

Chapter 1

Please, God, Be Careful!

An American president, speaking to an audience of women, read a letter that he had received from the mother of a U. S. serviceman. This is what it said:

“A week ago my son was still enrolled in the college of his choice. Tonight he’s in a strange motel somewhere. Tomorrow he steps onto an airplane which will take him far away. He enlisted in a branch of the U. S. armed forces.

“During these past weeks I’ve sensed and seen him ... in the process of pulling away, cutting the cord, getting ready to leave the nest. I saw him bequeath some valuable possessions, like his penny collection and his baseball cards. They went to a couple of small boys in his Pied Piper following on the block.”

The mother said she had watched him wax his new car. And he had told her she was a great cook. And she wrote, “So I now take my place among the thousands of other mothers who through the years have watched as their feelings were not so different from mine tonight.

“Actually,” she said, “it’s all quite appropriate. This is a guy who grew up in a room wallpapered with flags and muskets and drums. He regularly ran Old Glory up the flagpole in the backyard before breakfast in those days. He and his big brother had G. I. Joe uniforms sizes 4 and 6.”

She went on, “I remember seeing them sneak up the little hill in the neighbor lady’s backyard on their stomachs. I wonder how many times I’ve picked up little plastic army men from under the furniture. All those toys and memories have been packed away for years, but I feel the need to bring them out and handle them tonight.

“He has examined the options, as I suggested. The choices he’s made are taking him far away from me. He believes there are opportunities for him in education, travel and experience.

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No doubt there are.” He thinks he’s getting a good deal. No doubt he is.

“Personally, I’m inclined to believe the country is getting a good deal. In exchange for all their provisions, they’re getting one tall, tanned fellow with summer-bleached hair, a sharp young mind and more potential and possibilities than I have space to describe.”

And then she concluded, “Thank you for taking the time from running the nation to listen to the passions of a mother’s heart. And, please, will you be especially careful with the country right now?”

The president replied solemnly, “I will be very careful with the country just now.”

A mother’s letter to an American president. And there were tears all over the audience. The first lady, sitting on the platform near her husband, had big tears running down her cheeks.

It’s good that he was speaking to an audience of women, for men might have cried too. And men try not to cry - except when it’s very dark and very still and no one is listening but God.

There’s so much that is wrong with our world right now - so much that technology can’t fix. It seems to be so fragile. It trembles and quakes and convulses as if about to break up. Solid earth isn’t so solid anymore. It slides into the sea. It sinks into the mud. It washes away in the floods that follow the fires. It blows away. Stronger hands than those of even our best leaders are needed now.

It is no wonder that from uncounted hearts there rises like incense the silent, unspoken cry, “Please, God, be very careful with our little world!”

And with good reason. For our world really is little - so little that it seems it would never be missed if suddenly it should disappear. Mark Twain, in his story Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven, shared a tale that was obviously intended to be completely absurd. Captain Stormfield, the story goes, had died and was on his way to heaven, but was unable to resist the

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temptation to race with a comet. He ended up way off course, in a sort of heavenly “missing persons bureau.” An angel, wanting to help, went up in a balloon alongside a huge map of the universe, hoping to locate our solar system. The map was about the size of the whole state of Rhode Island. Three days later the angel came back down to report that he might have found our solar system, but he couldn’t be sure. It might have been just flyspecks!

Just an absurd piece of exaggeration. Never intended to be taken seriously. But we know now that Mark Twain may not have been so far off. We are like a tiny cinder on the edge of the universe. Could the Creator ever be concerned with us? Does He even know that we are here?

It was David who wrote, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” Psalm 8:3, 4, NIV.

Some believe that visitors from outer space are circling the earth, looking us over, wondering about us. But the astronomer Carl Sagan discounts such an idea. He says there’s nothing very interesting, nothing special about our planet. He describes it as “where the action isn’t.”

But our little world is so important, and so frightening, to us. It’s so full of trouble and confusion and hate. And it’s hurtling so fast - somewhere. We have a feeling that something is very wrong. We live in the atmosphere of expected crisis. Are we about to collide with something - or burn up - or explode - or perhaps be sucked into one of those black holes they talk about? What if God should drop one of those black holes? What if He should drop us?

Years ago a popular song was pleading, “Stop the world! I want to get off!” It was a clever title. Some took it seriously even then. Today we all do. If only there were some escape - somewhere to go - somewhere safe - before the planet we’re riding goes up in smoke.

God said through the prophet Isaiah, “The earth will wear out like a garment.” Isaiah 51:6, NIV.

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And do you recall these words from the book of Revelation? “The time has come for ... destroying those who destroy the earth.” Revelation 11:18, NIV. Does God know the trouble we’re in? Does He know we’re on this speeding, careening planet’ - and does He care? Are we on a collision course with doomsday? Can God correct our course the way NASA corrects the path of its spacecraft? And if He can, does He intend to - and in the nick of time?

NASA’s Voyager 2, after a four-year journey from earth, reached its closest encounter with Saturn’s rings right on time - almost on time. It was 2.7 seconds early! We marvel, and rightly, at such precision.

But if NASA can work such technological miracles, it NASA can boost a vehicle from here to Saturn’s rings - what about the One who made Saturn and the incredible beauty of its rings? Is His power less than that of the people He has made?

That’s another question that will have to be settled before we can sleep well at night. Did God create Saturn - and this world - and us? In the very first ten words of the Bible, the ancient and indestructible Book that claims to be the Word of God - in those very first words it says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis 1:1, NIV.

Did He - or didn’t He? If He did, then we have nothing to fear. But if He didn’t, then the Bible is a Book not to be trusted - and we’d better forget the idea of its being even a good book. If the Book is not what it claims to be, then it is the work of the worst impostor the world has ever known.

Yet impostor or not, the Author of the Bible puts its most incredible claim right up front, in the first ten words, making Himself vulnerable, as if to invite challenge. God stands or falls, and so does our personal security along with that of the universe, with the credibility of those ten words. For who of us can sleep peacefully tonight, believing that our future is in the hands of blind, bungling chance? Chance that, according to all the laws of probability, never created anything and never will.

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This is something that has to be settled before we can face the future with any confidence at all. Do we, or do we not, have a Creator? Were we made in the image of God, as the Book says? Or are we the hapless children of some cosmic accident, of some long-buried mystery that fizzled?

How can we pray to a God who lied to us in His first ten words - if He did? Our cry is lost before it gets through the ceiling if there is no one listening. It is mockery to pray to One we have written off as myth, as dead, or as a liar.

“Please, God, be very careful with our little world!” Such a prayer makes sense only as we believe that He is there, that He is listening, and that He really does hold this frightened, wobbly world in His hands!

Remember the song - the old spiritual that we all love? “He’s got the whole world in His hands... . He’s got the little tiny baby in His hands... . He’s got everybody in His hands.” Remember?

But did you know that this world, and the whole human race, trembled in His hands once - for a few moments? And not a soul knew!

It was a Thursday evening. Jesus and His closest friends - eleven of them - were on their way out of the city. Eleven of them, not twelve, for one had left the group a little while earlier. Jesus had sent him on an errand, they thought. But the errand was his own. He had gone to finalize a project he had been thinking about - the betrayal of his Lord. And only Jesus knew!

It was a beautiful spring evening. The moon was bright. But something was wrong. Something was wrong with Jesus. He seemed troubled, weighted down with some terrible problem that they could not understand. He must be very tired.

Leaving the others, He took three of His men deep into the garden. He needed them to share His terrible ordeal. He needed to know that they were waiting and praying nearby. But they understood not at all what was happening. How could the Messiah, the Son of God, need their prayers? Besides, they were exhausted. Twice He came back and found them asleep.

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So Jesus went on alone. And His unseen enemy was there waiting. This was his chance.

Try to forget the paintings of Gethsemane that you have seen. Jesus kneeling by a carefully chosen rock. His robe flawlessly draped. Every hair in place. Ready for the camera. No. It wasn't like that at all. Jesus was carrying the sins of the whole world that night. And the Father, though it caused Him exquisite pain to do it, must withdraw His presence from His Son. I picture Jesus falling prostrate on the cold ground, digging His fingers into the dirt as if to keep from being drawn still farther from His Father. Jesus had come to this planet to give His life for a lost race. All His life His footsteps had been leading straight to this hour. But now it loomed like a monster before Him. Was there no other way to save men? The tempter saw His human weakness and pressed his strongest arguments. Why should He die for a world that didn't even want to be saved? Why not call for a legion of angels to sweep Him back to heaven? Let men pay for their own sins!

The fate of the whole human race trembled in the balance as Jesus wrestled with the temptation to turn back. But no. The cry of a lost and lonely planet was ringing in His ears. He would go through with the decision that had brought Him to this world. And when Judas came with the cruel mob in search of Him, He stood tall and straight, ready for the cross that now in only hours would overtake Him.

And that's why you - and I - are safe in His hands. That's why we can sleep tonight unafraid, knowing that He will be very, very careful with our little world!