

# What was that you said about your Eyes?

By Brian Coatney

In two and a half years of going to the jail with Mimi to do Bible study, this week has proved one of the most unusual. Steven Howard got out Friday morning under Governor Patton's budget cutting, early release for designated prisoners. When he walked out, he had no ID, less than two dollars, and one outfit now too tight for him since he had begun working out while in jail. He went to the Salvation Army shelter, discovered that check in time is late afternoon, and called me. As I drove up to where he stood, he was shivering.

I took him to several thrift stores where he found a perfect coat, sweater, and pair of pants. The rest of the day we spent going to Social Security, the Department of Motor Vehicles, and making phone calls, as he tried to find a place to stay with friends in neighboring Caldwell County where he last lived, and where he

must take, therefore, the test to renew his commercial drivers license (at age forty, he has been a career trucker). Nothing surfaced for him except the good news that his home county approved him to take the CDL test in Hopkinsville, after his physical. I took him to a chiropractor who agreed to do the physical, and he will take his CDL test early this week, most likely then stepping immediately into one of the countless jobs open to a willing driver.

He spent two years in jail for bail jumping after his ex-wife filed a malicious charge, later dropped, but from which he fled. Though from California, he ended up in jail here because he had come to Kentucky to live near a long time friend who bought land nearby and settled. Claiming to be a Buddhist, his bunk was adjacent to John Hamblin's, and seeing John's stack of Bibles, Steven decided to read the Bible through carefully and slowly. Three months later, he was hooked and filled with a radiance that has remained.

As his efforts to find lodging in his home county fell through, yet with permission to take the CDL test in Hopkinsville, I

suggested he stay on at the shelter and spend non sleeping time with us until he is back in a truck, which by the way will be his home as well until caught up financially. Mimi invited him to Christmas dinner, and Steven is so much fun that we just keep inviting him to do more and more things with us. Today he went to “Lord of the Rings” with Tandy and me.

After two years inside a modern, but sealed up environment, everything hits him as new. He has lived in a cell for sixteen with only tiny, opaque windows, high up, that appear white like a light bulb, but show no detail. Therefore, walking outside after two years came as a shock. Unlike a penitentiary, where inmates go out into the yard, the jail here offers no such features. So when Steven got up this morning, he walked several miles, ending up drinking coffee and eating a piece of pie at the Waffle House before calling me to pick him up for the day.

He is making this Christmas for me—not that I lacked joy in Christ or warmth of family and friends; but the experience of watching his pleasure in every little detail fills me up. The inspiration for this story, however, came today, while we rode along

a beautiful street on this unseasonably warm and beautiful December day. After a pause in our chatting, he said, "My eyes are a consuming fire." At first I thought he had gotten metaphysical on me with this quote from Hebrews 12:29. Then, with the sun so bright in a brilliant blue sky, I thought he meant that the light hurt his eyes. He explained instead that he just couldn't get enough of everything he had been seeing all day. I have thought of his statement off and on all day since.

I expect Steven will pass that CDL test and hop into a cab within the week. He has a three-year-old son by his former live-in girlfriend of several years before jail and doesn't know how any of these details will work out except that the Lord is leading him each step of the way in even the smallest details. Yesterday I didn't think to get him gloves, and when he went walking this morning, his hands got cold, so he told the Lord that it sure would be nice to have a pair of gloves. Immediately, he looked down on the sidewalk and saw a clean pair of gloves that fit him. This delighted him to no end to remember throughout the day, along with other joys. To see someone so simple in faith and so appreciative refreshes us. He

said, "I feel like a child; everything is so new, and I am a new person."

It's Christmas here, and we're loving it. I think my eyes are a consuming fire too!

## Epiphanies and Temptations

The other day, shortly after picking Steven up for the day, I said, "Make yourself at home; just be yourself," to which he replied, "I wouldn't know what that looks like." I said, " I just let it come out and watch it unfold; the good thing is this: if you don't like it, you can try something else!" He grinned, and the day began. After a couple of days of offering and preparing, I showed him the whereabouts of everything in the kitchen and left him to get things when he wishes. This reminds me of one of my favorite sayings of Norman: at a conference in Baltimore back in the 80's, well into a talk and illustrating our inherited royalty with God, Norman said, "A prince goes to the refrigerator when he wants to."

Steven's routine the first three mornings at the Salvation Army shelter included a walk after the mandatory 6:30AM departure

for the day, ending up at a serendipity place to call me about 7:30AM to come pick him up. Having not seen the outside world for twenty-one months, he still revels in looking around and walking through town. Saturday, before he left the shelter, a man came in and asked him if he had any money—Steven then telling the man he could give him fifty cents. Suddenly the man asked him, “Do you need a watch?” For two days Steven had amused us by forgetting he had no watch, looking at his bare wrist, only to ask the time. He had walked to K-Mart and seen a four-dollar watch, but elected not to buy it, since he is managing a twenty-dollar cash gift. Now unexpectedly, this man, not a resident at the shelter, set a watch on the table and walked off. When Steven picked it up, he realized it to be the exact watch he wanted at K-Mart. These small miracles make him beam, and he loves to tell the stories about them.

We went to several thrift stores looking for more comfortable shoes for him because his cowboy boots, with the long pointed toes, make his morning walks a pain to the feet. We found nothing really in three different stores, but in the fourth I said to the owner, “Judy, do you have any men’s shoes?” She pointed to a tiny corner nook, saying, “I only have a few.” I reached in, and from the

six pairs of shoes, pulled out a beautiful pair of new looking walking shoes that even look dressy—hardly a scuff on the dark, perfect looking tread. This brought great pleasure to us both.

Sunday morning Tandy took him to a Sunday school at First Baptist, our home church, and then we sat together during the morning worship service of Christmas music and a sermon from John Chapter One on the incarnation. Steven surprised me again when he said, "This is the first time I've ever been in a church like this." Having just become a Christian in February, the only church he knew was the one at the jail. Sunday night we went to a fabulous Christmas musical presented by the Hillcrest Baptist Church choir at the old Alhambra Theater down town, where I went to the movies in high school back in the 60's. Since the local Pennyrile Arts Council maintains it, the theater has lost none of its character dating back to the first part of the twentieth century. From center seats in the balcony, we felt the full impact of some of the finest Christmas music I have ever heard.

Today (Monday) I drove Steven to Princeton—twenty-six scenic miles away on two-lane roads, so he could register for his

CDL test, according to mandate, in his last county of residence. Told last Friday that he would not have to take the hands on driving test again, he looked forward with elation to passing his written test this week and grabbing a job right after Christmas. When we got to Princeton, however, the circuit clerk looked into his case and told him that he would have to take a test again behind the wheel. The problem with this lies in finding a trucker and an eighteen-wheeler willing to take him to Mayfield or Bowling Green, both an hour or more away and making for great expense to do this. His face fell, but I told him we would get this done one way or another.

While he sat down to fill out additional paperwork, I went looking on the town square for an office supply store, because I noticed he carries his pile of papers around carefully in his hands. At the office supply store, I found a zip portfolio case with compartments and got it for him. When he saw it he said, "That's the same one I used to keep my logs in as a truck driver!"

On the way home from Princeton, I remembered a high school classmate, Ronnie, who owns a freight company here in Hopkinsville, and so we went to see Ronnie in hopes of hiring a

truck for Steven's road test. Ronnie said that insurance companies make this sticky, but that he might be able to arrange something in a couple of weeks, after the holidays. By this time, it was going on two o'clock, so we went to the house for lunch, and Steven and I started making phone calls, trying to hunt up another option for finding a truck, in case Ronnie's insurance company vetoed his gesture. I called Ryder to check on their availability, and while on the phone, Steven began to unload his depressed feelings to Tandy, but ended up with the words, "It's in the Lord's hands." At that very moment the other phone rang, Tandy answered it, and a voice said, "May I speak to Mr. Howard?" Handing the phone to Steven, he began to burst with excitement as the caller identified herself as the contact in Frankfort (Kentucky's state capitol) saying that the circuit clerk in Princeton had misunderstood Steven's case. Five years have not elapsed since the authorities suspended his license, so he does not need to take the road test. Steven said his heart began to pound so fast that it made his arm hurt.

Tandy and I also decided to invite him to stay with us the rest of his time in Hopkinsville. Despite all this good news, Steven started feeling down on himself, saying, "I didn't handle things so

well today." I looked at him in surprise and asked him why he thought that, to which he said, "I got so mad at that clerk in Princeton that I wanted to go off on her; and I got so down when I thought I had to find a truck to take the test in." I replied, "You did handle things; you *felt* like going off on the clerk, but *didn't*; you *felt* down about the driving test, but *ended* with, "It's all in the Lord's hands." I told him Dan Stone's famous line, "The truth comes after the but" and how we naturally and normally experience the negatives daily: the negatives make up the first part of our sentences, and faith makes up their endings. Reviewing this encouraged us all.

Later Steven went with Tandy and me to the fitness club, where he read magazines (he worked out yesterday in our driveway—doing four sets of fifty pushups as part of his workout). Tracey, one of our workout buddies came in. She loved the story I e-mailed around, and while she and Tandy did the treadmills, Steven stood and chatted with them. After that I took him by my sister Sylvia's house, where she, husband Art, and daughters Ruthie and Faith all enjoyed asking him questions about his conversion and what jail is like.

We finished the day with grilling hamburgers at Mimi and Billy's, and Steven told the most amazing story of a suicide attempt I know of. At age twenty-nine, he made his fourth attempt when he drove one evening to the top of a mountain in his California town, putting a carbon monoxide hose into his car from the exhaust, and swallowing a medley of pills. Miraculously the next morning, he awoke with the car still running and thought, "I'm still alive." He saw quadruple vision, picked the middle of what he saw, and made his way down the mountain to buy coffee and cigarettes, where someone observed him and called a fire truck and an ambulance. The hospital tested him for carbon monoxide in his body and told him that he should have been dead numerous times over. After such an experience, he decided he must be meant to keep on living.

Steven's situation with the woman he lived with several years before incarceration, and with whom he has a son, makes an equally interesting story unfolding. He called her home in California, and they got off to a heated start at first, Steven saying, "Desiree couldn't wait to get on the phone and start arguing." But she also told him that she has not dated anyone else and still loves him.

Glad that he's a Christian (Steven said she was a Christian when he met her) she pertly told him on the phone, "I knew Jesus before you did." Steven's getting some early lessons now on "Yes dear." He didn't argue with her, yet voiced his pain that he writes her so often without hearing back from her.

When he described her, however, she sounded just like Tandy, for Tandy finds it an agony to write letters and used to feel the more guilty because I would write so many. We talked to Steven about not judging love by lack of letters. I also told him, "You need to make an honest woman out of her." I know Steven needs to line up some spirit truths at center and not make Desiree the central point, yet I do sense an excellent match in faith for them.

I see a man more soundly converted than most I meet—a man I believe will run well without being hindered. More to come!

Faith Is Like Ice Cream—The More You Eat, The More You Want

Tandy and I decided that we didn't want to take Steven back to the shelter Christmas Eve or Christmas because check in time to sleep is 9:00PM, and family festivities continue well past that; besides, we enjoyed him so much, we now wanted him to stay with us.

We had invited Tandy's parents, Billy and Mimi to Christmas Eve dinner for a pot roast with cappuccino chunk ice cream for desert. Steven had only eaten one ice cream bar in twenty-one months at the jail, and that when a cellmate received some money from his family and bought the ice cream. So Steven had enjoyed a couple of big bowls of ice cream in the two days before Christmas Eve. I noticed the carton down to half full and thought I had better call Billy or Mimi to bring some additional desert. Pau Pau (Billy) answered the phone, and I said, "You may want to bring some additional desert since we have only a half a carton of iced cream left." Steven, sitting at the time across from me in the living room, said, "I don't think there's half a carton left." Laughter jumped out of all of us over this one.

Tandy, aside, asked me, "Are you going to get Steven a stocking?" That sounded like fun, so when I went to Wal Mart and Big Lots to shop for her stocking items, I found great pleasure in getting Steven little needed things like mousse, floss, toothpaste, etc. as well as Cheetos, cashews—and most of all, a good supply of another passion many of us share—chocolate bars!—especially a couple of Wonka bars. When Steven buys a Wonka bar, he hopes to find the gold seal for a free trip to the Wonka factory. He also told of a job he formerly had transporting tankers of chocolate; after a delivery he would get inside the tanker and scrape the chocolate from the tanker walls as part of the cleaning process, during which he ate all the chocolate he wanted, as well as taking five gallon buckets of it home.

Mimi, Pau Pau, and Tandy's brother Clark came over for Christmas Eve dinner; we all enjoyed a warm evening; and Seven settled into his new bed at our house, grateful for the Salvation Army, but glad to be part of a new family. I asked him his reaction to so much family around—the Coatneys, the Boldts, and the Andersons, to which he replied, "I've never been around family unity before." He was born the fifth of seven children in a home

situation so severe, that his father came and took him away at age six. But even his father never hugged him or said, "I love you," so life remained unstable, and Steven ran off as a young teen.

On Christmas day, after a quiet morning at home and the pleasure of the stockings (always one of my favorite times; my favorite stocking item was the package of magnet pins: I immediately rearranged all the pictures on the refrigerator), the Boldts—my sister's family—came over for a lunch of pancakes and sausage from a hog just butchered in the area. I always enjoy our griddle, almost thirty years old now, and making variations to the traditional recipe of white flour pancakes; so this time I mixed in half corn meal and swished lots of butter on them with a basting brush as I flipped them. Steven took three good sized pancakes and a couple of sausage patties, which he enjoyed, but afterwards commented on by saying, "The pancakes hit my stomach like lead." I suggested, "More likely the sausage patties hit your stomach like lead." He didn't think so. The next day Tandy uncovered a more likely explanation: Steven had eaten a Wonka bar before lunch!

Christmas night at Billy and Mimi's—the Anderson Christmas fellowship—I began to feel a strong pressure inside, knowing Tandy and I would leave Saturday, for Boone, NC to visit Carson, Mindy, and grandbaby Caleb. What would we do with Steven? Sensing an inner call to see Steven all the way through to getting settled, I found myself saying to the Lord, "I will." I thought of three options: take Steven with us to North Carolina, stay home with him while Tandy went on, or let him stay at our house. The latter seemed questionable, and I feared bringing it up to Tandy since so many released inmates fall quickly after getting out. Before leaving Mimi's, I expressed my concern without mentioning the idea of Steven staying at our house. Without hesitation, she said, "He can stay at our house while we're gone." I mulled this over, but thought, "She sounds confident, so perhaps this is the Lord's way."

The morning after Christmas, I sat reading before Tandy or Steven had gotten up. Just when I finished reading in Numbers about the faith of Caleb and Joshua when the other ten spies gave a negative report, Steven walked in saying, "I think I have faith to get a job today." He had in mind a trucking job, but I said, "I have another faith proposition for you: we're thinking of offering you to

housesit for us while we're gone." Pleased, he answered, "I would be glad to do that." I called Billy and Mimi and the Boldts to ask them to check on Steven and do things with him. When I told Pau Pau the plan, he immediately thought it a great idea, and my brother in law, Art, and my sister Sylvia, agreed as well. That settled the matter; I enjoyed peace about it after that.

On Thursday nights Mimi and I go to the jail to do the men's Bible study, and I asked Steven if he would like to go with us, but he told me that jail policy forbids an inmate going back like that. Mimi called me ill that evening, so I went on and found the men lively to discuss as we studied the verses in Hebrews chapter twelve about not letting a root of bitterness spring up to spoil the grace we walk in. When we read the verse about Esau selling his blessing for a pot of lentils, Chris looked at me with a guilty grin, saying that he felt the Lord talking to him through that verse since he recently gambled away eighty dollars to cellmates—also seeing himself out of control. I laughed too, kidding him about the Holy Spirit being all over him with conviction.

What also moved me this Thursday night came from the testimony of a newcomer to the study, Rocky—a young man who said, “I had never been in trouble before and had everything: I had women, owned my own business, and had a house; now I’m sentenced to fifty years for murder.” The weight of his words led me to sink inside momentarily, thinking of the apparent hopelessness of his situation and the awful grief of what he had done. Silently inside I said, “God, I feel devastated by what he did, but if this led Rocky to You, I bow to You and You have a good plan for him.”

Rocky did become a Christian after his arrest, and he digs into his Bible with great gravity and sincerity. Even writing about this clutches my stomach, though I know God will have His way in Rocky. We all deserve hell, so we equally deserve earthly justice as well. Inmates that justify themselves and see mercy or probation as rights do not do well. At the same time that I fully acknowledge the demands of justice, I also believe for the grace that can release us into a new and productive life like King David and the apostle Paul discovered. But here again, mercy does not come to us as our right, but as the gift of grace as the Lord wills.

Friday morning I woke up before Steven did, knowing that he needed to get to the courthouse early to take his written CDL test. I noticed Tandy's note of encouragement by the coffeepot and that she had the coffeepot ready for him to switch on. Steven commented on the strength of her coffee, and they both make stronger coffee now that they each realize the other also drinks it strong. The first couple of mornings Steven had made the coffee weaker, thinking she might not like it strong. Tandy, in an aside, had commented to me, "He makes weak coffee; they must make it like that at the jail so they can drink it all day."

When I told Steven what Tandy had said, I think they got into a strong coffee competition. Anyway, he started worrying aloud about the possibility of a particular clerk in the Princeton courthouse hassling him about his previous charge—the one from his former wife that got dropped but not forgotten. Then Steven asked me, "Did you finish Hebrews last night?" "No," I replied, "we're still in chapter twelve." At this, he opened his Bible, a moment later closing it to say, "This verse is my word," referring to Hebrews 12:1-2, "{...} let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with endurance the

race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (...)." Referring to this, Steven said, "The devil tried to distract me from my goal by getting me to worry about that clerk, but I see it now."

Before driving him to the courthouse, we stood in the den, and I put my hand on his shoulder, praying for him to have a clear mind on his test and for the Lord to bring back to his memory previous knowledge and skills. I dropped him off confidently, but when he called me to pick him up, he said that he had missed one too many, getting overconfident and in a hurry—not checking over his work. He said, "I'm not going to get down about this." It took me a few minutes to move to faith and resist lecturing him on what he already knew. He did pass the test for an auto license, so we headed toward Princeton for him to get that and also schedule another written CDL test. On the way over, he started talking about the questions he missed, stating the questions and the choices for answers, asking me to guess at them. Though I never imagine myself driving a big rig, I found the questions interesting, and every rig on the road I now see as driven perhaps by another Steven in search of God's love. I trust to remember that, when some big boy

is on my tail, giving me an undesired view of his front end at interstate speeds.

When we arrived at Princeton, the license clerk dashed Steven's word to her that the clerk in the state capitol had called him to say that he does not need to take the road test again. The local clerk had been right after all; the clerk in Frankfort had been wrong. I thought, "How strange, since just when Steven had moved from depression to faith a few days before, saying, "It's in the Lord's hands," the Frankfort clerk had called with the hallelujah news that he did not have to retake the road-skills test. At first—when that miracle faded away in the pleasant, but disheartening word of the Princeton clerk—the testimony of a few days earlier appeared hollow. A chilly reality hit me once again that everything does not work out without setbacks and the look of contradiction. All I said to Steven was, "We will see this all the way through," walking around the corner, while he finished some paperwork, to get him some thermal underwear since his legs stay cold in our house. When I returned, he said, "It's all in the Lord's hands"—the same words as before, but now with even more weight of glory behind them.

On the drive back to Hopkinsville, he considered driving regionally instead of over the road (an expression I learned means delivering to forty-eight states). Steven called this change in his attitude a revelation and confided for the first time that the Lord may not want him driving to California yet, since he owes \$3,000 in misdemeanor fines in California—fines for which the state will not extradite him, but fines for which it would arrest him if apprehended in state. He wants to work and pay those fines off, a task expedited more by avoiding re-arrest.

Saturday morning, Tandy and I headed to Boone, NC, leaving Steven standing at the door with Art, who had dropped by to help my neighbor move. It's Monday as I write this, and I don't know how much ice cream Steven has eaten since we've been gone, but if it's as much as his faith is growing, I expect he's eaten a lot of ice cream: after all, the more ice cream you eat, the more you want.

## Settling In

When Tandy and I left for Boone after Christmas, to see Carson, Mindy and Caleb, Steven felt confident about passing his written CDL test. However, just as before, he missed one too many

on the test and said later, "I've never failed any test twice in my life. I didn't want to go back to see anybody after failing, but I did." He later told me that he thought everything would come back to him when he looked at the test, even though it had been nine years since he last took the it. I told him that such only works for people with the photographic memories; everyone else needs refreshing and occasional use to remember things.

After this second failure, he studied continually so he could take the test again three days later, and Faith even quizzed him from the book when he went over to my sister's house. So when we arrived back from Boone New Year's night, he had prepared and felt nervous, but confident for the next morning. He easily passed, went to Princeton to get his permit, and waited to see how he might secure a truck to take his road test. This is no longer the day of the small operator, easily available, to let a student take a test; many companies utilize schools to train candidates, and the schools arrange the testing. Fear of lawsuits plus soaring insurance rates have made it more difficult to find a friendly driver with a rig who can help. But in Sunday School, a local man who works for Agri-chem thought he could include Steven with an Agri-chem employee

needing testing, and so everything looked set. However, after riding high with expectation again, the Agri-chem possibility fell through when its candidate could not go up for testing.

Not only that, but Steven had been on the Internet and the phone for days, contacting companies about the prospect of a job, only to receive the cold news repeatedly that his felony record disqualifies him on the front end. But he continues to say, "It's in the Lord's hands." Finally though, he began to consider that a smaller company, with a more personal touch, might hire him, and he brightened up when a small firm in Dover, TN, an hour away, at least offered to talk to him after he gets his CDL.

Steven has not been without his negatives, however; after a string of refusals because of his felony record, he sat down on the sofa one day in the living room, saying to Tandy and me, "I guess if you're a felon, you're supposed to just put a rope around your neck and give up, but that's not going to happen here." Also, he is getting used to the normal world of wildly fluctuating emotions. I asked him, "Didn't you have ups and downs in jail?" to which he replied, "No, every day in jail was the same." I think that he forgets the

intensity of some of his jail experiences, but he does have a wide range of choices and experiences now that he did not face in jail.

Also, and most importantly, his soul has come alive as a new Christian after years of numbness. He tells of how his girlfriend used to say, "Can't you feel anything; can't you express some emotion?" Steven says now, "I see that I've been numb since I was a child." Now, his emotions register everywhere, and the Lord is teaching him to brace himself, trust God's way through, and not run back into numbness.

Appetites, choices, and desires come at us in every way and from every direction, but now we do not need to run, try to freeze ourselves up, or drive with a foot on the brake. God created us to live spontaneously, all out, with passion; He did not create us to live simultaneously with all such creative energy by mashing the accelerator and the brakes at the same time. Fear goes out, as faith takes over, and we let go of our fear of sinning and trust His keeping. Powerful appetites and desires, and the complexity of choice, instead of frustrating our faith, now propel our faith—octane for the engine!

Steven has also gotten some negatives when he calls home, trying to reach Desiree and their three-year-old son, William. Desiree rarely answers the phone, so Steven gets the grandmother—who has a long, angry list of accusations against Steven. She regularly says, “Desiree’s not here.” The last time Steven called, I could hear him getting agitated as he answered obvious accusations from the grandmother, and after she hung up on him, he said, “the devil answered the phone; I won’t do this anymore.” Then as he told of the conversation, he would say, “Satan said this,” or “Satan said that.”

The exciting thing is that Steven recognizes the condemnation of the enemy through others. He probably will soon add the equally necessary insight that other, misused prodigals are also lost sons as he was. And in the overall picture, God orchestrates everything that comes to us, which Steven already catches, for he often says, “I guess God meant this,” or “I guess God didn’t mean for me to do that.”

At present, it does appear, for the third time, that his road test situation is lined up. He got hold of an old friend named Alan

Redden, who took him in his truck in 1994 for his road test. Semi-retired and up in years, Alan no longer drives actively except for some occasional, regional work, and his truck no longer meets the standards for what Steven need to test for. But when Steven arranged to rent a truck from Ryder in Bowling Green, where he will test, Alan used his business name to fax back and forth with Ryder in order to meet insurance requirements. So Steven appears headed toward his road test.

In the mean time, in order to create some cash flow, he agreed to clean out an unoccupied rental house of Tandy's brother Clark who lives in San Francisco and needs help with a house abandoned by his renters and left a mess. Also, I usually do not think much about maintenance on my 1993 Ford Escort since it has served me so well the six years I've had it. But I began to feel agitation thinking of a car with 92, 000 miles on it with the original timing belt. I also realized that I had not done the 60,000 mile servicing or the 90,000 mile servicing. Pricing the work at the local dealership, I got an estimate one would expect and made my appointment for the servicing. When I told this to Tandy, however,

she said, "We're not going to do that. We need to get a price at the Finleys (a family owned garage)."

That sounded reasonable, but Steven had also told us several times that he worked on cars for years and could do all the work. Of course, many say that they can do things, but can they? Also, he didn't come across strongly that he wanted to do the work. I wondered if that meant he doubted his ability, but learned later that he absolutely hates working on cars. Not only that, a January day in the driveway bare-handing an engine, did not appeal to Steven either. Needing money however, he agreed to do the work, and Tandy and I thought it much better to pay Steven than the dealer. Steven went to the auto parts stores, found all the parts, and backed the car into our driveway to start in on a remarkable, fifty-two degree sunny day in January.

He did not particularly want me to watch him work for the same reason he did not want to read any of these stories about him after I showed him a couple. He said, "I don't like anyone looking at my artwork (he's does a lot of sketching) until I'm finished with a piece, so I don't like to look at someone else's work until it's done."

So I determined not to hover in the driveway. For a while, I resisted looking out the window or running out to the driveway when I heard grunts and groans. My curiosity took over, however, and I spent more and longer visits in the driveway, never having watched a mechanic do a job before.

Steven relaxed for the most part and explained things as he went along. Once he got down to the timing belt, he recommended putting in an new water pump as well, since the cost to replace a water pump would mean heavy expense later. Since a dealer wants \$200 to replace a sixteen-dollar timing belt, and since the water pump lies under the timing belt, a water pump replacement later would mean another costly maintenance. So Steven saved us a future expense as well.

I'm not the most equipped when it comes to tools, so Steven had borrowed some from Billy, and we bought a half-inch drive. But when Steven got into the job, he realized he needed some metric tools as well. Our new neighbor, Mark, a policeman who works nights, happens to have "every tool known to man" as he put it, and so Steven borrowed the metric sockets he needed. In the middle of

the job, however, Steven couldn't reach a nut and needed a 17mm deep socket, but Mark had gone for a while. With no car to go get one, I called Mimi, Tandy at work, and my sister—none of them at home. Just as I headed out to walk, Tandy drove up for lunch, so I ran off to get the part. As the afternoon wore on and Steven's hands got more and more cut up, he needed another part. Already frustrated, he had accidentally sprayed cleaning fluid on a cut and howled in pain. I called my sister, and she drove over so I could use her car to get the part, while she chatted with Steven. Angels appear for Steven all along the way.

By the end of the day, only a few small items remained to do, and the five o'clock darkness sent me to the store for fried chicken, cabbage, and taters for supper. Winn Dixie has great fried chicken, the taters went into the microwave, and Tandy cooked the pot of cabbage. I realized an error on a ticket at the auto store and needed to exchange two things, as well as get a new hose fitting and take the car for an oil change and lube since we had no way to dispose of the oil at home. I had planned to drive Steven around the next day and get him to help me do all of this; but after the

night Bible study at the jail, I decided to let Steven handle these things.

The way this came about resulted from the end of our discussion at the jail about faith. I shared how nervous and out of control I felt much of the time while Steven worked on the car. After all, with a dealer or professional garage, one takes the car in and pays the big bill, but the work gets a guarantee. I finally had thought though, "What's the worst that could happen? Well, Steven will get everything torn down, make a mess, and I'll have to get the car towed to the dealer." I decided on the risk of faith, and he came through.

Having hovered much of the day watching him, I intended to quiz him and supervise everything the rest of the way, however, since the "engine check" light wouldn't go off on the dash now. But when I saw the look of "You need to have faith" on the faces of the men at the jail, I remembered what Norman taught about responsible sons, realizing that the thing to do, uncomfortable as it felt, meant asking Seven to handle the rest and let him manage the details and scheduling. No one likes the feeling when someone

starts to over-manage and control. I found myself relaxing this morning and getting on with my schedule. Praise the Lord.

One other fascinating aspect of walking in the Spirit came out when Tandy told me a story. Steven told Tandy that while he was house-sitting the five days for us he found some chocolate tucked away in a pantry. Wild about chocolate, he reached for a piece but then had a sense, "Don't eat that." Steven listened to that voice and oddly put the piece into a basket on the kitchen counter. While standing next to Tandy the other day, I exclaimed, "A piece of chocolate," and ate it. That jogged Tandy's memory to tell me the story. The punch line is this: the candy doesn't belong to Tandy but to the school system, and she uses it as motivation with her emotionally, behaviorally disabled students. We haven't made a lot of rules for Steven during his stay because he shows such simplicity and grace of spirit awareness. This example of the Spirit's ways refreshed us.

This also explains the ease we feel with Steven living with us—spirit to spirit. We look forward to him getting a job and back with his family, but we enjoy him here with us in the meantime. He

just now frowned after finding out that the Ryder company in Bowling Green still has not cleared the paperwork with the credit company for his test Monday, and here it's noon Friday. Just another negative to keep the adventure of faith alive. "Lord we hope for a Monday test, but it's in Your hands."

## The First Big Disappointment

Besides trying to get a CDL and a rig to drive for somebody, Steven goes to the Wednesday Bible study with us at Billy and Mimi's. Once again, we chose Romans for a book study, proceeding into chapter six. Having read Romans so many times, I like to sit back at Bible study and hear Tandy read out loud our chapter, looking at it as we begin to discuss. At first, I often balk at Romans because of familiarity, but find that if I relax, not binding my hearing with presumed tedium, the scripture relates in freshness of insight, even when covering old ground. Can we talk too often about our union with Christ's death, burial and resurrection—the basis of Christ living in us—for no Christ lives in us apart from God first placing us in Christ.

Christ dying for us sounds familiar, but how about Christ dying as us? He was made to be sin (2 Cor. 5:21), meaning that he became sin-indwelled humanity on the Cross, in his death, so that his death cut off sin from the body. In the resurrection, He, and we in Him, rose as Spirit operated humanity. On this basis, Christ lives in us, since we have been crucified with Christ. As we discussed this, along with Galatians 2:20, Steven recognized Galatians 2:20 as a compendium of Romans Chapter Six—an insight that excited me to hear from him!

Two days later, Steven wondered about his friend Alan's credit application with Ryder in Bowling Green, calling Ryder, only to learn that Ryder rejected the application because Alan is semi-retired. Deflated, he nonetheless said, "The devil's trying to get me discouraged; but it's not going to happen." We couldn't understand why, if a renter pays insurance as part of the rental fee, a truck rental company would require another business owner to fill out a credit application for the renter. Confused, we thought it must satisfy a requirement for a strong reference. We would later learn the real reason for such a credit reference requirement.

In the meantime, I sat working at the computer, when Steven stood next to the open refrigerator and said, "There's nuthin to drink around here." I replied, "Sure there is, there's juice, milk, or water; what do you mean, 'there's nuthin to drink?'" He answered, "soda," so I said, "What kind of soda?" and he said, "any kind of soda." Tandy drinks soda, but mostly at work, so said, "Put it on the grocery list," and when Tandy got home, I told her, "Steven's really family now."

However, Steven clearly felt some light depression, and I found myself resisting the familiar temptation with people to want to fix everything in order to relieve their discomfort. My reading schedule keeps me in Job, so I discovered new depths in Job's same argument with God about suffering. I had known that Steven would have tribulation; but in the early going, when blessings and anointing stream effortlessly, deferral of pain looks appealing—much as we comfort children as much as possible before the discipline days set in, without sight of immediate relief.

Two scriptures from the Psalms helped me as I watched Steven: "I wait for the Lord, my soul does wait, and in His word do I

hope" (130:5 NAS) and "The Lord will accomplish what concerns me: Thy lovingkindness, O Lord, is everlasting (...)" (138:8 NAS). I read these to him and later commented in a practical vein, "It looks like the insurance companies are taking over; people are lawsuit crazy." Steven replied, "I'm going to someone higher than the insurance companies." So I asked, "Oh, who is that?" to which he answered, "I've already been talking to Him this morning."

The ambiguity of the credit application requirement led to two days of quiet frustration and wondering about how to proceed. Hearing about the credit application block, Mimi said, "Who would want to do that?" and I began to think that Steven would help himself by getting temporary work—an option I had discussed with him several times, only to observe a distance in his response. But phone calls to trucking companies, schools, and old friends or family had taken on a cyclical, futile tone. Without a business to back Steven, how could he proceed?

I thought, "Perhaps the Lord means for him to attach himself to business in a lesser capacity in order to establish a new history of work reliability." Steven had called many large companies, but a

small business that likes his work and character might see past his felony record. More phone calls, however, indicated that the trucking industry mirrors the pattern that has ended, for the most part, the mom and pop grocery, or the mom and pop hardware store.

I felt led to call a friend from church, Mason Clark, who has ownership in a family business selling contracting supplies, explaining Steven's predicament, and also asking Mason about part time work opportunity. Mason could not help at this time, but I knew the Lord had led me to make the call, and I could hear Mason starting to get creative ideas. One never knows when a link will lead to a link, or to another link. Then I experienced a quickening to talk to Steven about temporary work in faith terms, saying, "For business to attach itself to you, you may have to attach yourself to it first; faith means that what you take takes you." Again, I saw the detached look, followed by Steven saying, "I'm going out for a walk." I headed out the door behind him, on my way to the exercise center.

I got back before Steven returned, and Mimi picked me up for our Wednesday afternoon Bible study with the women at the jail. On the way, she told me that Steven had walked over to their house to discuss his impasse, to which Billy encouraged him to get a temporary job. I felt relieved that I had not yet told Billy or Mimi the conversations of the morning—not that this would have been wrong—but Steven got to experience the Holy Spirit working independently of normal collaboration. Equally, I felt confirmed about my tack with Steven that morning.

Back from the jail, I saw Steven across the street consulting with my nephew Peter, who had sheared a bolt while replacing a water pump in his old car. The phone rang, and Ronnie Luttrull, an old friend and CO-owner of a family feed business, was returning a call from Steven about the credit application situation. Ronnie had thoroughly discussed the issue with Ryder in Bowling Green and learned that backing Steven does involve the utmost liability: financial strength like unto collateral for the 135,000 dollar tractor and trailer, plus potentially millions of dollars in accident liability.

I told Ronnie, "I don't want you to feel pressured at all; if the Lord leads someone to do this, I will celebrate, but if not, I perfectly understand that too; it would give me chills if my son Carson took on such a liability risk for someone." Ronnie said, "I'm sure glad to hear you say that!" I told Ronnie that I believe Steven needs to get into the work stream somewhere. Ronnie made an interesting observation about hiring: "I used to hire people that didn't have a job, but got frustrated at all the ones that work a few days and quit. Then a business friend told me that he hires people already working in a job, saying, 'The people that want to work are already working; nothing stops them.'"

I called Quality Personnel, the temporary agency that helped me so much five years ago, and Julie Kittell warmly greeted me on the phone, discussing Steven and catching up on our kids (Elliot went to high school with her daughter Natalie, who earned a masters degree and is presently on her way with her husband to serve on Campus Crusade for Christ's campus staff at UNC-Chapel Hill, of all places—my alma mater). Julie said that the job situation is presently tight, but encouraged me to bring Steven in.

At Wednesday Bible study, a week having elapsed in our narrative, Steven threw his hands up saying, "It's up to the Lord; maybe He doesn't want me driving a truck right now, but I can't do anything—it's up to God." He then stood up behind Mimi's sofa and with heartwrenching, spiritual emotion, sang us two songs out of the depths of his heart. Ronnie also explained the credit predicament to Steven, but assured him that he would be on the lookout for a job for him; farmers often need truck drivers to haul grain, and a farm truck can drive within a 150-mile radius without a CDL driver. Steven would enjoy the experience, make contacts, and who knows how else the Lord might lead?

On the way home, Steven said, "After going to the temp agency tomorrow, I guess I'll have to look into school options again for getting a CDL." After a night's sleep, we went to Quality Personnel in the snow, with the result that Steven received singular attention, and I got to chat and catch up with a number of the staff. Hardly an hour later, Julie called with a job opportunity with Plymouth Tubing, a large plant in the industrial park. He reports tonight for third shift—from 8:30PM to 7:00AM, and a four day work week to start with.

Steven took this well, spent the afternoon on the Internet and the phone fervently looking for a trucking school opportunity, and laid down about five to rest a few hours. I felt agitation at times, wanting to say, "Shut up all that trucking talk; you have a job of the moment!" In former times I would have, and I don't subscribe only to a mute policy, but the more Steven arrives at on his own with the Holy Spirit, the better. Also, we learn to discern the Spirit's leading of when to say something to someone and when not to. No rule tells us that, only the moment by moment daily dying Paul talks about.

So Steven goes in to night. I feel excitement and nervousness. "Lord, thank you; You are up to good things." I also remember the scripture in Zechariah, "For who has despised the day of small things?" (4:10).

## "Mommy, Mommy"

Two things emerged clearly in the past week: first, for a business to fill out a credit application so that someone can rent an eighteen-wheeler means tremendous liability, both for the truck and

for injury; second, trucking companies, as a rule, do not hire someone with a felony record.

Ronnie Luttrull put the former into perspective when he said that his drivers often find themselves harassed by automobile drivers cutting in or maneuvering in order to provoke a lawsuit. The scarceness of the owner operator and the small trucking firm puts the latter into perspective. Matriculation into the seat of an eighteen-wheeler now comes almost exclusively through the collaboration of insurance companies, large trucking firms, designated training schools, and the Department of Transportation.

Steven accepted the liability situation for businesses, but found the quick, cold tone and hanging up on him by many human resources people discouraging. One afternoon, before I dozed off in a chair next to him, he slumped back after one more rejection on the phone. He thought aloud about answering "No" when asked if he has a felony record. I turned with concern as he got up from his chair saying, "I can see the truth's gett'n me nowhere." I responded, "You can't do that here; you're free to do it, but we don't do that

here." I felt the tension and the relief when he quickly said, "I hear you."

After some reflection, sitting quietly in his chair, he said, "I didn't say I'd made a choice." I quickly acknowledged this and resisted the ever present temptation to explain, reason, instruct, etc.; after years in the control game (Satan's game) I learned for the most part when to drop a thing. The more someone discovers by the Holy Spirit, the better; counsel is good, but the final threshold in a person is sacred.

So I relaxed and said, "I'm going to grill some snow-burgers," which Steven liked. I lit the coals, grilled standing in the snow, and we had supper without Tandy: she had camped out at the hospital with her father, who has been beset with a kidney infection. Later we went over to the hospital to visit, and Steven, in his sanguine way, exuded the fragrance of the Gospel as he and Billy kidded with each other. Billy, though weakened by the infection, asked him how his first night at work through Quality Personnel at Plymouth tubing went, and Steven enjoyed telling him how he helped "bump" extruded strips of metal into spec.

Steven has also learned progressively to research on the Internet, combing classified ads from all over the state and surrounding states, as well as digging up new companies to call. I noticed a passive attitude, however, in his answers when asked about his felony record. So I suggested that he anticipate the attitude of companies and prepare for it with a planned response, acknowledging his past record, but moving on to present, positive aspects in his life. This means taking the offensive, not in hostility, but in recognition of the need for strategies to overcome predicted obstacles

Uplifted by taking the initiative, rather than wilting under another rejection, Romans 4:17-18 floated into my mind: “(...) God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. Who against hope believed in hope (...).” That reminds me of the time Norman wrote me quoting that verse and adding, “because they really are.” In other words, some things only appear not to be, but since faith constitutes our reality, they really are. Therefore, we do not waver, but persist toward what we already see as established and certain by reason of faith.

Staying in the vein of faith, I added to Steven, "This is spiritual warfare, not that you are hostile, but that you take the offensive in faith to call yourself a truck driver, looking for the door that God opens. When you get a rejection or hit a knot, go on creatively looking for the next open door." This enlivened me too as I watched a new burst of energy take Steven into hours of research. I found myself constantly interested and exchanging conversation with him as he discovered some owner-operator to call from ads and even found a web site referring to a specialist for people with felony records.

When Monday morning came, however, I needed to work at the computer, and Steven continually walked up with comments or questions about his next moves. I had already employed before with him (and plenty of others too) the cold, detached posture of not answering; or the opposite, consuming posture of attending to every response of his. Neither satisfies—one too flavorful of budding resentment and the other making me feel crazy like a mother with her kids hanging on her every moment crying "Mommy, mommy."

I knew I didn't want to lecture Steven to the effect, "I have work to do; can't you see?" or, "You're a forty-year-old man; do I have to see about you every minute like your world is all that's going on?" Steven is basically sensitive to the Spirit, so I decided to go on spontaneously and naturally with my work, listening out of one ear and responding to bits. I just relaxed, went on, and didn't trouble myself over the increasing times I did not respond to something he said. After a while he settled down to his own agenda. Solitude and self-initiative in the Spirit—they never hurt anybody. What damages someone is an entrenched pattern of attending to people's wishes in the fear that they might have to weather discomfort or not like us.

This is the least of our concerns. While waiting for my doctor's appointment recently, I read an article on child discipline that gave five symptoms of too little discipline. I don't even remember the magazine, but I do remember the first symptom is never having a battle with a child in a store. At first I thought, "But that sounds so good—remembering my own battles with parents in a store and those of my sons with me. The author cut to the point immediately as you might imagine, and I thought, "Oh, of course."

I'm not a child, and neither is Steven; but we all get pulled into a little "Mommy, mommy" at times. It's good to see this and weather it in grace.

## Slowing Down

Ideally, Steven would like to jump in a truck, pass his CDL road test, get hired, pay off debts and fines, and get back to California to see Desiree and their son William. Things have not moved that quickly, and if anything, they have slowed down proportional to the desire to speed up. When Steven was first here, we encouraged him to call Desiree, but he either could not get past her grandmother answering the phone and curtly deflecting him, or Steven found himself on the defensive with Desiree. After a few such experiences, he left off calling, and we stopped bringing it up as well. Steven continued his single-minded efforts to rent a truck.

However, the same snags left him without an open door yet, so, with time on his hands but no work, he signed on with the temp agency, Quality Personnel. An hour later, they assigned him a four-day job on third shift at Plymouth Tubing, and following that, they assigned him a long-term assignment at Copar Aluminum—a

manufacturer of radiators for cars and motorcycles. Not only that, the job is twelve hours a day, from 3:00 in the afternoon until 3:30 AM. He makes eight dollars an hour plus overtime, working at the end of a long oven in which the radiator, clipped together, bakes to the point that the clips can be removed. Steven removes the clips and places the radiators on shelves.

He finds the money both agreeable and frustrating. He says, "I guess the Lord wants me to make money." But then he feels frustrated, saying, "I've never had to work for this little money per hour." This comes from three things: his work history of great skills with his hands mechanically, his years a driver, and partly from having lived in higher wage areas in California. Thankfully, living with us, he can sock money away now for a while if it takes time to get back into trucking. One thing I admire about Steven is that he resolutely plans to pay his back child support and his outstanding misdemeanor fines in California.

After his first day he said, "I won't be wearing a thermal undershirt to work again; I sweat all night." From living in California, he hates the cold and has constantly worn a thermal shirt, even in

the house (we do keep it 65 degrees). Also, Steven hates to tuck in a shirt, and even wears his shirts out at church, where thankfully things like that don't matter like they used to. But at work, a shirt tail out can lead to serious injury or death. So until he can get to the store and buy some waist length shirts with cling bands, he tucks his shirt in at work, but finds the conveyor belt pops off his lower buttons. He had the sewing kit out the other day putting them back on, but gave up doing that when the belt popped off the newly sewed on buttons. Though frustrated, he said, "It's just a thing." That's what he tells himself at work when something goes wrong: "It's just a thing." Then he starts praising the Lord.

Living with Steven is a contrast in preferences. I usually buy honey ham, shaved thin, in the grocery deli. He ate it for a while, but then commented that he doesn't like the sugar taste and likes ham in a hard chunk that he can slice. Also, he bought a loaf of potato bread, so I kept getting it for him and even liked it myself on certain occasions for its lightness and bun-like texture. At the store last time, however, the only potato bread was a heavier kind. After a few days, Steven told me that the loaf I got is too heavy. So—I like shaved, sweet ham on heavy bread, and Steven likes heavy ham on

light bread. I'm glad for his humorous way of letting me know what he likes and doesn't like.

We differ also on clothing styles. He gets up and puts on his jeans and denim jacket—also his cowboy boots if not working. When I'm in the living room, I can hear him coming through the kitchen. I don't know whether to line dance or rope a steer. Not that I sit around in khakis and a button down shirt; I hang out in jeans and a sweatshirt and would live in them if they did not bore Tandy. I'm sure when Steven is back with Desiree, she'll have a few preferences too, though he told a story about her family I can't resist here.

Desiree's lives in a house with some relatives, and when Steven lived with her, they did not wash socks, but let them pile up until they bagged them and threw them away. Then they went and bought more socks. One day when Steven came off the road, he couldn't take this anymore, so he collected the piles of worn socks around the huge house, washed them, and threw them in piles on the bed. Then he had everybody come in and sort socks. When he

called Desiree recently, he asked if they still let worn socks pile up before throwing them away.

After his first day at Copar, Steven did catch Desiree on the phone. He had had me call a week earlier and ask for Desiree, and when the grandmother asked who I was, I just told her, "This is Brian Coatney calling from Kentucky." She paused and then gave me Desiree's cell phone number, and that's how Steven got her this last time. I don't know what she had just said, but when I came into the den, where Steven was on the phone with her, I heard him say, "I don't cuss, I don't do drugs, I don't run with women, and I don't drink." Evidently that pleased her, for a long, animated conversation followed as Tandy and I sat amazed. Steven told her about his job and that as soon as he can get his CDL in order, he will come out there.

At the end of the conversation, he could hardly get off the phone because she would chat some more. Then he would say to her, "I love you." When he would go to sign off, she would continue talking, followed by another "I love you," from Steven. After he hung up, he said, "I told myself that I wouldn't say 'I love you,' but

it kept coming out." Tandy said, "See, you couldn't help yourself." I asked, "Did Desiree tell you that she loves you?" Steven answered that he gave up hoping for that a long time ago. Desiree says, "You have to read between the lines." But Steven says that he can press her to say it if he tries hard enough.

Steven's first day at Copar came on a Friday, and he worked with a full time employee, Tommy King, a guy I went to high school with but haven't seen in years. Tommy and the foreman Tony are Christians. The Lord arranges things so precisely: Julie at Quality Personnel is a Christian and places Steven at Copar, where he ends up on a line with Christians. This encourages us when we see the slowed down timetable for Steven getting back into trucking.

Steven also has chances to share his optimism at work, where as you can imagine, there is plenty of griping. In the break room, when someone griped to him, Steven said, "This beats four walls with a TV in a cell and people slamming dominoes all night." Not that Steven likes the twelve hour shifts and the labor: he said, "Those people have no life." It is true, however, that each line in the plant operates as a team and votes on its schedule format; and

people do adjust to what they have to do. A lot of people would look at the life of an over the road driver and say, "They have no life, being on the road all but three to five days a month." So who's right?

As Steven was telling me about the schedule, his job, etc. he was getting the eggs out of the refrigerator to make his omelet. I felt a wave of negative about his schedule myself, though the Lord has gotten me through many grueling, long-term jobs before, and I learned to thrive on the Psalms about perseverance and waiting, taking pleasure in the Lord's strength in my middle aged, aching frame—often competing with people half my age. As Steven stood at the refrigerator, he said, "I did it for the devil for years; I may as well do it for the Lord now. I stayed up two days at a time plenty of times in the past when I worked for the devil."

This encouraged me, for I find it more difficult at times to come through in faith for Steven than I did for myself in the past. Perhaps this is because I feel even less sense of control with another person, and perhaps I have also tapped into paternal feelings I hardly knew even as a parent to my own sons. For years

Tandy's maternal love was so strong and encompassing that I looked at it, knew I could never be like that, and retreated into aloofness. Therefore, I did not know the fine line that unites detachment and involvement—sacrificing neither.

Steven also finds it interesting when he meets people that grew up as Christians, but have since become nominal or even departed for a season. He said, "Since I became a Christian at age forty, I know what's out there; I know what's on the other side of the fence—drugs, money, and women. I always lost the money. Women always gave me heartache, and I don't mean just romantically either: they find your weak spot and go for it. Women don't want to be screwed and used."

At this I said, "I guess women know intuitively what the Bible says: that we aren't made for a life like that." I stopped there, knowing that the Lord will increase Steven's understanding of women. We poor men sure can't figure it out on our own!