

## Only The Good Die Young

In Ezekiel, “Thus Ezekiel is unto you a miracle; according to all that he has done shall ye do: and when this comes, ye shall know that I am the Lord Jehovah. Also, thou son of man, shall it not be in the day when I take from them their strength, the joy of their splendor, the desire of their eyes, and that whereupon they set their souls, their sons and their daughters, that he that escapes in that day shall come unto thee, to cause thee to hear it with thine ears? In that day shall thy mouth be opened to him who is escaped, and thou shalt speak, and be dumb no more; and thou shalt be a miracle to them; and they shall know that I am Jehovah.” xxiv. 24-27.

“Only the good die young,” the crooner used to wail over the radio. It was a mean and deadly game of chicken the children played back in the day. And all those boys knew they got beat after he decided to join them. That conspiracy has remained undisclosed because their secret belonged only to them and no one is allowed to know. The one who directed the silence is gone with the flood of life at its end in this material world. And this hidden mystery must now be revealed.

“We’re going out of town on a business trip with dad,” the next closest in age older brother beamed in announcement to him at the dinner table. The whole family sat there looking at him right after the oddly fashioned prayer that each night began our evening meal. Every Monday their father would leave the house and not come back until Friday, his job was traveling salesmen with a territory covering the State of Michigan. The marvel of being able to leave the house and seeing the great world beyond the woods suddenly beckoned. He wanted to know when they could go. Now it was time for attention from his father. He had arrived of age with the two older brothers and would share now in their fathers love. “You’re too little. You can’t go,” that brother seemed to gloat, as his young heart sank in the body of a two maybe three-year-old boy. “But I am big now,” the little boy defended looking with pleading eyes to their father dreaming of

going down roads by his side. “No, you have to stay,” their mother interjected as the father callously looked to her and away. “See,” the pleased brother said to assert his dominance, “you have to stay, mother said,” to end the conversation as the little boy swore that no one would see tears or watch him cry as his young heart silently broke. They came back later with the fish that was caught and made him eat it.

He took to climbing trees and could make it to the very tops of the highest oaks and held fast while sailing away in the breeze. What will life bring in the future, because soon these trees will no longer hold him and his infant fears are now mastered? He wanted to know to become a prophet just like in the Sunday School Bible stories. He wanted to be brave just like Elijah and Daniel. He wanted to show God just how brave he could be. He wanted God to teach him to be a prophet. He knew that other little boys wouldn't and couldn't climb trees like him. But it would take much more than this to convince God that he is brave enough to become a prophet. And anyway, just how is it that a prophet knows that a lion will not eat him? What causes that?

The mother knew the little boy climbed but did not realize what he could do and neither did the brothers that were sent off to school on the yellow bus. The father never bothered to ask. The little boy learned by the doing he was big but they would all have made him to stop. So, he never told them. One day at the edge of their lot the trees gave way to a clearing and a new house being built. The older boys from the neighborhood could be heard playing there. “Would you like to come and play in the house with us,” Steve Cook asked the little boy that day in Holland, Michigan from the foot of the steps on Oakwood Avenue. He was surprised on this acceptance. He did not get turned away. He felt instantly gratified and finally satisfied as an accepted fellow boy. This older boy

welcomed in acknowledgment and did not mind a bit that he was younger than all of them.

“Sure,” the little boy agreed and walked the plank into the newly framed house going up. “We’re playing on the roof. But you can’t come with us if you are going to tell your mother,” the rule was explained on the first floor landing to the newcomer. “Are you going to tell your mother,” the Cook boy demanded before letting him climb up the stairs. “No,” the little boy promised. “Are you sure,” he wanted reassurance. “No, I won’t tell,” the taste of frustration started to rise up over the doubt of his word and the fear of being turned now away. One of the other boys close by interjected, “I don’t think we should let him.” The Cook boy ruled for all of them who were now all gathered around the little boy for their inspection, “don’t worry he’ll be all right.” Then climbing the stairs they went with the acceptance of all.

And there they all were together on that framed roof up on the top of the house. The peak was a long straight one. The rafters were on twelve-inch centers because of the heavy snows from off Lake Michigan. The game was real simple. They did not think he could play. “Can you stand on the peak,” the Cook boy asked. But some of the boys did not really want to know. “No, don’t let him,” one of the boys answered quickly. Another responded, “Don’t worry, he won’t try.” “You can’t do it,” taunted the voice of another. “I think I can,” the little boy responded who now could prove how big he was to everyone that doubted. “Let’s see,” the Cook boy dared.

“He won’t be able to stand up,” one of the boys’ smirked while he sat with his arms and legs hugging the rafters. Why would he say that? The little boy thought. Then slowly where they all gathered to watch he ventured to stand on the peak. The legs

presented a wobble but straightened as the arms were outstretched in balance as the little boy proudly stood tall. You just said that because you can't, the little boy thought of that challenger when noting the sheepish look now on the unbeliever. "You can't walk on it," taunted the voice of another who challenged because he must have done the deed. "I did it," another boy crowed. With questioning eyes he looked at the leader who said, "Its ok, you don't have to." "I'll try," the little boy answered where he sat proud in victory over fear, now realizing the amusement here is not over. And then rising, he gingerly began putting one step ahead of the other. He quickly taught himself that the right foot could be placed where the rafters met the center timber and more surface area could be used for footing for that first step. It's like being in the trees the little boy thought suddenly growing bigger as the steps were slowly taken. If the mind just concentrates on putting one foot ahead of the other, the fear is easily conquered just like in the trees. Only instead of putting one hand in front of the other the foot is kind of climbing instead, as the sport was quickly mastered. The boy proudly smiled to them all realizing it was easier to balance while moving than it was to stand tall. "But you have to do it without looking down where your going to put your feet," came the dare from one of the smug faces who did it. The boys, who couldn't, dropped their eyes and faces in shame while he looked for confirmation. "Is that really the way you're doing it," the boy questioned this revelation. "Yes, but that is ok. You're a brave boy. You don't have to try," the Cook boy encouraged him to stop. "We know you are not afraid. But this game is too big for you," he did not realize saying the dare. But if it can be done and you are doing this, so can I the boy thought. "Watch me try," the boy said who would not be cowed. He was a big boy now. He'd somehow show them just like he did already. Since, they can do it. He

can, too.

No one knew that he had mastered the art of climbing oak trees. He knew better than to tell. Those big oaks grew in an area of the State called a snow belt from the lake effect. That swath of land in the eastern section for the lower State of Michigan would receive tremendous snowfall each winter from the moisture collecting from off the great lake. The long branches of the oak trees would become deformed growing out and slightly down from the weight of these snows each winter. Catching the ends and pulling, those large lower limbs could be bent to the grasp by reaching up with a stick. The boy would scamper up the bough like a squirrel he congratulated himself. The thinner limbs above could be caught too and pulled down to continue the climb. Then, the branches became closer along the trunk of the tree as he ascended. Sometimes the descent though brought a wrenching grip of fear to his gut. It is easier to conquer going up then coming down. At times, he had to let go of one bending branch to catch in hand the one his feet would purchase below. If he didn't, he could be found out stuck up in a tree. And like a cat caught up in a tree sometimes it would take time to muster the courage to come down again to the ground.

But how will he do this? He worked to understand as the walk down the peak on the roof frame began. Since the other boys are doing it there must be a way this can be done. They can do it and he can too. He knew how to place each foot just so every six inches to slightly catch each rafter on the right foot with the left perfectly in between. The rhythm for each step formed a pattern as the body slightly rocked in motion, but where to look if he can't watch his step? His mind raced and a plan of attack slowly formed. The eyes will be brought up ahead just a little forward for each step is how they are doing it,

he comprehended. The pattern formed by the falling footsteps must not be changed one bit, he knew. The rafter end could be felt underfoot of the thin canvas boat shoe. The eyes slowly lifted as each step was taken in turn. And continuing, he determined to just keep moving and the fears could not find place in the busy mind. And then the thought struck him. He did it while proudly continuing and then stopping for a return to the scene. "Did you do it," they all wanted to know. "Yes," the boy affirmed simply. Some wanted to doubt but they could not after a slight argument arose. "You really did it, didn't you," the Cook boy decided when proud assertive eyes met his gaze. "But you stopped too soon," came the rejoinder from another boy. "You have to go all the way," another agreed. They would not concede victory to the youngest of the lot. "You don't have to do that. Don't listen to them. They are just saying that because some of them can't do what you just did. You are brave. You can stop. You don't have to do it," the Cook boy observed thinking the boy must have his fill by now. "You know the rules. The winner has to walk all the way to the end without looking. He still did not win," the boys all agreed in defiance of their leader.

Then the boy took the dare and began walking down the beam again without looking. He wanted to make it all the way to the end if it could be done. So he moved before anyone had the idea to say no. The concept was learned and applied that with each step the eyes would slowly rise on ahead. And then off to the side in the distance the last rafter to the left in the series came into focus. His eyes wandered down its slope and became fixated. He was not looking ahead but off to the side. If something happened, he would grab hold of a rafter just like grabbing a tree branch underneath to stop the fall. As each step brought the boy closer, the reality of besting them all in this amusement

approached, too. All he had to do was concentrate on that final rafter because it met at the peak for its end. At that point he would stop and grab hold as the picture in the mind grew to become firm and an established dependable fact. Then the boys started hollering. He heard them telling him to stop. But the perception was clear, he was safe. And the voices grew louder in protesting shouts because they did not want him to win. He wouldn't let them break his concentration. He kept in focus a place on that board before his sight. In his minds eye he could see where the end rafter met the beam where he could not look. In just a few more feet the beams end would soon be reached and then he would stoop down and hug the end. Their shouts could not stop him. No one could stop him. They would all know. He'd show them. He was a big boy now. Why did the left foot not find the center beam like usual? He wondered for a moment and then stopped.

The crook of his legs was caught in the scaffold brace that hung cantilevered out from the house after finding the bottom brace slamming into his back arresting his fall. He was surprised to see the angle iron he grabbed. Then he promptly swung down and dropped to the base for the new fireplace. And looking up from the foundation, he saw why his foot did not touch wood. It wasn't there. He had just walked off the end of the roof peak to this house. His final step had plunged his body from the roofline headfirst with a 90-degree twist into the basement. The scaffold hanger was nailed into the side of the house and the scaffold board had been removed. A few inches here or there in the hanger placement and he would have died young. An angel must have intervened and told that carpenter where to nail that steel scaffold hanger against the sealing joist running around the belt of the house. Another must have commanded the scaffold board to be removed. He just got delivered from instant death by more than one angel sent by Jesus.

He was able to recognize.

“Are you all right, you must be hurt,” the Cook boy alone had the nerve to go and find him outside of the basement standing in the yard silently looking back to what had just gone before. “How come you’re not hurt,” their leader asked looking the boy over close. “What happened, you don’t even have a scratch,” he wanted this extraordinary development explained. “The scaffold hanger caught the crook in my legs. Then I grabbed the steel brace right there and swung down,” the boy matter of fact showed him to explain. And as the scene became concrete the Cook boy took in the obvious, “You’re supposed to be dead. Are you scared?” As the boy considered the question and answer for a response, his perception told him the Cook boy wouldn’t believe. So he didn’t bother to say. It’s a little too late to be scared. “Yes,” he readily agreed to appease him. “Do you want to go home,” the Cook boy wanted to know. “Yes,” the boy agreed again to appease him, but hadn’t really given that idea a thought. He was alone in contemplation of the Divine and did not want to bother trying to relate. “Are you going to tell your mother,” he peppered the boys’ mind with silly questions as the shock of near death and newly found life took precedent over any other consideration. “You can’t go home now. You have to go back into that house and climb back up on that roof. What you did today shows that you are very brave. But if you go home now without going back up there and doing it again, you will live in fear for the rest of your life. You will become a coward,” the Cook boy threatened. The secret about what we were doing in the house needs to be kept too the boy honestly assessed. But what if this con to keep our secret really is true the boy marveled at this extraordinary development coming immediately upon being born again. Why take a chance on growing to become a man who lives afraid in life, he decided.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” the boy chorused. “You think you can,” the Cook boy said challenging and frustrating the boy. Didn’t you just hear me say I would do it? The boy had decided. He turned in defiant silence to calmly walk back for victory over the unknown without deigning a reply.

The other boys will try and stop me or I might lose nerve in stopping to talk. The boy understood as the game continued to play. He knew better than to halt for their questions over seeing him alive and unscathed. He decided not to even acknowledge them with his eyes as he went for the last round. “Are you all right,” the first of the boys wanted an answer as the rest of the boys sheepishly came through the house. “Why didn’t you stop, we hollered,” exclaimed the frightened other. “Where are you going,” cried the last voice as he smoothly walked past them on the first floor landing without admitting their presence. And up to the roof on the steps he climbed past a terrified straggler, before anyone could make him stop for an answer. No one was there to watch him begin. All the other players had enough and were successfully left behind with the Cook boy out in the yard where it was safe for all of them. The knees were wobbly as he straightened, one more time for the final turn. A new violent shake in the legs presented which wasn’t there before. His legs weren’t shaking like this the other times the boy recalled. And the lessons of only moments before continued as he willed the feet to step along the way. Maybe the Cook boy is right, the boy pondered as the concentration to stay alive now took place over the fear of death as the tremors calmed and then ceased. And slowly the eyes lifted from the narrow way on the board before him to the horizon at the end of the roofline. This time he noticed. The chimney was to be placed inside the house. The outside two rafters did not meet at the peak. The thought then suddenly struck his mind.

God just saved his life. And he went right back up and did it again. Sorry Jesus, he prayed now embarrassed at discovering his evil. The boy tempted God by doing it, again. He climbed down from the roof peak of the house and out the front door and down the plank to find all the other boys waiting to hear the word.

“Did you do it,” the Cook boy asked for them as only their eyes met outside on the firm sandy soil. “Yes,” the boy honestly replied to claim victory and the honor as bravest of all. “No, you didn’t,” exclaimed a sore loser. “You couldn’t do it without looking,” another agreed, while the boy continued to disdain them. “Did you look,” the Cook boy wanted to judge as they continued to measure each other. “No, I didn’t look,” the boy boldly answered yet shamed for tempting God and fate. “You are a very brave boy,” the Cook boy ruled for them all while neither would avert their gaze. “But now you are going to have to do something even harder. Or it will all be for nothing. You can’t tell anybody,” the leader of the pack wanted the boy to agree. He considered this development as another ruse to keep hidden what we were not supposed to be doing. But what if he is telling the truth? What possible gain could be had for the telling? The winner must keep silent the boy knew when now examining the pasty faces of the scared beaten crew. Their fear of corporal punishment was telling and all very real. The boy understood their fate was now his responsibility and listened for the explanation to begin.

“Bravery isn’t about what others think. It is what you believe about yourself. You don’t need anyone to know you are brave. You know now that you are brave,” the Cook boy bragged to them that day encouraging the boy to stay true. “Okay,” the boy agreed and then said, “I’m going home now,” as the game was over and he was through. “You won’t tell, promise,” a boy pleaded. “I just said,” the boy angrily turned and confronted

the doubter of his word. Then he left them. And as he walked alone under the trees to his home prayers were made for forgiveness and compassion for the tempting of God and the bold defiance of death.

“What did you do today,” his close older brother asked him that night. The boy fought back the bile of confession wondering if the secret was known. “Nothing,” he told the first lie of life to the brother not knowing if he was already caught. And as the heart raced and flushed the face hot with blood the worry that obviously something is wrong could be told. Those searching eyes will find out all while he willed himself to remain stoically calm. “Well, let me tell you what I did,” and the boy was relieved as the big brother confirmed his ignorance of the drama that took place just next door. And as the next older brother spoke the secret then started to become real. Then as the story of what else occurred that day was busily told, the brother did not notice the inner turmoil that the boy feared would tell all. “Me and Buck were out in the canoe trying to catch turtles. We were over on the other side of the bay from Bucks house and there are turtles bobbing on the top of the water everywhere. We would get right up to them with a big net at the end of a long pole and try and scoop them up. But right before we could catch them, under the water they would go,” he beamed over the adventure that was shared by close friends. Quickly, the boy planned out asking a question about turtles to hide his troubled soul from his brothers questioning eyes. “How close did you get to catching one,” the boy asked slowly to hide the tone of voice that may betray all. Tomorrow will be different the boy considered as the turtle story continued. One of the other boys will tell him, he hid the next day in his worried mind. The secret at heart will be known. Everyone will be angry, and now the close elder brother for being calmly told a big fat lie. The sin of

tempting God is now compounded but the boy could not betray a trust and tell all. That day came and went without the dreaded confrontation as the boy considered his fate. When the coming days and time went by, he knew. Those older neighborhood boys are hiding this from the brother, his best friend and everyone. Nobody knows, but us. The boy was now trapped by their game.

“Class we have a special visitor here in our Sunday school today. Her name is introduced. She wants to come and greet you. There is something that she has to say. I told her it would be all right,” the teacher explained to the class. “The reason I wanted to see all of you and look upon your faces was because I need to tell you about my dream. It was the most powerful spiritual experience of my life and God told me to tell you,” the lady confessed to the enraptured children who had only heard mystical stories read to them out of the Word and explained to them before by the Sunday school teacher. “In that dream, I was told that one of you here will live to teach people all about the Bible. I asked your teacher if I could come in and look at all of you. You need to understand. I don’t know which one of you the Lord spoke to me about but one of you here is a very special child of God. It is important that one day you will remember what I told you,” the lady prophesied at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Holland, Michigan in the early 1960’s. And looking around the room the boy considered. It can’t be a girl. And all the other boys are chicken. I am that boy.