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## So Shall Ye Be Established

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the April 19, 1981 Sunday School Beacon

There were four of us that night, Earl, Stuart, Joe and me. Toting flashlights and dip nets, and wearing high rubber boots, we tramped through the dripping woods to an obscure pond at the base of a low hill not far from the village. It was the first warm, rainy night after a winter of heavy snows, and low mists were filtering through the woods, reeking of primordial ooze and dark beginnings.



"Kinda' eerie," Stuart ventured, flashing his light from side to side and looking, every now and again, behind him.

"You're kidding!" Joe quipped, laughing ever so softly as he slapped Stuart on his broad, wide shoulders. "I love this; do I ever! I'm still dedicated to my first calling . . . being a dedicated herpetologist."

Without preamble Stuart rejoined, "I'm not sure that I'm all that interested anymore, not if it entails nightly treks through mosquito infested swamps and being a habitue of dark places where nothing but red and green eyes stare at you from beneath logs and behind trees. This is spooky, and I mean spooky."

"But, Stu, they're harmless creatures," Earl added suddenly in a muffled sort of voice.

"Maybe so. Maybe so, but I've suddenly lost my once-fervent relish and enthusiasm over the whole thing. I think I'll major in English, instead, when we leave for college this fall."

I walked along in silence, listening and chuckling to myself. For so long as I could remember nearly, Earl and Stuart and Joe and I had been a foursome, known better to the community as the quarter from Piney Ridge Church. We had gone through grade school together and were about to graduate from Piney Ridge High together in a few months, God willing, and for so long as I could remember, Stuart had always been the impetuous and temperamental one.

For eleven and a half months out of the year, in our part of the country, blue-spotted salamanders live in darkness, lurking in dark crevices two to three feet beneath the surface of the earth. Once a year, preferably on the darkest, wettest nights of early April, these creatures of darkness desert their subterranean existence and crawl through the rainy woods to nearby breeding pools where the eggs are laid. We hoped, on this "perfect" night, to see those elusive critters. For me, excitement was at an all-time high; the same with Joe and Earl, I was sure. But Stu... well...

For a mile or so we tramped down a muddy road, turned left and forged through the woods, clearing wet branches as we moved. In time we heard the high ring of a spring peeper chorus, a sure sign that we were approaching the pond, and after a few minutes we came to the place. There, crowded into a small temporary pool just east of the main pond, we saw them.

There was something elemental in the scene. Each spring for years and years the blue-spotted salamanders emerge from their holes, migrate, breed, lay their eggs, then return to their dank existence underground. We had caught them now in their brief sojourn into the upper world.

I stopped dead-still, my heart beating wildly with joy and my being experiencing a surge of inexpressible awe and wonder.

"It's fantastic/" Joe exclaimed in a hushed whisper near my ear. "Fantastic! I can hardly believe it! We're actually seeing them, Clair!" he added, laying a gentle hand on my shoulder. "This is one of the greatest moments of my life."

"You can say that again!" Earl declared. "Isn't God good! Imagine, us seeing these elusive creatures, especially since they're becoming so few in number anymore. ' ' "

"And that's one reason why I want to major in herpetology," Joe declared positively and emphatically: "to see why they're decreasing from our area. There must be a reason; things like this don't just happen. Something's happening in this area to bring about their rapid decline. Why, unless something's done to preserve them, they'll be

virtually extinct by the time I may have children with whom to share this exciting, once-a-year night-time vigil and thrilling adventure."

I sighed; Joe was right, I knew. "It's the same all around us," I said quickly; "change, change and more change. Even the churches are changing. Instead of groaning there's gorging; instead of praying there's playing, and..."

Stuart's flashlight blinded me momentarily with its bright light. When he spoke his voice trembled with pent-up emotion. "You fellows are archaic to a fault!" he declared stoutly. "As I see it, those churches which you say are changing are merely keeping abreast with the times. And why not? Who wants to stalemate and . . . and emulate our grandfathers and how they worshipped in the churches of that era? Not !! Our church is too constricting and too restrictive. I'm tired of it, Clair. Tired of it, I tell you! Maybe, when I was smaller and a whole lot younger, it was OK; but not anymore. I can't 'swallow' what we hear... 'you can't do this; you musn't do that,' " he mocked in sing-song fashion, his voice rising to an unnaturally high pitch.

"Stu!" I gasped. "Stu, you can't be serious; not with all the light you have!"

"Light! What light? Those things are merely the preacher's notions."

His statement dripped with contempt and reeked of scorn. Cold fear clutched my heart. Many things came back to me then -- things which Stuart had said and which I had passed off as a practical joke on his part. Now, however, I saw their real meaning, and in the revelation of the enlightenment I was scared for him.

"You... you..., what happened to you, Stu?" I asked, shivering, but not from any cold air. "You didn't used to be like this."

"That's what you think!" he answered defiantly. "I never have gone along with all those 'thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not,' and all this bunk on dress, the dance and the movies."

"Bunk! You call what the Bible is opposed to, bunk/I'm fearful for you, Stu; I honestly am."

Stuart threw his head back and laughed. "It's a matter of personal interpretation and opinion, this dress question is; and so far as I'm concerned, all this preaching on standards is absolutely unnecessary. It's completely irrelevant for our times."

I felt suddenly numb with shock. Stuart became like a stranger to me.

"The Bible is the most current and up-to-date book in the world," I replied. "Its message fits all ages and is relevant for any and all generations. As for your statement

regarding 'personal interpretation,' 2 Peter 1:20-21 says, 'Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.

" 'For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.' So you see how very wrong you are, Stu."

"There again, it's a matter of personal opinion, of personal beliefs, of who believes what. I'm just not as gullible as I once was, that's all. I've begun doing my own thinking and things have taken on a different perspective for me -- a broader view of how to make it in the world. And now that I've expressed myself, I'll be going home. Don't look for me at church anymore, Clair, and please, please, don't visit me and try to get me back; you won't be welcome; no one will be. I've thought this thing through and my mind's made up; I'm going to do what I want to do for a change."

I stood gazing at my friend, feeling for all the world like what I had just heard was one great nightmare, but knowing it was stark reality. Sudden tears stung my eyes, their salt content only adding to the pain and agony I felt all over.

"Let me say just one thing, Stu," I ventured brokenly. "You'll live to regret the day when you turned your back on God for your 'broader view' of thinking. I see now why, all these years, you have never been established; you haven't gone to the bottom, as the ministers say. No, you never 'wholly followed the Lord.' 2 Chronicles 20:20 says, 'Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper.' "

With a gesture of impatience and anger, Stuart said sarcastically, "Thanks for the sermon, Clair; you know how much I appreciate it!" Then, turning on his heel, he walked into the darkness, calling over his shoulder, "Remember what I said: no visits; not ever! You won't be welcome. This is final!"

There was no "good-bye", no "thanks for the many good times we shared," no anything; just the haunting echo of his, "You won't be welcome. This is final!"

I stood for a long time, too shocked to move. Then, with feet that felt like they were loaded with buck shot or some other heavy weights, I shuffled toward Joe and Earl on the far side of the pond.

Joe was lying flat on his stomach in the damp, marshy grasses, so intent on watching the blue-spotted salamanders that he never noticed me. Earl, however, got off his knees where he was trying to capture the creatures on film, and came towards me. "Where's Stu?" he asked quickly.

"Gone," I said in a tone of voice not sounding at all like mine.

"Gone? You mean home? What's hugging him?" Earl asked, taking a partially muddied hand and wiping it on an old hankie he'd brought along for the purpose.

"He defected."

"Defected? What do you mean?" Earl's voice came out so shocked and so loud that it immediately silenced the great chorus of night-practicing, night-singing peepers.

I stood with bowed head while tear's flowed down my cheeks. "Stu's another Benedict Arnold, Earl," I managed weakly and brokenly. "A spiritual traitor. He's taking sides with our strongest adversary and foe, the devil."

"What are you talking about!" Joe exclaimed, standing suddenly on his two feet and facing me so quickly that I almost fell over backwards from fright, "Who's a traitor? A defector?"

"Stuart is. He's another Demas. You know, 'having loved this present world.' "

Joe gasped; then he groaned. "I knew he was changing, Clair," he said sadly, addressing me. "But why? What does he hope to gain?"

"More worldly favor and acclaim, I'm sure," Earl answered, refreshing both Joe's and my memory about something which Stuart had said months ago.

Like ghosts out of the past, all the jibes and snide remarks, the many innuendoes he'd let drop when all four of us were together, paraded back to me with unmistakable meaning and clarity now. Contrary to my thinking and my belief that Stu was merely joking when he'd made his insinuations, I now realized that he had been doing anything but joking about it. He had been dead serious all along and we were too dumb to believe it.

After a long time in which none of us spoke, Joe broke the silence with, "Well, what do we do now? We're only a three-some anymore."

"What do we do? Why we buckle the armor of God on a little tighter and stay right where God put us," I replied, feeling more determined than ever to run the race to the finish.

"There's more with us than are with the unrighteous," I added. "And now, on with the exciting business of learning all we can about the blue-spotted salamander."

"Right you are!" Joe exclaimed, dropping to the ground and, by the beam of the flashlight, making notes in a small book he'd brought with him while Earl centered the camera's lens for his "just right" pictures.

Dropping on my knees to get a close-up look at the salamanders, I thanked God for the peace I had in my soul. Holiness of heart was wonderful indeed. Yes, it was. I was glad I sought till my heart and soul received its cleansing; its filling. I was completely satisfied.

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