



THE WAGER

*Marcus Bach
(as told by Lawrence F. Green)*



At a religious conference in California I met a retired clergyman, Lawrence F. Green, of Stockton. I said to him, “In looking back over your fifty years in the ministry, what stands out as your greatest experience?”

He replied at once, “That day I preached the sermon God told me to preach.”

It happened during the early days of his first pastorate in a wide-open western town in North Dakota, a frontier town full of “blind pigs,” gamblers, and gunmen who defied the law.

One Monday as young Pastor Green sat down to outline a sermon for the next week’s church service, he visualized, as he had done often before, his struggling congregation of well-intentioned parishioners. It was a small flock of thirty-five who came regularly to the services, listened to his words, and tried as best they could to “live the life.” This Monday, as always, the minister selected a text he was quite sure would serve: “Blessed are the

meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

As he reflected on these words, it seemed as if he heard a voice saying to him, “What about the people who aren’t meek and who never come to church? Preach to them for a change. Don’t preach about the meek. Preach Galatians 6:7.”

Pastor Green turned the pages of his Bible to the text in Galatians that says, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” All that week he struggled with the question of whether he truly had heard the voice of God speaking to him.

When the night before he was to preach came he was in such a quandary that he went to his study and dropped to his knees. “O God,” he prayed, “if You want me to preach a sermon from that text, it is up to You to send the people to church who never ordinarily come. If you will send them to the service, I will preach whatever You want me to say.”

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As he prayed he could hear the Saturday night sounds with their usual note of noise and violence. The first automobile had just been introduced in town, and drunken horseback riders were daring the automobile driver to race with them. Over the commotion came the bellowing voice of pistol-toting Big Tim who was once more running afoul of the law and vociferously arguing with the sheriff.

Pastor Green listened in his study as he gazed down at Galatians 6:7. "If the people come," he said half-aloud, "I will use that text." Was God given to bargaining? He did not know. There were many things his years of training for the ministry had not revealed to him. But he could not doubt that he had heard a voice and that something in his heart said, "There is a sermon God wants you to preach."

Where was the sermon? For the first time in his career he had nothing written out on the eve of the Sabbath. No notes. No outline. It was a new experience and an awkward one, a kind of "wrestling with an angel."

Sunday came. After breakfast he went to his study to select the hymns and a Scripture reading. He also recited his customary morning prayer, but running through his mind like a thundering herd were the words "Preach that sermon!"

As he left the parsonage with his wife, she asked, "What are you preaching about this morning?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You don't know?" she exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"I don't have a sermon," he replied. "Today the Lord must truly put the words into my mouth."

His wife, sensing his concern, said quietly, "I am sure He will."

They made their way to the simple white-frame steepled church as they had many times before. This morning things seemed different. This Sabbath was uncommonly quiet. There was a somber feeling about this overcast morning, and the clang of the church bell sounded like an alarm. The customary, "Good morning, pastor," and "Well, here it is Sunday again" went almost unheard. What Pastor Green remembered most was the reassuring touch of his wife's hand and her confident words, "I am sure He will."

He walked slowly up the narrow center aisle to the pulpit and seated himself in the high-backed chair while the woman at the portable organ played her customary prelude. He closed his eyes, carrying in his vision the people in the pews. They were his usual flock, the folks who always came. He knew them well. They were the meek. They were his people.

So, Lord, he said to himself while the organ played, here we are as we have been many times before. I thought that today a kind of miracle might happen. I felt it in my soul that this

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morning would be something special, but we are here as usual.

Meditating along these lines, he suddenly heard a sound above the organ's tones. In the church yard a number of galloping horses were slowing to a halt. There were voices outside the door, loud voices that soon dropped to a respectful whisper. Then he heard a shuffling of feet down the aisles of the church. He fought back an impulse to open his eyes. In his innermost mind he knew what was happening: God was keeping His part of the bargain.

He opened his eyes and saw a congregation such as he had never seen before. The meek and lowly had been joined by more than seventy of the bold and haughty! They sat there dressed as for a Saturday night, men and women who had never been in church, not even for a funeral. They were here now, and as he asked them to rise for the invocation he stood face to face with his own terms. Even while he prayed aloud, another prayer was going through his mind: *O God, give me the strength and the words to fulfill my part of the bargain we have made!*

His parishioners gazed at him as if asking what magic had lured these non-churchgoers to the service or what plot they might be hatching by their presence. He caught a reassuring glance from his wife that reflected his own thought: *they are here because God brought them.*

Then there was a restless stir. Big Tim, six-foot-six and wearing his pistol belt over his cowboy togs, had entered. Big Tim sauntered up the center aisle and took a place next to a most respectable elderly woman parishioner. With remarkable politeness, she handed him an open hymnal, and Big Tim stood there book in hand while the people sang, "Safely through another week, Thou hast brought us on our way."

The time came for the sermon. As Pastor Green slowly turned the pages of the large pulpit Bible, his affection for the Lord and His Word became a fellow-feeling for all people. He had looked for an opportunity to lay down the law, but now he wanted only a chance to remind men of God's love.

"Dear friends," he heard himself say, "our text for today is found in Galatians 6:7, where we read, 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.'"

Several of the meek caught their breath and glanced about uneasily, but under his gaze they finally decided he might also have included them in this unflinching text.

"God," Pastor Green proclaimed, "is saying to us here that we ourselves set the judgment of our own souls. He is warning us that our sins will find us out and that the things we do fashion our lives and the lives of others. God, as we all know, hates sin but loves the

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sinner. He sees something of Himself in every man. He sees Himself in you and me because we are made in His image. The more power and authority He gives a man, the more He expects that man to do His will, and that goes for Big Tim here as well as for me.”

For the first time in his ministry Pastor Green was speaking as men of Bible times must have spoken when they were “in the spirit.” For once the people listened as though waiting his command. They sat in agreement as he cited the lawlessness and evil rampant in the community. They heard him warn Big Tim of “the fearful harvest that must be reaped if the seeds of sin continue to be sown.” They saw through his eyes how a loving Father denounced wickedness and longed for order and peace.

“This day,” he prophesied, “God has come to our town to triumph over evil and to transfer the bent toward violence into a force for good. For if our freedom leads only to license, think what cowards we must be in His sight!”

The organist was so absorbed she forgot to play the response after the sermon-prayer. For once the people wanted their pastor to keep on speaking after the appointed time. Even the benediction was different. “God,” said Pastor Green, “has brought us here this morning to enter into a new covenant with Him this day.”

When he went to the door to shake hands

with the people, he was tempted to ask every visitor, “What put it into your heart to come this morning?” He especially wanted to ask Big Tim, but he refrained. The time had come to trust and believe. So he grasped each hand and said, “God bless you.” Big Tim responded, “Bless you, too, Parson. You preached just what we came to hear.”

There were tears in the eyes of his parishioners as they tarried after church-time. One man said in a shaky voice, “This is what I’ve been praying for.” A woman told Pastor Green, “I knew this would happen someday.” Mrs. Green put her hand in his and said, “Neither we nor others will ever be the same after today.”

That was literally true. Throughout the town and for miles around, people talked about the sermon, about the miracle of attendance, and about the changes that were already beginning to be felt in individual lives.

On Wednesday, which was mail day, Pastor Green went to the post office. Here everyone commented on the “Galatian Sermon,” but it was the postmaster who took him aside and said, “Say, pastor, Big Tim said your sermon was such a humdinger that he is going to help clean up the town and cooperate with the sheriff in enforcing the law—and Big Tim always keeps his word. Do you know why he came to the service and why all the other folks came along? Big Tim lost a gambling bet,

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that's why. Lost it late the night before you preached. After practically losing his shirt he said to those who were crowding around the table, 'If I lose this next poker hand, danged if I don't go to church in the morning!' He lost all right and everybody came to church to see whether he'd really be there. Oh, he always keeps his word."

"You can say he came to church because

of the gambling debt," said Pastor Green doggedly, "but God knew that Big Tim and all the rest of them were coming to church as long ago as last *Monday morning!*"

"How come?" exclaimed the postmaster. "It just happened last night."

"Because that's just the way the good Lord works," said Pastor Green, and then he turned and walked thoughtfully away. ✂