

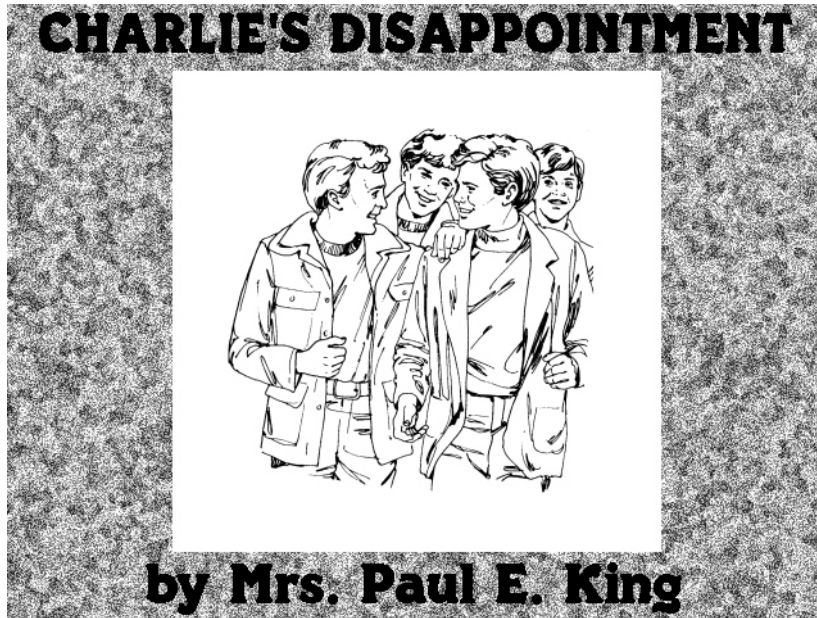
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Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon
May 22, 1994



CHARLIE'S DISAPPOINTMENT
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Charlie stood back in the shadows, not wanting his friend to know that he had heard what he said. Charlie felt confused. More than that, he felt like he'd been let down by Clifford Wiggs. A disappointment so sharp and acute as to be painful seemed to be slashing him to pieces. His mind felt like it was reeling and his brain shot question after question to him. Clifford said he was

a Christian; said he loved the Lord with all his heart; then why did he say what he just said?

Charlie's legs felt rubbery and weak. He stood straight and tall then flexed his knees and swung his legs outward, first the right one, then the left. He hoped the exercise would take away that nasty-weak rubbery feeling. It didn't. Nor did it help to alleviate the keen disappointment that continued to slash away at his heart.

He heard Clifford's voice again. This time it was closer and nearer, even, and again Clifford told an off-color, borderline joke. Charlie felt like he was suffocating with shock and disbelief. A Christian was different, wasn't he? Good-different, right? A Christian didn't tell smutty stories nor off-color, borderline jokes, right?

The questions reeled around and around inside his head like a merry-go-round. Between the hurt and the sting of disappointment and the endless questions, Charlie felt almost sick. He had believed in Cliff. Believed in him so sincerely and honestly that he had told Gilbert Tolly that if ever he became religious or had any inclination at all in that direction, he'd be looking into what Clifford had. Gilbert had only laughed like a hyena and told him he could do better than to look to Cliff as a model.

"But he's a Christian, Gilbert," he remembered having argued. "He said he was. He told me so himself."

"Cliff a Christian?" Gilbert had shot back, incredulous. "Cliff a Christian?" he repeated again, as he laughed like a hyena then walked away.

Charlie now heard the voices getting nearer still. He wanted to run. But he didn't want Clifford to see him. He didn't want Cliff to know he'd heard him. "Hey Cliff, try this."

That was Rusty Owens' voice. Charlie recognized it immediately. Rusty was relatively new in the neighborhood. He was not only relatively new but he was a charmer as well. A pied piper sort of guy. He had a "way" with the girls, and the fellows, that seemed to be almost irresistible. It was pretty much a mimic thing; a, whatever-Rusty-does-we-do, sort of thing. It filled Charlie with disgust. He had no intentions whatever to follow the pied piper. None whatever.

"Try it, Clifford," Rusty insisted a second time. Charlie saw them plainly now. Rusty had a cigarette between his fingers. He was urging Clifford to take it.

"I don't smoke, Rusty. Thanks," Clifford said. "This is final, OK? No more asking."

Charlie saw Rusty's lips part in a sort of sneer. "You don't smoke, huh? But you can tell a pretty raunchy joke. What's the difference, Clifford? Sin's sin, no matter which one you do. And since you're into the dirty joke, off-color-stories syndrome why not go all the way and do all the other things? If I understand a Sunday school teacher correctly, whom I had as a little kid when I went once in a while with a neighbor boy, your punishment won't be less for having committed only one sin than if you'd have done every wicked and evil thing imaginable. That old man said the Bible stated that 'the soul that sinneth, it shall die' (Ezekiel 18:4 and 20). It scared me back then. But when you get started into doing things you know are wrong, well, it's hard to quit. It's downhill all the way. So how about it, Cliff?. You're already on the slide."

"I told you no, Rusty, and it's still no."

Charlie watched the group pass. But what Rusty said sort of dug a groove in his heart. In a way, it was like a broken record that kept playing its message over and over again and again in his heart; "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The soul that sinneth, it shall die . . . shall die . . . shall die. . . ."

Charlie swallowed and gulped several times. He felt a small measure of admiration for Rusty Owens. Very, very minuscule, the measure; but still admiration, nonetheless. It took courage to tell a fellow that he told "raunchy" jokes, didn't it? And it took courage to tell a bunch of sinners that he had gone to Sunday school as a little guy, too. And it took even greater courage to quote that Bible verse about the soul that sinneth, it shall die. And, yes, it took a certain amount of courage, too, to admit that once one got started into doing wrong things--sinful things -- it was hard to quit and that it was downhill all the way.

Charlie watched until the group was completely out of sight then he emerged from the shadows and continued on his homeward journey with Rusty's, "the soul that sinneth, it shall die" scripture verse hammering ceaselessly at his brain and in his heart. He wondered where the Bible was that Grandma had left behind when she died. He knew she never allowed a day to go by without reading it in the morning and at night. But he hadn't seen it since his folks gave most of Grandma's things to the Salvation Army. No doubt the Bible went there too.

He was nearly at the end of the block where he'd turn left and go down Woodward Street which would then take him to The Pines development where he lived, when he heard a familiar voice calling his name. He turned around quickly and came face to face with Dave Hill.

"Hey, why the gloom on your face, Charlie?" Dave asked, giving him a gentle slap on the shoulder. "Gloom? Oh! Well. . . ."

"Well what?" Dave prodded gently. "Charlie," he went on, "I've been wanting to talk to you for a long time; but every time I'd try, you seemed to vanish. I know you're a busy fellow, working all those hours after school and on Saturday too. But even at school, it seemed that by the time I reached your locker you were gone. This is God's appointment for us, I'm sure. I certainly didn't expect to see you. Didn't you work today?"

"I always have Tuesday evenings off, Dave. And am I ever glad I do. It's the only real night for studying. Genuine studying, I mean. I had to go to the drugstore for a prescription for my mother. Dad's working overtime tonight -- too late to find the drugstore open by the time he's off work."

"You're a pretty great guy, Charlie. I admire you. In spite of your heavy work load you stay on that honor roll. Congratulations. I know this requires discipline on your part. I was wondering, though, if you've ever been born again."

"Born again? What does that mean?" Charlie asked quickly.

"It means that you recognize yourself for what you are -- a vile sinner -- and that you repent of your sins and ask the Lord Jesus Christ to forgive you and to come into your heart and to save you -- to change you from the man you are into becoming a new creature in Christ Jesus. And when you know

that the Lord has come to live in your heart and that your sins are all forgiven, this is what is called being born again -- of God."

Charlie scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment. Then he asked, "And are you changed? Really and truly?"

"Oh, Charlie, yes. Yes! Why, I could hardly believe I was me, after I was born again. Old things passed away and all things became new. The things I once loved to do I hated and despised now. And the way I used to talk was all changed. I was made new, Charlie; new in Christ. Oh, it's wonderful to be a Christian!"

"Christian? Why Dave, Clifford says he's a Christian and he tells off-color, dirty jokes just like the rest of the fellows."

Dave took Charlie by the shoulders and said gently, "Listen to me, Charlie, please: When an individual is truly born again -- saved is another word for being born again; so is 'converted'; they all mean the same thing though. But when an individual is born again -- of God -- that individual is honestly and truly changed.

He doesn't tell dirty stories and jokes anymore and he doesn't drink or smoke or curse and swear -- none of those things any-more. He has been made new, Charlie. New -- in Christ. The old, vile, wicked things pass away and are stopped forever; the new man -- in and through Jesus Christ -- now walks like his new Master -- Jesus -- and talks like Him and acts like Him."

Charlie felt a lump come up in his throat. In a voice that sounded hoarse and that shook with emotion, he said, "God certainly sent you down this street today, Dave. I just had one of the greatest shocks of my life. . . ."

"Really?"

"Clifford told me he was a Christian, like I told you a little while ago. And honestly Dave, when I overheard what was coming out of his mouth, I felt like someone was cutting me to pieces on the inside; I was that disappointed in him. You see, my idea of anyone who says he is a Christian is like what you just told me. I felt sick at heart over learning firsthand that Clifford was no different from most of the fellows in school. I don't pal around with this kind. I feel they're not only destroying themselves but that they're trying to take as

many others as possible down the slippery slide of doom with them. I'm thankful you're here."

"I'm anxious for you to give your heart to God, Charlie. Jesus said that except a man is born again he cannot enter Heaven. I want you to go with me to Heaven, Charlie. And believe me when I tell you that a really born again man is different from the world. I've experienced it personally. So will you."

"You present a convincing argument, Dave. And since I had a grandmother who lived the way you just described a true and real Christian, well, I'm ready to make a change. I didn't get to see my grandmother much when I was growing up but the memories I have of her are very sacred and sweet and precious. She and Grandfather have been gone for many years. But I'm sure they're in Heaven. And Dave, I want to go there too. Please pray for me."

Charlie's disappointment became God's appointment: his heart was open and willing and ready for change. On Woodward Street, beneath a pin oak tree, he was converted. Born again. Made new in Christ. It was real.

"He's come! He's come!" he cried joyously as he smote his chest with his hands. "I'm forgiven, Dave. Forgiven! Free! And new. All new, in Christ!"

From a nearby church tower came the music of the early evening vespers. Charlie thought it sounded like bells from Heaven.