Fog swirled over the valley like great clouds of smoke. Joel Hartford, standing inside the small, neatly-clean, and well arranged shop which he was buying, watched the sea of white as it billowed, rolled, and swirled around the buildings in the picturesque village, swallowing them up, as it were, in its
density. A sense of loneliness, almost as great and as dense as the fog, he
was sure, surged over his being.

He shook himself and walked away from the window. He, of all people,
should have been happy. He should have felt fulfilled. For almost so long as
he could remember, his one ambition in life was to have a business of his
own; nothing large, and not anything conspicuous or out of keeping with the
small town in which he had visualized his shop would be located. A small
shop with selected gift items for everyone, this was his dream. His ambition.
A place where parents and children could browse and shop with delight and
pleasure and leave, ultimately, with a gift of unusual beauty and uniqueness.
A keepsake, even.

Joel turned and surveyed the interior of his little shop. A sense of pride
welled up inside his being. At twenty-five, he was in business. Not bad for
one so young as he, he thought.

His father's voice reached to him from out of the past, bringing his
heady thoughts out of the clouds and down to the nitty-gritty reality of just
where he was and how he stood financially in his present set-up.

"Remember, Son," his father had said, "every gift you have, or possess,
has come to you from God. Nothing you have done, nor what you know, has
merited these gifts. If you become vain and high-minded and puffed up with
pride, God may have to humble you; to bring you down. LOW!"

"What do you mean by that statement?" Joel had queried quickly,
feeling humiliated by the admonishment from his Spirit-filled father.

His father had studied his face for a long while, so long, in fact, that
Joel remembered feeling uncomfortable in the dead silence beneath the
probing, penetrating, piercing blue-gray eyes that were fixed intently and
unwaveringly upon him.

"I guess there is no easy way to say what I feel constrained to say,
Joel, my boy, so I shall not mince words; I'll get straight to the point. You
possess a brilliant mind; it was God's special
gift to you. But if you are not careful, and if you do not stay close to the heart
of God, it can be your demise."
Joel recalled the sick feeling he had had in the pit of his stomach as he heard his father's words. It was as though his father had read his thoughts and seen into the very inner recesses of his heart.

All through school and college, he had excelled in books. ALL books. He had graduated a year ahead of those who had enrolled the same year in which he had. Studying came easy for him; retaining what he had read and studied, easier still. His brain was like a computer; the things which were "fed," or programmed, into it he retained.

"Joel," his father had continued, "I am praying earnestly for you. Desperately, even. Pride is a destructive thing. . . ." His sentence had trailed meaningfully in the agonizing silence that followed.

"Do you think I am proud, Father?" he had managed to ask after some time.

"I do," came the straight-forward, unwavering reply. "And Joel, it frightens me. Your mother is gone; her beloved form has long since gone back to the dust of the earth. But her spirit is among the host of Heaven. I have tried to be both mother and father to you since you were twelve. It hasn't been easy for you, I know. But Joel, I have trained you in the ways of godliness and true holiness. Don't allow the enemy to sidetrack you. Having a business is not wrong. Unless, of course, that business possesses you instead of you it. This is wrong. It then becomes one's god."

"I don't intend for this to happen," he had replied. "I just want to have a store of my own."

"Only if this is God's will, Joel. Anything outside of God's will is not the best, Son. It is wrong. Whatever God has for you, be thankful in it. Your mother and I made it a habit of our daily living to always be thankful. In joy or in sorrow, in prosperity or poverty, always, we were thankful, and gave God thanks for it all, knowing that He sent the ill winds as much for our benefit and profit as He sent the fair, milder and much more desired pleasant winds. Remember, Son, everything you have, or may acquire in the future, has come from God. It all belongs to Him."

Joel felt a restlessness wash over him with remembering. A sudden homesick feeling engulfed him with such enormity that tears flushed from his
eyes. He brushed them away quickly. His customers must not find him, a man, in tears.

He busied himself with the displays on the shelves, rearranging the crystal and hand-crafted items until they were displayed to their very best and in the most appealing manner. An attractive display made for better sales, this he knew.

The tinkling of the doorbell announced his first customer of the morning. Perfectly poised, and with gentlemanly dignity, he greeted the lady, who had a child holding onto each of her hands.

"May I help you, Ma'am?" he asked, smiling broadly.

"I would like to look around, please," came the responding reply.

"Enjoy yourself," Joel said, graciously. "I shall be happy to wait on you if you find something you like. Here," he added, reaching for suckers and handing one to each small child.

Shyly, the little boy and his sister took the proffered candy, thanking Joel behind shy smiles.

"I have a toy chest over here," Joel told the customer. "The children may play with the toys while you look around, if you so desire."

The woman looked at her offspring, then to Joel and back to the children again. Seeing that the toy chest was within eye-viewing no matter which aisle she might be in, she said softly,

"You may go and play, little ones; Mother will be watching over you."

Smiling warmly up into the woman's face, the pair hurried to the inviting chest.

Joel busied himself in the shop while the young woman browsed around. No customer enjoyed being followed, he knew; furthermore, it gave them the feeling that they were not honest and trustworthy. It tended to drive the customers away instead of attracting them to the place of business. He had studied his business well and had learned the do's and don'ts of it. He
had not only studied and learned but he had purposed within his heart that he would apply his learning. What good was there in knowing what, or how, to do without doing said thing?

"Sir, do you have anything on thankfulness? A unique plaque, perhaps?"

The young mother's voice sliced into Joel's thoughts in a softly-kind way.

"Something on thankfulness? What about this?" he asked, walking to a wall where all kinds of hand crafted plaques were hanging. Taking one off its hook, he held it out before her.

"I looked at that one," she replied. "But it isn't exactly what I was wanting."

"What do you have in mind, may I ask?" Joel questioned, studying the petite form standing before him, her blue eyes serious but misty.

"You may not understand, Sir; but I . . . I'd like something with a tree on it, and . . . and a man kneeling at the base of the tree."

Joel felt color drain from his face.

"I'm . . . sorry if I offended you," the young mother said apologetically, seeing the color drain from Joel's face. "I . . . I'll never forget a man who helped me. That is why I'm looking for a plaque like this."

"A . . . man . . . who helped you?"

The mother seemed suddenly very shy. "He was a good man," she said, fearful lest Joel had had other thoughts. "A very good man. Holy, too; and . . . and God-like."

"Yes?" Joel's questioning reply came out quickly, almost impetuously.

Looking Joel full in the face, she said, "I don't know why I'm telling this to you, but I feel that I must do so. I have never told it to anyone before. And,
even now, I feel almost like I am desecrating a sacred and cherished memory by relating it. However, I feel constrained of the Lord to do so."

"Please do," Joel urged. "I am eager to hear about that good man."

"I was in desperate need. . . . "The sentence trailed for a long while as the mother tried to control her emotions, which overcame her with recalling the event of the past, of whatever nature it may have been. "I was lost in sin," she said brokenly, "and was in desperate need of a Saviors. Only, I hadn't known there was a Saviors. Not until he came my way. God sent him to where I was working. It was no accident; it was by Divine appointment. He was the kindest, most gentle man I ever met."

Again, she wept. Silence reigned in the room. One of the children, seeing the tears falling, cried out, "Mama! Mama, don't cry."

She turned and smiled at the children. "I'm all right, dear little ones," she said reassuringly. "I was just remembering something; it made me cry."

Reassured by both their mother's smile and her kind words, the children resumed playing with the toys which they found hidden beneath the wicker chest's lid.

"My marriage was on shaky ground," she continued. "I blamed myself for everything that was happening between Morris and me. We had been married less than a year. What I thought would be a perpetual honeymoon turned out to be a battleground. I dreaded coming home from work; I knew the inevitable would happen. And it did. We sat across the table from each other with hatred in our hearts. It was dreadful. I had wanted to be a housewife; only a housewife. A good one. He insisted that I work. Each pay day, my entire check was turned over to him, at his demand. My weekly allowance for groceries and personal needs was meager beyond any describing. Because I couldn't possibly make ends meet, he castigated me and grew more angry daily.

"For weeks, and months, I said nothing. Then one day something within my being gave way. It was like the pressure on a dam: I had reached my extremity; my limit! I could stand no more. I lashed out at him with such anger as to surprise myself. It frightened me greatly. This was not my usual personality."
Tears flowed freely again. Lifting her face to Joel's, she said, "Oh, it was horrible! He was destroying me; I was changing from a sweet-dispositioned, kind, and considerate being into another person. I felt trapped. I wanted help, but I didn't know where to find it. Then one day at work, he came into the office where I was employed as a receptionist for the company; this kind, God-like man, I mean."

"How did you know he was God-like?" Joel questioned, never lifting his eyes off those before him.

"It was just there! Written and defined indelibly upon his face. And in my heart, I may add. I shall never forget him. He sensed, instinctly, that I was miserable and in some sort of trouble. I suppose these negative things are displayed upon one's being just as surely and profoundly as are the Christ-like and upright qualities," she added thoughtfully.

"Yes, I . . . suppose you are right," Joel replied softly. "What one is is displayed outwardly, generally."

The tinkling of the door chimes heralded another customer. "Excuse me, please," he said kindly, "while I see if I may be of any help to this customer," and he hurried away.

(Chapter 2)

Numerous customers came into Joel's unique little gift shop, some to browse, others to buy. Each customer remarked upon the shop's beauty and uniqueness and quaintness. Joel felt gratified and greatly rewarded by the compliments. His long-time dream was reality. When, finally, he was free, he hurried over to the mother with the two small children.

"I am free now to listen to the rest of your experience," he said.

"Oh, but I don't want to bore you!" the young woman exclaimed quickly. "You are a busy man."

"Contrary to what you may think, I have not been bored. Rather, I have found your experience to be extremely interesting. Quite thought-provoking, even. Yes, extremely thought provoking. You left off at the part where the
kind man sensed your miserable condition and knew, instinctively, that you were in trouble, as I recall." Joel reiterated the story as it had been related to him. "What happened then? Did he speak to you about your unhappiness?"

"Strange as it may seem, the kind man was delayed for a long while before he could see the company's president. And, looking back now, I realize again that with God nothing is strange, nor is it by sheer accident: Everything comes, or is permitted, because of, and by, His Divine permission and His appointment. In my case, it was definitely a matter of God's appointment.

"The president was tied up in a business meeting that afternoon. I told the kind man that it would be some time before my boss could see him but he seemed not to mind, stating that God had his schedule and his appointments perfectly arranged and timed and that everything was on schedule, by God's time clock."

Joel swallowed, trying to rid himself of the nasty lump that had popped involuntarily into his throat and lodged there stubbornly. Memories of his childhood and boyhood flashed before him in rapid succession.

"Without warning, it seemed, and after a long silence, the man looked at me," the young mother continued. "'You're in some kind of trouble,' he said softly. 'I believe with all my heart that God sent me here to help you, young lady. Do you know Jesus? Have you ever asked Him to come into your heart? And does Jesus know about your troubles? He's wanting to help you, you know.'

"No,' I replied, 'I didn't know. Please, Sir,' I begged, 'tell me about Him.' And tell me he did! I learned -- for the first time ever in my life -- that I was a sinner on my road to hell. But I need not go there, he said. The blood of Jesus Christ was shed and provided for my sins. He then pointed me to Calvary and the why of it; to the glorious resurrection and the hope of it. I was so hungry for what he was telling me about that I cried brokenly, 'Please, kind Sir, I want Jesus. Help me! I must have Him! Pray for me!'

"It was in that office, by my chair, that I became a child of God. I was transformed. Radically so! Old things passed away for me and all things became new."
Joel brushed tears from his eyes. He hadn't meant to cry in front of the lady but the tears came in spite of his resolve not to do so. His brain was replete with memories of his own. And no matter how hard he tried to banish them and forget them, they had a way of coming back to him.

The mother continued. "Without any probing or prodding from the man, I found myself unburdening my heart to him. I knew I could trust him. Furthermore, I knew he would pray for me and would instruct me wisely and rightly. I told him about my marriage and its crumbling, decaying walls; told him, too, of my verbal outburst to Morris and of the fright that I felt in my heart over having done it. He told me that this, too, had been taken care of on Calvary; that the Son of God was manifested that He might destroy the works of the devil. He said my outburst of anger and retaliation was called carnality and that I could be totally free from this through the sanctifying, purging, cleansing power of the Holy Ghost, which experience, I am happy to say, I have since received and have been living joyously in ever since.

"I could scarcely wait to get home to my husband. I wanted to tell him what had happened to me; how the Lord Jesus Christ had come into my heart and changed me wonderfully and radically. I felt such a love for Morris, now that I was born again, and I was sure that it would solve our every problem."

"Didn't it?" Joel asked anxiously.

The young mother's head dropped. Again, the tears came. "I wish I could say that it did; but such was not the case for me. I got home at the usual hour, and prepared an exceptionally wonderful meal, going far beyond what my small monetary allowance permitted. But I wanted something special for my husband."

"And didn't he appreciate it?" Joel asked, almost fiercely, though he kept his voice well modulated.

"Appreciate it? He took the meat and potatoes and threw them outside when I told him that I had given my heart and life to Jesus and that now, for the first time ever in my life, my heart and soul had found inner peace and rest."
"What a beastly man!" Joel uttered the words more to himself than to the young woman.

"He ranted and raved and carried on like a maniac. All the while, as I sat at the table, my heart overflowed with peace and inner rest. Thinking, perhaps, that the bit of news which I had been keeping from him might now serve to make him happy, I told him that we were going to become parents, and I added that I wished, for the new arrival's sake at least, he would change and give his heart to Jesus. But it made him fierce. He seemed more like a wild man than a human being."

"How dreadful!" Joel remarked. "I'm sure he loves the children, now that each is here?"

Turning tear-filled eyes to Joel's, the mother said sadly, "He never saw the twins. He left the house in a fit of anger and never returned. The mortician called to tell me he had been killed in a car accident; would I come down immediately?

"Through all my sorrow and grief, I had my Heavenly Friend. And, too, the kind man promised to pray for me every day. I knew he was. He said that, during all of his life, he had what he called his Thanksgiving tree. No matter what kind of trouble came his way, nor how fierce the battles of his life were, nor how hot the furnace of affliction was, he resorted to the tree to offer praise and thanksgiving to God."

"For afflictions and troubles and battles?" Joel's questions were asked softly, almost reverently.

"Perhaps not strictly for the afflictions and problems nor the battles and troubles, as such; but always, he said, always, he would thank God that the affliction was not greater than God's grace was sufficient, nor the battle more fierce than God's power was mighty and all-powerful to bring him through more than a conqueror. This is why I have been searching for the kind of plaque of which I have just spoken to you. I have wanted it as a kind of gentle reminder for me that I should be thankful even in the valley and in the dark places. The man said it worked miracles for him, this thing called praise and thanksgiving."
"The world would be a far better place in which to live," Joel declared, "if everyone applied that principle to his life and used it constantly."

"The kind man said the Lord loved to be praised. And after reading through Psalms several times I have discovered this to be so," the young mother added softly.

"Why not give me a few days time?" Joel remarked. "I believe I can have your plaque for you. I know an old man whom I feel will be able to create what you want."

"I would like it larger than the one you showed me," the mother replied.

"Give me your name and telephone number," Joel said. "I'll call you when it's ready. If it isn't what you want, you are under no obligation to buy it."

"Oh please! I do want it ever so badly!" came the immediate reply. "I will never forget the kind man. Never! I want it, too, so that when my children have grown older, if God sees fit to spare them, I shall be able to not only tell them about the kindest man whom I have ever known but I shall be able to show them, as well, of his Thanksgiving tree. This will be my reminder, and theirs, too, to give thanks to God always for all things and under all circumstances. Life is not filled with only sunny skies and pleasant valleys, as we all know. So, as the twins grow up and come face to face with the dark places and the steep mountains of adversity, trouble, and sorrow, I want to tell them of the kind man's secret of victory and how he thanked God, at the base of his Thanksgiving tree, for everything that befell him. Perhaps it will help them on to victory over their battles like this has helped me. The kind man's 'formula' works!"

"This man, is he still living, do you know? Did he ever show you the tree?" Joel asked, misty-eyed.

"I never saw the tree, no, sir. And as to whether the man is living or not, this I do not know. But I do know that God sent him into my life when I needed help badly. I saw him only two times; each time was in the office where I was employed. He came to me as an angel from God. A few times I wondered if, perhaps, he was not an angel. Then I reminded myself that angels weren't faced with physical human battles such as he said he had
encountered and which God had brought him through. But even though he was not a heavenly angel as such, he very positively and definitely was God's human angel sent to me to point me to Jesus, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world."

"You never got his home address?" Joel questioned.

"Oh, no, sir. This would have been out of order for me, a lady, to do. It was enough that he helped me and led me to Jesus Christ. Someday, when I get to Heaven, I shall go to him and thank him properly for all the help he gave me."

"I . . . I'm sorry," Joel apologized. "Of course, it would not have been a proper thing for you to have asked him for his address. This would have been completely out of line for you to have done. I guess I just thought that perhaps there may have been further contact after your change, that is all. Usually, one has a minister and his wife to go to and, since you apparently had neither, I thought this kind man may have become as your minister."

"I'm sure he would have been an excellent one," the young mother replied. "But, no, he was not. He did, however, recommend a good, spiritual Holiness church to me. I have been attending it ever since, and I have been growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ."

With candid, unwavering eyes, she asked quickly, "Sir, do you know Jesus? Is He your personal Saviors? Have you ever been born again and made new in Christ?"

The questions, so frank and pointed, left Joel speechless and pale.

(Chapter 3)

For a long while after the young mother had left the shop, Joel's mind was a turmoi of thoughts. Memories, too. He stood behind the cash register holding the piece of paper in his hand which contained the woman's name and address. Constance Starr, it read. Pretty name, he mused silently as he studied the neat handwriting on the piece of paper while his thoughts swirled and rolled through his head like the fog outside his shop door.
He put the piece of paper in a little drawer near the cash register, then tried to assuage his troubled thoughts by busying himself with some of his wares. It didn't work. The woman's question, so poignant and personal, stabbed his heart with dagger-like pain. Her testimony, too. It was almost like when he was a boy of ten or twelve. He had settled some things then: things of an intensely spiritual nature.

Memories flowed back to him like a curtain being parted, and the things which he thought he had forgotten now rolled and tumbled before him like they had happened only yesterday. He was a boy again, sitting between his parents in the small church in the valley. A colporteur, traveling through the valley, felt a heavy burden upon his heart for the people of the valley. For days, he stayed in the church, praying, fasting, and calling on God to send a revival to the valley. God heard; He answered.

The revival came in a way which Joel had never seen before. There were no printed posters or announcements whatever and no set dates, either. It was Holy Ghost sent; a spontaneous and fiery revival. People were drawn to the church by an Invisibly-powerful force. Men left their places of employment and, weeping like children, prostrated themselves over the mourner's bench and were gloriously converted. Places of business were shut down and prayer meetings were held instead. Women, under Holy Ghost conviction, ran, screaming for mercy, to the little church, where they sought God until their guilt and condemnation was washed away in the precious blood of Jesus.

Tears flushed from Joel's eyes now as he remembered that meeting. Child though he was, he was gloriously converted in that Heaven-sent revival and, a short time later, he was sanctified wholly. His mother was still living then, and her joy and rapture over knowing that her only child was safe in God's fold was beyond any describing. She was almost beside herself with holy joy and rapture.

For years, he had maintained a close and beautiful relationship with God. In fact, the Lord had been the very center and core of his life. His one main purpose and delight in life was to please the Lord. Nothing else was as all important to him, young though he'd been, as pleasing the Lord and doing God's will.
It was during his first year away at college that the fire began burning low. He had been busy: too busy, really. He was working his way through college; the late night hours, coupled with a full load of college courses, sapped his strength, until, from sheer fatigue and weariness, his once-daily, wonderful times of Bible reading and earnest praying had been neglected and were crowded out. He hadn't meant for it to happen. No, indeed! But it had happened. He was left with a feeling of total emptiness.

A sob tore Joel's frame as he remembered. He should not have carried the heavy load he'd had. One never did things of lesser value to crowd out the greater, higher, nobler things. He knew this. Nothing was gained by doing so. Truth of the matter was, he had lost. Dreadfully so.

With tremendous force, a Scripture verse hammered away inside his being: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his soul.

He had gained much in worldly goods, there was no doubt about this. The little shop in which he was now standing was proof positive of the fact. True, the City Bank still owned the building. But it was fast ceasing to do so: another year or two at the most, and it should be his. Solely and entirely. He had taken a special course in money management and knew how to budget and spend wisely. Too, he had neither a wife nor children to support. He had wanted it this way, until the quaint little shop would be totally and completely debt free, and he had established a solid business from it.

He looked across the street at other buildings and felt a surge of pride engulf him. He was not only in a small village but it was a village known for its tourism. Steady streams of tourists flocked into the village all year long. It was known for its excellent skiing facilities in the winter and its fishing, boating, and spectacular scenery in the summer and fall. The former owner of his shop had deceased. The relatives, his heirs, all from distant states, were eager for a final settlement of the man's estate and sold the shop for far less than it was worth. Through a business associate of his, Joel heard about the shop and its asking price. He had no trouble whatever securing the loan from the bank. The transaction had gone so smoothly and easily that it all seemed like some miracle to Joel. It was, indeed, his dream come true.

The little shop, newly redecorated and remodeled, was an added attraction to the village. It was a woman's paradise for browsing and buying.
He had every reason in the world to be proud of his little shop. Every reason but one: if he were still truly saved and sanctified wholly and ready to meet his God. But he wasn't. And he knew that he wasn't. This was the troublesome thing that took away from his happiness and satisfaction over buying the shop. He awoke each morning to it troubling him and went to sleep each night with the same.

He felt like groaning. Things . . . and materialism, no matter how great . . . could never replace, nor begin to take the place of having a personal and vital relationship with God. Joel discovered this sad and startling fact shortly after he had allowed his good-paying job and his heavy college load to crowd the Lord God out of his daily schedule and, ultimately, out of his heart and life.

Since then, he had felt empty and lonely. He had longed to run home and pour his heart out to his father. But he hadn't. He was too proud for such as that.

And now, here he was, on the road to success and apparent prosperity but devoid of true happiness and peace and joy. At times he felt like a hollow shell. The exterior was there, all of it intact and in place, but the inside was empty. Lonely, too. Oh, so lonely! And lost!

The tinkling of the doorbell roused him from his thoughts and, coming out from behind the counter, he greeted a group of people; mostly women. They ooh-ed and ahh-ed over the beauty of the shop's interior and its shelves of unusual, quaint, and exquisite merchandise. Joel felt flattered and duly compensated for all his hard work and his search for the unusual; the beautifully unusual. He knew that his buying-purchasing trips to the large cities would be paying off handsomely for him.

He watched with pride and enjoyment as the customers looked and browsed, touching, picking up, and handling. The crystal glassware, especially.

Joel prided himself in his selection of the crystal. He selected pieces from the merchants which he was sure his mother would have been delighted to possess and own, had she lived. Strange how so many of his choices and decisions had revolved around his long deceased parent. He may not have been privileged like some to have a lifetime of memories of her, but the
memories which he did possess were lovely and fragrant like flowers and every bit as beautiful, too. He remembered her as a sweet and lovely mother with a gentle disposition like a dove. And she was holy, also. Holy, upright and righteous. But, then, so was his father.

Like it was only yesterday, sacred memories from out of the past came before him with painful nostalgia. He had had a rich heritage; a sacred heritage. God had blest him with its bestowment. And he had desecrated it. Instead of cherishing and embracing it, he had, like Esau, sold his heritage for a "mess" of worldly possession and earthly accumulation.

In its acquisition and its accumulation, his soul had become utterly desolate and bereft of its contentment and its love and peace and joy. With Christ, he had been the possessor of all these richer, higher, inner blessings; things which no amount of money could buy or give and things which no one could take away from him. These had all been his at one time. Priceless and rich treasures, he realized with a sudden startling awakening. And they could still have all been his had he kept his part of the contract with God. He had a wealth of promises at his disposal for keeping him.

At thought of the many promises of God which were contained in the Bible for keeping those who walked in the Spirit and lived in the Spirit, Joel felt both guilt and shame engulf him. God kept His Word. Always! Nothing was broken, ever. His Word declared explicitly, "If we walk in the light as he is in the light . . . the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." The blood cleansed constantly and continually so long as one was walking in the light.

God had not broken His part of the contract. No, indeed. It was he, Joel, who had done the breaking of the contract. He had failed to continue walking in the light and in the Spirit. God's sweet, tender Holy Spirit was much too sensitive and courteous to abide in a heart where He was not wanted or welcome and where His commandments and precepts were disregarded and disobeyed.

He groaned inwardly. In a way he was sorry and totally disgusted that the young mother had come into his quaint and unique little shop. He had thought the past memories were quite snugly and securely buried with the past. And they had been; until a certain Constance Starr came into his life to disturb him with her pointed question and her desire for a wall plaque
portraying the kneeling figure of an aged man praying and praising God at the base of a tree: His Thanksgiving Tree!

   Joel felt his body temperature go from hot to cold. There was no way one could run from God. No way! Especially, not he! God knew his address. He knew, too, how to locate him, smart though he had thought he was when he traveled from home and settled in the small village.

   The group of happy people flocking to the cash register . . . his cash register . . . erased the troublesome thoughts quickly from his mind. The sales from the group would help to put a sizable amount of money on the indebtedness of the shop.

   A broad smile enhanced his already handsome face. He took on the air of a happy and successful businessman as he began ringing up their purchases.

   (Chapter 4)

   For days, Joel's unique and quaint little shop with its steadily growing business, kept him busy and his thoughts rather well occupied. Occasionally, when there was a lull in business and in sales, the young mother's question came back to haunt him and torment him. At twilight, however, when the lights were turned out in the shop and the key was turned in the lock and he made his way to the two-bedroom apartment that overlooked the bay, the question was a constant tormentor companion. Try as he may, he couldn't shake it, and with Thanksgiving day approaching and the plaque which the young mother had requested now finished and resting on top of his desk in the apartment's living room, he felt like a ghost from out of the long ago past was dogging his trail and following his every footstep.

   He glanced at a calendar in his neat little place of business and groaned. "Two days!" he exclaimed aloud. "Only two more days till Thanksgiving."

   So what! This Thanksgiving day would be like last year's had been. And the two years before that. He would go to a restaurant -- The Shrimp Net, this year -- eat his solitary meal, sit and sip his hot tea in a relaxed mood, then pay the bill and go to the apartment and read. Or study further on how to be a better businessman. A routinely-ordinary Thanksgiving, his would be. No
aunts and uncles; no grandparents; no cousins; no one but himself. For the past three years or more this had pleased him. It was something he chose to do; a way of life which he thought would be wholly and completely to his liking. But since a certain Constance Starr had come to his shop and had "meddled" where she had no business to meddle, he felt restless and, yes, very lonely. Homesick, too.

He reached for the phone and dialed her number, a thing he had done repeatedly since the aged craftsman by the sea had finished the desired plaque and gotten it to him. There was no answer. She was gone for Thanksgiving, no doubt, he rationalized reasonably and sensibly. And why not? It was the natural thing to do when one had a family, or relatives, was it not?

A sudden feeling of sweet nostalgia surged over him. It almost swept him away with its tide, emotionally. Tears stung his eyes. A yearning possessed him. He felt his heart grow tender and melt. His proud heart grew soft. He would do it, he decided quickly. Yes, he would. It was the natural thing to do; the right thing.

With the resolve fixed solidly in his mind and in his heart, Joel experienced an eager expectancy. It was almost as intense and as gratifying as when he was a child. His heart felt happy and buoyed up because of it. Two days. He could wait. They would pass by quickly.

It was snowing when he locked the shop door and headed homeward that twilight. The beautiful white blanket settled down noiselessly upon many another snowfall that had come and gone, leaving its added accumulation thick upon the ground. He liked snow; lots of snow. It would be perfect for the Thanksgiving season, he thought, looking upward and watching the rapidly falling flakes transform the world around him into a glittering, glistening fairyland of fresh beauty and wonder.

He prepared his own meal that evening, choosing to do so rather than to eat at The Shrimp Net. Somehow, and for a reason known only to him, the resolve he had made or decided upon in the shop seemed to have brightened his day and to have done something to his personality.

After closing his place of business early, the day before Thanksgiving, Joel packed his bags, tossed them into the trunk of his car and headed out of
the picturesque, snow-covered village. He had mixed feelings and emotions. Questions raced back and forth through his mind, and anxiety, coupled with fear, made him uneasy. Was he doing the right thing? After all the years, was it fair? Again, the nagging fear returned to haunt him.

Joel gripped the steering wheel fiercely. His knuckles showed white against the deep maroon of the wheel. For one brief moment he was tempted to turn the car around and go back to the cozy apartment that was home to him. He knew, however, that sooner or later he would have to face life's issues; this one in particular. He had severed the relationship; if it had been severed, ever. He knew only too well that, on the other's part, there had been no severance. None at all. Nor would there be, ever! He . . . the other one . . . was too kind and Spirit-filled, and too full of love, to have been the possessor of ill will or the perpetrator of bringing about a division or a severance. He . . . that other one . . . had been nothing but love. Love. And more love.

Pain stabbed Joel's heart like a sharp dagger. It cut deep into his inner being. Remorse, too. And remorse could be such a dreadful pain maker! But it could be a good thing, too, he knew. If he was remembering those once-precious, long-ago-memorized Scripture verses of his boyhood days correctly, he knew that remorse could lead one to true repentance and to a godly sorrow for sin; a godly sorrow that wrought great carefulness in one; a godly sorrow that worked a repentance unto salvation not to be repented of.

Tears, unbidden and unashamed, fell onto his hand. He was softening. Without any shadow of doubt, he was becoming soft-hearted. It had been years since he cried. At least, the way he was crying since Constance Starr had become the disturber of his thoughts and of his manner of living. Strange, he soliloquized, how words could affect one so. Right words, that is, at the right time.

He drove into the night. The snow continued to fall; heavier now. It glistened and danced and swirled in front of the car's headlights. Traffic grew less and less. Joel felt like he was a lone traveler in a vast expanse of white. But he must make his destination. And he should. By morning's light, barring no trouble, he should be there.

Seeing a brightly lighted neon sign flashing ahead, he pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant. The brief stop would rest his legs and relax his
body; besides, he was hungry; a sandwich and a cup of steaming hot coffee or tea would taste good.

He sipped the hot, freshly-dripped coffee slowly. His mind was a jumble of thoughts; so many things he wanted to say when he reached his destination. Needed to say, really. So much to do, too, to make amends for his miserable behavior.

Recalling his failures and his behavior, he groaned aloud. Why did he do what he had done? Whatever made him do it? Everything that was good and right was one day his. He had turned against it all. He had acted like a fool acts!

He finished the sandwich and drained the cup of its coffee, then hurried to the car to finish his journey. He was eager to get there. He had so much to do. Yes, so very much. And he meant to do it properly and to do it well. Like the work he had done at any particular job which he had had, he meant to do this the same..., well. No halfway business; wondering what he, Joel, was getting at or trying to say to the one involved. No indeed! He would "clear the deck," as the old time Holiness folks used to say to anyone who seemed to be having a struggle at an altar of prayer when they were seeking the Lord.

The sun was a mere speck of brilliant light just tipping the sky in the east when he drove into the small town and stopped at a service station to look in the telephone directory for a certain number. His fingers trembled as he turned the pages and his heart felt like a hammer inside his chest. Would he still be living? he wondered. If so, where?

His eyes scanned the page with fear. Fear that he . . . the one he had come to see . . . would be gone. Deceased. But, no! There it was; his name!

Shaking like a quivering leaf in a chill fall wind, Joel thanked the service station manager for allowing him the use of the directory, then walked to his car and drove to the far edge of the town until he came to the little-used side road. It looked much the same as it had always looked, he thought: a typical quiet and peaceful looking snow-covered country road. So full of memories, it was. Painfully-sweet memories.

He saw smoke from the chimney curl upward toward the sky before he saw the house. Memories and past recollections flooded his being. He was a
boy again, coming home from school. Always, unless hindered in some way, his father met him here, before the house came into view around the next bend.

He applied the brakes on the car and sat for a moment, watching the long-forgotten but now familiar sight. As a boy, he had felt that God tucked their house in a place of hiding behind the hill and the bend, and that when winter arrived and they needed the heat from the fireplace, the chimney with its curling wisps of smoke, was the only thing that gave the hiding place away.

Slowly, and moved emotionally to tears, Joel took his foot off the brake and eased the car forward along the snow-covered road. The house came into view as he rounded the bend. With the view, came the rushing wave of painfully-sweet nostalgia again. He felt overcome by its overwhelming surge, and something akin to the love he knew and possessed in his boyhood days now drew him to the house like a magnet.

He pulled up in front of the house, noticing its well kept condition in spite of its age. How familiar everything looked, and how inviting! Almost, it was as though he had never been gone. But he knew he had. How well he knew this!

He slid out of the car and stepped onto the porch. He tapped lightly on the door, waiting with bated breath while his heart hammered out its fear.

He heard footsteps. They were measured and slow, he thought, as he listened from the outside.

The door opened; an aged man, wearing his eyeglasses on the tip of his nose, peered at Joel in a strange manner. Then his face brightened; recognition dawned. In a moment's time, he rushed forward and clasped Joel to his manly frame, crying out joyously, "My son! My son! Bless God! He answered my prayers. The lost is found. You are home. Come in, my dear boy."

"Dad!" Joel exclaimed. "Dad, I have much to say. But first, I ask you to forgive me for hurting you so and for causing you so much grief. It was exceeding wicked of me, and sinful, too. But Dad, I want to change... to what I was when I was a boy at home here with you. I want to come home.
To God. Will you forgive me, please? I'm sorry for the hurtful things I did to you."

"Say no more, my dear Joel; it is enough that you have come home. Now let us pray."

"At your Thanksgiving tree, Dad. I feel God would be pleased."

"A storm took the tree, Joel. My rocking chair now serves the same purpose. Come, we will kneel by it. We can have a Thanksgiving 'tree' right here. . . .

With tears of joy streaming down his face, the father led the way into the kitchen while a penitent Joel followed. Thanksgiving Day! What a lovely day for a prodigal to return home! he thought, as he dropped to the floor on his knees beside his father, the man who had the Thanksgiving tree.

(The End)