Ashton circled the block a second time on his bicycle. He was sure he'd seen a light on in Jud's house. This time around, though, he was going to be positive-sure that he had. It was possible to see a glare from something or other and mistake it for a light coming from inside the house, he knew. It had happened to him a time or two, he remembered.
He slowed down in front of Jud's house. Sure enough, there was a light on inside. Jud must be home. But why hadn't Jud called him if he still wanted him to go to the youth rally with him? Ashton wondered, feeling a bit confused and puzzled.

He brought the bicycle to a complete standstill and started toward the door when his shyness stopped him. Mounting the bike, he drove away quickly, hoping no one had noticed him.

The air felt cool and refreshing against Ashton's cheeks, hot and flushed over what he had almost done. Not that it would have been wrong to have asked Jud if he still wanted him along to that young people's rally. But what if Jud had changed his mind and didn't want him along, then what?

The latter thought sent a queasy, sickening feeling into the very pit of Ashton's stomach. It would not be right to put a fellow "on the spot," he thought, which is what he most certainly would have done had he gone to the door and asked Jud.

He drove homeward in a pensive mood, wondering why his best friend had failed to call him like he had said he would. This was certainly not at all like Joseph Judson Jennings, or, just plain Jud to all his friends.

Ashton recalled the first time he had ever seen Jud. It was on the school's ball field one day in late summer several years back when a group of the fellows got together for a game of ball.

"See that guy on first base?" Gary Springer had said, speaking directly to Ashton. "He's new in Princetonville. A really religious fanatic. Don't get too involved with him; he'll influence you in his direction. I hear he's quite convincing. Me, I keep my distance."

Ashton had watched Jud carefully after Gary's well-meant warning. He didn't have the foggiest idea how a religious fanatic was expected to act, perform or do, and, being too shy to ask, he consulted the dictionary. Unable to find both words connected, like Gary had stated them to him -- religious fanatic - Ashton looked up the word religious. It was an adjective. This he already knew. Light on the word itself stated it as: "feeling, and living in accordance with, a belief in a Divine power to whom obedience and reverence are due; devout; righteous; pious. . . ."
Nothing wrong with being religious, he told himself as he reread the meaning as given by the dictionary. In fact, he felt convinced that it would do a lot of people a world of good -- himself included -- if they became religious.

The word fanatic, also an adjective, made him observe Jud even more carefully than he had previously done. And the more he watched the tall, quietly genteel young man, the more he became convinced that he was not a fanatic. Nowhere did he see, and no time did he hear Jud being "wildly extravagant in opinion or views, generally about religion," as the dictionary described what a fanatic was.

In a strangely-indefinable way, Ashton felt himself being drawn toward Jud. Maybe it was because he was always patient and kind to, and with, everybody. Or maybe it was simply because he had never once seen Jud lose his temper and get angry at anyone. No time; not even once! And under all kinds of circumstances-not once! That was a record. To Ashton, it was almost unbelievable. But he knew it was true: he had watched Jud with a careful and shrewd scrutiny; a scrutiny totally unknown to the tall, lean newcomer.

Jud was different all right; this Ashton and no one else could deny. But his "difference" was different from anyone else whom he had previously branded different, too. This made Ashton even more curious. Just what was it that made Jud like he was? he wondered. Was he just, naturally, born kind and meek and gentle and full of compassion and feeling for others, and filled with understanding?

It hardly seemed possible that such was the case, Ashton decided. But, still, what else could it be? Maybe if he met Jud's parents he would have a better understanding as to why Jud was like he was. Yes, indeed, that might be the key to unlocking the mystery as to what made the difference and why Jud behaved in the excellent manner he did.

Ashton remembered his very first trip down the block to the Jennings' house. It was made in true leisurely style and fashion. Jud was on the front porch helping his younger brother with a model airplane or something. He glanced up just as he, Ashton, pedaled by in a slow, easy way.
"Hello, my friend," Jud called cheerfully. "Why not stop and enjoy a glass of Mother's delicious, freshly made iced tea? She makes the very best. Ashton's the name, if memory serves me correctly from what I heard on the ball field that summer evening."

What a memory! Ashton remembered having thought, as he wheeled around quickly and was soon enjoying not only the most deliciously-refreshing iced tea he had ever tasted but the warmth and the fellowship of the friendliest family he had ever met also. And from then on, he was a frequent visitor to the Jennings' house.

In less than a month after he had begun going to Jud's house, Ashton discovered the secret of Jud's constantly-sweet attitude and spirit. He immediately developed a hunger and a thirst for the same.

"I'm fully and completely convinced, Jud," he said to his new friend on one of his visits. "I want to know what I must do to get this peace and joy that you have."

"Even if the fellows shun you and make sport of you, Ashton? This is part of the price. . . ."

"Yes, Jud, even if no one likes me! I want to take the road you're traveling on. I know it's not the popular way. I'm not blind; I've seen how a lot of the kids shun you and make fun of you. But I'm ready to link arms with you and do whatever I must do to get the peace and joy that you constantly possess and have."

And that night, in the Jennings' home, he had become converted and was born again. And that was only the beginning: Mr. Jennings and Jud explained to him his need of a holy heart, purged and cleansed by Pentecostal fire. He sought until the Holy Spirit came in in purifying, holy fire and not only eradicated the "old man" of sin but filled him with Divine Love. From then on, he, too, was branded with Gary's brand. Little matter: his heart had peace with God and he was too full of holy joy to care what the fellows thought about him.

Ashton parked the bicycle inside the garage, next to his father's car, and sat down on the front porch swing to think. Maybe it was the wrong thing to do, he reasoned, since thoughts could be so mistaken and wrong. But he
just couldn't figure out why Jud hadn't called him like he promised. He'd never known Jud to break a promise. Not once. To Jud, a promise was like a sacred trust; something one fulfilled and carried through. Or, when providentially hindered, an accurate explanation was given as to why the promise had been broken and not been fulfilled or carried through. But he had had no word whatever from his friend. None. Nothing but silence.

He walked inside and picked up the phone and dialed the Jennings' number. It rang and rang and rang. No answer.

His mother breezed by him with a dust cloth in her hand. In a teasing fashion, she brushed it lightly over his sandy colored hair, stating, "Maybe that will help to dust the serious look off your face. Something bothering you, Son? You've been as restless as a chased rabbit."

"I just can't figure it out, Mother, that's all."

"Figure what out?"

"Why Jud hasn't called. He said he would. It's not like him. Not at all."

"Jud...? Maybe that's what that paper was all about!" Mrs. Greer said, turning quickly and facing Ashton. "You found the paper, didn't you?" she asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mother. What paper? Where was it?"

"I put it on your dresser, Ashton. Jud stopped by late yesterday afternoon; said for me to give it to you, since you were still over at The Market Place working and he didn't have time to get it over to you. The whole family was in the car when Jud brought it by. They seemed to be in a big rush."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm sure that'll explain why Jud hasn't called," Ashton replied as he hurried to the bedroom in search of the paper.

"Did you find it?" his mother asked, following him. "I put it on top of the dresser so you'd see it when you got in your room last night after work."
"It's not here," Ashton answered, looking beneath the lamp and a prized model. "But I'll find it, unless you vacuumed in here since putting Jud's note here."

"I didn't, Ashton. In fact, I was just going to do that."

Ashton was down on the floor now. 'You know there's been a beautiful breeze coming through those windows ever since last night. So I'm sure it's here somewhere, Mom. And guess what?" he cried triumphantly. "I found it! Not on the dresser but just as safe beneath it. Unless of course, the vacuum cleaner would have found it. Then woe be unto Jud's note."

Opening the paper, Ashton read the hastily scrawled note: "Sorry about the youth rally," Jud wrote, "it's off for this time. My Grandfather Jennings was rushed to the hospital in critical condition. Heart, Dad said they told him. We're leaving immediately. Don't know when we'll be coming back. It all depends upon how things go with dear Grandfather. Pray for us, Ashton. We love him greatly. I started to call you, then I remembered you were still at work. I'll be counting on your prayers. Request prayer in church, please. Thanks much! Jud."

"Am I glad I didn't pass judgment on Jud, Mom!" Ashton exclaimed. "I'd have been all wrong."

"What happened?" Mrs. Greer asked. "And why would you have acted rashly in judging? I think Jud, and that whole family, have proven their genuineness to all of us."

"That's just it, Mother. I know when Jud says a thing it's always like he says it is. Yet today, when I didn't hear from him like he said he'd let me know either last night or early today about what time we'd be leaving for the youth rally, well, the devil sent a few questioning thoughts scurrying back and forth in my brain; like, maybe Jud had changed his mind and didn't want me going with him."

"I asked the Lord, through His mighty power, to please rebuke and erase them; and He did. But every so often, the enemy tried subtly to re-enter them. Am I ever glad I didn't listen to his suggestions and make a rash judgment about Jud! I think I've learned a valuable lesson through this," Ashton added thoughtfully. "Never pass judgment on anyone until the facts
are all in and the case is clearly known. And even then, let God do the judging. He doesn't judge by what He sees nor hears, but He judges righteously, as stated in Isaiah 11:3-4."

"I suppose this has been a classic example on judging for me, too, Ashton. Thanks for everything you said. You, and Jud's family, have certainly helped your father and me since our conversion from sin unto Christ. We're still babes in Christ."

"And we're all learning together, Mother," Ashton said, hugging his mother.

"And growing in the grace of God," Mrs. Greer answered, brushing tears from her eyes.