rockland pulpit. (Seventy-five miles away, remember?)

The Sunday service, as I recall, was at two-thirty in the afternoon. That gave me just enough time, if I was careful to obey the speed limits, to

*Jack Winebrenner*

get there after our morning services for the three Sundays. I figured that if I followed the same highway rules on the trip back I could make it back in time to lead the youth group each Sunday evening.

That meant, of course, that I couldn't preach really long sermons. I think the folks in Rockland appreciated that. They enjoyed the brevity so much, I suppose, that they took up a "love offering" for me on the final Sunday.

No time for a special fellowship period on that third Sunday, though. I still had duties with the youth group in Auburn. I gratefully pocketed the \$17.86 they had collected for me and jumped into my 1949 Dodge. Still and all, I was fifteen or twenty minutes later than usual pulling out of the church parking area heading south onto U.S. 1.

If I thought things might be different for this final trip so that I could stop somewhere for a hamburger on the way, I was overly optimistic. I would have to fast again like the first two Sundays. But at least the offering I had received would defray most of the gas expenses for the three round trips.

Traffic was considerably heavier, it seemed, than on the other trips. Route One was harrowing enough on its own. It was a three-lane highway. When oncoming traffic seemed safely far enough distant I could speed up and pass the slowpoke in front of me, which I did several times. On more than one occasion, I came rather close to having a too-intimate meeting with a northbound car. What really made things exciting, though, was when a northbound car got the idea to pass someone at the same time I had gotten into that third "suicide" lane.

Traffic thinned for a while and my concern about not being late eased a little. That changed. A girl in a Ford played "lazy foot, lead foot" while she slowed down in the impossible-to-pass areas and speeded up when the roads opened up again. I guess her V-8 accelerated better than my heavier, in-line six jalopy did. I finally saw my chance and got the jump on her at a short straight-away.

It worked. I put as much distance between my car and hers with a devil-may-care attitude for several miles. Yes, I know. The devil didn't care; he was happy about my reckless abandon. And, yes, I know the Lord was not pleased with my attitude. But I had a righteous cause. I needed to get to church on time. And it seemed that I did have the Lord's blessing in the matter. No state troopers or *county mounties* had caught me in the act.

When I got to the traffic light in the small town of Bath, my car chose that time to have one of its habitual stubborn streaks. The engine vapor locked.

I sat through, I believe, six traffic light changes. When it was time for the seventh green light to flash on... well, you can guess who was right next to me. The girl in the Ford!

I turned the ignition key, heard the usual whiney sputter, and then the sudden delight of all six spark plugs firing in succession. I'd like to say that I left the girl in a cloud of smelly white smoke but that was the fate of the cars behind us. We both sped, side by side, down the widened mid-town highway through Bath.

Then she disappeared. And the road had narrowed to its three-lane normality. I had a minor guilt trip about the girl. I hoped she had not crashed when the road narrowed. I didn't have much time to dwell on that prospect, however. A Bath Police cruiser was speeding down the road behind me, lights flashing.

I slowed, ready to pull off the road to let him pass. I didn't want him to have a sudden altercation with a northbound car swerving around a slower car into the cruiser's path. The policeman had other ideas. He wanted me all the way off the road. He wasn't racing toward an emergency somewhere down the road. He was after me.

*Jack Winebrenner*

I got the ticket and got on my way again. Carefully following God's will to remain within all the towns' and highways' speed limits, I got to the church just in time to take up my duties as youth leader.

Sometime during the next week I was scheduled to be in court. I thought I could successfully fight the case against the overzealous cop who had stopped me. He was way off. The ticket said I had been going fifty miles an hour in a thirty-five mile zone. I wasn't.

At least, I wasn't at the time he showed up racing down the road behind me. Sure, he might have been doing the speed he had indicated on the ticket. But logic would tell a sane person that he obviously had to be exceeding my speed by a long shot in order to catch up with me. So I had my case and my arguments pretty well in order by the time our case got called out.

Things sure seem different when an authoritative voice from a judge bellows sternly down to you from way up on that pedestal where he sits. It never looked that imposing in the Perry Mason episodes I always watched.

At first I sputtered worse than my Dodge had when recovering from its vapor lock. But I got into the routine early enough to convince the judge to let me argue my case. His manner seemed to soften. He even helped instruct me on the procedure of calling my witness, the police officer.

Officers are more intelligent than I had ever given them credit to be. However, I did manage to have him sounding (at least to me) defensive. Finally, I hit him with my big clincher.

"So, officer," I pronounced boldly. "I could not have been doing the speed you wrote on the ticket, could I?"

"You could and you did, Sir."

I let loose with my well rehearsed logic about the impossibility of two cars going the same speed if one was overtaking the other.

“Fifty miles an hour is totally out of reason, then,” I stated.

He gave in slightly.

“I suppose it could have been less,” he said. “Maybe forty-five *would* be more accurate.”

“Forty-five?” I responded in my best Perry Mason imitation. “You know, don’t you, that I could not be going that fast. Not even forty miles an hour. It was more like thirty-eight, wasn’t it?”

I had him. I was sure to win my case.

The judge had other ideas.

“Son,” he said, “you just convicted yourself. One mile an hour above the speed limit would still be against the law. I heard you say you were three miles over the limit. You will be paying the fine. And since you elected to contest the case, there will also be court costs.” Then he raised his voice again. “Next!”

I was led to a clerk’s desk and she showed me the adding machine tape. (Keep in mind, this was 1957 and we were in a small town in Maine.)

I looked at the tape. The amount floored me: \$17.86, to the penny. Surely, they didn’t know the amount of the love offering I had received in Rockland?

But it gets worse. I wrote a check to pay the fine and court costs. The clerk would not accept it.

“Cash only,” she said. “We do not accept checks.” I’m sure she meant to add: “From sailors.”

*Jack Winebrenner*

I did not have \$17.86 cash with me. Next thing I knew, I was in a cell in the basement with the barred door closing behind me.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Don’t I get to go back to the base to get the money?”

“No,” the jailer replied. “We’re in Maine. We still have debtor’s prison here. You’ll stay as long as it takes for you to get the cash to pay for your crime.”

I winced at his wording. Nor was I sure he was on the level about debtor’s prison. But I wasn’t Perry Mason anymore and couldn’t come up with any clenching statements to reverse my fate. I did think of asking if I could make my one allowable phone call.

He pulled the cell door open again and motioned me to a phone on the wall next to the stairs. Luckily, I did have a nickel to put in the pay phone. I called the Naval base and one of my detractor “friends” answered. Since he thought my faith in God was, as he called it, “Poppycock,” I had to listen to his sermon. There were lots of interruptions while he shared my story with other like-minded guys around him. Lots of laughter, too.

So I spent an hour or so in jail. The one who brought the cash to spring me was one of my fellow crew members from the airplane we flew in. A note accompanied the cash.

“We took up an offering for you,” it said. And a bunch of signatures followed.

That was a poignant lesson for me. Nothing excuses us from obeying the law of the land. We do not have a special dispensation to speed through a town or run stop signs. Our *busyness* does not give us license to do or act or even have unholy feelings about things we are required to do.



*40 Years In The...*

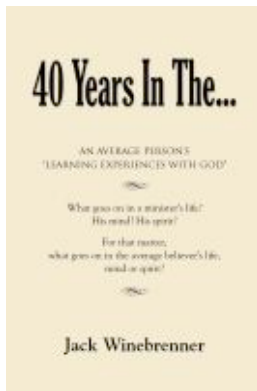
Jesus, if you read the gospels carefully, never appeared to be in a hurry like we usually seem to be. He did not get stressed or anxious about reaching His destination when someone interrupted His journey. He did everything that needed to be done, healing the sick and lame and blind, and teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Even when His good friend, Lazarus, was seriously ill (and Jesus knew how serious it was) He continued teaching at the place where He was. Lazarus died. You know the rest of the story. He raised Lazarus from the dead. It turned into a greater miracle than if He had simply showed up in time and healed Lazarus. We should remember to allow for God's guidance during our journeys.

So I became a jailbird. My testimony suffered among people I had been trying to lead to the Lord. I lost the exact amount I had received where I had been preaching. The only good that came from it was the learning, including the humiliation that also resulted.

There were "little" things, too, such as my emotional reaction to the girl in the Ford and the slowpokes that inhibited my dutiful progress of getting back to the church... all of that came glaring back at me. We do not have the luxury of allowing our emotions to rule our spirit. And if we don't learn, God will see to it that we get another lesson along the road of life.

I would have many more lessons. They would come, whether while I was in a sailor's uniform or, later, when I served as pastor of a church in Collegeville, PA.



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