

THE SEVENTH
GIFT OF GOD

Books by Dan Weatherington

BRANDYWINE BAY

BLEMISHED HARVEST

THE SEVENTH GIFT OF GOD

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WEATHERINGTON

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GIFT OF GOD

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Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to all those who search for a kind and loving God.

Chapter 1

The End - The Beginning

Elder Simms woke with a burning feeling in his chest. Suddenly, his entire body arched in pain. He gasped for breath. It felt like a huge rock had landed on his chest. He was terrified. Then, as quickly as it came, the pain stopped.

He lay in the dark trying to catch his breath. Was it something he had eaten? All he had for supper was a bowl of fruit and a cup of tea. It couldn't be that. Had he done anything different tonight? Nothing he could remember. He had brushed his teeth and set out his clothes for the next day. He had said his prayers and read a verse from his Bible. No, he had done nothing different.

As Elder lay in the dark wondering what had happened, he noticed a tiny light in the distance, a mere speck. It didn't flicker or move. It was just there, alone, by itself. He wondered where it was coming from. He was certain he had extinguished the flame on the stove and besides, from his bed he wouldn't be able to see into the kitchen. The only other light he had used that evening was in his room and it had obviously been put out. The curtains were drawn, so it couldn't be from outside. Yet, the little beam was there. Elder could think of no reason for the light or from where it might be coming.

For a time, he just lay there fascinated by the tiny speck. It was small, but for some reason, it was beautiful. It seemed pure and gentle. Then, he noticed the little light seemed to begin to increase in size and brightness. As it grew, so did its beauty and purity. The more he watched, the more the tiny beam seemed to take on a personality. It was warm and comforting. Elder sensed a certain power in the light. It possessed a strength and purity. Even though its brilliance continued to grow, it remained gentle and soft. It made Elder feel safe. It made Elder feel good.

As it grew, the little light began to pulse, a slow, methodic, gentle pulse. Its pure whiteness against the blackness of night took on the appearance of a tunnel. Somehow, the light began to draw him. Though he had no idea what this light was, Elder willingly moved into its grasp.

Then, memories of Elder's life began to flash before him. In an instant, he relived every moment he had ever experienced. He felt the gentleness of his mother's touch, the strength of his father's hands and the love of his friends. He shared moments with people he had known, teachers who instructed him and a family who adored him. He remembered the pack of gum he had taken from the corner store when he was eight years old and the neighbor's shovel he had borrowed and not returned. He relived the joy of his daughter's birth. He was there again for his father's death. Both the good and the bad of his life passed before him. In a fraction, he saw the joy and the misery of an entire lifetime.

Like the pain before, the flash of memories ended as quickly as it began. As it did, a thought went through Elder's mind. A light, his life flashing before him? These are the things of death. An intense fear came over him. Again, he looked at the light. The old folks used to say that when you die to go toward the light. Was this the light of which they spoke? Was the pain he had felt earlier his death? Was he on the way to eternity? Was he to soon stand before God in judgement? If so, it was much too soon. There was still much to do. If this was his death, with all that was left undone, would he be rewarded with Heaven or face eternal damnation in Hell?

Then, the beauty of the light seemed to momentarily erase the thoughts of death. He was in the same tunnel with the same light in front of him, but now it possessed an increased softness.

It was even more comforting than before. He was experiencing a softness and gentility that he could have never before imagined.

The thoughts of death and the beauty of the light went back and forth in Elder's mind. He continued to assure himself that this was a dream yet, he wasn't certain. He felt concerned, but at the same time he wasn't. Is this death he questioned? If it was, he had much to fear. He is a good man, but far from perfect. He has led a good life, but was it good enough? He is a man of faith, but he had experienced times when he doubted that faith. He treats people as he would like to be treated, but he certainly hasn't done all he could do.

Then it occurred to him that this couldn't be his death. From the time he was a boy he was told that Jesus would be there to greet him when he died and there was no Jesus. Elder had listened to sermon after sermon on the subject and had sung countless hymns proclaiming that Jesus would be waiting for him. He had delivered the same sermon. He had taught it in Sunday school. This couldn't be his death. There was no Jesus. Was this a sign of something. Was Elder not fit to be in the presence of Jesus? There was only the tunnel and the light. That glorious, beautiful light. As beautiful and comforting as the light was, Elder was still afraid, confused.

The light continued to draw him. Each movement he made toward it increased its beauty and brilliance. Each step forward made it softer and more comforting. Soon, he was standing

directly in front of the light. He felt he could almost touch it, but he dared not. It continued to pulse and draw him toward its beauty. The depth of its fire was unimaginable. It was incomprehensible. Despite its power, its brilliance appeared to be becoming more gentle. The sensation of warmth and love was overwhelming. Elder imagined that if he stepped into the brightness the feeling would be even greater, maybe greater than he could conceive. It was drawing him into its radiance. He wondered what could be on the other side of the light. Was he being drawn into Heaven? Was Jesus waiting for him there? He knew whatever was drawing him was certainly nothing of this world. Even so, he was certain that if he stepped through he would not return to the life he knew. But, if there was a better life beyond the light, wasn't this where every man eventually wanted to be?

Again, he tried to assure himself that this was only a dream. All he need do was wake and he would be in his bed. But, he wondered, was the decision his, or was this really his death and his time to go? He was confused. Thoughts bounced back and forth in his head. In a few minutes would he be awake in his bed or would he be standing before his maker in judgement?

Elder's faith had always been strong, intensely strong, but if this was his death would he stand before Jesus like he had believed all his life or would he stand before another? Many people believed in Bhuda. Would Bhuda be deciding where he would spend eternity? Might it be Allah? Millions believed in

Allah. Would Allah be his judge? No, No, it would be Jesus. It would be the God he believed in and trusted.

Still, would his past life allow him to enter Heaven? Would the things he had done, and hadn't done, be acceptable to God? Others had done more for the poor and people in need. Would they be enjoying the fruits of their good lives while Elder spent eternity with those who had done wrong? Elder feared death, but everything that was happening was good. Would God make something as wonderful as this the prelude to an eternity in hell? No, not the God, not the Jesus, Elder loved so dearly.

The light continued to beckon him to step through. It became even stronger. At that moment was heaven and eternal life only one step away? Or, did he have the power to reverse course and awake from this dream? Did he want to reverse his course? He was a good man. Though he wasn't certain, he felt that whenever he did step through the light, be it now or later, his reward will be eternal happiness. But, would it be? He was far from certain. The urge to step into the light was intense. He was sure that whatever awaited him there had to be wonderful. Nothing short of divine could be pulling so powerfully. It had to be his Savior calling him home.

Elder smiled, took a deep breath, and stepped into the light.

Chapter 2

The Cove - Jacob Potter

The instant Elder touched the light, it vanished and he found himself standing in a dense fog. Even in the cool, misty haze that surrounded him, the warmth, the softness, and the love that he had felt moving toward the light was still present. If anything, it was even stronger. The fog reminded him of when he was young and the mist would cover the river until well into the day. Why, he wondered, would he be thinking of such things? The events of the last few moments had been confusing enough. He didn't need other thoughts to concern him.

Then, the smell of honeysuckle and sound of waves breaking on a nearby shore brought back even more memories. Memories of a place he had been many times before. As a child, he played by a small river cove not far from his home. As a teenager, the cove was a perfect place to be with friends, to study, to sit and think, or just to be alone.

As the fog began to lift and shapes began to form, Elder could see he was right. He was beside the same river cove he had known in his youth. The tall pines, the clean white sand, and the tiny blue crabs that scurried about in the frothy tide assured him that it was the very same place. He did not know how, but he had returned to a wonderful place he had never really wanted to leave. Confused, Elder sat on the bank of the cove, the same bank he had shared with his parents and any number of his friends. Though he didn't know what was happening, it felt good.

In the distance, he could see a man walking his way. As he came closer, Elder noticed the man's resemblance to his old friend, Jacob Potter. But, his excitement in seeing his old friend was dashed when he remembered that Jacob Potter had died long ago. This man could not be Jacob Potter. As the man came close, Elder stood to greet him. "Hello, Horace," said the man, "it is good to see you again." It was the same smile and same soft voice he remembered Jacob Potter having, but it couldn't be Jacob Potter. Jacob Potter was dead.

“See me again?” Isn’t that what the man said? wondered Elder. Who is this man? Though the resemblance to his old friend was uncanny, Jacob Potter had been dead for over forty years. This man could not be Jacob Potter. Then, it occurred to Elder that the river cove he loved so dearly, and now sat beside, was also gone. He remembered how sad he had been when he was told. He had made a special trip just to verify the news. The little cove had been gone for years.

Elder was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. He was confused by the cove and the man who had called him Horace. No one had called him Horace in years. The last to do so was. . . Jacob Potter. Who was this man? Elder needed to know.

“Not to be rude, Sir, but you have me at a disadvantage. You seem to know my name, but I don’t seem to know yours.”

The man smiled at Elder. It was the same broad smile that Jacob Potter once had. “Horace, your memory serves you well. I am Jacob Potter. The same Jacob Potter who was, for so long, your best friend.” The man gestured toward the river bank. “Can we sit?” he asked.

For a while, neither man said anything and they both quietly watched the small crabs run back and forth following the incoming waves. Then, the man spoke in the same soft manner that Elder remembered so fondly of his long-departed friend. “Remember how we used to sit for hours and just talk?” he asked, “we talked of so many things.”

“Sir, again I don’t wish to be rude, and I’m not quite sure how to say this, but the Jacob Potter I knew is dead. I watched them lower his casket into the grave. Obviously, Sir, you are not dead. I don’t know your purpose, but you can’t be Jacob Potter.”

“Horace,” said the man. “Think for a moment. You remember this place, yet you know it no longer exists. Now, look at me,” he said. “You remember me. You remember my passing.” Elder nodded. “Only a moment ago, the thought of your passing, your death, crossed your mind,” said the man. “You thought of it as you moved toward the light. My friend, your thoughts were true. You did die. You had a massive heart attack and you died. Horace. I never lied to you in life, I certainly won’t do it now. You did die, Horace. You. . . and I are spirits.”

Elder feigned an uncomfortable smile. He was shocked. Too much was coming at one time. Death? Spirits? This place? This man appeared to know Elder’s thoughts. He even knew about the light. How could anyone know about the light? But, the man was right. Elder did know the cove was gone. He knew it had been the victim of a storm many years before. The man was right. Could he be right about everything?

“I don’t understand the things you say, Sir,” responded Elder. “You can’t be a spirit. I see you plainly. I can’t be a spirit. Look, you can see me. See my hand, my arm, my face. I can’t be

a spirit.”

“You remember the pain that came in your sleep, then quickly went away?”

How did he know? wondered Elder, but he nodded, “yes.”

“The pain went away when your body died. Afterwards, there was a light and a tunnel.”

This man, who Elder hadn’t seen in years and knew for certain to be dead, was talking of things no one could possibly know. It had to be true. “Yes, but when I saw this place. A place I had been many times before, I thought maybe. . .”

“You had been here many times in your dreams, You thought. . . you hoped, this was a dream,” said the man.

“Yes,” responded Elder.

“Horace, in the past, when you dreamed of this place, while it was happening, did you once think it to be a dream?”

Elder thought then slowly shook his head no. Again, the man was right. This place had been in his dreams time and time again throughout his life, but never once had he thought it to be a dream.

In a breath, Elder seemed to accept his fate. Somehow, now he didn’t feel upset. In a way, he was elated. Thought after thought went through Elder’s mind, but he realized that now,

many of his thoughts were unimportant. In a matter of time his wife would be here. Most of his friends should already be here. The world he left behind did quite well before he was born and would likely do just as well now that he was gone. And, if what this man was saying was indeed true, there was little he could do about it now.

“Sir, . . .”

“Horace, we’ve been friends for many years. I don’t think you need to call me ‘Sir.’ Do as you have always done. Call me Jacob.”

Elder smiled and sighed. The man was right once more. “You are right,” he said, “and for years I have been called Elder. I am comfortable being called Elder.”

“Ah yes, you were elected Elder in Cambridge Church. That’s right. It was shortly before I . . . Yes, a wise decision on the part of Cambridge Church. I remember now. I too cast a ballot. Yes, I do remember. And, that name stayed with you?”

Elder nodded. He knew then that he was with his old friend. Though death had certainly not been in his plans, if he had died, which apparently he had, it was good to once more be with Jacob Potter.

“Jacob Potter,” said Elder, “You know I am confused. I see you, though I know you are dead. I see this place even though I know it no longer exists. Is this place also a spirit? If it

is, I must ask. Is this place Heaven or is it. . .”

“It is neither, Elder,” interrupted the man. “This is a place of comfort for you. It is a place where you feel safe.”

“Is this where I am to spend eternity?”

“No, Elder, this is neither Heaven nor Hell nor the place you will spend eternity. This is . . .”

“That’s right. First, I must be judged,” interrupted Elder. “Is it time? Will you be the one who will lead me before God? Before my judgement? I must tell you that I am afraid. My life has been far from perfect. If we must do it. Lead me now to where I must go.”

“Elder, I know you are confused. I know you have questions. That, Elder, is why you are here. This place, this time, it is a gift, a gift to you.”

“A gift? I don’t understand.”

“Yes, a gift. It is a gift for which you prayed. A gift for which you asked.”

“I prayed? I asked? I don’t remember asking for any such gift.”

“Yes, you prayed for it. You prayed for it on May 14, fifty-three years ago.”

Elder thought for a moment. There was something special about that date. Then he remembered. “My father died May 14.”

Jacob Potter nodded. “The night your father died, you knelt beside his bed and prayed for answers. You asked God why he had allowed your father to die? Where did your father go? You asked if there was a God and why he does the things he does? You prayed to be able to understand a lot of things. In your mind, you asked even more. That’s why you are here. In a way you are right. All this is a dream... a vision, given to you by The Creator. The Creator is answering your prayer. I will be the one who will answer those questions. I consider it quite a privilege. This was my gift.”

“Jacob, you died forty years ago. If what you say is true, I died just moments ago. Are you saying you’ve been waiting for me all this time? For forty years?”

“In this place, forty years is a mere wisp, a moment. In life, time is limited. Every second is precious and measured. Here. . . in eternity, time is of little consequence. But yes, to answer your question, I have been waiting for you.”

Elder nodded as if he understood. He didn’t.

“This place, this dream, this vision,” said Jacob Potter, “is a vision of a place you loved. You know it is gone. You have known this for years, but it is in your memory. It was a real place, your place. A place of comfort and security. It could have

just as easily been a room, a church, a place by the ocean or on the top of a mountain. It could have been anywhere you felt safe. You are here. ‘Here’ depends on your memories. For you ‘here’ is a cove beside a river. As I said, everything you see here is a vision of what was. . . one great, magnificent vision, created for you because this place made you feel secure and happy. That is why you have returned here now.”

“Why do I deserve such a gift? Why do I deserve any gift?” asked Elder.

“I say I will answer your questions, but there are questions that cannot be answered, like why The Creator does things. Some things only The Creator knows. Every living thing receives gifts beyond comprehension. Why he gives them to us is not for us to understand. He doesn’t explain it, he just does it. For you, the gift of this place, this time, is just one of many. I can’t tell you his reasons. I only know you asked.”

“You said it was a gift for you also.”

“Yes, a beautiful gift. Most souls go directly to where The Creator decides. They never ask questions. They never come to a place like this, but I, like you, had prayed for answers. And, like you, I came to a similar place. When I received my answers, I realized that the gifts of The Creator are more wonderful than anything I could have ever imagined. Nothing was as I had been told. Nothing was as I had learned. It all seemed too simple. It all seemed too pure. It all seemed too good. It all seemed

impossible.”

Elder looked at Jacob Potter with a confused expression. “You realize I have no idea of what you are talking about,” he said.

“Yes, I know,” responded Jacob Potter with a kind smile, “these things you will learn.”

“You came to a place like this?” asked Elder, “and someone answered your questions?”

“Yes, do you remember the little park beside the college? You went there with me many times. We met with friends there. We had debates about philosophy and theology there. It was a wonderful place. When I died, it was my special place. Like I greeted you, a man named Andrew greeted me and answered my questions. Andrew was a good man, a gentle man. I know because I defiled him. I thought he spoke lies and I told him so. His words were too far away from the things I had learned. I told him that I did not believe him.”

“What changed your mind?” asked Elder.

“His kindness and a simple question he asked.”

“A question?”

“Yes, he reminded me of where we were and asked me what purpose would he have for not speaking the truth? He was right. There was no reason. He was actually the first person I

had ever spoken with about God who could possibly know the answers and the first person who could not be mistaken.”

“Jacob,” asked Elder, “why would you ask to be here now? Why did you pray for this? Why did you want to be with me in this place?”

“When Andrew had shown me the things he did and told me the things he told me, I reflected back on you. I reflected back on the many hours we had spent together sitting on the second pew of Cambridge Church. They were good hours.”

“You thought of me. You thought of those times?”

“Yes, I was overwhelmed by what Andrew told me and knew you would be too. It was so distant from the things we learned. . . the things we thought we knew. In life, you were one of my dearest friends and I wanted to be the one to tell you. You were one of the kindest, most thoughtful individuals I have ever known. I died long before I could repay even a fraction of your kindness, but I did pray to be the one to guide you across and answer your questions. I knew I could never repay you in life, but this would be something I could do in death. I could answer your questions. I could guide you into eternity. I prayed and I am here. It is my gift from The Creator.”

Elder looked directly into the eyes of the man beside him. “Jacob Potter, if what you say is so, if we are dead, then what are you? Are you an angel? Are you a demon? Please tell me.”

“Elder, as for me, I am just like you. I am a spirit waiting for The Creator’s direction. As for this place, for now, me, this moment, as I said, they are all visions. Visions of things that once were and visions The Creator wishes to happen once more.” Jacob Potter placed his hand on Elder’s shoulder. “I know this is confusing. I also know you have questions. Your questions will be answered, but if I were to answer now you would be even more confused..”

Elder gave a questioning look but said nothing.

“We all come to eternity with ideas. . . , thoughts, that would make answering questions difficult or impossible. Will you first allow me to help you with some of those thoughts, some of those ideas?”

Elder made it obvious from his expression that he had no idea what Jacob Potter was talking about, but he nodded. Then he asked, “Can I ask one question first?” He took a deep breath. And said, “no disrespect, you were a dear friend, a very dear friend, but all my life I have been told by good men and women that Jesus would greet me at my death. That we would talk. If this is my death where is Jesus? Where is God? Jacob Potter, you are right. I am confused, very confused.”

Jacob Potter smiled and said, “come with me, my friend, we have far to go and much to do.”

Chapter 3

The Orchard - The Spring

Together, the two old friends walked along the river talking of Cambridge Church and the people they had known. In time, they came to a path leading away from the river and into the woods. As Jacob Potter turned toward the path, Elder stopped him. “Wait Jacob,” he said, “I have never seen that path. So far, I have remembered every rock and crevice of this place, but I don’t remember that path.”

“No, Elder, I’m certain you don’t. And, neither will you be familiar with where the path will lead, but I have many things to show you and this path will take us there. The cove and the river is a place you feel secure because you know it well. Where we are going will not be familiar. It will be new, as will be the things that I will show you and tell you. You will still be in The Creator’s realm. You will still be safe. I assure you that soon we will be sitting on the river bank talking of the new and wonderful things you are about to see.”

“Jacob Potter, have I anything to fear from where we are going?” asked Elder. “Is this a place I would not want to be?”

“No, you have nothing to fear. Along this path I will show you things you have looked at, but never seen. I will tell you things you have been told, but never heard. I will tell you of magnificent gifts you have been given, but never accepted.”

Elder breathed deeply. “Things I have looked at but never seen? Things I have been told... Jacob, you talk in riddles. I do not understand. And, you have still to tell me of my judgement. My judgement still concerns me.”

“There is nothing to fear, my friend. The things I will show you, the things I will tell you, are glorious. Everything will soon become clear. Everything will soon make sense to you. If the things I have to tell you were not wonderful, I would not have prayed to The Creator to be the one to share them with you. If they were not magnificent, The Creator would not have given

me the privilege to do so.”

“Very well, Jacob, lead me, but do know that I fear what is to come.”

As they walked, Jacob Potter could sense Elder’s apprehension. Elder continued to question him about his judgement before God and what was to happen. At first, Jacob Potter either avoided the questions or changed the subject. But, as they moved further along the path, Elder became more insistent. Eventually, they came upon a large tree that had fallen beside the path. Jacob Potter stopped and looked toward the fallen tree. “Can we stop and sit here a moment?” he asked.

At first, Jacob Potter said nothing, but Elder noticed a tear coming down Jacob’s cheek. “What is this?” asked Elder. “I thought everything was to be so wonderful, but from your expression and the tear in your eye, I begin to wonder.”

“No Elder, everything will be wonderful. But now I wonder if I was the right one to take upon this task.”

Again, Elder looked confused.

“Andrew did not know me so he simply told me the things I should know. Though what he told me was wonderful, he had no idea of how painful it was to me to learn these things.”

“So, what is different about us? Just tell me what I need to know and be done with it.”

“Different?” said Jacob Potter. “There is much difference. Elder, you were the best friend I ever had. I thought all of this would be simple. You would ask me a few questions and in the process of answering them I could tell you about The Creator and how wonderful he actually is. But, I see I must be more direct.”

“More direct?” asked Elder.

“Yes, things I must just tell you outright, regardless of the pain it may cause.”

“Pain?”

“Yes, Andrew did not know me, I know you. I know how you loved...”

“Jacob,” interrupted Elder. “Do what you must do. I know having a thorn removed hurts, but the pain will go away. And, after it is done, everyone is the better for it.”

“Maybe so,” smiled Jacob. “It was just that causing any form of pain to a person so dear...”

“I know, Jacob. Do what you must do.”

“Very well, Elder, very well.”

Jacob looked at the ground then looked at Elder. “Elder, at any time did you ever doubt our faith or the Bible?”

“No, I don’t recollect ever doing so. There was that time that you and I questioned about the possibility that God might be Allah or Bhuda, but we quickly dismissed the subject and said no more.”

“Yes, I remember it. Then, may I ask you another question.”

Elder nodded.

“Elder, you were a good man. Why are you so concerned about your judgement? Why are you concerned at all?”

“Jacob, how could you ask such a question?” Elder asked in an alarmed tone. “You know I fear eternal damnation. Didn’t you fear it forty years ago? I can’t believe you feared an eternity in Hell any less than me. I have no idea what God considers good and bad. I have done things that to you and me may be of no consequence, but God... I just don’t know.”

Jacob Potter looked solemnly at Elder and for a moment said nothing, but when he did speak he asked a question that surprised Elder. “How do you believe God will judge you?”

“What do you mean?” asked Elder.

“Exactly what I asked,” Jacob replied softly. “How do you think God will judge you?”

“I assume by his laws,” said Elder.

“And exactly what are his laws?”

“I guess. . . I thought. . . the ten commandments, the laws in the Bible.”

“All right. You and I have spent many a good evening over a fine ham and potatoes. Does that mean we are doomed to burn in eternal hell?”

Elder gave a questioning look.

Jacob continued, “if you will remember, there was a couple in Cambridge church named Fisher, Tim and Mary. He had been married before and remarried to Mary. Should he be in Hell?”

Again, Elder said nothing. He was confused. He was confused especially by the gentle manner of Jacob Potter’s questioning.

“You remember Evan Marcus? He was also a Deacon in Cambridge Church.”

Elder nodded.

“You and I did not kill him. Should we be condemned to Hell?”

“Kill him?” replied Elder. “Why should we kill him? Evan Marcus was a fine man. He did much for the community. He did much for Cambridge Church. Why would we kill him?”

“Because Evan Marcus was a homosexual. We knew that. Yet, we didn’t kill him and in Leviticus it states clearly all homosexuals should be put to death. But, the Bible also says we should not kill. Which law will you be judged upon? We ate pork. Should we be condemned to hell? It violates what is written in Deuteronomy. We ate shrimp and lobster too. Deuteronomy also says that is forbidden. According to the book of Mark, Tim Fisher was an adulterer, he had been married before. I guess we should have stoned him as it states. No, in the Ten Commandments it says thou shalt not kill. Which will it be, Elder? Which will it be? In the Bible, people killed all the time. God killed. What will it be? Should the women of Cambridge Church be condemned? Paul said in Corinthians that women should not speak in church. Many women spoke in Cambridge Church. Should they be condemned? Corinthians says women are not to speak in church. Many wore gold and pearls. What will become of them?”

“Gold, pearls? No, wait, wait, wait,” said Elder. “What are you doing?”

“Elder, it says in the book of Timothy that women are not to wear gold and pearls. Yet, the women of Cambridge Church wore them often.”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand,” said Elder.

“I’m just trying to figure out which laws you figure God will use to judge you. Obviously, it can’t be the Bible or even

the ten commandments. Which will he use, Elder?”

“The laws of God,” said Elder. “That is what he will use.”

“And, dear friend, exactly what are the laws of God?”

Elder thought then shook his head no. He had no answer.

Jacob Potter placed his arm around Elder, smiled and embraced him. No, The Creator will not judge you like some servant at the feet of a zealous master. That is a concept of man. There is no judgement. . . not here at least.”

“Not here? Then where?” asked Elder.

“Dear friend, you have received your judgement. You received it every day of your life. You were judged by those around you. They were your judges. They were the ones who judged you on what they considered right and wrong. Some you pleased. Some you didn’t. Those you pleased chose to remain beside you and stood as your friend. Those you displeased went away and either avoided you or spoke unkindly of you.”

“You were also the judge. The judge of those around you. You judged them by your values, your opinions, your concerns and your desires. No, there is no judgement here. On what would The Creator judge you? The rules of man? The Creator has no concern with the rules of man and even if he did, would it be on the rules of an urban professor or of a jungle farmer. The rules of man differ from place to place and even from time to

time. God can't use the rules of man. And, he can't use rules he has made because he has never expressed his wants to those in his creation. The Creator gave you, me and every living thing his entire creation without condition. What we do, how we use that creation, is up to us. He is not like human kings that must be obeyed and feared. The Creator has never once demanded anything of those who inhabit his creation. He is not a human king who punishes the things that displease him."

"Jacob Potter, let me understand. Are you saying here is no judgement? Are you saying I need not fear eternity in Hell?"

"Oh yes, there is a judgement. You survived it every day of your life. And, as I rememberer... as I know, you passed the test quite well. You merited love and trust from those who knew you."

"I must admit, Jacob Potter. You said I would be overwhelmed and I am overwhelmed. What you say is wonderful. It is logical. But still. . ."

"Still what, Elder? Tell me."

"The Bible... I never questioned the Bible. Now you say what you do. I am confused."

Jacob Potter looked straight into Elders eyes. "Yes, as I knew you would be."

“Jacob, I was taught all my life that every word of the Bible was true. I really expected a judgement.” Elder glanced off past the overlook. “I really feared that judgement.”

Jacob Potter patted Elder on the back of the hand. “I know you did, my friend. I did too.”

Elder noticed a tear trickle down Jacob Potter’s cheek. “Don’t be dismayed, Jacob. You told me the truth. I would expect no less.”

“I hope so, Elder. I sincerely hope so, because for you to realize the majesty of our one true creator, I must tell you more. But for now, we have far to go and much to see.”

It was a long walk through the woods, but the path was clear and the time passed quickly as the two old friends continued to renew their friendship. No more was said of death or judgement or the events of the day, but much was said of the memories they both shared.

Late in the day, they entered a large grove of fruit trees. The trees were filled with brilliant green foliage and every branch bowed under the weight of a full load of perfectly formed fruit. Elder stopped to look. “I don’t know that I’ve ever seen such a beautiful orchard.”

“I agree,” said Jacob Potter as he reached up and pulled an apple from a tree and handed it to Elder. “It is beautiful.” He then pulled an apple for himself.

Elder bit into the apple and the juice trickled down his chin. He gave a sheepish smile and wiped the juice from his face. “I don’t remember ever tasting such a perfect apple,” he said before taking another bite.

“Every one of them is perfect,” said Jacob Potter tossing another apple to Elder.

As they continued along, there were other trees, pear and orange and guava and some fruit Elder had never seen. “I’m lucky to be here when the fruit is ripe,” he said.

“Not really,” said Jacob Potter. “The fruit here is always perfect, every day of the year. The orchard has produced such fruit since the beginning of time. Its bounty knows no end. It’s always producing, it’s always perfect and it’s here for the taking to anyone who wants it.”

“Indeed, a wonderful orchard,” said Elder.

As they walked through the orchard, they passed a tree that was much larger and even more beautiful than any others. Its limbs stood tall and erect. Yet, there was not one single fruit on any of its massive branches. Though it was lush and green with glorious foliage, there was not one fruit to be seen. “What is that tree, Jacob Potter? Why does it have no fruit?”

“It is said by some that one day it will bloom and bear more than any of the other trees in the orchard.”

“When is that supposed to be?”

“Those who speak of it have been waiting for centuries, but no one knows for sure.”

“When did it quit blooming?”

“It has never bloomed. It has never once borne fruit.”

“Never?” asked Elder as he looked closer at the tree.

“Never has it produced the first bloom,” replied Jacob Potter.

“Let me try to understand,” said Elder. “In the middle of a glorious orchard whose trees have produced since the beginning of time sits a single tree that has never produced the first fruit. Why is it allowed to remain? The other trees have proven their worth. This one has not. Why is it here? It makes no sense.”

Jacob Potter said nothing and continued walking. As he passed another tree he pulled three pears and tossed one to Elder. He put one pear in his pocket and began to eat the other. “Come,” he said to Elder, “we have much to do.”

For some time they continued through the orchard. No matter how far they walked, every limb on every tree was laden

with ripe, beautiful fruit.

“This orchard goes forever, Jacob. It is huge,” said Elder.

Jacob nodded. They followed the path until it finally ended on a high clearing overlooking everything for miles around. The view was majestic. From the precipice they could see massive forests, high mountains, and the river below as it flowed into the sea. They stood on the overlook for a long while gazing at the beauty before them.

“This place is breathtaking, Jacob,” said Elder. “It’s hard to believe the beauty of God’s world.”

“Ours is a world of gifts, Elder Simms, wonderful gifts,” said Jacob Potter. “What is out there are some of those gifts. Out there is everything every living thing needs to have a full, complete, and yes. . . happy life. The Creator gave us all this and expects nothing in return. Look around. It’s all there, right before your eyes. It’s not hidden. It’s there. This is proof that The Creator does exist, and evidence of what The Creator has made. You asked the night your father died if there was a God. Yes, there is a God. There is a Creator. . . you see his handiwork here.”

“Yes, somehow I knew when I passed through the light

there was a God, it was no longer one of my questions. And yes, he has given us gifts. . . many gifts.”

Jacob Potter gestured for Elder to follow him to a small spring on the side of the clearing. The spring trickled out of the side of a mountain into a small pool. Around the pool were several large rocks. Jacob sat on one of the rocks and Elder sat on another. “This is a beautiful place, Jacob. Being here with you reminds me of the times and conversations we had in the past. It was good.”

“Yes, it was, Elder, and this time together will be good too, but there are things I must say that will be difficult for you to understand. Please keep in mind I am your friend and wanted to be the one to share these things with you.”

“You need not hesitate, Jacob. You are the one who told me of my death... and of my judgement. I can’t imagine anything more disturbing. Please believe me when I say I want to hear what you will say. But, I can’t believe the things you tell me will be that different from what we learned together. Just start when you will.”

Without a word, Jacob reached down and grasped a handful of soft soil from beside the pool. When Elder saw him do this he became silent. Jacob Potter then sprinkled water from the pool onto the soil and placed it into Elder’s hand. “What you hold in your hand are four of the gifts of which I spoke,” he said.

“Some dirt and some water?” asked Elder. “How are these the wonderful gifts? Besides, there are only two.”

“No, Elder. Look again. In your hand there are four. You see the soil and the water. You mentioned those. But there is also the air that surrounds it and the rays of the sun that warm it. That is four. These are the source, the beginning, for every living thing you see before you. These, my dear friend, are gifts of The Creator. From these things came everything, the grass, the trees, the fish, the birds, the animals, everything, Elder. . . including us.”

“Jacob,” said Elder, “I don’t doubt your sincerity, but a handful of dirt and a few drops of water doesn’t make a tree, much less a fish or a bird. . . and they certainly don’t make a human.”

Once more, Jacob Potter smiled. “You are right, my friend, a handful of dirt and a few drops of water doesn’t make a tree. Neither does it make a fish or a bird. But, millions of years ago, dirt like this and water like you hold joined in just the right combination, and at one special moment, in one tiny spot, unseen to anyone except The Creator, everything was perfect. Everything was ready.”

“Still, Jacob Potter, a handful of dirt and a few drops of water doesn’t make a plant no matter how much sun and air it gets.”

“No, Elder, it doesn’t, but there are seven great gifts. That is only four because in that tiny drop I speak of, when everything came together in just the right proportions, The Creator made life. Life was gift number five. Through the millions of years that followed, that one little life. . . , that one little cell, would one day be two, and two would become four, and four would become eight, until there was a multitude of living cells. Each of these would continue to multiply and would one day be the plants and all the trees, and in time they would cover the earth.”

Elder looked into his hand. For the first time he realized what he held. He paused a moment and thought. “Wait. I have heard of such things, but they are not in the Bible. The Bible clearly states that God created the plants and trees when he created the earth.”

“That is true. That is what it says,” said Jacob Potter. Without hesitation, he continued. “There were other cells to which The Creator would give another gift, a sixth gift. Not only would he give them life, he would also give them a soul. Some of these creatures would live in the water. Others would be on the land. One day, still others would take to the sky. Over the following millions of years, all would change to suit their needs. Some would be strong, others would be fast. Some would be neither strong nor fast. In order to survive, some would have to learn to think. They would have to use their brain instead of their bodies. Those were our ancestors, my friend,

that is us.”

“Jacob Potter,” said Elder, “The way you tell me that man and the things of the earth began is not what we were told. You know as well as me what the Bible says. We studied it together. In Genesis it says that ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth and the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. . .’”

“ . . .And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,” interrupted Jacob Potter. “Yes, Elder, I know it well. The story in Genesis is beautiful.”

“Yes it is, but there is no mention of cells or millions of years or the things you say. In six days God created the world and everything in it.”

“No, those things are not mentioned in Genesis. You are absolutely correct.”

Elder looked at Jacob Potter. “Then why do you tell me these things? You know these are not the things I was told. They are not the things I learned.”

Jacob Potter smiled, “I know,” he said. “I know. Yes, that is what was written, but, dear friend, I must ask you. Can you be expected to tell me of things which you do not know?”

Once more, Elder looked confused and did not respond.

“Can you tell me of quantum physics, or nuclear theory, or molecular...”

“Of course not,” interrupted Elder. “I never studied those things, you know that. I know nothing about them. How could I be expected to tell you about subjects of which I know nothing?”

“Yes, but you know those things exist. You know they are real.”

“Yes, but for a scientist maybe. They would be the only ones who would understand it. Certainly not me.”

“A fair answer, but those things don’t just exist for the scientist who understands them. They exist for all mankind,” said Jacob Potter. “And, you are correct. No man can be expected to speak of something of which he has no knowledge. And, I’m certain had the good man who wrote Genesis known about cells and how life came about, his story would have reflected that knowledge, but the writer was an ancient man. He could only write about the things he knew. It was logical for an ancient man to believe that The Creator placed man and all the things around him on the earth as they were would be expected. Like I said, it is a beautiful story. But, the Bible, the Quran, and all the others were written by men. Men whose knowledge was limited. Men who had never heard of a cell, or how things are created. These men could not be expected to write of things of which they had no knowledge.”

Just then a small mouse ran out of the grass and onto a rock between Elder and Jacob Potter. Jacob Potter placed his hand beside the mouse and it scurried into his palm. “You forget, I sat beside you as you learned those things. I learned them too.” Jacob Potter lifted the tiny mouse and gently stroked its back. “How does this little fellow differ from us, Eder? Like us, when he is hungry he eats, when he is thirsty he drinks. In his time, he seeks a mate. Look at him, our bodies are not all that different. He has eyes like us and breathes like us. Where should The Creator draw the line? To what should he give a soul? To what should he not? These are The Creator’s decisions, not ours. To say that only humans had a soul was the idea of man... not The Creator.”

“Okay, but I was also told that when we die. . .”

“. . . only humans had an afterlife? I know, but this little mouse is here, isn’t he? He’s not a human is he? All these birds you see, the fish in the water before you, they’re not human, yet, they are here. Again, to say that only humans have an afterlife was an opinion of man... not The Creator.”

“This is so confusing. You are saying animals have the same soul as a human. How could this be? How could it possibly be?”

“What is a soul, Elder Simms? Tell me, what is a soul?”

Elder became quiet. He could not answer. Though he had spent his entire life concerned about his soul, at this moment

when the answer mattered, he did not know the answer to the simple question he had just been asked. He looked at Jacob Potter and confessed that he did not know.

“A soul is life, Elder. It is the very property of life given to us by The Creator. It’s not some mystic apparition that will float through eternity. It is life itself. Yes, this little mouse has a soul. So do the birds and even the things that crawl. The Creator gave it to us. The Creator gave us life.”

“The Creator also gave life to the plants and trees. Did he also give them a soul?” asked Elder.

“I guess, in a way he did, Elder Simms. I guess, in a way, he did.”

For a long while Elder was quiet and Jacob understood why. He remembered when Andrew had told him these things.

“You spoke harshly to the man named Andrew when he spoke these things?” asked Elder.

“Yes, very harshly. Just about the time you felt harshly toward me.” Jacob Potter smiled a broad smile. “Except you, were more polite than me. You said nothing, but your expression said much.”

“I’m certain it did, Jacob. It is much to hear.”

“Yes, it is. Elder, do understand. There is a God, a magnificent God. A God of wonder and might.”

Elder nodded. “Yes, I know that. I told you...”

“But, Elder, there is only one God, God The Creator.”

“Yes, I notice you call him that and that is good. I can accept that. We agree, there is only one God.”

“You know that I am aware there is only one God. I have always believed that.”

“No, *we* have not always believed that.”

“Of course we have. One God in Heaven. Call him The Creator if you will. I call him God. Still, there is only one God.”

“Yes, but during our lives we also worshiped more than one god. We also worshiped an idol, an idol created by man. We worshiped this idol with total sincerity.”

“Again my friend, you have me at a loss. I remember worshiping no idols. We never worshiped idols.”

“We didn’t? No, what we worshiped wasn’t some golden image. It wasn’t some gilded animal or glittering statue, but it was as much a man-made idol as much as any golden calf has ever been.”

“Jacob, we never worshiped any idols. I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“You don’t, Elder? You don’t? Think about it.”

Elder chuckled. “I can think throughout eternity, but I am certain we never worshiped any man-made idols.”

“What then, dear, dear friend, would you call the Bible? Wasn’t it an idol? Didn’t we worship it?”

“The Bible?” responded Elder. “The Bible is the word of God.”

“Is it?”

“Of course. We’ve known that since we were small children. Every Christian knows the Bible is the word of God.”

“Is it?” asked Jacob Potter.

“Of course, of course it is. You know that.” Elder smiled an uncomfortable smile. “We learned from the Bible. You and I were students of the Bible. . . the Good Book. And, we were excellent students I might add. Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Very well, my friend, then I must ask you another question. How would you feel if I told a good man, a good Muslim man, that the Quran he believes so dearly was not the true word of his god Allah, but just the thoughts of men like himself?”

“How would I feel?” asked Elder. “Is that what you are asking me?”

Jacob Potter nodded.

“I would not feel anything, Jacob. I’m certain that what you told him would be true. Only the Christian Bible speaks the true word of God. No, it would not concern me.”

“Very well. What if I would tell a good Mormon man the same things about the Book of Mormon and tell him that it contains no more than the thoughts and words of Joseph Smith and not the words of God. How would you feel about that?”

“I guess about the same as I would about the Quran. Neither is the word of God. That is only found in the Christian Bible.”

“May I ask you another question?”

Elder nodded.

“Who wrote the Christian Bible and the Old Testament?”

Elder smiled and almost laughed. “Jacob, you know the answer to that question. We learned their names when we were only children. We memorized them. We probably know their names as well as our own.”

“Okay, then tell me their names,” said Jacob Potter.

“Alright, if you insist. . . Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul...”

“What are those names, Elder?” interrupted Jacob Potter. “What are those names?”

“What you asked,” he said. “The names of the men who wrote the Bible,” smiled Elder. Then his smile faded and he repeated in a low voice, “the names of the men. . .” His expression became obviously uncomfortable. “Yes, they are the names of the men who wrote the Bible. That is what you wanted.”

Elder turned away from Jacob Potter and returned to the rock beside the pool where he had been sitting. Jacob Potter followed. “Did God write any portion of the Bible?” he asked in his soft voice as he sat beside Elder.

Elder’s expression betrayed his discomfort with the question. Yet, he answered “No, but the men who did write the Bible were divinely inspired by God to write the words they did.”

“Would you imagine the good Muslim man I mentioned believes his Quran was divinely inspired? Would you think the good Mormon gentleman of whom I spoke might believe the same?”

Obviously frustrated, Elder blurted out, “I’m sure they would, but they would be wrong. All those books can’t be divinely inspired. They don’t say the same things. Only the Bible is divinely inspired. You know that. We studied it together. We

were good scholars of the Bible. Why do you ask me these things?” he asked with a trembling voice.

“It is obvious, my friend, that you know what I am about to say. Yes, just like the Quran, like the Book of Mormon, and like every other religious work man has ever known, the Bible that we loved so dearly is the words of men, the men who wrote them, not the words of God.”

Elder Simms tried to smile but he was unable to do so. “You are making me very uncomfortable, Jacob. Yes, I guess you are right, it was written by men, but it was inspired by God.”

“Inspired by God, or inspired by a *love* of God?” asked Jacob Potter in his kind voice. “They are not the same. Those great, wonderful writers may have been filled with a love of The Creator, but he didn’t tell them the words to write. When Andrew told me of this I reacted as you did, then he asked me a question.”

“A question?” Asked Elder.

“Yes, he asked me if God knew the earth was round? I told him that of course he did, he made it. Then he asked me why, if God was inspiring those men, didn’t he tell the ones who wrote the Bible that the world was round? As all men of those times, they believed the world was flat. Then he asked me about Judas death, and Easter morning, and a dozen other things I can’t

remember. He asked me if God knew about those things. I told him of course he did. Then he smiled at me and asked that if God was inspiring all those writers, why couldn't he have told them the facts or at least the same things, because every one of the things he mentioned was either a part of a contradiction or an outright error.

“Outright error? What do you mean?” asked Elder.

“Well, just as I said. Judas' death was one. In Acts, Judas threw himself headlong onto a field he bought and his intestines gushed out. In Matthew, he hung himself. It couldn't have been both. The same with the empty tomb. In Matthew, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. In Mark, Mary, the mother of James and Salome. John wrote that it was only Mary Magdalene. Which was it?

When whoever it was arrived, who was in the tomb? Matthew wrote that it was an angel. Mark wrote that it was a young man. Which was it? Luke said two men in shining garments and John said two angels, one sitting at the head and one sitting at the feet of where Jesus had lain. Which was it, Elder? Which was it?

“In Exodus God spoke to man. Yet, later in Exodus, it clearly states that no man shall see God's face and live. Again, which is it, Elder? It can't be both.

“Then Andrew told me of errors and contradictions in the Quran, the Book of Mormon and many other books of which I had never heard. Every one of those books was limited by the knowledge of the one..., the man, writing it.”

Jacob could sense Elder’s reaction. For a while, neither said anything.

Then Jacob spoke. “Like I said, all those books, all those writings, were limited by the knowledge of the men who wrote them. If the writer didn’t know that the world was round, he wrote the world was flat. If he believed the stars above us now were no more than lights in the sky, they were described as lights in a firmament. . . no more than a dome over the earth.”

“What did you say when Andrew told you these things?”

“What could I say? He was right. Elder, man’s writings are exactly that. . . man’s writings. Some are wonderful works and convey glorious thoughts of how life, a good life, should be conducted, but, as I said, they are the writings of man, not of God.”

Jacob hesitated then spoke again, “No, Elder, The Creator has never written a single syllable. He has never spoken a single word to man. Why would he? Why should he? What need, or purpose, would he have to inform us of what he has done or what he wants? Everything in The Creator’s universe was given to us without condition. . . , any condition. It is there for us to

see. It is there for us to use and enjoy without reservation. It is there. It is ours. He doesn't need to explain it."

Chapter 4

The Night - The Stars

Elder stood and walked to the precipice. For a while he looked out at the forest, the river and the sea and eventually sat on a large patch of lush green grass. Jacob Potter remained where he had been sitting and said nothing. He remembered how dismayed he had been when he heard the same words he had just said to Elder. He remained by the spring until darkness fell. It was only when the sky was a blazing canopy of glimmering stars that Jacob walked to the precipice and sat in the grass beside Elder.

Jacob Potter looked into the sky and said, “I believe it’s at this time of day that I feel the closest to The Creator. When I look at what he’s done, when I look at what he’s made, I feel like I can almost reach out and touch him.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” said Elder. “It does almost seem like it. All my life I’ve believed that after I died, I’d be with God. I believed he would be beside me and I would know his glory.”

“No different than me, Elder. The sad part was that I could have been one with his glory at any time and I didn’t even know it.”

“I don’t know what you mean, Jacob. I can see what you are saying now, looking out at the stars and the planets, but at any time? I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I guess what I’m saying,” said Jacob Potter, “is that there wasn’t a time that I couldn’t look out at the earth and the sky and know his greatness. There were thousands of nights like this that is was quite obvious, but I should have seen... I should have experienced his glory in things much smaller.”

“Much smaller?” asked Elder.

“Yes, things much less. I should have seen his glory in the falling rain, the gentle breezes, in just life itself. It was always there... if only I had taken the time to look.”

“The things you say make me sad, Jacob, because I too didn’t see those things.”

“None of us did, Elder, we weren’t taught to do so. And, quietly, we accepted it.”

“What do you mean,” my friend?” asked Elder.

Jacob Potter placed his hand on Elder’s shoulder. “Since the beginning of time, man has had a burning desire for the one who made all this to be a man just like him.”

“I never thought a man did all this and I don’t understand what you are trying to say,” said Elder.

“Then, I’ll ask you, when you think of God, what does he look like?”

Elder thought a second then gave an embarrassed smile. For the first time he understood exactly what Jacob Potter meant.

“Don’t be embarrassed, my friend. In your mind he looks like a kindly old grandfather. Am I right?”

“You know you’re right,” said Elder.

“Yes, a kindly old grandfather with long flowing robes and long white hair. He’s a man who sits on a throne. To some, God is an image of a man who looks like them. To others, he is black. To some, God is a grotesquely overweight Buddha. It goes on and on. People’s image of God is a picture they saw in a

book, or on a wall, or something they saw as a child, or maybe something their parents told them. That, to them, is The Creator. In every case, they have a vision of The Creator. To most, if not all, he is a man like them.”

“But, the Bible says we are made in his image,” responded Elder.

Jacob Potter nodded. “Yes, that is what it says. But, my dear friend, where did we learn everything about The Creator? Where did we find the things we think we know about him?”

Elder smiled. “The Bible, of course. Even though I now know it to be the writings of man.”

“Yes, in a book written by man. We read a book, we heard endless interpretations of that book, we even worshiped that book, when all we needed to do was open our eyes and see The Creator all around us.”

Eventually, Elder looked at Jacob and smiled. It had been a confusing day for Elder Simms. Jacob Potter raised his hand and pointed to the sky. “Look above you, Elder. Look at all those millions of stars. They are real. They are worlds. They are suns and moons and planets. They are there. Something created them. You can see them. They are in front of you. Look at this world. These things are our proof. There is a God. There is a Creator. We don’t need to have faith. We don’t need to believe in anything that can’t be seen or proven. What is out there can

be seen. What is below our feet can be touched. That is our proof. It doesn't need to be proven. There is a God, Elder. He may not be the God of man's writings, but there definitely is a God. He is very, very real. In the sky above us, the stars appear to be mere flecks of light, but almost every one is a sun, just like our sun and most are surrounded by planets. Even though their numbers are so great they cannot be counted, all those suns and all those planets are in perfect harmony. Can you even imagine such a thing? Can you even conceive of a power that could create such things?"

"No, but I know these things," said Elder. "Why do you bring me so far to show me things I already know?"

"Because I want you to do something for me, my friend," said Jacob Potter as he pointed upwards. "I want you to imagine that you are one of the first humans to see that sky. Looking at that beauty, that majesty, what could you tell me about God?"

Elder smiled. "You are asking me who those first men thought God was? Is that correct?"

Jacob Potter nodded. "Yes. To those first men, who was God. . ., what was God?"

Elder sighed and tried to think. After a while he shook his head and said, "I don't know. If I look into the sky, if I look into his creation, I simply don't know. I don't know what my idea of God would be."

“Neither did those ancient men. Ironic as it was, the first primitive men gave The Creator his due and made no attempt to try to explain him. They accepted that he was there and he had created the world. They didn’t try to explain why he did things or try to explain his thoughts. To these primitive peoples, The Creator was just there. They honored him. They respected him. They loved and adored him for what he had done and what he is. Oh, later they would imagine gods of all types, but those first men. . . those first primitive men, accepted God for what he was. But, above all, they didn’t try to make him into a human.”

“Make him into a human? I don’t understand.”

“Then I must ask you another question, Elder. A very serious question. Could a man, any man, have created all you see above you and all that is below your feet?”

“No. Of course not,” said Elder, “no man could have done all this.”

“Yet,” said Jacob Potter, “man instead tries in our own feeble way to explain something that is far beyond our comprehension and certainly beyond our understanding by making stories that we can understand. And, Elder, we have to do this using stories that we can understand at the time the stories are written.”

Elder gave a questioning look.

“At the time Genesis was written, man did not know about cells or about how things grow, develop and change. To them, the plants, the animals, even the earth itself was exactly as it had always been. To them, nothing had ever changed. Now, we know that this is not true. We know that the entire planet has changed, changed much since its beginning. And, that everything on it has changed.”

“Yes, but aren’t we to know him... to understand him?”

“Again, those are the thoughts of man,” said Jacob Potter. “What purpose would it serve for us to ‘know’ him? How could we possibly ‘know’ something that has been here forever, will be here forever, and has the power to create the immensity you see above you or even that below your feet? Also, is it likely that we could ever ‘understand’ him?”

Jacob Potter smiled a kindly smile. “Think of the stars, my friend. Millions of planets are there in perfect harmony. Look at the harmony of the earth, the regularity of the seasons, the predictability of the tides. When humans write about The Creator they give him every human trait. He wants praise and sacrifices. He is envious and destroys entire nations because they worship other gods. He selects one group above another and destroys their enemies. In the Bible you and I held to so closely, God murdered entire populations because they didn’t do his bidding. In the story of Noah, he killed off the entire world except Noah and his family. That is not a kind God, Elder. That

is not a loving God. To answer your question, Elder, that is a god of man's writings, from man's mind. It is not The Creator."

For a time, Elder was silent. Then, he stood and walked to the far end of the precipice. There, he stared out at the stars. He slowly returned and sat beside Jacob Potter. He looked directly at him and as he spoke he enunciated every word. "Even though what you tell me is confusing, why is it that what you tell me in some way exciting?... even comforting?"

"Because it is simple and it is real. There is no other reason. There is no need for another reason."

Chapter 5

The Bible - God

For the majority of the evening Elder moved between the precipice and the forest, occasionally stopping at the spring. He was confused, but Jacob Potter was well aware of it and left him to be with his thoughts. He had been in the exact same state forty years ago. He remembered how it was for him. In his heart, he had moved back and forth from despair to elation. He remembered it very well. On one hand, the things he had heard sounded reasonable and perfect. On the other hand, they were impossible. He knew exactly what Elder was feeling.

Eventually, Elder crouched at the base of a tree near the edge of the forest. Jacob Potter watched him then thought it was time, it was time to be with his friend.

“What have I done, Jacob Potter? What have I done?”

“What do you mean, friend?”

“I led my entire life on words which I believed to be the words of God. Now, I find those words were nothing but the scribblings of men, men just like me. I have no idea if I led my life as I should, or. . . or. . . something entirely different. That book, my Bible I loved so dearly, was nothing more than a book written by men. It may as well have been a cookbook. I patterned my life after those words. What have I done, Jacob Potter? What have I done?”

“A cookbook? A cookbook? Yes, a cookbook,” smiled Jacob. “A surprisingly accurate assumption. Let me ask you something, Elder. If you wanted to prepare a meal would you hesitate to use a cookbook?”

“No, that is exactly what you would need, but we’re not talking about a meal, Jacob, we’re talking about my life.”

“Yes, true. And what if God didn’t write it? What if God isn’t responsible for the first period or comma in the entire book? Does that in any way lessen the value of the good words it contains? Just because God didn’t sit down and write the words or even tell the ones who did what to say does it lessen

its value as a guide for life?” Jacob smiled, “as a cookbook for life?”

“Maybe not, but Jacob, God didn’t write it. . . goodness, he didn’t even inspire it.”

“No, Elder. No, he didn’t write it. He didn’t inspire it. But the Bible, the Quran, and all those others were inspired by something. . . something pretty important. . . a love of God, a love of what is right, a love of what is good. Yes, my friend, the words may be human words, but they still make up for a good cookbook. . . a cookbook for life. In other words, you could have done much worse.”

“I have wondered about God, but never once have I doubted the Bible. If I remember correctly, you held it as dear and true as I did. Now, I find it is not the work of God.”

“The guilt, my friend, must lay in ourselves and those who came before us. It is not the fault of the Bible or those who wrote it that we made a god out of a book. But, my friend, we wanted. . . no, we needed something which to attach our trust, our belief. For some it was the Quran, for us it was the Bible. No, it is not the writings of God, but the book was a very logical writing of the needs of the time.”

“Needs of the time?” asked Elder.

“Yes. Ancient men needed a reason. . . an answer for the things happening around him. What was more logical than blaming things they couldn’t understand on the ‘gods’? When it was thundering, the gods were angry. When the sun was shining, the gods were happy. When someone was sick, the gods were punishing them for something they did. Everything was blamed on the gods. In the same way, everything came from the gods. . . the forest, the water, even man. It was simple. It was logical. For the time, it was perfect. Yet, as man grew wiser, the reasons they gave were less logical, less perfect. It thundered more when it was warm than when it was cold. Were the gods angrier when the sun shined and the earth was green than when it was cold and the snows came? Simple things. . . at first to explain with angry gods but as man grew wiser he relied less on blaming the gods and looking more for logical reasons. But, even after man began to develop societies, some things just didn’t have a logical reason. The gods were still good to blame.”

“I can understand what you are saying,” said Elder, “but those were ancient peoples. The Bible was written just a couple of thousand years ago. It had been years since the people you speak of. The people who wrote the Bible had cities and schools and languages. Man was much brighter by then.”

“Was he?” asked Jacob Potter. “Yes, they had the things you said, but they still couldn’t explain sickness and disasters and death and a thousand other things. Instead of gods doing both bad and good, now, for the most part, God did the good

and the Devil did the bad. Everything became a case of rewarding good and punishing bad. Everything that was written was either rewarding good or punishing bad. They made sacrifices to God to forestall bad. Everything followed the pattern of man's progression. Everything. The God of which they speak wasn't The Creator, it was a man-god.

“Wait a minute, friend. Even if God never took sides, or fought any battles, history is full of natural disasters that have killed and ruined lives. Are you saying God had no part in any of those?” asked Elder.

“Yes, The Creator did make the water that produces the floods, but it is also the water that feeds the crops and is necessary for life. He made the air that makes the winds, but it is the same air we breathe. He made the earth that sometimes quakes and falls from below us and the sun that sometimes causes drought, but these are also the things needed for life. Not only were they needed for life to begin, they are needed for life to continue. How would it be possible for him to give us one without the other? Should he forbid the rain from falling? Freedom from flood, maybe, but a curse to those who farm the land. Should he stop the wind from blowing? What should he do? Elder? What should he do? We can't have one without the other. What The Creator gave us is good. In the billions of years since he created the universe he has never done anything to harm or hurt any of his creation. As far as the Bible, men, good men, have written volumes, again, sincerely believing they were

the words of God and that their thoughts had been guided by The Creator. Still, these words were tempered by their times and by their circumstances. Remember, they were the writer's words, not The Creator's.

“Elder, let me present you with a question. You have created a complete world that contains every thing any living thing will need to lead a full and happy life. You love everything in what you have created without condition and want, and ask, absolutely nothing in return.”

Elder nodded.

“Would you have any reason whatsoever to tell those living things what you are doing? What is there, is there for the asking. The only possible reason you would have to tell them anything is to get their praise. Wanting praise for what you have done is a human trait. It is what a human would do. The praise of human writings are patterned on the way ancient peoples used to honor their rulers and kings. Those kings demanded those actions. They wanted them. If their subjects didn't give them such treatment they were punished. The writers of these volumes call The Creator a king and believe they should try to think of him as a human king. Deep down, all humans want praise for the things they do. Be it a king or a commoner, we all want praise. It is difficult, no impossible, for people to understand that the love of The Creator is total and absolutely without condition. He doesn't want or need praise. He is above such things. He is not

some human king who wants and needs to be told how wonderful he is. Most of the writings are words of praise. Words of praise to a deity who neither needs it or wants it. He has provided everything and expects nothing. This is unconditional love. Needing praise is not. You can observe the works of The Creator and determine for yourself exactly what you believe he is. You can observe for yourself the very nature of The Creator. He does everything for the good of his creation, in turn, for the creatures in his creation. It is his nature. It is the way he is.”

All of what Jacob Potter had said concerned Elder. “Nothing you tell me is what I was taught to believe. The things you tell me are not what I expected. It sounds too simple, too pure.”

“It is simple, My Friend, it is pure. The Creator whose work you see before your eyes doesn’t put conditions on our existence. He doesn’t expect praise or sacrifices. What he has made, what he does, and what he is. . . is the purest form of goodness. There is nothing conditional or temporary about him. The Creator has never created anything bad or unkind. He has never killed or injured. He has never harmed anything. He has never done anything but good.”

“Here, my friend, I would have to take you to task,” said Elder. “As you said yourself when you told me about my bedside prayer years ago, I wondered why God had taken my

father away. I wondered why he had allowed him to die.“

“That was one of the most difficult things for me to accept. And, for you, I believe it will be even more difficult.”

“Jacob, many of the things you have already told me have been difficult for me to accept. My entire life has been spent learning, no, embracing, things that I now find are not so. There is nothing you can tell me more shocking than the things you have already said.”

“As you wish. I did promise to answer your questions and I shall. When we were small we were told that we were children of God. As we grew older we were told the same. Our readings referred to us as children of God, even our prayers repeated it.”

“Yes,” responded Elder, “that is right. We are children of God.”

“No, Elder, we are the children of our parents. They made us, they created us, they cared for us, they guided us in whatever direction we would ultimately go. We look like them. Good or bad, most of us have the qualities of our parents. Good or bad, most of us think like them and accept their values. Our parents made us, Elder.”

“Jacob, that is not disturbing to me. I think I always knew that. Maybe we didn’t sing hymns about it, but I knew my parents made me. Yet, I still don’t know what that has to do with why God allowed my father to die.”

“Elder, in a way we are children of The Creator. As I told you before, he gave us a soul. He gave us life.”

“Yes, I understood that.”

“The soul he gave us, Elder, is eternal. It is spiritual. It will never die. It will never go away. The body our parents gave us is physical. It is temporary. It can be injured. It can suffer from illness and disease. It can grow old and one day, it will die. You, me, and your father’s bodies all died. You had a heart attack. I became sick and my body couldn’t go on as did your father. Regardless of how the life of your body ends, it is physical and it will end. The Creator doesn’t decide when it will happen. In most cases, we do, by how we lead our lives. What we eat, what we do. . . and how long we do it determines our lives. Not The Creator. When your father died, you blamed The Creator. He gave him life. He gave your father a soul. He did nothing to take it away.”

Elder sat for a moment saying nothing and thinking of what he had just been told. “Where is my father, Jacob Potter? Will I see him here?”

“Elder, your father’s soul has gone to wherever The Creator determined. The moment he died another life began. I don’t know where. I don’t know to whom, but that same soul, that same life that was once your father’s is now the life for someone else.”

“Does he remember me?” Asked Elder.

“I don’t know,” said Jacob Potter, “but do know that The Creator greeted your father in death just like he greeted you. . . and me.”

“God greeted me? I don’t remember that. I was looking for God and never saw him.”

“Oh yes, The Creator was there. The problem was that you were looking for the God of the writings we had learned to think were infallible. You, and yes, I, was looking so hard for a man that we never saw the greatest entity in creation when he was right beside us.”

Elder looked down at his feet and started shaking his head slowly back and forth. Then, he broke into a broad smile. “The light,” he said, “that warm, wonderful light.”

“That’s right. You were like me. You stood right beside him as he guided you here and were so busy looking for a man you couldn’t see God.”

“One small question, Jacob Potter, you call The Creator ‘him’. What I saw wasn’t a man.”

“No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t a man, it wasn’t a woman. It isn’t anything we know. To us, it is a light. But, somehow I have a problem calling something as wonderful as The Creator ‘it’. I say ‘him’ out of pure love and adoration.”

Jacob Potter smiled and asked, “do I need to ask you what Andrew asked me?”

“Do you mean what would be your point in telling me something wrong?”

“That’s exactly what I mean, my friend,” said Jacob Potter.

“You are right. I am overwhelmed.”

“Yes, I knew you would be. In any of the things you have seen and heard, have you seen or heard anything about one speck of unkindness or cruelty by The Creator?”

Elder thought and slowly shook his head no.

“You haven’t,” said Jacob Potter, “because there is none. For a human this is very hard. . . almost impossible to believe. . . an entity absolutely devoid of any form of anger, jealousy, or any of the human traits except love and who does absolutely nothing except good.”

Elder shook his head back and forth. A tear trickled down his cheek. “All that time we spent in church. All that time we listened to things that were wrong.”

“No, my friend, what we learned wasn’t wrong. What we learned was good. We learned about the goodness of The Creator. We learned how we should treat others. We learned much about what is right and what is wrong. It was far from the wrong place for us to be. It was a wonderful place for us to be.

We learned good things there. We learned wonderful things there.”

“But you said that what we learned were words of men, not of God.”

“Yes, but they were good words written with good intentions. They were not the words of God, but they were still good words. Elder, I know it is difficult. You still cling to things from the Bible and things our teachers have said.”

“But, I see what you say, those are the writings of man.”

Jacob Potter nodded and said, “Right, and it did make sense. It made sense to the ones who wrote it too. It made sense to say that only humans had souls. In these writings the human is always exclusive and superior, but so is the writer’s tribe, the writer’s religion, the writer’s ancestry, even the writer’s sex. Those are the thoughts and words of men. The Creator didn’t make us. Why would he favor one group over another? Why would he declare that men are superior to women? They are not. Without one the other ceases to exist. The writings are man’s thoughts, not The Creator’s. Does it make sense that the Creator’s ‘chosen people’ is always the writer’s people, regardless of where that people is from or what that people believes? Does it make sense, my friend?”

“When people become ‘intelligent’ they attempt to explain The Creator. They try to give him human traits. If they make golden gods, they give them arms and legs. If they describe spirits, they have human form. If they write about him they say they are made in his image. In every way, they try to make him a human. Not only the way he looks, but they also the way he acts. Like them, he can be kind, or cruel. He can be vengeful or forgiving. He can either be gentle or be a warrior. They attempt to attach every human characteristic to an entity who has none of those characteristics. They have thoughts or dreams and convince themselves that it is The Creator speaking to them. They write these things saying they are his words and convince themselves, and others, that the words are holy and divine. They are not. They are their thoughts, they are their words. They are not the words of The Creator.”

“Then the same thought labors me,” said Elder. “All that time we spent in church, reading the words of man.”

“Elder, I hate to say this to you, but if all that time we spent in church was just to read a book... any book, even if it had been written by The Creator himself, then we were wrong. We were there for a much greater purpose.”

Once more, Elder looked confused. “A much greater purpose?” he asked.

“Remember I said the ancient men didn’t try to explain God’s thoughts. They honored him and respected him, but mostly, they loved and adored him for what he had done... and what he is.”

“Yes, I remember you saying that,” responded Elder.

“Is there anything... Is there one thing wrong with praising the one who made it all happen? Is there one thing wrong with that?”

Elder gave an embarrassed smile. “No, but...”

“The ‘but’ you’re about to say is that we have made such a ritual... such an event out of church that we don’t know how to just get down on our knees and say ‘thank you’. Isn’t that what you were about to say?”

Elder glanced away. Once more, Jacob Potter was right.

“Our purpose for being in church wasn’t to read some book, or at precisely eight minutes after eleven sing a certain song and twelve minutes later have a man tell us about what another man had said about God, be it right or wrong. Our purpose for being in that quiet place was to make time to say ‘thank you’ to the one who made our lives... our entire existence possible. That, dear friend, should have been why we were in church. And there is nothing, dear Elder, wrong with that.”

Chapter 6

The Seventh Gift

Jacob Potter watched his friend. Elder was looking into the sky and appeared to be alone with his thoughts. “You are very quiet,” he said.

“I guess I am, but you have told me much,” replied Elder.

“I told you I would.”

“Yes you did, but most of it I should have figured out for myself decades ago. Jacob, you didn’t tell me one thing that wasn’t plain common sense for any reasonable man.”

“Probably not, but I can’t say anything. I never questioned either. We had no reason to question. Our parents believed it. Our friends believed it. Our relatives and most of the people around us believed it. There was no reason to question anything, if everyone believed it, it must be true.”

“I think that’s what’s bothering me, Jacob. Everyone didn’t believe what we did. There were beliefs of every kind. In our own town we had Catholics, Jews, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and a few Muslims. We had everything. There were different churches all over town. They couldn’t have all been right. And, if something as great as God could create a universe and wanted us to know who, or what, he was, wouldn’t it have been a simple task to tell us? He wouldn’t rely on human prophets and sages to imagine what he was and then write all kinds of books to tell us. He would have told the whole world, not different things to different people. We would have known from the beginning. All of us would have known the same God.”

Jacob Potter smiled gently. “Remember I told you there were seven gifts?”

“Yes,” said Elder, “but you only told me of six. What was the seventh?”

“The seventh was only given to man. By giving man the seventh gift, The Creator, God if you prefer, gave man the ability to doubt, to question and to imagine. Basically, to do

what you are doing when you say you should... no *we should*, have realized these things all along.”

Elder looked away from Jacob and watched the water trickling from the spring. “You mean the fact that so many believed so many different things should have told me that what I believed wasn’t necessarily true?”

“Yes,” responded Jacob. “That would have been a good start.”

“A good start?” questioned Elder. “How much does the seventh gift include?”

“The entire breadth of the seventh gift is beyond comprehension. It goes forever.”

“Forever,” said Elder. “I don’t understand. How can any gift go on forever?”

“Quite simple,” said Jacob Potter. “The gift allows man to question. He can question even God. Elder, maybe one day we will all know the same God. The seventh gift continues to grow. It was the seventh gift that allowed you to know the things you just said. For you, it may have been in death that you finally came to know, but one day someone will know in life. As I said, the seventh gift continues to grow. One day, man and mankind will know.”

“The seventh gift, didn’t you say that was man’s ability to reason?”

Jacob Potter’s expression again became full of excitement. He walked to the precipice and stood like a conductor about to perform a majestic overture. Elder had never seen anyone’s face reflecting as much joy and promise. It appeared that for Jacob Potter, the time for him to do what he waited so long to do was at hand. His very expression seemed to announce the wonder he felt in what he was about to say. He motioned for Elder to sit.

“The seventh gift is much more than reason, dear friend. Much, much more. If it were just reason it would be enough, but as I said, it is so much more.”

Jacob grasped his hands together, this was something he had waited a long time to say. “The seventh gift wasn’t something The Creator gave to everything. He only gave it to man. . . and even then, he didn’t give it to man immediately. Those first men had no more ability than the animals around them. They were like the animals competing for food and fearing each other. It was like I told you about that first tiny cell. It would be thousands of years before The Creator would look upon man and know the time was right to give him that seventh gift. Even then, The Creator didn’t give it to man all at once. He gave man the ability, but it would be up to man to develop it. It is still up to man to develop it.”

Jacob Potter was as animated as anyone Elder had ever watched. He walked the precipice annunciating every word and making gestures to make those words memorable. “At first,” he said, “it probably started as no more than one of those early men taking an extra handful of berries back to his shelter so that he would have food when it was needed. Little more than a squirrel gathering nuts. But even today, the squirrels continue to collect their food where they can find it. Man eventually used his reason to realize he could bury a few seeds and grow his food near his home. No, not a big thing, but a start.”

“Jacob. . .,” began Elder. Jacob Potter lifted his hand and whispered, “shhhh. . .”

“Like I said, no, it wasn’t a big thing, but in time, man would realize he could grow enough food for his entire family. In time, he learned he could trade any extra food he had grown for other things he and his family needed. Some people would learn to make homes and tools and clothes and things people needed and they would make these things and trade for the things they need. Man was doing this while the other animals were still gathering nuts and berries.”

“Like all the animals, early man possessed instincts, but few of man’s were as keen as the animals. The animals had a better sense of smell. They could see better and could hear far better. Yet, when The Creator gave man the seventh gift he had the ability to doubt and to question. Abilities no other animal

possessed. In time, these simple abilities would lift man far above the animals.”

“From the moment The Creator bestowed the seventh gift on mankind the world would never be the same. Each moment would see new discoveries that two moments before couldn’t have been imagined. And, though it was a most wondrous gift, the gift had two sides.”

“Two sides?” questioned Elder.

“Yes, because man is capable of the most wonderful accomplishments imaginable and the most hideous.”

Elder smiled. “I don’t remember you and I having a part of either. We just led our lives as good and decent men.” Elder noticed that Jacob did not return his smile.

“Then, my friend, did we use the gift? Did we use the greatest gift The Creator placed in our hands. . . and, I imagine expected us to use?”

“Jacob, I doubt God expected each of us to do great and wondrous things,” said Elder.

“No, I don’t imagine he expected all of us to discover fire or find a cure for cancer, but I do imagine he expected more than simply an existence.”

“Jacob, we had good lives. We had friends. We raised children to be good people. We did what we should.”

“Jacob Potter pointed to the stone next to where he had been sitting. “Remember the little mouse who was here earlier?”

“Yes,” said Elder. “I remember.”

“That little mouse had a good life. He had friends. He raised any number of good children. But he didn’t possess the seventh gift. He did what he should.”

“In other words,” said Elder, “what you are saying is you and I should have done more. . . much more.”

Jacob Potter lifted his eyebrows. Elder was right.

“Jacob, you take me to the pit of my soul when you tell me the Bible, the basis of my entire life, was only the writings and thoughts of men. You bring me to elation when you tell me that my fears of an eternity in Hell are the thoughts of man and I have nothing to fear. You allow me to feel unimaginable regret when I realize these things were quite obvious if I had just used my logic. . . my reason. Now, you shame me by telling me I didn’t use the greatest gift God ever gave me. Is there a point to this, Jacob? I fail to see why you waited these forty years to do me this injustice and take me from sadness to joy and then make me feel unbelievably shamed. May I remind you, we are dead. We can do nothing about it now. I don’t even know if we will remember any of this. Again I ask you. . . what is the point?”

“Wait, wait, wait, Elder. Please don’t be angry. Believe me, there is a point.”

“Please then, Sir, tell me that point. You said you would tell me of wondrous things. And, yes, some are wondrous, but others are. . . well, they are far from wondrous.”

“Calm yourself, my friend, let me explain.”

“Please do,” said Elder.

“Each of the things you said is true and we are dead and I don’t know if we will remember any of this, but my excitement was not about what I would tell you. It was about something else.”

Again, Elder looked confused. “Something we will do?” he asked. What can we do, Jacob? We are dead. Our time for doing the things we should have has passed. You say we shall cross to a new life, but you don’t know if we will remember any of this. Your words make no sense.”

“Elder, we believed that when we came to eternity we would meet The Creator and he would be a man like us.”

Elder nodded.

“We believed we would sit with The Creator and talk.”

Elder nodded again.

“Now we know that The Creator is much more than a man, or a grandfather on a throne.”

“Agreed,” said Elder. “We know this.”

“But, the night you knelt beside your father’s bed and prayed for answers, you had no idea The Creator would bring you back to the cove.”

“You are very right,” said Elder. “I didn’t even think of the cove.”

“Like you,” said Jacob, “the night I prayed to be able to answer your questions and guide you into eternity, I had no assurance I would be here now.”

“Yes, this is all true,” said Elder.

“It is safe to assume that one day mankind will use the seventh gift and discover the greatness of The Creator.”

“I hope someday he will.”

“My point is, my friend, that The Creator does answer prayers. You are here. I am here. These are things we asked from The Creator. Things for which we prayed.”

“Agreed,” said Elder.

“Then, what is to prevent us from saying a prayer? One more prayer?”

“A prayer?” questioned Elder.

“Yes, a prayer that in our next life we will know about the seventh gift.”

“Ah,” said Elder, “so we make use of it to help mankind. . . instead of just living. A fine idea.”

“Yes, a fine idea, but wouldn’t it be a better idea to let all mankind know that everyone is capable of doing something for his world?... not just for himself?”

“Do you think they will listen?”

“I don’t know,” said Jacob, “all we can do is ask. The Creator decided when he wanted to give man the seventh gift. It is up to him to decide if it is time to take it further. He will decide. If this is a task he will give to us, we will remember the seventh gift. If he doesn’t, we will not remember. Like I said when you asked me about the next life, The Creator has never done anything wrong for his creation. I don’t believe he will start now.”

Elder looked up into the sky for a long time, then looked at Jacob Potter. “Jacob,” he said, “where does God live?”

“Oh, the men who wrote the great books would have us think The Creator lives someplace in the sky, surrounded by clouds and golden castles. A beautiful place of peace and eternal harmony. A nice thought, but The Creator isn’t a man. He has no need for castles and streets paved with gold. This too is something of man’s desires. Not The Creator’s”

“Then, do answer my question. Where does God live?”

“The Creator. . . God. . . is in all of creation,” said Jacob Potter as he stood and walked to the overlook. He lives in everything from the smallest speck of dust to the largest galaxy. The Creator is in everything. The Creator can’t be confined into a single city, a country or even a universe. He is too great. . . too wonderful. Let’s remember, Elder, we are talking about an entity who created everything and gave it to those in it.”

“I guess I was hoping there was a Heaven. It sounds like a marvelous place,” said Elder.

Jacob Potter looked out from the precipice. “What is this, Elder,” he asked.

“You said it was a vision,” said Elder.

“A vision of what?” asked Jacob.

“Of a world I once knew. . . and loved,” responded Elder.

“Do you remember when we first came here, what I said about this place?”

“Yes, you said it contained everything any living thing needed to live a full life.”

“Almost. I said out there could be found everything that every living thing would need for a full, complete *and happy* life

“Do you remember that?” asked Jacob Potter.

“Yes,” said Elder, “that is what you said.”

“And do you remember that I also said that The Creator gives us everything and expects nothing in return?”

“Yes,” answered Elder, “you also said that.”

“Think about those words, Elder. Think about them.”

“The Creator gave us everything, right from the start. It is ours. . . all of it. He didn’t hold back something good and say ‘if you please me I will give this to you’, any more than he said ‘if you displease me I will punish you.’ He gave us everything from the start. . . from the very beginning. . . everything.”

Elder thought for a moment, then began muttering to himself. “He gave us everything. . . everything. He gave us everything that every living thing would need for a full, complete *and happy* life. . . Full, complete *and happy* life. . . everything.”

Elder looked toward Jacob, “are you saying that this is Heaven? Are you saying we have been in Heaven all along? No, no, no. That can’t be right, Jacob. Heaven is a glorious place.”

Jacob pointed out past the overlook and said nothing.

“Yes,” said Elder, “it is magnificent... it is... glorious. But in Heaven we would want for nothing.”

Jacob stared straight at Elder. Then Elder thought... ‘everything that every living thing would need for a full, complete *and happy* life.’ “But, Jacob, we would be...”

“With God?” interrupted Jacob. “God lives in everything from the smallest speck of dust to the largest galaxy. Remember those words, my beloved friend? God... The Creator, is with us every second of every day from before we are born until well after the last second we live. God never leaves us. He’s not there to judge us, or advise us, he’s there because he loves us. Just as our soul is a part of us, God is a part of us.”

“Whew,” said Elder. “I must say it again. You said I would be overwhelmed. I, Sir, am overwhelmed.”

“I know the feeling well. I know it all too well.”

“In other words, Jacob, you are saying that the seventh gift, like The Creator, may very well last into eternity.”

“It can, dear friend, it can. The things man had discovered five thousand years ago would have been mind boggling to man a thousand years before. The things we have in our time would have seemed unreal in the time of Christ, or even Napoleon. In our time, the diseases that wiped out entire nations could have been cured almost instantly. One day, the diseases that killed you and me will probably not even bear mention. The devices man has developed, the techniques he has perfected, though impressive to us, will one day seem ancient.”

“It is much to think about, Jacob. It is much to think about.”

“Imagine, Elder, one day man will find new ways to power their devices, to feed their families, to do the things they need to do to make all mankind’s lives better. The future will be fascinating. For us, it will be inconceivable. Why, because of The Creator’s seventh gift to us.”

Elder smiled. “Actually, Jacob, we’re not so far from our ancestors. They wrapped their feet with skins, we do too. They heated their homes by burning coal and oil. We do too. It may take the form of electricity, but it’s still burning coal and oil... not too far from burning wood. There is so much to do. So much to do.”

Chapter 7

Of Jesus and Great Men

Elder gave Jacob Potter a long look. “Jacob, I have mentioned Jesus several times, and you have not responded. Tell me of Jesus,” he said. “Why was he not there when I died? Is it that I have done something wrong? Why was he not there? Why is he not here now?”

Jacob Potter placed his hands together behind his back and looked off into the distance in deep thought. It was as if he had anticipated the question for a long time and had many times thought of a proper way to answer. “Elder, you and I prayed to

Jesus. Together, we spent untold hours hearing about him and the things he did. Jesus was a great man, Elder. Probably, the greatest to ever live. We thought he was God. He carried with him a great message. Unfortunately, it was a message we were never allowed to hear.”

Elder’s face betrayed his confusion. Jacob Potter continued. “You remember how we spoke of the great light that brought you and me and everyone else to eternity but we couldn’t see God because we were looking so hard for a man?”

“Yes,” said Elder. “We spoke of it when we were talking about my father.”

“In the case of Jesus, Elder, the exact opposite was true. We were searching for God so diligently that we couldn’t see a man. . . as I said, a truly great man.”

“Jesus was God.”

“Was he God, Elder? Did he ever once say that he was God?”

Elder was completely silent for a moment. Several times he began to speak but stopped before he actually spoke. Finally, he said, “he referred to God as his father several times.”

“Yes,” said Jacob Potter, “Jesus often spoke of his father in Heaven. But The Creator may be said to be the father of all mankind. Every man, woman and child may claim the one who gave them their soul as their father. In the language of the times, it was quite common for a man to be called ‘a son of God’. This was not unusual. But, in all you have ever read, in all you have ever seen, did Jesus once state that he was God?”

Elder thought for a while longer then responded, “No, I don’t believe he did. He never used those words, but. . .”

“. . .Pardon me for interrupting, my friend, but history is replete with men whose followers attempted to claim their leaders were gods. The Greeks, the Romans, the kings of Europe and the far east at one time or another claimed many of their leaders to be gods. Many, like the Egyptians, believed their leaders were living gods. People in search of something. . . anything. . . often looked upon their leader as a god.”

“Yes, they did but the Bible. . .” Immediately, Elder Simms caught himself. He realized, probably for the first time, exactly what he was about to say. Jacob Potter finished Elder’s sentence.

“. . .said that he was God. Yes, Elder, the Bible said he was God. A book said he was God, a book written by men said he was God. And who were those men? Desperate men. Impoverished men. Men under the heel of a Roman conqueror. Men who had no hope except the hope that was given to them

by one man. . . Jesus. Jesus never said he was God, Elder. Man. . . and the Bible. . . made him God. In your mind,” said Jacob Potter, “try to remember the words of Jesus without the words of John, even without the words of Matthew, Mark, and yes, even Luke, just the words of Jesus. They are words of hope. They are words of reality and praise. To whom, Elder? To whom?”

“Yes, to The Creator. Once more, think of his words. What was he telling us about and what did we do? He was like other great men throughout history who told us of the seventh gift, but we did not hear him. We were looking for a god so hard we missed what he was saying. We could not hear him because we were looking for something else.”

“Great philosophers of ancient times told us of the seventh gift, but we did not hear them. Even Jesus, the greatest of all, told us of The Creator, but we would not hear him. Instead, we killed him. Like so many, he was trying to tell us about the seventh gift and we would not listen.”

“Jesus was our savior.”

“Savior from what, Elder? Man believed he was condemned to Hell because of the actions of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Again, these are the thoughts of man. Not of God. The loving Creator would have no reason to condemn all mankind. To an all loving Creator such an idea would be absurd. Again, these are man’s ideas written in the Bible. Mankind needs no

savior from the will of The Creator who only does good. It is man who condemns. Not God.

Elder exhaled as if his last breath had been sucked from his body. Tears were in his eyes. “To his father in Heaven,” responded Elder. “To God. To. . . The Creator.” Each time Jacob Potter mentioned the seventh gift his smile grew broader. Elder gave Jacob Potter a long look and asked, “why, Jacob Potter, do you seem to be excited when you speak of the seventh gift? Your entire face appears to glow. There must be more than what you are telling me.”

“I guess, my friend, that every time I speak of the seventh gift, I am like the child at Christmas opening his gifts for the first time. Though it was there all along, we never saw it. We had looked at it, we had heard it. It was there, Elder. It was right there before us and we didn’t see it. Great men, men who changed the world told us of it. We read of it. We spoke of it. Yet, we never allowed ourselves to see it.” Jacob Potter’s face was totally aglow. He was telling Elder Simms something he had waited forty years to tell. Even though forty years may have been no more than a whip as he had said. It had still been forty years. Jacob Potter was right. . . he was like the child at Christmas.

Chapter 8

Reflection and Destiny

Elder returned to the spring and sat with Jacob Potter. “Did you fear your judgement as bad as I did mine, Jacob? Did I appear foolish?”

Jacob Potter shook his head in a definite manner and almost laughed. “Elder, I was terrified by the fear of the judgement. No, you didn’t appear foolish. In our minds we condemn ourselves for the things we do in life. Of this we are all guilty. And, though that man with the long white hair isn’t sitting on a throne meting out judgement, there is a judgement and I believe that seventh gift causes us to put much on ourselves, even in death.”

Elder held up his hand to stop Jacob from saying more. “Jacob, may I say what I believe you are about to say? It is something that has bothered me since you told me of my judgement.”

Jacob smiled, he felt good to think that he knew what Elder was about to say. “Please, my friend, speak.”

“Are you about to say that we ‘religious people’ have contorted the Bible to be a measure of what is right and wrong in the eyes of God because we fear his judgement when we should be using those words to help mankind? Is that what you are about to say?”

“Yes, Elder, it is. And, it’s not only the Bible, it’s the Quran, the Book of Mormon and every other religious book that was ever written. We have a treasure house of words to tell us how we can help each other, but we don’t use it for that. . . none of us do. We use it because we are concerned about how God will punish us or reward us. Not a very good reason.”

“Will we remember this lesson when we cross over, Jacob?”

“I don’t know, but I hope so. Yet, even if it doesn’t, as I have told you, the seventh gift grows greater each day. The day will come when someone will open his holy book and say to himself that there are good words in here to help mankind. He will say that it is time to use it as such. I don’t know when it will happen, but it will begin to fill man’s great destiny.”

Jacob Potter's expression was full of excitement. It was as if the things he had already told Elder were not what he was really waiting for. It was as if his forty-year wait was about to end. He walked to the precipice and stood there like a conductor about to perform a majestic overture. Elder had never seen anyone's face reflecting as much joy and promise. It appeared that for Jacob Potter, the time for him to do what he was waiting to do was at hand. With a joyous expression he seemed to announce, "Elder, every living thing has a destiny. Every living thing has a purpose. This will come regardless of where he is born and it will come regardless of whom his parents may have been. Every living thing possesses that destiny, and believe it or not, most living things will achieve their destiny . . . few humans ever will."

"Jacob Potter," said Elder, "I can see your joy, but again, you talk beyond me. When you say all living things have a destiny, I think of living things as only being human beings, but you have told me that a living thing is anything . . . any being . . . with a soul. And, it is not only humans who have souls. Are you saying *all* living things?"

"Yes, Elder, all living things."

"Destiny is a big word, Jacob Potter. Destiny means accomplishment. How can a bird or a fish have a destiny? It would be impossible for a bird to have a destiny."

“Yes, it would thinking your way, but you must think in terms of The Creator’s universe. Keep in mind, there are few things in The Creator’s universe that are immediate or instant . . . probably none. Everything in The Creator’s universe comes to pass in its time. It is created in its time, it changes in its time, and. . . it ends in its time.”

About that time a small bird landed on a tree near where he and Elder stood. The bird began singing at the top of his voice. “I can’t tell you what the destiny of every living thing will be, Elder,” said Jacob Potter. “The destiny of the bird you hear singing so beautifully may be no more than to bring the beauty of his song to The Creator’s world. It may be to become lunch for a passing hawk, but I have all ideas it is probably to insure another generation of birds like him that will make this world a better place to be for every living thing. That to me, Sir, sounds like a noble calling... a calling he will fulfil.”

“What was our destiny, Jacob? Did we fulfil our destiny?”

“I don’t think so, Elder,” said Jacob Potter, “I don’t think so. I believe we could have done more.”

Elder returned to the spring. Again, he needed to be alone. He needed to think.

Chapter 9

Return to the Light

Elder stood and once more looked out over the river, the forest and the sea. It was a beautiful sight and he knew he had learned much. Jacob Potter was right. The Creator was a good God. The things he had given his creation were all good and without fault. How, wondered Elder, when all he needed do was walk out on a clear night and see the stars had he not realized all this. Why had he allowed God to become so complicated when the truth was so simple? Why had he lived his life guided by a book written by men like him with loves and fears and hates instead of seeing The Creator in all his magnificence? Why?

Elder heard Jacob Potter coming his way. “Time to return to the cove,” said Jacob. “Time to return to your place.”

Elder looked once again at the sights before him and smiled. “This too is my place, Jacob Potter. The entire world and everything in it is my place. . . I just never realized it.”

“You do now, Elder. That’s all that’s important. I know it was hard to learn. It was hard for me, but I believe you will agree, it was well worth it.”

Jacob Potter turned and began walking to the path leading to the river and to the cove. Elder followed close behind.

Elder was quiet as he and Jacob Potter walked along the path. He had said that he understood all he had said, but Jacob still had his doubts. The things he had told Elder were a total change from what he Elder had believed all his life. Did Jacob have a right to expect him to immediately accept what he had told him? For now, he felt it would be better to say no more, but to just be with his friend.

As they walked, they returned to the orchard they had come through on the way to the overlook. Its beautiful fruit glistened in the early morning sun and pleasant smells filled the air. Soon, they came to the huge tree in the center of the orchard that had borne no fruit. Elder Simms stopped in front of the tree and silently stared. For the first time, Jacob Potter didn’t feel he knew what Elder Simms was thinking. Elder continued to look

at the tree and barely moved. Silently, Jacob Potter walked to the side and sat under one of the trees.

For the longest time Elder stared at the tree and barely moved. Then, he began smiling and walked to where Jacob Potter was sitting. “There’s been a purpose for everything you have shown me and told me, hasn’t there Jacob?”

Jacob said nothing, but gave a slight smile.

“On our way to the overlook you took me through this orchard for a purpose.”

Jacob continued to listen.

“Actually,” said Elder, “we could have stopped here and you could have told me everything. There was no need to go to the spring, or the overlook, or look out at the heavens. You could have stood right here in front of this tree and told me everything. But you didn’t. You went on.”

Jacob still said nothing.

“When you showed me the bounty of this orchard, a bounty that has gone on forever, you were showing me the bounty of The Creator. It has no beginning and it has no end. You were showing me that, Jacob. You were showing me that and I did not see.”

Elder stepped closer to the massive tree that had never borne fruit.

“Then, you made a point of walking by this tree, a tree more beautiful than any in the garden, but a tree that has never yielded anything. You did this to show me where we were. You said that some believed that one day it would be more bountiful than any in the orchard, yet it had never yielded. This tree will never yield the first bloom or fruit. You know that. You knew it when you showed it to me. Here we are standing in a glorious orchard with all the blessings mankind could ever desire right at our fingertips yet, we place our hopes on a tree that cannot yield.”

Jacob Potter’s expression let Elder know he was listening intently.

“You knew this tree couldn’t yield. The entire orchard is here for us now. It has always been here for us, it will always be here for us.”

Elder reached up and pulled an apple for himself and one for Jacob Potter.

“This massive tree is nothing but promises, beautiful promises, but still only promises. It’s like the way we believed. IF we live a good life according to the rules of man, IF we believe what we are told and do this all our lives. And IF we die and have done all these things we MAY be rewarded in eternity. This was all about man, not about God. God, The Creator, has already given us everything. It is already there, but the beliefs man created in his books never gave us anything except

promises, promises we would collect upon IF we did what man's books told us to do."

Elder shook his head back and forth.

"And, not only did The Creator give us everything any man would ever need, he gave us the seventh gift, the gift to accomplish unimaginable good for our fellow man and the ability to see beyond idle promises. It was all there, all the time. Couldn't you have just told me?"

Jacob Potter took a bite of the apple Elder had given him. He took his time chewing the bite and when he had swallowed it he asked, "would you have believed me?"

Elder broke out in a laugh. "No, no, no, I wouldn't have believed you. I would have thought you were out of your mind."

"As I did Andrew?"

"Yes, as you did Andrew."

Elder continued to laugh then slowly quit laughing and became somber. "Still," he said, "we should honor The Creator, for truly, he is our God."

Jacob Potter looked directly at Elder with a warm, approving look.

"He is responsible for it all. He made it all happen. And. . . it is good, if only we give it a chance to be," said Elder.

Jacob Potter nodded. “And how would we give it that chance?” he asked.

“The only way is to use the seventh gift as long and as far as we can. Just like the ancients who wrote the Bible didn’t know things we now know. Mankind will know even more in the future. Our small world is good now, but there is no reason it can’t be great for all . . . For every living human, not for just a few, but for all. We have the gift. We have it already.”

“And honoring The Creator?” asked Jacob Potter.

“The things we learned. . . the things we did. . . didn’t honor God, they didn’t worship him, they. . . patronized him. Our prayers say what we think he wants to hear. The things we do are to please him, not to honor him. We do it because we want his rewards. . . because we fear his punishment. That’s why you showed me this orchard.”

Jacob Potter’s smile became broader.

“That time we spent in the orchard was for a purpose. It was to show me that’s God’s gifts were there and they were obvious. I didn’t have to have faith, all I had to do was open my eyes. It was there the whole time. You knew this. And the barren tree in the midst of plenty. I asked you why it was allowed to stay. I must be blind. It represented promises... man’s promises. God never made promises he didn’t keep. He didn’t promise anything. He just did. And he did it long before there

was a man on this earth. You knew this too.”

“And, Jacob, all that time we spent in church. All that time we could have been honoring The Creator, not praising the things... the plans... the thoughts of man. Even Jesus was telling us these things and we would not listen.”

“Jesus? Telling us?”

“You know what I mean, Jacob Potter. Our Father, who art in Heaven.... He was talking about The Creator... OUR FATHER, the one who gave us our souls. He wasn't praying to himself, he was praying to my father, your father and all mankind's father. The whole time, the greatest man in all time was shouting for us to listen and we were so intent in making him God that we couldn't hear him.”

Jacob Potter nodded. “That is right, dear, dear friend.”

Then Elder looked at Jacob. “No, I probably wouldn't have believed you if you had told me without our journey.”

“No, you wouldn't. I had to answer your questions in my own way, a way that would allow you, on your own terms, to understand... to accept... how wonderful our Creator, our God is. As long as he was no more than a man, even be it a great man, these things would have been impossible for you to accept.”

“You are right, Jacob. Now I see. Thank You. Now I know this world, this universe, are just like this garden. The gifts of God are already there. We already have them. We don’t need to say and do things simply to get things from God. We already have it all. We don’t need to say and do things to avoid his wrath. He’s not one of us. . . he is so much more. Come on, Jacob, we have somewhere we need to be.”

Neither man spoke until they were along the river. Elder looked at Jacob and said, “I believe we have one more prayer to say. Can we do it together?”

“Yes, my dear friend, it will be an honor.”

Together they knelt in the soft sand beside the river and prayed for The Creator to bless them by allowing them to remember the Seventh Gift wherever they might go. Though they prayed separately, they prayed together, two old friends doing the thing they had done so long ago, except this time for the right reasons.”

They stood and Elder asked a question. “Will we remember this in the life we will soon be living?”

“I don’t know,” said Jacob Potter. “Now, it’s all in the hands of The Creator.”

“Yes it is,” said Elder, “and they are good hands. I just pray that this time I will know what great hands they are.”

Jacob smiled.

“Will we see The Creator again,” asked Elder.

“Yes, my friend, soon,” said Jacob.

As they arrived at the cove, Elder once more smelled the aroma of honeysuckle and heard the waves lapping upon the shore and he was happy. A thick mist was moving in from the river and at the end of the cove a bright light was glowing. As Elder and Jacob walked toward the light Jacob Potter reached for Elder’s hand and held it. Together, they walked into the light.”

The very instant the two friends touched the light, two children were born and began their lives somewhere in The Creator’s universe.

THE END

No man will know eternity for certain until he is fully a part of it

The Seventh Gift of God is a novel, a work of fiction. No writer has ever died and returned to report the events following his death.

The work is based on Deism, a belief in God which relies on reason, observation, and logic. It is the same Deistic belief shared by such men as the founding fathers of the United States

Benjamin Franklin
Ethan Allen
George Washington
James Madison
Thomas Jefferson
Thomas Paine

and other notable men and leaders such as

Adam Smith	Keith R. Wright
Albert Einstein	Lysander Spooner
Alexander Pope	Mark Akenside
Antony Flew	Mark Twain
Cicero	Marlon Brando
David Hume	Matthew Tindal
Edward Herbert	Maximilien
Elihu Palmer	Robespierre
Frederick the Great	Moses Mendelssohn
Gotthold Ephraim	Napoleon Bonaparte
Lessing	Paul Davies
Brett Gurewitz	Victor Hugo
John Locke	Voltaire
John Toland	William Hogarth