

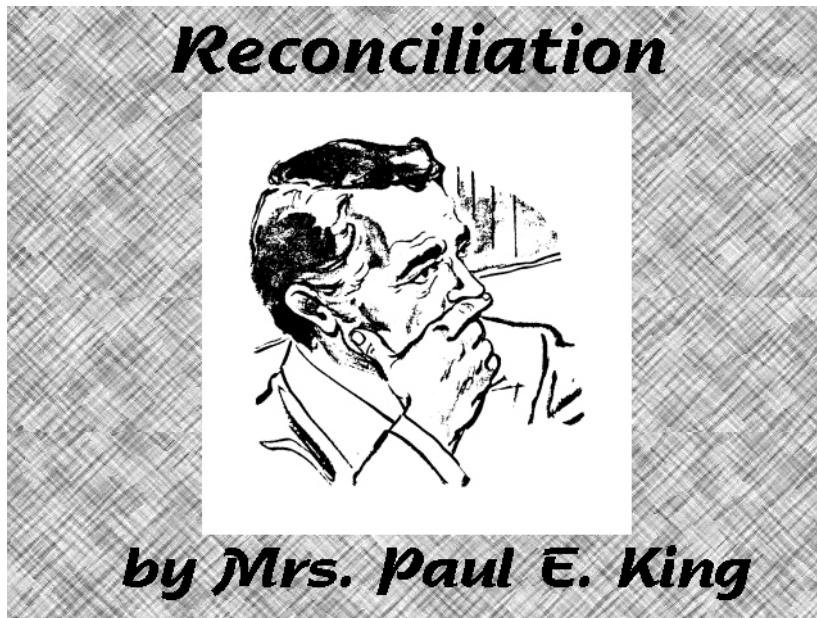
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Digital Edition 10/22/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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The Sunday School Beacon
October 23, 1994



RECONCILIATION
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Bart Kellogg felt sweat trickle down his forehead and dance over his cheeks. At the same time, he felt his heart hammer furiously inside his broad chest. Why'd he come to church in the first place? he wondered as he squirmed uneasily in the last pew on the left side of the well-lighted sanctuary. It had been years since he'd set foot inside a church.

The minister continued on, giving book, chapter and verse for everything he preached. His well-oiled, Holy Ghost anointed arrows hit their mark, not once, nor twice, but every single time. Again, Bart squirmed in the pew.

He looked around, cautiously, hoping to locate or find an easy exit, some way to escape without being conspicuous. There was only one way out, however, and that was through the same doors by which he had entered.

He pushed his big frame up tightly against the back of the pew and searched his sport coat pocket for a handkerchief to wipe away the perspiration which by now had thoroughly drenched his face. Even his well-groomed hair was wet. How he prided himself on his ever-neat, well-groomed looks and person. And here he was, in church, of all places, looking like a drowned rat, he was sure.

Where was that handkerchief? he wondered with mounting agitation. He knew he had put one out before leaving. He knew it. Where was it? With a sudden, sinking feeling, he remembered: it was still lying on top of the dresser where he had placed it before he put his sport jacket on. Oh no! He groaned inwardly.

"But if ye forgive not men their trespasses," the preacher was saying in what sounded like a thunder clap to Bart, "'neither will your Father forgive your trespasses,' Matthew 6:15. I feel someone is in this service who hasn't spoken to his brother for years. That burning greed, and the spirit of envy and jealousy has separated you and, today, your heart is a seething cesspool of iniquitous anger and hatred and bitterness. Brother, sister, it will send your soul to hell. Repent/Go to your brother; be reconciled with your brother before it's forever too late. . . ."

Bart got to his feet and headed for the back door. He could take no more. Who had told that preacher about him? Who? It was obvious that he knew all about him and his state of affairs. He had "painted" his picture perfectly, and that in the presence of a full church! The very idea!

The cool evening breeze fanned his wet brow and face, drying off some of the sweat and cooling his temper to some slight degree. He made fast tracks in getting away from the church.

He walked, not caring where he went; he just had to walk. Some things needed sorting through; things in his mind. He couldn't figure out what was happening to him; him with the brilliant, calculative mind. Always, he had been able to manipulate and scheme and plan until things went his way. Always. He had known what to do, when to do what he figured he should do, and how. Lately, however, everything seemed to be going wrong; nothing was working right for him. His world had turned upside down and inside out, it seemed. Even Maureen and his three children. . . .

At thought of Maureen, Bart felt like he was suffocating. He tried to tell himself it wasn't true, that she had left him. But the empty house and its accusing silence were positive signs and tokens attesting to the awful reality of the fact. When he saw the empty closets and empty dresser drawers where once hers and their children's clothes had been, he thought he would die.

He should not have been shocked at her leaving, he realized with sudden awareness and clearness: She had told him numerous times, lately especially, that unless he changed his ways and stopped taking out his feelings on the children in brutal physical punishment she would have to leave and take them elsewhere lest he mutilate or injure their bodies.

The man felt a new outburst of sweat on his forehead at thought of how easily he could have injured his own offspring. And Maureen as well. He had a temper that was like dynamite when it exploded. He was dangerous to be around -- or near -- at such a time. Very dangerous. He admitted now -- grudgingly, to be sure that he was conceited and self-willed too. Also scheming and conniving. It was the scheming and conniving that had brought the division between Brad and him, he knew.

He walked until he found a park bench to sit on. Where did one begin to "sort out" when he knew that, basically, everything needed a thorough going over, going through sort out? Especially so when even a perfect stranger knew one's past life and proclaimed it from his pulpit for an entire congregation to hear and know about.

"Go to your brother," the preacher had thundered. "Be reconciled to your brother." (Did the man think his people were deaf, that he shouted the message of reconciliation to them?)

Be reconciled to thy brother. . . . Be reconciled to thy wife and thy children. . . . Be reconciled. . . . Be reconciled . . . reconciled. . . .

The message played itself over and over in his mind like a phonograph needle stuck in the groove of a record. He felt like he was going crazy; like he was losing his mind. Where should he begin? Where? There were ever so many things needing to be straightened out and fixed up. With Maureen and the children; and his twin, Brad, especially. But he had no idea whatever where Brad was. None whatever. And the same held true for Maureen and the children: he didn't know where she had gone. He did know, however, that he couldn't live without her. He loved her, he realized with a sudden fiercely strong intensity.

He leaned forward on the bench and groaned aloud. He never realized what he had until now, when he lost it and it was gone -- Maureen and their four children and. . . .

Sudden tears formed and fell. He hadn't cried in years. He'd thought it was a sign of weakness and femininity. He hadn't needed to shed tears; not when every scheme and manipulation of his had made all things to "fall in his lap," proverbially speaking. Brad was the weeper. Especially so when he, Bart, had worked things around so cleverly and perfectly until Brad's share of their joint business venture became his alone.

Brad knew he was a supplanter -- a modern day Jacob -- but rather than fight and cause family problems, his brother left the area completely, leaving no forwarding address nor telling anyone where he was going. And he -- Bart -- thought how lucky he'd been. getting the prosperous business and running it to his liking and his way of doing things -- scheming, manipulative things and ways, all of which Brad disapproved.

He smashed a fist into the open palm of his other hand, feeling sudden anger arise at thought of Brad. Why should he bother about him now, or even be thinking about him? It was rare for him to think about his twin. Very rare. And if it hadn't been for that preacher he wouldn't be thinking of him at all. No, he wouldn't: He had a clever mind; one that had learned many years ago the "art" of forgetting "obnoxious" people and places and things or happenings.

He stood on his feet and began walking back and forth around the park bench, trying desperately to shake Brad out of his thoughts and of his mind; but the minister's sermon wouldn't grant him the freedom: ". . . Be reconciled to thy brother. . . . I feel someone is in this service who hasn't spoken to his brother for years. That burning greed, and the spirit of envy and jealousy, has separated you. . . . Repent! Go to your brother; be reconciled with your brother before it's forever too late."

All at once it seemed as if Brad was standing before him, looking at him with probing eyes; eyes that plead with him to straighten out and make right his many wicked and crooked business deals and to get right with God.

In a fit of anger, Bart broke a sapling in two and began beating the bench until there was nothing left in his hand but an eight-inch length of the once straight, tall, lithe young tree.

"What do you think you're doing?" a burly police officer barked, standing before Bart and swinging his billy club meaningfully. "Do you realize that you have just destroyed park property and that, a tree with three years' growth on it? I'm thankful I didn't have you for my father, mister. I imagine your children are scared stiff when you're around, and little wonder at that! Well, since you don't seem to mind destroying public property, I'm giving you a little reminder that you better never do it again. Unless, of course, you want this 'friendly' little \$500.00 reminder to be doubled. . . ."

Handing Bart the ticket and giving him a scalding, scathing look, he walked away, shaking his head in disgust and disbelief, muttering, "Now if it had been a child, or a teen-ager, even, I may have understood a bit better; but a man! A full-grown, mature man. . . !"

Bart looked at the ticket in his hand with shock and disbelief. \$500.00. \$500.00 for a sapling! He felt a new outburst of anger roll over him and for a moment he was tempted to tear the fine in little pieces. His better judgment, however, withstood him and forbade him to do so. Sooner or later, he knew, he would have to pay the fine for the damage he'd done to a healthy, fine looking sapling.

He tucked the pink piece of paper into the inside pocket of his sport coat and suddenly he realized why Maureen fled for the children's and her life: he became like an insane man when he was angry and upset over

anything. He felt neither pity nor love for the one upon whom he was venting his anger at the time: He was like a mad man, indeed.

Feeling drained of every ounce of strength by the realization of his murderous brutality, Bart sank down on the bench and sobbed. What if it had been one of the children he was beating instead of the ground?

He shuddered with fear now, recalling how the children ran from him whenever he came near them. He had never before stopped to think what he was doing to them; now, however, he saw with utter clarity how he had alienated himself from them and driven them from him. They were afraid of him. Actually and truly, afraid of him -- their father!

Bart trembled with the revelation. Never had he allowed himself time or opportunity to "evaluate" the real Bart before. Truth of the matter is, he was proud of the prosperity of the businessman, Bart, and felt other things were of little or no importance whatever. His business and its prosperity was all that mattered. It was everything to him. Little matter that he had connived and schemed and manipulated and pulled wires and cheated Brad out of his half of the profits. Little matter that Maureen and the children had been neglected and were emotionally and physically abused. Little matter that he had pushed God out of the picture years ago. Little matter . . . little matter. . . .

He was sweating profusely again. If he had thought he put God out of the picture he had better think again! God was demanding a reckoning. And that, now! The time had come when he knew he must do something. God had his number. He had a record of all his deeds, his thoughts, his actions, his devious ways and his crooked deals and dealings. The record was accurate. Flawlessly accurate! He was frightened.

He groaned aloud. Then he got to his feet and began walking. Maybe, if he hurried, he may still be able to see that preacher. Maybe, after he'd had his own heart fixed up and made right with God, the preacher and he could locate Brad and Maureen and the children -- for a reconciliation.

Tears flowed freely as he broke into a run toward the church.