



The Three Trees

Once upon a mountaintop, three little trees stood and dreamed of what they wanted to become when they grew up.

The first little tree looked up at the stars and said: "I want to hold treasure. I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I'll be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!"

The second little tree looked out at the small stream trickling by on its way to the ocean. "I want to travel mighty waters and carry powerful kings. I'll be the strongest ship in the world!"

The third little tree looked down into the valley below where busy men and women worked in a busy town. "I don't want to leave the mountaintop at all. I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me, they'll raise their eyes to Heaven and think of God."



Years passed. The rain came, the sun shone, and the little trees grew tall. One day three woodcutters climbed the mountain.

The first woodcutter looked at the first tree and said, "This tree is beautiful. It is perfect for me." With a swoop of his shining ax, the first tree fell.

The second woodcutter looked at the second tree and said, "This tree is strong. It is perfect for me." With a swoop of his shining ax, the second tree fell.

The third tree felt her heart sink when the last woodcutter looked her way. She stood straight, tall, and pointed bravely to Heaven. But the woodcutter never even looked up. "Any kind of tree will do for me," he muttered. With a swoop of his shining ax, the third tree fell.

The first tree rejoiced when the woodcutter brought her to a carpenter's shop. But the carpenter fashioned the tree into a feed box for animals. The once beautiful tree was not covered with gold or filled with treasure. She was coated with sawdust and filled with hay for hungry livestock.

The second tree smiled when the woodcutter took her to a shipyard, but no mighty sailing ship was made that day. Instead the once strong tree was sawed and hammered into a simple fishing boat. She was too small and too weak to sail an ocean. Instead she was taken to a lake.

The third tree was confused when the woodcutter cut her into heavy beams and left her in a lumberyard. "What happened?" the once tall tree wondered. "All I ever wanted was to stay on the mountaintop and point to God."

Many, many days passed, and the three trees eventually forgot their dreams.

But one night, golden starlight poured over the first tree as a young woman placed her newborn baby in the feed box. "I wish I could make a cradle for him," her husband whispered. The mother squeezed his hand and smiled as the starlight shone on the smooth and sturdy wood.



"This manger is beautiful," she said. And suddenly the first tree knew he was holding the greatest treasure in the world.

One evening 30 years later a tired traveler and a few friends crowded into an old fishing boat. The traveler fell asleep as the second tree quietly sailed out into the lake. Soon a thundering and thrashing storm arose. The little tree shuddered. She knew she did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely through the storm. The tired man awakened. He stood up, stretched out a hand, and said, "Peace." The storm stopped as quickly as it had begun. And suddenly the second tree knew he was carrying the King of kings.

One morning the third tree was startled when her beams were yanked from the forgotten woodpile. She flinched as she was carried through an angry, jeering crowd. She shuddered when soldiers nailed a condemned man's hands and feet to her. She felt ugly, harsh, and cruel. But three days later, when the Son of God rose from the dead, the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything. And from that day until this, every time people have thought of the third tree, they have thought of God.





The Pearl

Years ago, while an American named David Morse was living and working in India, he met and became friends with a pearl diver, Rambhau.

Morse spent many evenings in Rambhau's cabin, reading to him from the Bible and explaining its central theme: God's love and salvation in Jesus. Rambhau enjoyed listening to the Word of God, but whenever Morse would encourage Rambhau to accept Christ as his Savior, Rambhau would shake his head and reply, "Your Christian way to Heaven is too easy for me! I cannot accept it. If I gained admittance to Heaven in that manner, I would feel like a pauper there—like a beggar who has been let in out of pity. I may be proud, but I want to deserve my place in Heaven. I want to earn it, and so I am going to work for it."

Nothing that Morse could say seemed to have any effect on Rambhau's decision. Years passed. Then one evening Morse heard a knock on his door. It was Rambhau.

"Come in, friend," said Morse.

"Will you come with me to my house?" asked the old diver. "I have something to show you. Please don't say no."

"Of course I'll come," replied Morse.

As they neared his cabin, Rambhau said, "In a week's time I will start working for my place in Heaven. I am leaving for Delhi, and I am crawling there on my knees. "

"That's crazy!" Morse exclaimed. "It's nine hundred miles to Delhi. The skin will break on your knees, and you will have blood poisoning before you get there—if you ever get there!"

"No, I must get to Delhi," affirmed Rambhau, "the immortals will reward me for it! The suffering will be sweet, for it will purchase Heaven for me! "

"Rambhau, friend, you can't. How can I let you do that, when Jesus Christ has already suffered and died to purchase Heaven for you? "

But the old man could not be moved. "You are my dearest friend on earth. You have stood by me in sickness, in want. Sometimes you have been my only friend. But even you cannot turn me from my desire to purchase eternal bliss. I must go to Delhi! "

Once inside the small cabin, Rambhau walked to a back room and returned shortly with a small but heavy strongbox.

"I have had this box for years," he said. "I keep only one thing in it. Now I will tell you about it. I once had a son. ..."

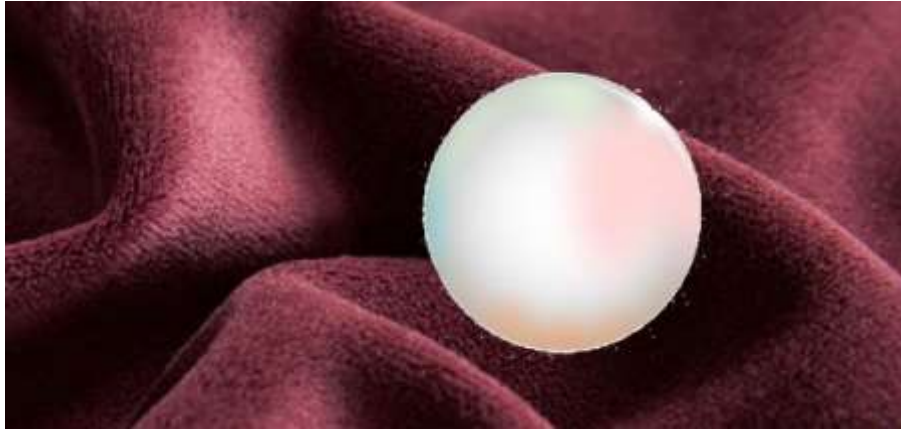
"A son! Rambhau, you have never once mentioned him!"

"No, I couldn't." As he spoke, the diver's eyes filled with tears. "But now I must tell you. My son was a diver too. He was the best pearl diver on the coasts of India. He had the swiftest dive, the keenest eye, the strongest arm, and the longest breath of any man who ever dived for pearls. What joy he brought me!"

"As you know," Rambhau went on, "most pearls have some defect or blemish that only an expert can discern, but my boy always dreamed of finding the perfect pearl. One day he found it! But in gathering it, he stayed under water too long. He died soon after. That pearl cost him his life. "

The old pearl diver bowed his head. "All these years," he continued, "I have kept this pearl. Now I am going and may not return, so to you, my best friend, I am giving my pearl."

Rambhau worked the combination on the strongbox and drew from it a carefully wrapped package. Gently parting the cotton packing, he picked up a mammoth pearl and placed it in Morse's hand.



For a moment Morse gazed with awe and was speechless. Then he exclaimed, "Rambhau! What a pearl! "

"That pearl, my friend, is perfect," replied the Indian quietly.

"Rambhau," Morse said, "this is a wonderful pearl, an amazing pearl! Let me buy it. I will give you ten thousand dollars for it."

"What? What do you mean?" Rambhau asked.

"I will give you fifteen thousand dollars for it, or if it takes more, I will work for it."

Rambhau stiffened his whole body. "This pearl is beyond price. Not a man in the world has money enough to pay what this pearl is worth to me. On the market, a million dollars could not buy it. I will not sell it to you. You may only have it as a gift. "

"No, Rambhau, I cannot accept that. As much as I want the pearl, I cannot accept it that way. Perhaps I am proud, but that is too easy. I must pay for it, or work for it. "

The old pearl diver was stunned. "You don't understand at all, my friend. Don't you see? My only son gave his life to get this pearl. Its worth is in the lifeblood of my son. I cannot sell this, but I can give it to you. Just accept it as a token of my love for you. "

Morse gripped the hand of the old man. "Rambhau," he said in a low voice, "don't you see? My words are just what you have been saying to God all the time. "

The diver looked long and searchingly at Morse. Slowly he began to understand.



"God is offering you salvation as a free gift," Morse said. "It is so great and priceless that no man on earth can buy it. No man on earth could earn it. If he were to work for it all his life, his life would be millions of years too short. No man is good enough to it. It cost God the lifeblood of His only Son to gain entrance for you into Heaven. In a million years, in a hundred pilgrimages, you could not earn that entrance. All you can do is accept it as a token of God's love for you.

"Rambhau, of course I will accept the pearl in deep humility, praying God I may be worthy of your love. Rambhau, won't you accept God's great gift of Heaven, too, knowing it cost Him the death of His Son to offer it to you? "

Tears rolled down the old man's cheeks. The veil that had clouded his understanding was beginning to lift. "I see it now. I could not believe that

salvation was free. Now I understand. Some things are too priceless to be bought or earned. I will accept His salvation, my friend!"



The Empty Cage

One day Satan and Jesus were having a conversation. “Yes, sir,” Satan gloated. “I just caught a whole world full of people! I set a trap and got them all!”

“What are you going to do with them?” Jesus asked.

“I’m going to have some fun!” Satan replied with glee. “I’m going to teach them how to lie and cheat and steal and kill. This is going to be great!”

“And what will you do when you’re through with them?” Jesus asked.

“Then I’ll kill them,” Satan said proudly.

“How much do you want for them?” Jesus asked.

“Oh, you don’t want those people! They aren’t any good. They’ll just hate you. They’ll cause you nothing but misery and heartbreak, and they’ll kill you in the end. You don’t want those people!”

“How much?” Jesus asked again.

Satan looked at Him and sneered. “Your LIFE!”

“DONE!”

Then Jesus paid the price.



The Events of Easter

Nearly 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ was crucified in the land now called Israel by the order of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the then Roman province of Judea. Jesus had been falsely accused by the Jewish high priest and other Jewish religious leaders of blasphemy against the Jewish religion. This was not a crime under Roman law, and Pilate was inclined to release Jesus. But after being reminded that leniency toward someone regarded as a troublemaker could be viewed as disloyalty to Rome, and upon hearing the clamor of an incited mob that called for Jesus to be crucified, Pilate bowed to the accusers' demands. Jesus' execution took place right before the Jewish holy day of Passover.



Arabic documents dating from the 10th century contain the following account, credited to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (AD 37?–100?):

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon their loyalty to him. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive. Accordingly they believed that he was the Messiah, concerning whom the Prophets have recounted wonders.

Following is the account by Matthew, one of Jesus' followers, of the events following Jesus' death.

The next day, the leading priests and Pharisees went to see Pilate. They told him, “Sir, we remember what that deceiver once said while he was still alive: ‘After three days I will rise from the dead.’ So we request that you seal the tomb until the third day. This will prevent his disciples from coming and stealing his body and then telling everyone he was raised from the dead! If that happens, we’ll be worse off than we were at first.”

Pilate replied, "Take guards and secure it the best you can." So they sealed the tomb and posted guards to protect it.

Early on Sunday morning, as the new day was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb. Suddenly there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled aside the stone, and sat on it. His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint.



Then the angel spoke to the women. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. And now, go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember what I have told you."



The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to give the disciples the angel's message. And as they went, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they ran to him, grasped his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid! Go tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there."

Then the eleven disciples left for Galilee, going to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him—but some of them doubted!

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 27:62-66; 28:1-10, 16-20, NLT)

The King's Return



When the apostles were with Jesus, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!” (Acts 1:6,9-11, NLT)



For 2,000 years Jesus and His kingdom have remained unseen by this world, manifested only in the hearts and lives of those who love and receive Him by faith. But the day is coming when this present age will be over and all the world will "see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with power and great glory" (Matthew 24:29-31).

The Bible warns us that a powerful world government will arise in the final days of man's dominion on Earth, led by a demonic dictator—the Antichrist—who will be possessed by Satan. The last three and a half years of his rule will be a time that the Bible calls the "Great Tribulation" (Matthew 24:21; Revelation 7:14).

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