

Garden of Life

a parable about faith
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An Interesting Stranger

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“Howdy neighbor,” a thin, bald Caucasian man in his late fifties said to Henry. The friendly man held up his hand and waved as he peered through a row of small, leafless crape myrtle trees from the front yard next door, on Henry’s right. “My name is Jerry,” he continued.

“Hey there Jerry—nice to meet you,” Henry said, putting down his garden shears. He walked around the bushes guarding his front porch and approached Jerry. As they straddled the border between each yard, both men removed their gardening gloves and shook hands.

“I think I’ve seen you around here before,” Henry continued. “Are you new to the neighborhood?”

“For the most part, yes.”

“I see. Did you just buy this gorgeous spec-house next to us?”

“Nah,” Jerry said. “I didn’t buy it. But I *am* moving in soon.”

“What do you mean? Did the builder decide to rent this house?”

“Well, sort of. I’m actually an independent contractor for the developer and builder of your subdivision. As you know, the real estate market has been plummeting here lately. But since I’m older and I work pretty cheap, I worked out a deal

with the powers-that-be to help them continue building-out your neighborhood—to the extent that’s even possible in this lousy economy.”

“Oh, I see,” said Henry. “So what exactly do you do?”

“I’m pretty much a jack-of-all-trades. I work with existing owners on their warranty issues—making some of the repairs myself. I also show spec-houses to prospective buyers. You know; stuff like that.”

“I gotcha. So are you moving-in next door as a part of your deal?”

“Yep, I sure am,” Jerry said. “The builder figured it would be a good idea to have someone on-site in the neighborhood to watch over all of the empty properties. I don’t have much stuff, so it won’t be a problem for me to quickly move out when the house finally sells.”

“That makes sense,” Henry said. “Hey; I’m fixing to have a cup of coffee on the porch. Would you care to join me?”

“You bet,” Jerry said, nodding. “That sounds good. I could actually use a little break. Since the temperature is only in the fifties today, I don’t think I’ll need my coat. But if you don’t mind, I’ll need to go get a sweatshirt out of my truck so I won’t get too cold. Old fellas like me need to stay warm, you know.”

Henry grinned. “I’ll get the coffee ready while you get geared up. Meet me on my porch in a few minutes.”

“Great!”

“Oh—how do you take your coffee?”

“*Au naturale*,” Jerry said. “I don’t need a bunch of unmanly junk messing up my java.”

Henry chuckled. “Black coffee it is, then, for my new neighbor. But be forewarned—I like mine really sweet and really creamy. Let’s be sure to not get off on the wrong foot by you challenging my masculinity because of this. Okay?”

Jerry belly-laughed. "I wouldn't dare!"

"See you in a minute," Henry said.

A few minutes later, Henry and Jerry were sitting on Henry's covered front porch on faded-green, lattice metal chairs. Each of them leaned their elbows onto the cool, matching metal café table, sipping their caffeinated nectar. They began to chat.

"So tell me, Henry," Jerry began. "What's your story, my friend? Everybody has one. What's yours?"

"Actually, my story is pretty boring. I'm an independent insurance agent down in Athens. Along with my wife and teenage daughter, we moved here to Jefferson last month from Jacksonville, Florida. My wife Helen just started as a school teacher at Jefferson Elementary School, and my daughter Megan is a junior at Jefferson High. We really don't have a ton of money in the bank, but I suppose we're doing okay. Helen and I are both in our forties, so I guess you could say we're just trying to live-out the American Dream. I'm afraid there's not much more to my story than that."

"I see. No offense Henry, but there's *always* more to someone's story than a neat little synopsis like that."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen..." Jerry began. "I may be jumping the gun a little, but you seem to be the kind of guy who is a real straight-shooter. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong at all."

"All right, then. Allow me to ask you a direct question. Do you mind?"

"Be my guest," Henry said. "At my age, I'd rather cut to the chase than play games. If you have something to say, then go for it. I hate it when people aren't being *real* with me. What's your question?"

Jerry chuckled. “Actually, you just answered part of my question.”

“And that is—?”

“My question is this—do you like real conversation, or just idle chit-chat? Life is short, full of complexity, and has many problems. As a result, I don’t like spending a lot of time discussing trivial things.”

“Wow,” Henry said, chuckling. “I think you may be as straightforward as me. Perhaps more.”

Jerry shrugged. “So that’s a good thing, right?”

“It sure is.”

“Good deal,” Jerry said. “Allow me to jump right in, then. The bottom-line with me is this: my personality represents a pronounced dichotomy.”

“In what way?”

“I’m a passionate encourager of people, but I’m also one who warns folks if they’re headed in the wrong direction. You see, when my friends are on the wrong path, I can’t help but to be concerned, and therefore warn them. So basically, I’m giving you a heads-up that I’m not one to mince words. As we hopefully get to know each other, please don’t be offended by this propensity of mine. I actually have a lot of care and concern for the folks who I become friends with.”

“Okaaay...” Henry said slowly. “Figuratively speaking, it looks like we’ve already jumped into the deep end of the pool of life.”

“Truthfully, is there any other way? Why should we waste our time trying to become friends on merely a superficial level? In my opinion, life is *way* too short for something like that. I’m hoping you’ll consider becoming a *real* friend of mine—not just a friendly pal next door.”

Henry shrugged. “That’s fine with me. But please remember—that door swings both ways, you know.”

“I understand. Hey, how about this? I’ll give you a brief overview of my life, just like you gave me. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough.”

“Okay then,” Jerry continued. “Well, let’s see. I’m not married, and I don’t have any children. My dad is my only real family, but he’s in Heaven. Also, I don’t have any siblings. I’m pretty good at fixing things, both physically and spiritually. I guess you could say that I’m a bit of a loner, since I live a quiet, peaceful life, helping others. In that regard, I have absolutely no regrets. In truth, my only real joy in life comes from spiritually mentoring my friends.”

“So you don’t date or anything?”

“Nope—not me. Romance is nowhere on my radar screen. I know that sounds a little unusual. But as you get to fully know me, you’ll come to understand why I am, the way I am. It may take a little while, but please trust me on this.”

Henry held up his hands. “No problem Jerry. I get that.”

Jerry nodded, continuing. “My philosophy in life, Henry, gets down to one basic principle, which is faith. I often cite *Hebrews 11:1* as my motto on life ... *Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.*”

“Oh boy,” Henry mused. “So you’re one of those Christians, huh? When you mentioned the word ‘spiritually’ earlier, I was actually hoping you meant something else. No offense.”

“None taken,” Jerry said, shaking his head. “Friends don’t have to see eye-to-eye on everything to get along. I’m merely sharing my beliefs with you.”

“I’m okay with that,” Henry said. “Just as long as you don’t start shoving the Gospel down my throat. My wife Helen is a Christian, just like you—”

“Did I just hear my name in vain???” a voice suddenly asked.

Henry and Jerry looked to their left and saw Helen and Megan standing there.

“Hey honey,” Henry said. “This is our new next door neighbor, Jerry. Jerry, this is my wife Helen, and our daughter, Megan.”

“Pleased to meet you ladies,” Jerry said, standing up.

Dark-haired, olive-skinned and pretty—just like her mother, Megan remained quiet, wearing a look of boredom. Jerry thought he could almost see her eyes mentally rolling around the back of her head.

“Young lady—don’t you have anything to say?” Helen admonished.

“Oh—hi,” Megan said waving. She then folded her arms.

“Hi back,” Jerry said. “Hey, I like your Jefferson Dragons sweatshirt, Megan. I’ll have to pick one up some time. It’s pretty snazzy.”

Megan looked away, then glanced back at Jerry and nodded.

“Where are you girls going?” Henry asked.

“We’re just going around the corner to Kroger for some groceries. We’ll be back in a little bit. Fortunately, our Thanksgiving leftovers are almost gone from a few days ago. We need some new supplies.”

“I heard that,” Henry said. “I’m fine with waiting another full year before eating any more stuffing. I’m about sage’d out.”

Jerry chuckled.

“Anyway,” Helen began, “it’s really nice to meet you Jerry. You boys finish your coffee. We’ll be back in a little while.”

“Nice to meet you too, Helen.”

Helen and Jerry exchanged a brief, sincere look into each other’s eyes. Helen immediately sensed that Jerry was a kindred spirit. Without saying a word, Helen knew that Jerry loved Jesus Christ. This made her heart rejoice. Henry’s obstinate,

anti-Jesus position had emotionally nagged at her nerves over the years, and she really wanted some help in this area.

“I love you,” Henry said. “See you gals in a bit.”

Helen nudged Megan.

“Love you too, daddy,” she said.

“Love you bunches,” Helen added.

Mother and daughter departed via the walkway, towards the driveway. After they had pulled away, Henry and Jerry continued.

“So...” Jerry began. “You were telling me that Helen is a Christian, just like me, right? She seems like a very nice lady.”

“Helen is the best wife a man could ever have,” Henry said. “But I’m afraid she is who she is, due to nature’s luck of the draw. I sincerely doubt that it’s due to some almighty God who created the world.”

Jerry shook his head. “Do you really believe that?”

“Of course,” Henry said. “Life just simply happened, and I got lucky. No offense, but at my age, I’ll likely *not* be seeing things your way—from the Christian perspective. However, if your God still wants to prove Himself to me, then I just might reconsider.”

Jerry nodded. He knew that Henry was testing him.

“On the surface,” Jerry replied, “that sounds pretty good to the human spirit. However, in the end, I’m afraid that God has absolutely nothing to prove to any of us.”

“Why not?”

“Listen, if you really want to understand how the LORD works, you’ve got to look at things from His perspective. If you fail to put yourself in God’s shoes—to the extent that’s even possible—you’ll completely miss the boat. In other words, it’s essential that you view the world from God’s point of view to really understand it. Failing to do so will almost assuredly mean you’ll never give Jesus Christ a fair shot at your heart.”

Henry sipped his coffee, thinking.

“Okay then, Jerry,” he said. “Answer me this. If Jesus is so powerful, how come there are so many religions in the world? It seems to me that every single one of the world’s religions have a claim to the real truth and the real god. What makes Christianity so different? Also, with so many irreconcilable truth claims, how can they all be right? Logically speaking, that can’t be true, can it?”

“No, it sure can’t. I agree with you on that point. But just because all of the world’s religions and their exclusive claims on the truth aren’t right—doesn’t mean they’re all wrong.”

“Hmmm,” Henry mumbled. “Go on.”

“Before we go any further,” Jerry said. “What do you actually believe?”

“I most definitely believe in a higher power. I think that some kind of god or supernatural power likely created the world; then backed away from it. I also believe that god is in everything, but he or she isn’t necessarily personal. I believe that if God was indeed personal, there is *no way* there’d be so much evil in this world.”

“I strongly disagree with that assertion, but we’ll get into that subject another day.”

“Suit yourself,” Henry said, shrugging. “So what else is on your mind? You seem to be wanting to say something.”

“Actually, I do want to say something. What I want to share with you today is the importance of faith. Now I’m not talking about a generic faith that is nebulous or subtle. I’m talking about the real, biblical human hunger to find faith in the only way to everlasting life with God—faith in Jesus Christ.”

Henry rolled his eyes. “As usual, you Christians are always coming at me with vagaries and generalities. Before I can even

possibly reconsider my position, I'm going to need a lot of information to convince me.”

“No problem,” Jerry said. “Please bear with me. You see, the human hunger to find faith is actually innate. Every person has the need to have faith in *something*. However, it's critically important that one finds the right belief to have faith in. In the case of Christianity, it's not about religion. It's all about finding a relationship with the only One you should have faith in—Jesus Christ.”

Henry shook his head. “I'm not following you.”

“Okay, think of it this way. Why would a person want to have faith in something or someone who is unable to carry you over the chasm of death, into eternal life?”

“You're still not proving anything to me, Jerry. There's lots of evidence that runs counter to the resurrection story of Jesus Christ. You need to know this—I'm not a complete dummy on matters of Christianity.”

“I'm not saying you are,” Jerry said. “Listen. Let's try this thing another way. In order for me to prove my point, I'll have to use some Scripture to do so. And before you start questioning the integrity of the Bible—like so many non-Christians do—I'll ask you to please indulge me on this. Okay?”

“I guess that seems reasonable. But why can't you just spit-out your point?”

“Please bear with me. The Bible likely won't make much sense to you if you don't slow down and have an open mind to investigate it. Essentially, God's Holy Word is His revelation to mankind. If God really exists, the Bible *must* be one-hundred percent true. If God doesn't exist, then the Bible is obviously false. Due in part to the specific truth claims of Christianity, logically speaking, there can't be anything in-between. Does that make any sense to you?”

“Perhaps. Go on.”

“In my opinion, other than Jesus dying on the Cross for mankind’s horrific sins, God’s greatest spiritual fruits and gifts are mentioned in *1 Corinthians 13:13* ... *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*”

“And...?” said Henry, skeptically.

“Think about how intertwined all three of these spiritual items are. Also, think about what it would be like if you were completely removed from God’s presence. You know; if you were removed from ever experiencing these blessings ever again. What do you suppose your life would be like?”

“Pretty bad, I guess. But you’re still not proving anything.”

“Like I said, please be patient, Henry. We’re talking about some pretty deep issues, here. I’m afraid that as it relates to God, there simply aren’t any *drive-thru* answers regarding His existence or non-existence. In other words, getting to know the LORD is a journey; not a destination.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Henry relented. “So what else do you have to say about faith, hope, and love? How does all of that work?”

“In *Galatians 5:6* we’re told that ... *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love....* So tell me; what do you think both of these passages mean?”

“Hey, I’m no bible professor,” Henry objected, holding up his hands. “I don’t believe in the darned thing. How could I possibly understand that quote?”

“You don’t have to be a bible professor to read and seek the meaning of Scripture,” Jerry said. “Please—indulge me. If the Bible is true, what do you think those passages mean?”

Jerry repeated the Scriptures.

“Well,” Henry began. “If those passages are true, it sounds like there’s an inter-relationship between faith, hope, and love. If those things are indeed the spiritual fruits and gifts from God you seem to be claiming, then it makes sense they’d all work together to bless God’s people.”

“Wow!” Jerry exclaimed. “That was pretty brilliant for a pantheist who thinks that God is basically a rock; among other things.”

Henry chuckled. “That’s a gross misrepresentation of my beliefs Jerry, but pretty funny.”

Jerry grinned and nodded.

“Alright, I’ve got one for you,” Henry continued. “One of the things I’ve always objected to about the Bible is the story of Abraham and Isaac. Now then; there is *no way* you can convince me that a loving God would ask a man to kill his child by sacrificing him or her on an altar. In fact, that whole situation sounds like it was cooked-up by a sadistic and capricious criminal. What do you have to say about that???”

Unbeknownst to Henry, Jerry was quite comfortable with the direction of their discussion.

“Okay, Henry. If you want to know the truth about that situation, I’ll be glad to tell you.”

“I can’t *wait* to hear this,” Henry mused.

“Let me begin to answer your question by reciting a passage. It’s *Hebrews 11:17-19 ... By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.*”

“Humph,” Henry snorted. “Can you repeat that?”

Jerry did so.

“So what are you saying? I believe I’d go nuts if God asked me to sacrifice my daughter. Are you condoning the idea of child sacrifice?”

“No,” Jerry said, shaking his head. “Not at all.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“First off, it’s a given fact that child sacrifice was fairly prevalent back in Abraham’s time. Secondly, what I *am* saying is that Abraham had an abiding faith in God, along with God’s promises and covenants. Essentially, there’s a bigger issue at stake, here.”

“What do you mean?” said Henry.

“You need to understand that Abraham’s function of being the so-called ‘father of our faith’ has already been taken. So the job isn’t available to you—or anyone else. As a result, you don’t have to worry about God asking you to sacrifice Megan. In addition, when Abraham’s faith was tested by God, Abraham demonstrated that he was righteous. Actually, *Romans 4:3* says ... *What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’*”

“Okaaay ...?”

“Stay with me, Henry. God entered into a very special covenant with Abraham. Essentially, God made an unconditional deal with him. A unilateral covenant like that only requires one party. In this case, that one party was God. Although Abraham did indeed demonstrate great faith in God’s promises, God’s covenant didn’t technically require anything of Abraham. Another way of saying this is that through Abraham, God, on His own, entered into a very sacred relationship with Israel. Ultimately, this relationship has extended to all of mankind through Abraham’s descendant, Jesus Christ.”

“That’s actually pretty interesting. So getting back to the sacrifice of Isaac, are you saying that Abraham knew God wouldn’t lie?”

“I am. But don’t forget what I just stated in that Scripture. In Abraham’s mind, in a worst-case scenario, Abraham knew God would raise Isaac from the dead. So from Abraham’s perspective—and you must remember that God cannot lie—this covenant was always going to be fulfilled through Isaac *and* his son Jacob. Essentially, as an act of worship—and as an act of faith—Abraham believed God. And due to his faith, Abraham was found to be righteous.”

Henry was quiet for a few moments. “A-ha!” he said. “So when were you going to confess to me that you’re actually a preacher???”

Jerry chuckled. “No Henry, I’m not a preacher. Although I must admit, I do love to preach the Gospel. And speaking of preaching; let me finish up our little chat about Abraham’s faith with this—Abraham was willing to sacrifice his own son Isaac due to his tremendous faith. Interestingly, this was actually a foreshadowing of the real sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross, later on in history. It’s particularly important to once again note that Jesus descended through Abraham and Isaac’s blood line. So in the end, God the Father was the One who truly sacrificed His Son, not Abraham.”

“If you say so. But I’m still not getting it.”

“C’mon Henry, give me some time and you will. Do you realize that understanding Christianity and reading the Bible are very much like eating an elephant?”

“How so???”

Jerry grinned. “The most efficient way to eat an elephant is *bite-by-bite*. The same thing applies to investigating Christianity. You can’t just swallow it whole—in one sitting. It usually

takes some time and a concerted, genuine effort. Generally speaking, getting to know someone—including Jesus Christ—is an ongoing process.”

Henry shook his head. “Who says I want to spend any time investigating Christianity? I’m pretty happy with my own faith.”

Jerry shrugged. “I understand. I really do. Anyway, I’d better get going. Thanks for the coffee, Henry. I promise to be a good neighbor. If I can help you with anything at all, please let me know. Other than that, enjoy your day off on this beautiful Monday.”

Both men stood up and shook hands.

“I’ll see you around, Jerry. Don’t work too hard.”

Jerry shook his head. “No worries—I won’t. I’ll see you soon.”