



The Parable of
Cherry Lane

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Cover photo by James Peight, Bedford, PA

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Published by Wordsmith Publishing of Penn Yan, New York

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This booklet is part of a larger study guide entitled "Come Aside".

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THE PARABLE OF CHERRY LANE BY PENN CLARK

The following is a parable the Lord gave me when I was a young disciple. While I have preached it a few times, I always felt it was something He gave me for my own life, to serve as a reminder of how easily His blessing can become something it was never intended to become. Like most parables, it all happened long ago. . .

A long time ago, in a remote part of the kingdom, lived a young man named Nigel. He had an infectious grin and a streak of kindness that ran almost as deep as his love for God. It was obvious to all who met him that the favor of the Lord rested squarely upon his life. He worked hard for the local blacksmith, but always found time to visit a quiet place, where he would go to seek the Lord. He could sing aloud without any fear of being overheard by anyone other than the deer who ventured out into the meadows, cocking their ears and flagging their tails as they listened to him raise his voice aloud in worship to the Lord.

At first glance, the lane would not be considered a beautiful place, but its splendor lays in its simplicity, which became apparent when you spent time there. It was only a gravel lane, strewn with stones flecked with color, which Nigel would often pick up to admire. The lane meandered through several meadows, bordered by a sweet-smelling forest and divided by a clear stream. He would often slip his feet into its cool waters. He named the place Cherry Lane, because of the large black cherry trees that laced their branches together, creating a perfect canopy of shade all along the Lane.

Some of his happiest days were spent there. It was a place where he could sort out everything before the Lord. One prayer he often found himself bringing before the Lord was the issue of what he was going to do with his life. All he knew was that he wanted to help people, work with his hands, and serve the king. He often asked for someone special with whom he could share his cherished place. He laid out his heart's desire before the Lord, and after a long wait, he was able to take a beautiful young gal named Nell to see Cherry Lane. She loved it immediately.

At the close of the day, they stopped at an old wooden house, which sat at the entrance to one of the meadows. It was a simple old place that turned the color of amber as the sun began to set upon it. During one of their visits to the old house, Nigel told Nell that he had always wanted to live on Cherry Lane. He asked her if she would join him in turning this old house into a home.

From their happy wedding day onward, they spent most mornings and many evenings strolling down Cherry Lane, praying and worshipping, bringing their plans before the Lord as they watched the sun rise and set together. It was on one of these early morning walks that Nell noticed Nigel was deep in thought. When she asked him what he was thinking about, he sighed and said that, while he liked being the apprentice to the blacksmith, he had always hoped that someday he would be able to work for himself. He confided in her that it was his dream to own a workshop so he could help people and perhaps even serve the king.

Part way down Cherry Lane stood an old drive-shed nestled beside the creek. As they stood in front of it, they talked, half-jokingly at first, about how this would be the perfect place to open a blacksmith shop. Soon, they were inside planning where to hang his tools and where they could set the bellows. A few days later, Nell surprised Nigel as they strolled past the shed, having hung a hand-painted sign over the door, which said, "Nigel the Smith." At that moment, they dedicated their plans to the Lord in prayer, asking for His blessings. They ran excitedly down Cherry Lane, laughing at the bold faith that caused them to hang up a sign no one else could see.

One morning, as the sound of a hammer hitting steel echoed across the meadow, the deer came out of the forest to see what was making the new sound on Cherry Lane. Little by little and day by day, the sound would increase as wagons were brought to the little shop to be fixed and horses were led there to be shod. Nigel was a craftsman with integrity, and word got around, "If you want something fixed right, see Nigel the Smith."

There was always enough work to provide for Nigel and Nell's growing family and he always took the time to walk the little ones down Cherry Lane, where their squeals of laughter could be heard across the meadows as they chased frogs and caught salamanders. They loved to discover new flowers or pick the wild berries that hid among the high grass. He helped them climb the same trees he once sat in to read from the Old Book and delighted in seeing them splash around in the same creek that had refreshed his feet so many times before. Seeing their wonder helped Nigel recapture what he had first felt when he started coming to Cherry Lane. As the sun began to set, they would make their way back to their sturdy new house at the edge of the meadow.

THE KING'S SMITH

One day, a big black, shiny carriage pulled up in front of the little blacksmith shed. The king's coachman stepped down onto the gravel lane, squinting at the shed, missing all the beauty around it. He opened the door for the king's messenger, who quickly stepped out and approached Nigel, who had been sitting in the early morning sun, reading from the Old Book. He often did this as he waited for his helpers to bring yesterday's coals back to life for another busy day. The messenger said that word had reached the king's ears of Nigel's skill and integrity, and he asked if he would be willing to become the king's smith. A modest grin crept slowly across Nigel's face. He quietly said that he would be honored to serve the king. The quick rapping of a hammer provided the exclamation point to Nigel's words as the coachman hung the king's seal of approval next to Nell's old sign.

That evening, as they walked hand-in-hand down Cherry Lane with all the little ones running ahead, Nigel and Nell sang a song of gratitude to the Lord. For a long time afterward, they would stand in amazement whenever they saw the shiny king's seal hanging on their little shop in the middle of nowhere. They marveled at God's great blessing upon their lives.

More business began to come their way as word spread about the king's smith. Soon, he

needed to hire more help, so he built a much larger shop next to the old shed, which was now barely large enough to store his coal. From that time forward, the ringing of the hammers drowned out the subtle sound of the insects and the sweet sound of the birds. All you could hear was the sound of horses coming and going, and the village people haggling in the Lane as their carriages lined the meadows. Even Nigel's own carriage could be seen hurrying down Cherry Lane, his wheels spurning the flecked stones he once picked up to admire.

TOO BUSY TO NOTICE ANYMORE

From time to time, Nigel would look up from the anvil to catch a glimpse of Nell walking with the family down the Lane, but even she was becoming too busy to do this very often. He could not remember the last time he walked down the lane, much less lay in the meadow or rest his feet in the cold, clear stream. The children would sometimes coax him to walk with them, but it was obvious that his mind was somewhere else. They were still thrilled to find a new fawn grazing with its mother, or catch sight of a trout resting against the current in the stream, but Nigel did not seem to notice these things anymore.

The children would pray for their dad when they saw him trudging his way between their sturdy little house and the big shop, where he would spend another night trying to catch up on the day's work. He also had to get up very early each morning to get things ready for the men who would soon arrive for work. They brought their own tensions to Cherry Lane, and their work was never quite up to his standards, but he was too busy to do it all himself.

STARRY, STARRY NIGHT

Then, one evening, as he walked toward the shop, Nigel heard the call of a whippoorwill. Hearing the bird's old familiar song instantly transported him back to simpler times when he would often sit in the cool of the day, feeling satisfied with his humble life. It stirred his heart like nothing else, reminding him of quieter times. He stood in the same spot, deep in thought, until the stars came out. The faint smell of the sweet grass hung heavily in the Lane, which gave it that distinct smell that Nigel loved so much. As he stood there, his heart began to melt before the Lord as he considered all that he had and all that he had lost in getting it. He had always felt rich but somehow was feeling poorer with each passing season. He had lost something truly valuable along the way and did not know how to get it back. He longed for simplicity and, then and there, decided that he needed to find it, no matter the cost.

INTO THE FOG

Nell felt Nigel leave the bed a little earlier than usual, and rather than heading straight to the shop, as usual, she saw his silhouette slowly walking down Cherry Lane. She prayed for him as he

entered the meadow, stepping into a wisp of fog that shrouded the early morning. The foggy meadow mirrored the condition of his own soul as he began to call aloud, asking the Lord to help him. It sounded so strange to hear his own voice pray aloud, as he said, "Oh God! How could Your blessing turn out like this? You have given me everything I have ever wanted, but surely You could not have intended this. Help me find my way back to You and to simpler times." As Nigel wept freely, the deer came out of the forest to investigate the strange new sound that was echoing across the meadow.

Morning by morning, he began taking time to be with the Lord, knowing that somehow this was the only way to begin to find his way back to the Lord, asking Him to change what he could not change himself. The men began to notice how Nigel's mind was no longer as focused on the work and how he would sometimes slip away during a busy day just to pray for an hour or so. Instead of working in the shop late at night, he could be seen standing out under the stars, learning to sing to His God again.

BACK TO THE OLD BOOK

He started reading the Old Book again, as well. Even though at first he did not find what he was looking for, he stayed with it. In time, he began to feel it speaking to him. He found the perspective he needed, especially from the words written by a rich old king who, even though God had blessed him in every way, had become very poor. It was as if this old king were asking Nigel these questions:

1. What do you have to show for all your work?
2. What good is all this work to get enough food if you never really taste it?
3. What makes us work so hard that we fail to enjoy the fruit of our labor?
4. Is there not more to life than working all the time?
5. Would a small amount with quietness not be better than having both hands full, with travail and vexation of spirit?
6. Doesn't our dissatisfaction only lead to more work?
7. What is the point of building a house that is empty of life?
8. Why have children that you never have time to enjoy?
9. What is the point of working hard so we can retire and still never find rest?
10. Why work at something we hate doing, when it is the gift of God to enjoy the work of our hands?

11. Why trade what we already have for that which we never really wanted?
12. Would being able to enjoy this fruit not be the best proof of God's blessing?
13. What does it accomplish to go from labor to labor, travail to travail, and not live long enough to enjoy what you worked so hard for?
14. Why work hard just to lay up things for those who have not worked for it?

BACK TO SIMPLICITY

Nigel began to realize that people are only here for a short time and before long someone else will come behind them and reap from all the work they have done. This had happened to whoever built the first little house at the edge of the meadow, who had set the drive-shed beside the creek, cleared the meadows, laid the gravel road, and planted the shade trees along Cherry Lane.

All of this came down heavily on Nigel's heart, like a hammer hitting steel, causing him to become more determined to work harder at simplifying his life.

Nigel and Nell can still be seen walking slowly down Cherry Lane with their grandchildren at their side. They listen to them squealing with delight when they find something new along Cherry Lane. They smile to each other as they notice how the deer come out of the forest to see whose voices were now ringing across the meadows.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The book of Ecclesiastes is a reality check. It is so contemporary, it could have been written today. It is about a man who had everything but ended up with nothing. My wish for you, and for myself, is that we make a break from all that vexes our souls so we can discover the simplicity of our own Cherry Lane. Let's build our lives on the things that satisfy our hearts, rather than those things that vex us.

As we read Ecclesiastes, it is as if King Solomon is standing in the middle of the road, waving his arms, warning us not to come his way, shouting, "Go back! Don't follow me! I have gone the wrong way and need to find my way back to God!" But many of us drive right on by, waving at him, as we head to our own destruction.

The bottom line of the book of Ecclesiastes is that life is short and the goal of man's existence is to fear God and walk with Him all the days of his life. So often, this is the first thing that gets lost in the busyness of life, but it is the one thing we need to live in simplicity.

The parable of Cherry Lane was written as a reminder that it is not just doing bad things that can rob our lives of life, but often it is doing good things in an imbalanced way that can hurt us. People have burned out on ministry and other God-given jobs because they failed to adjust the rhythm of their lives by resting and taking time to come aside to gain fresh perspective about the things that matter most in life. Again, this is reflected so beautifully in Eugene Peterson's rendition of Jesus invitation to recover our lives:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." (Matthew 11:28-30)

The Parable of Cherry Lane is a chapter taken come from a chapter of my book "Come Aside". Look for this book at our bookstore www.wordsmith-py.com

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ISBN-13: 978-1-947472-01-3 (print edition)

ISBN-13: 978-1-947472-02-0 (e-book edition)

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