

THE PLANNED ENCOUNTER

I am writing you these words from Crestview, FL. We got off to a late start, but made pretty good time getting to our lodging. Upon exiting the interstate, we immediately noticed the engine making a peculiar sound. As we pulled under the awning of our hotel, a young man sitting just outside said, "Hey! I took a couple of years of mechanics school in college; maybe I can help." I said, "Well, let me get us checked in and I'll be back." So, I checked us in, took my wife to the comforts of our room while I went downstairs to park the car, not really expecting to see the young man again. And I didn't at first, but as I approached the car, I saw him approaching me asking, "Would you like me to check it out?" I said, "Sure, if you don't mind." The young man crawled up under the car, made a diagnosis and suggested I get to a mechanic soon. I introduced myself; he smiled and said, "My name is Jacob Copeland." I then inquired, "Jacob, if you were to die today, do you know for sure you would go to heaven?" I did not know that just days before, Jacob had experienced a near death experience. I could tell my question penetrated and hit a nerve.

In years of witnessing, I have learned the value of listening. In my early days of witnessing I insisted on dominating the conversation. As a matter of fact, in Bible college we were taught to not let the prospect get off the proverbial hook by their questions and diverting conversation. I am learning through the years that if we allow them to open up, they will lead us to the very place God wants to meet them. For instance, in John, chapter four we see the woman at the well told Jesus just enough information that He seized the moment with a most pertinent answer. When she began to talk about the right place to worship in Jerusalem or Samaria, Jesus instructed, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Our Lord was pointing out it was not a place, but a personal relationship.

Jacob opened up and told me about two of his relatives very near and dear to him that had passed away. He went to their funerals held inside the church and it upset him so much that he decided he was through with church because of the bad memories of loved ones who died. After some coaxing, he visited a church recently with his girlfriend, and then he told me, "After about an hour, all these memories began to flood my mind. And it was like the Devil was on one of my shoulders saying, 'Get out of here now,' and an angel was on the other shoulder saying, 'Stay.' Finally, I had all I could take and I got in my red Firebird and sped out of the parking lot. While going down the road, I began to beat on my steering wheel

asking what is this all about: why am I going through this? The next thing I knew, I looked up and a deer had run in front of me. I swerved to miss it and went into the ditch and flipped the car three times.” When Jacob came back to consciousness, nurses were asking him why was he alive. Jacob had flat lined, was declared dead and the sheet was pulled over his head. Thirty minutes later they had not unplugged him and his blood pressure began to rise. They pulled off the sheet and to the dismay of the medical staff he was very alive!

Jacob said, “You may find this hard to believe, but it was like I was outside of myself and could see them pulling the sheet over my head.” He went on to explain it was like one of the videos at a funeral where they show the deceased when he was a baby, then as a child growing up until the day he dies. Jacob said that was the way he saw himself; he saw his life from beginning to the end. Only it had not ended...not yet anyway.

I pressed him now by saying, “God is definitely trying to get your attention.” He said, “I’m just a southern rebel.” (He’s from Vidalia, GA). I said, “There’s nothing wrong with being southern, but you don’t want to be a rebel from God.” I added, “Do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?” He answered, “Yes sir.” I told him that the Bible says, “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). “...Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (II Corinthians 6:2). I said, “You have been running from God; it’s time to stop running. I showed him in the Bible how if he had died without Christ, he would have gone to Hell. I shared with him Rev. 20:14 and 15: “And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.” I then quoted Luke 16:23 and 24, “And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” We should never be timid about talking about the ramifications of death outside of Christ, “The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death” (Proverbs 14:27). I then showed him from the Scriptures that he was a sinner separated from God. Then I took him to the cross where Christ was beaten, bruised and bloodied and then died for our sins. I told Jacob that a few years ago I went to the very tomb where our Lord was buried and then I said, “Jacob, do you know what I saw?” He, with wide eyes, asked, “What?” I replied, “Nothing! Because Christ is risen from the dead!” I preached a little more and then finally I said, “Jacob, are you ready to ask the Lord to save you?” He said “Yes sir, I am!” With heart-felt repentance, he asked the Lord to forgive him and to save him and he declared he was turning his life over to Christ. He then said, “And Lord, I also give you my child that is about to be born and my future wife.” When he was through praying he was smiling from ear to ear and his eyes were bright and shining. By the way, he is now intent on getting baptized in a Bible-believing Baptist Church when he gets home and he now has

every intention on marrying the girl that is carrying his child. I explained that, in Christ, he is now a new creature (II Corinthians 5:17), his sins are forgiven. I hugged his neck and told him I loved him and gave him my address. He told me he will be getting back in touch with me to tell me how things are going.

As my wife and I planned our stay, we did not know we were going to meet Jacob. God knew we would. As I contemplate this day, I see in hindsight, God planned it all. We were late in getting our start, our plans were to leave earlier. Looking back now, I realize we left right on time. I'll even go so far to say, even with the malfunctioning vehicle, God was in it. God will break a car to win a soul. The Bible says, "O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). We do not have the wisdom to know what God knows, but when we allow him to direct our steps, do not be surprised when He directs you to a soul that is ready to be saved. "A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Prov. 3:5, 6).

As the day draws to an end, my heart is full. Before we left home, I packed our Suburban with Gospel tracts. Does a man go hunting without ammunition? Does a person go fishing without his pole or bait? A few years ago, I rededicated my life to be a better soul winner. "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise" (Proverbs 11:30). I must from time to time renew my dedication to this most important task. I remember Dr. John R. Rice used to say, "Nothing is nearer to the heart of God than soul winning. Lost sinners are who He had in mind when Christ died on the cross." The Bible says, "When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand" (Ezekiel 33:8). Paul gave God the glory as he declared, "Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men" (Acts 20:26). Our Lord has planned encounters for you and for me. Stay soul-conscious. Keep your heart open. Jesus said, "...Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

During the Civil War, a soldier enlisted late and was not able to learn all the bugle sounds and the messages they conveyed. The bugle sounded, and the command to charge was given—and he charged. When it was realized that the enemy was getting the best of them, the bugle sounded retreat. The new country boy did not know what that meant, so he kept charging. The evening wore on and there was no sign of the new recruit. As the men gathered around the camp fire wondering if he were dead or captured, the sound of rustling was heard through the trees. The sentinel threw his rifle to his shoulder and hollered, "Halt! Who goes there?" Lo and behold! it was the new recruit carrying a wounded enemy soldier over his shoulders. He smiled and said in his colloquial speech, "This here one is mine! Go get you one! The woods is full of 'em!" May I say, let us all go get some! The woods are full of them! "And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the

highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Johnny Pope". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.