I put the sack of groceries inside the trunk of the woman's car and, closing the trunk lid, I turned to go inside just as a classy-looking, lemon-yellow convertible came down the busy road leading past Dorsey's Grocery Store.
"Slave!" someone hollered to me from the yellow convertible. "Slave! Go ahead and slave away, Craig."

I turned and saw Wesley Stillman's face laughing at me as, turning, he sped by in the car.

I felt a lump come into my throat and a bigger one in my heart, I guessed, since it felt more like a heavy, crushing weight down there. So heavy, in fact, and so crushing that I longed to go over to the church and pray. But, of course, I couldn't do that now, not while I was working. I had always been diligent and careful to give a full day's work, ever since I had had the first part-time job. I believed in working while I was on the job -- no loitering, or using and abusing my employer's time by doing something other than what I was supposed to be doing. And now no idling either.

I hurried inside to help sack the groceries of the other customers and to restock the shelves with their fastly-disappearing cans, jars, and whatever, my mind dwelling on Wesley. The two of us had been friends for years. We had played hide-and-go-seek together as small boys, graduating eventually to ball games with bigger boys on the vacant lot in the back of Kerry Mason's house. Kerry was another friend and, like Wesley and me, could either pitch or bat a fast ball on the vacant lot. We had spent many pleasant summer evenings together on the lot, "working off the excess energy" (our fathers' words) and enjoying the clean, wholesome fun of boyhood.

Wesley was a "natural" at anything and everything he did, it seemed. He excelled. It seemed as though he had a head full of cued-in brain power for everything he did or attempted to do. Somewhat like a computer: feed it info, push a button, and wham-o, it was there. That was Wesley; let him see, hear, or even have a thing suggested to him and he had it. It was there. Permanently and indelibly. He was a whiz in math and science, super in chemistry, English and French, and unexcelled in art and music in our school. Within one more year, he and I would be graduating, God willing.

Wesley was by no means religious. Often he jostled me about being "too religious," calling me "super old-fashioned" and "really square." But he did it all in good humor and we remained friends, living on the same street and in the same block. Just four doors apart, actually.
No less than two dozen times, I had persuaded Wesley to go to church with me, even taking him to our young people's meeting on Sunday evening a number of times. Each and every time that I told him that I was praying for him, or that our young people's group was praying for him, he thanked me, saying he appreciated it, but that he wasn't ready to become religious, not now and maybe never.

I explained to him the difference between religion and salvation, telling him often of the Saviour's dying love and how the choice of where he would spend eternity, in either Heaven or hell, was entirely up to him and what he did or didn't do with the Lord Jesus Christ. He told me he believed in me and what I professed to have inside of my heart, but he said I was old beyond my years -- that I was missing out on all the fun of the late teen years and that someday, I would regret it all.

Nothing I said to him lately seemed to make an impact on him. We still lived on the same street and block, four doors apart, but for almost a year now, I had seen very little of my neighbor-friend. Of course, part of the reason right now could be because of my summer job, I realized. I worked from eight till nine, six days a week, giving Mr. Dorsey his 8-hour day then going directly from the job to another -- a fruit-vegetable market where I worked until 9 at night. Quite naturally and understandably, I wasn't able to see Wesley. I was tired when 9 o'clock came, ready for a shower and the bed as soon as I had spent some time in God's Word and on my knees.

The past year at school, Wesley's grades had declined sadly. He seldom, if ever had made it on the honor roll and it hurt me . . . for him. It was almost like he hadn't cared -- like it just didn't matter. Not at all. Once I tried to talk to him about it, asked what was really wrong but he evaded the issue, told me he was having the time of his life, that I needed to "get with it," for whatever it was worth to me. Then he said, "Craig, let me introduce you to a guy who'll really turn the lights on for you. You won't believe it until you've experienced it."

I told him (again) how Jesus had turned His lights on inside my heart when He forgave my sins and made me His child, then filled my heart with His Holy Spirit and sanctified me wholly. He laughed at me, turned and walked away. And after that, he had tried to avoid me, it seemed.
I was carrying more groceries out to another woman's car when Wesley came by again, going in the opposite direction, an attractive blonde sitting beside him and another couple in the back seat.

"Hey, Craig," he shouted loudly, "you must enjoy working more than the rest of us." He was stopped by a red light.

"I really do like my work, Wesley," I answered with a broad grin. "And your car's a beauty. You must have just shined and polished it."

"Yesterday," he called back, shooting ahead through the green light.

I thought how unfortunate some young folks were, not having to assume responsibility when they were young. And then I thanked God that my parents' financial circumstances were such that all three of us older children had to work to help earn our own clothing and provide some of the foodstuffs as well. It was preparing us for the day when we would have a home and a family of our own, teaching us invaluable lessons on thrift and budgeting and how to make our dollars stretch the farthest.

I was enjoying earning my own money and I felt sorry for my friend. I felt he was being deprived of something valuable and priceless by having everything he wanted or asked for, given to him by his overindulgent parents. Well, that was their business, not mine, I decided, as I bade the lady a good day, closed her car door and hurried inside to be of further assistance to the girls at the check-out counter.

Business was brisk and soon I forgot all about Wesley. The cash registers rang consistently and constantly. I was busy, busy, sacking groceries and either pushing them in carts to waiting cars or carrying them there.

On one of my numerous trips in from depositing groceries into a car, Mr. Dorsey called to me. "Come here, Craig," he said.

I followed him to a corner near the rear of the store. He was upset. It registered plainly on his face. I wondered what I had done wrong.

"Bud's not here again." He didn't waste time. "I know they're busy up front, but I need you in produce. Think you can manage, Craig? I'm sure you
can," he added quickly with what looked like hope in his eyes and on his worried face. "I've had my fill of that boy!" he exclaimed. "This is twice he's pulled the same thing on me in one week. But this does it! The job's yours if you want it. I've watched you. You're dependable and honest and diligent."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Dorsey. I've never managed the produce department here. But I help all the time at Hargie's Produce stand; so I'm familiar to that extent."

"Good. Good! You'll do excellently. I know you will. Grab an apron from the back room and get at it like you've always worked it, Craig. Fill up everything. It's getting pretty empty. Bud knew this was another one of our busier days. He knew it, and never even bothered to call and say why he wasn't coming!" and Mr. Dorsey hurried away.

I enjoyed working in produce. Instead of the department seeming strange and unfamiliar, I felt a comfortable familiarity to it, like I had done it always. Working for Mr. and Mrs. Hargie had made the difference, I was sure. It had bridged the gap.

I removed all spotted, over-ripe fruits and bagged them at reduced prices, culled out the vegetables that needed culling; then made attractive, eye-appealing displays of each, using vegetables and fruits that color-complemented and helped each other.

Mr. Dorsey breezed by, slapped me on the back and with a pleased smile exclaimed, "Great, Craig! Really great. I knew you could do it. Great! Thanks. The job's yours permanently. I can always get another sacker and stock boy . . ."

It was at that very moment that I knew who the boy was in the back seat of Wesley's car; it was Bud. I hadn't paid attention when I was taking care of the woman's groceries. But now I knew: that laugh; the sandy-colored hair; something Bud had said to me at work one day about going with Wesley to the shore and Mr. Dorsey not needing to know a thing about it. "I'll put it over on him," he had said.

It was like a light came on inside me. I felt embarrassed over Bud's unconcern for his employer and his business. I had tried to put the best construction possible on his absence, thinking that he may have been ill . . .
not able to work. Now it hit me with force and I was ashamed of some of my peers, truly ashamed.

I finished my day's work at Dorsey's Grocery and was almost ready to "close shop" at Hargie's Fruit stand when an old, blue Chevy drove up and Jeanne Masters got out. Jeanne was crying. I saw that something dreadful had shaken her up badly. (You'd have to know Jeannie; she doesn't get shaken up over every little thing).

"What's wrong?" I asked, going toward her.

Jeanne hung her head and wept visibly. I was glad the Hargies weren't there. "O Craig!" she cried. "It's terrible. Wesley's dead."

"Dead! Wesley? But Jeanne, I saw him twice this morning. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. The news just blared the horror story. And, too, Nadja, his cousin who is a friend of mine, called me."

"What happened, Jeanne?" I felt color draining from my face and my hands went clammy. Cold. Wesley, dead!

"He's been on drugs for over a year, Nadja said. She tried to help him, urged him to go somewhere for help, but he only laughed at her, told her he was having the time of his life. He started out on pep pills, he told Nadja. Then he began experimenting with other drugs. He went on to speed, which caused that one accident he had over a year ago. And in the past few months, he was shooting heroin."

"But what killed him?"

"He was killed trying to rob a service station in an isolated place along the shore road, Craig. And oh, his soul! He'll never have another opportunity to get right with God!"

"Were there any others, Jeanne? I mean, was anyone else killed?"

"A Bud something or other. I can't remember his last name. The news said he was an accomplice. And then it said something about two girls being
with them. But since I didn't know any of the girls, I can't remember their names. Isn't it sad, Craig? And he did it for a thrill, the newscaster said."

"Yes, Jeanne," I answered. "Very sad." And, I thought, as tears filled my eyes for my friend, not only sad, but a payday for sin. A thrill! Holding up a service station for a thrill!

Alone in my room that night, I wept. And I prayed . . . a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to my wonderful Lord for giving me a heart-felt, satisfying experience in Him. I was a slave all right. A love-slave for Christ.