Talk about hot! Whew! It was. And the night before was the hottest night of one of the hottest weeks we have known and endured for decades. All day long the sun had beaten down on the buildings and pavements in our town; the nights had brought no relief and they were intolerably long. My Amanda, she was sure we'd suffocate to death.
Early in the morning I arose and went to the door to catch a breath of what I hoped might be cool morning air. The sky was palely gray with the coming dawn but the air moved sluggishly, if it moved at all. I pitied Amanda. Pitied our dog, almost as old as I'm sure any dog can ever get. Pitied the farmers whose crops were drying up for lack of moisture and burning up beneath the rays of a burning sun. And even sort of pitied myself.

I stood and watched the stars, pale, liquid gold, growing less and less in the approaching light, and the moon, cool and aloof, gracefully preparing to leave her spot on the stage of night and I tried to feel the coolness which normally would have been around at this early hour but which, lately, had become an elusive, in-hiding sort of thing. Just where it was in-hiding, I had no idea. I only knew I missed its ordinarily-cool, fresh, and (now I realized) taken-for-granted wafts of coolness and fresh air. Dreadfully so. But that's so much like us humans; taking the good, God-sent, everyday blessings for granted and never fully appreciating them until they're gone. Yes, that's what I tell my Amanda and she tells me. And it's a for-sure fact. God gives us so many, many, everyday blessings until we just sort of take them all for granted and don't stop to think . . . not ever . . . how truly great and wonderful they are. Not until they're gone or are taken from us.

Down by the creek bank below our house (we lived at the very edge, the fringe, of our town, Amanda and I) well, down at the creek bank, I heard red wing blackbirds waking up and beginning to stir. Somehow it gave me a good feeling. At least something had life and felt like bestirring themselves, I thought, taking my big red bandana-type handkerchief out of my hip pocket and fanning myself with it between mopping the running sweat off my face.

I heard Amanda stir around inside our kitchen; felt, rather than heard, her presence surveying me pityingly from the open kitchen doorway. Then I smelled the appetite-whetted bacon sizzling in the frying pan and thanked God for Amanda. As sure as my name was Josiah Avery Ketchum, I'd have brown biscuits to go with that mouth-watering, browning bacon. Never once . . . not once . . . since the day I married her, did Amanda fail to make biscuits for me. And how she could make them! Um!

She learned, during courtship, that I loved tall, light, golden brown biscuits. Now, instead of doing like most girls would do, Amanda waited till after we were married to wield her culinary skills on me, not before. She said she wanted to surprise me. And believe me, after 42 years of wedded bliss,
she's still surprising me. A great wife, my Amanda. Yes, a great wife. She knows all the secrets on how to keep her man . . . me . . . happy. Strange, too, she never went to school to learn this. But my Amanda, she had a wonderful mother who told her all about the duties and joys of wife-hood. And Amanda was an excellent "learner"; an able scholar. And the beautiful part about it all is that everything her mother taught her came straight from the pages of the Bible. God's Word.

Tears of joy and happiness sprang to my eyes. God had blessed me in a super-abundant way. I knew Him personally in saving grace and sanctifying power; I had my Amanda, we had half-a-dozen-plus-two grown and married offspring, twenty grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. We all had enough food to eat, a good bed to sleep in and a sufficient amount of clothing to cover us so we looked like Christians.

"Bacon's ready, Josh."

Amanda's soft voice was still as sweet and pleasant to my ears as the day I met her. "Comin', my love," I answered as I gave my face another sound mopping with the big red handkerchief before going into the kitchen.

"Another hot day, Josh," she said softly, giving me my usual every-day early-morning routine kiss. "I love you, Josh," she said. "God gave us to each other."

"That He did, without a doubt," I said agreeably with a catch in my voice. "You excited about the fish fry, Amanda?"

Excited as a little girl with her first doll, Josh. Just think of it, all of them home!"

"And down on the creek bank like old times! Wonder if the frogs'll give us the Hallelujah Chorus in bass. Remember how John always declared that's what they were doing when they harumphed their loudest and noisiest?"

"Crescendo, Sally called it. It has something to do with music, I gather."

I laughed. So did my Amanda. Then we sobered. After forty-two years of living together we read each others thoughts. And hearts. I knew
Amanda's burden was every bit as heavy as the one I, too, carried for John, our firstborn. Our eldest.

Except for John, all the other children were safe in God's fold. John had been safely in at one time, but "things" came in. Business now monopolized his every waking minute. God took His departure. He was crowded out, literally. We had prayed, fasted and wept for John, over John, and with John. He remained unchanged. Then he "couldn't come home" for Christmas, Easter, or Thanksgiving. That had been how many years ago? Five? Yes. Yes, it was five.

I sighed. My Amanda sighed. She took the corer of her pretty flowered apron and wiped her eyes. I used my big red handkerchief.

"And to think, Josh," she remarked in little more than a whisper, with shining-bright eyes, "John suggested this fish fry! 'For old times sake,' he wrote. I think maybe . . . yes, I believe . . . no 'maybes' about it, that our eldest is thinking again."

"And searching!" I added with a hoarse sounding voice.


As soon as I finished the last bite of the airy-light biscuit, Amanda tried to shoo me out of the kitchen. "Nothing coin', my love," I remarked. "We're going through life together, doing things together. I'm a part of you, you're a part of me. Now, I can wash and dry the dishes while you do something else." I kissed her on the cheek and gently took the dish cloth out of her hand.

"Thanks, Josh. You're a wonderful husband. I actually love having you in the kitchen with me. I'll get busy on the pies . . . . . ."

The sun was a real scorcher by noon and of course with the oven doing full duty for hours it only added to the intense heat inside the house. But we had endured it other summers and I knew we'd make it again.

The children began coming in toward evening, and when John and his family drove in it was like one big grand reunion day. None of us had seen him for five years.
"I'm ready to help fry," he announced nobly, looking healthy and strong and well.

Amanda and I had to hug everyone before we did anything else and then we all headed for the creek bank, carrying food fit for a king and laughing and enjoying each other's company.

While Amanda and all our girls...daughters and daughters-in-law...got the fish ready, we men set the fires in motion. Then standing shoulder to shoulder at the three home-welded cauldrons, we rolled the wet fillets in seasoned cornmeal and dropped the pieces into the six inches of boiling fat. The fish turned pale gold, then amber, and as soon as they were bronze as a Roman helmet, we took them out.

In another cauldron, fat, golden-brown hushpuppies were fried, along with onion rings, and piled high beside crisp fillets. Fried potatoes, baked beans and crisp salad plus pies and cakes, rounded out the feast.

We ate the tasty fare with relish, talk going from church to business to college and back to church again. John remarked how sturdy (yet) the picnic tables were, in spite of the many years of being subjected to hot and rainy weather.

We ate our way through the early twilight into a star-studded, spangling-bright sky, at which time the lanterns, which we had brought, were lit and provided the perfect setting for our family gathering.

Fireflies turned on their bioluminescent lights. What fascinating little creatures, I thought, recalling an article I had read which stated that scientists call their abdomen lanterns universal sources of cell energy, with so little heat loss in the firefly's lighting...mechanism that it makes an ordinary light bulb like a...wastrel, turning 92 to 100 percent of their energies into...cool light, compared to the 10 percent in a bulb, with the...rest going up in heat. Let it up to my All-Wise...Creator-God, I thought joyously. Truly, He made all...things well and good. Even fireflies for grandchildren to...chase and enjoy.
The bull frogs started their chorus -- deep, bass . . . hoarse sounds which echoed noisily in the sluggish night . . . air. I wondered if John remembered.

A hand touched my shoulder. A voice said, "Dad, . . . I've come home to talk to you. Suppose you can spare a . . . few minutes alone with me?"

" 'Course, Son. Why, yes. I'd be happy to."

"Maybe if we just walked along the creek bank . . . . . . like we used to do, you and I . . . . . . ."

"I'd love it, John. Yes, I'd love it. It's been a long . . . time . . . . . . ." and we started out together.

"I know, Dad, and I'm sorry. When one strays away . . . from God he feels miserable and uncomfortable in the . . . presence of holy people. That's why I haven't come . . . home for five years. I'm ashamed of myself. But it's the . . . truth. Forgive me, please."

"You're forgiven, Son. 'Course you are."

"Thanks, Dad. I'm tired of trying to run from God. . . . It's impossible to do that. He's been on my trail ever . . . since I went back. Everything I did, everywhere I . . . turned, He was there. Tonight I want to come Home. . . . That's my big reason for coming here. That, and you and . . . Mother."

"That's an excellent reason for returning, John. . . . Nothing is so important as one's soul."

We walked beneath a silver studded sky. Fireflies . . . were like stars on the grass and sparkling gems in the . . . moonlight. Frogs chorused noisily and loudly.

"Dad, I'm ready to change," John said, turning back . . . toward the rest of the family. "I've been the most . . . unhappy man in all the world, I do believe. Life has no . . . meaning or purpose without Christ. I want the family to . . . pray for me. Tonight shall be a Homecoming in two . . . ways . . . . . . ."
"With great joy, Son. Tonight I seem to hear the . . . Father say, 'Kill the fatted calf; rejoice with me: my son . . . has come Home again.'"

"Let's hurry, Dad. My soul is hungry . . . . . . ."

The bull frogs were crescendoing and my thankful . . . heart told me that before long they would be having stiff . . . competition. I knew John when he was in good victory . . . . Yes, I knew John. Already my heart was praising God.