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Digital Edition 08/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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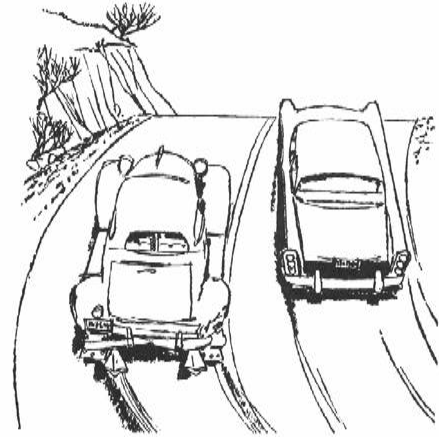
The Fog

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the September 21, 1980 Sunday School Beacon

The shiny, new sports car sped along the black ribbon of highway in the early part of dawn. It was that halfway time -- between the last nod of night and the first gray streaks of early morning light -- when all of nature, it seemed, became suddenly very silent and still for the transition.

Bob Catcher leaned his tall, muscular frame against the thickly-padded, densely-cushioned bucket seat and sighed with contentment, casting an occasional quick sideways glance toward his sandy-haired seat companion.



Neal Orton was an enigma to him. Not that he disliked Neal, ah no; Neal was real, and genuine through and through. But Neal was so very religious; that's where the enigma came in.

Bob pushed the cruise control button on and relied behind the wheel, enjoying every single minute of driving his new car. The crisply cool morning was perfect, flaunting an appreciative display of autumn wonders with the sweet copper of the turning foliage in a glorious riot of flamboyant colors on either side of the highway and the entire unspoiled countryside.

Bob cast another quick glance toward Neal whose eyes were misted over with tears. "Something bothering you?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing, Bob. I was just meditating and thanking God for making our world so beautiful. Look at these hills, would you! Who, but God, could have . . ."

"Spare the religious prong!" Bob interrupted in a brittle-crisp tone of voice as he lifted a restraining hand in mild protest. "I don't enjoy being preached at, nor to. Maybe I'm not 'converted,' as you say I need to be, but I'm certainly no heathen either. I go to church . . . each and every Easter Sunday morning and on Christmas eve . . . and I live a good moral life. I don't bother my neighbors, nor molest or harm them; so I'm sure the Lord will have some place other than hell for me to go when I die."

"'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.' St. John 3:3 Salvation is far more than living a 'good' life, Bob; it's being made new in Christ -- a 'new creature.'"

"Please! Let's not discuss it further, Neal. Go ahead and believe what you want to, but allow me the privilege and freedom of choice. I'm not a bad guy; you know that. We've been bosom friends since the sixth grade and you know I have never smoked nor drank any kind of alcoholic beverage. Neither have I caroused around and messed my life up nor blown my brain with pot and dope. So spare me the pain of hearing a sermon."

Pushing his medium-built frame back against the plush seat, Neal made no further comment. Never one to argue, he realized with sudden clarity that unless God opened his friend's eyes to his spiritual need, nothing he could say would have bearing or make an impact on his soul. God would have to take over.

Neal's mind raced back to the night of graduation -- just a few months ago, it was. Laurel High was a beehive of laughter and activity and congratulations for the graduates: He was standing on the third step from the bottom, with his parents, when a hand tapped his shoulder. Turning, he saw Bob.

"Well, we made it, Neal!" he commented. "Finally!" "I suppose you'll be taking off for some religious college a couple thousand miles away and I'll never see you again. Right?"

"Wrong," Neal remembered saying. "I'll be staying right here where my roots are firmly established unless God tells me otherwise. In fact, I begin work at Ludlow and Ludlow's one week from Monday, the Lord willing."

Bob spun around so fast to face him that he almost fell down the three steps. "Not the Earl Ludlow!" he exclaimed in utter disbelief and total surprise.

"One and the same."

Bob gave a long white. "How lucky can you get, Neal! Did you realize that more than a dozen of the fellows from Laurel High have approached the Mr. Ludlow for

employment and they never made so much as a dint in the man's favor or concern for them. With a crooked half-smile and a polite -- polite, I said -- we'll-call-you-if-we're-interested reply, they were ushered to the door. Who's pulling for you?"

"God, Bob; no one else but God. I asked Him to direct me, and He did. A month ago, I felt impressed -- while praying -- to see Mr. Ludlow. I went to his office and was told to return in two weeks time. When I got there, Mr. Ludlow informed me that he wanted me to begin work one week after graduation. So I'll be working for the Ludlows. I told the Lord to make me the best businessman that He possibly could. God needs good, strong, stable business people and working men in his church, Bob. However would a church move forward and progress if there were no consistent-living, stable and dependable lay people?"

"I'm not sure I can answer that question, Neal, since I'm not at all religiously inclined. But I know two things; first, I'm glad that you'll be around and that we'll still be buddies; you've been the one big factor that has kept me from getting involved with the drunks and the hop-heads. I thought you'd like to know. Second, God had to have worked for you in getting you in with Ludlow and Ludlow."

"Like I said previously, it was God. And Bob . . ."

"Yes, Neal?"

"I'm going to see if Mr. Ludlow, Sr. can put you to work, too."

"Wh . . . what do you mean by that?" Bob asked, stammering. "The other fellows have been turned down."

"It so happens that the man told me he was interested in hiring a couple of non-smoking, non-drinking men. Said he checked my record carefully and was much pleased with the results. So-o . . ."

Neal remembered now how Bob had gulped and swallowed as he stood before him, speechless. Then, recovering query, he said, "you're a real friend, Neal, and I'll appreciate anything you may be able to do."

"It will have to be God, Bob; God, plus the fact that you don't smoke or drink. Mr. Ludlow hires only this kind of men. Said they were more dependable, less sickly, and that they performed their duties more efficiently."

"You don't mean it! A corporation as exclusive as Ludlow and Ludlow hiring only non-smokers and nondrinkers. It's unheard of, Neal."

"It isn't now; we know of one -- the Ludlows." After he had worked for one week and two days, Neal mentioned Bob's name to Earl Ludlow, Jr., stating that his friend neither smoked nor drank, and a week later Bob was hired. Together they drove to and from work, discussing their respective positions and having good rapport until something spiritual or religious was mentioned and brought into the conversation. That's where the dividing point was all too obvious and dear. Bob was "touchy" where spiritual things were concerned.

"Fog!" Bob exclaimed suddenly, slicing into Neal's recollections and slamming on his brakes. "Whew! This is bad!" he added in concern.

Neal jerked himself erect and looked out. The thin streamers of mist seemed to be rising out of the ground directly in front of them -- thin streamers which thickened and filled the air around them.

Bob pursed his lips. "I've never seen anything like it. Never!" he exclaimed emphatically with a queer in his voice. "Settling in so thick and so fast in so short a time, I mean. Why, only a moment ago the countryside was a breath-taking sight of color. Then, almost like a curtain was dropped in front of me, there isn't a single thing visible. Not a thing! Not even the hood of the car! This is dangerous; what if there's a car directly in front of me . . ." and Bob's voice trailed meaningfully.

He slowed the car down to what was almost a snail's pace and clutched the steering wheel tenaciously. His knuckles showed white against the shiny, black wheel. Sitting on the edge of the seat, his brow furrowed in wrinkled concern, Bob peered into the now impenetrable, swirling, churning, rolling fog. "Did you ever," he said through set teeth in a tone of utter disbelief. "This is absolutely the worst fog I've ever seen, Neal. And where did it come from so suddenly? If I stop completely, someone may plow into me from behind; and if I don't, I may run into anyone in front of me. Sad thing is, I have no idea how far over to go to get off the road without hurling us down the bank."

Neal edged up on his seat. The fog was bad, unusually dense, too. But God was as much interested in the fog as He was in the sunshine or any other kind of weather, he realized, and He knew where they were. Bowing his head, Neal gave thanks.

"Don't tell me you're thankful for this!" Bob exploded.

"I'm thankful for everything that befalls me; it is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning me. I'll that He blesses is good, and unblest good is ill . . ."

"Please Neal! Please!" Bob interrupted dogmatically, bringing the car to an abrupt halt and extracting a soft chamois cloth from the glove compartment.

"We'll be late for work," he said crisply as he opened the door and wiped fiercely on the windshield. "Thought that may help a bit but I guess I was wrong," he conceded grudgingly.

Neal washed the vigorous sweep of the chamois-clad hand as it arched across the fog-soaked glass and a moment later Bob was back behind the wheel sagging with disgust.

"Look at that!" His index finger pointed accusingly at the glass. "For all my effort, it didn't do one bit of good. I can't understand it." And a frown mingled with the disgust as he started the car again and moved slowly forward.

"Bob," Neal said softly, "Where is the piece of chamois?"

Bob jerked his head toward the litter box. Quickly Neal had the cloth in his hand. "I just thought of something that might help; at least a little bit."

"It's no use; you saw how much it helped a moment ago," Bob said with apparent sarcasm.

Neal ignored the statement. Slowly, deliberately, he wiped the inside of the windshield.

The surprise nearly tumbled out of Bob's mouth. "Well what do you know!" he exclaimed. "The windshield's clear, and I can even see ahead on the road a little. How about that!"

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Neal's mouth. "It's still foggy out there," he said; "so don't press that accelerator too heavily, Bob."

Continuing his slow and deliberate wiping on the inside of the windshield Neal added, "You forgot to clean the inside, Bob; that is the most important of all. And that goes for a lot of other things, too -- things like one's heart."

Neal paused, half expecting another verbal outbreak of anger, but when it didn't come he said kindly, "There are worse things than geeing caught in a physical fog; there's a danger of keeping one's heart shut tight against God's truth and becoming completely swallowed up in a spiritual fog . . . a fog so dismal and dense that it's virtually impossible to ever get out of."

Bob turned suddenly and faced Neal. "You . . . you mean I'm kind of like the windshield!" His words rose sharply then fell with thoughtful deliberation. "Maybe so. Maybe so." He paused again, then glanced through the cleared and cleaned windshield. "How stupid can one get -- and be!" he exclaimed quickly. "The defroster was at my

fingertips all the time; I just never thought to use it. The blame all went on the fog. But look, Neal; the fog's lifting, too."

Neal turned his eyes toward the ribbon of highway, continuing to breathe a prayer heavenward for his friend. The long fog tracers were shortening and thinning now and lifting a good distance above the ground, making it easy to see ahead.

Heaving a sigh of deep relief, Bob moved steadily forward. "I . . . think you're right, Neal," he said quickly, almost reverently; "About windshield and hearts, I mean. The inside cleaning is important. Finally, I see the light. The fog is lifting . . . in here." And Bob smote his chest with his hand. "I want the kind of salvation you have," he added, with a catch in his voice. "I'm tired of fighting and resisting; I'm ready to yield."

"When, Bob?"

"Now. Right now, and right here!"

With tears in his eyes, Bob steered the car off the highway to the shoulder of the road and once more brought it to an abrupt halt . . . this time to have the fog removed entirely from his mind as his heart was made new -- in Christ.

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THE END