

A Letter From Torment

Charles Pogue

Dear Anita:

They wouldn't let me bring my cellphone down here with me, and how I would love to talk to you just once again. That one time I went to church with you I remember the preacher saying something about we brought nothing into this world and we can take nothing out of it. He was right about that. I got here without even any clothes. There's not even a pencil and paper down here so I am having to imagine writing this letter to you, and hope that somehow my thoughts will reach you. The only thing I would like to have more than a pen and a piece of paper right now is a drink of water, but there is no water here, only fire and darkness all around.

It is agonizing in these flames, but the strange thing is, nothing is consumed. The pain makes me think that I know how the bush must have felt that time when God talked to Moses from it. You used to say how God talked out of that bush, and that it is important to listen to God. I used to gripe that you were trying to push your religion down my throat, but I can tell you right now, being pushed is a sight better than burning. I told you there was no way you could ram religion, church, salvation, and stuff like that down my throat, but what I would give if not only my throat, but my heart had been as open as I am sure my grave was. If that had been the case, knowing what I know now, I would have listened to you.

I'm not composing this message though just to talk about me and the misery I am in. I was always proud to have you as my wife and to have you by my side, even though I didn't always do a good job of showing it. If I could just talk to you once and say just a few things to you now one of them would be to beg you to please not come here. I know you must be grieving, and that is the thing that is really troubling me. Maybe if I had not had that last drink or two, I could have told the middle of the road from that big oak tree, and I'd still be there with you and the kids. I wish I had never had that first drink. I don't mean that night, either, I mean ever!

But back to the grieving; please, sweetheart, don't let your grief stand in your way of avoiding this place. Don't even ask the question why did this happen, because it might do something to weaken that faith you were always talking about. And, whatever you do, don't blame God. I'm here not only because I made decisions that resulted in me leaving you behind there, but decisions that got me just what I deserved. It isn't God's fault. So, whatever you do, don't grieve for me so much that you say I don't want to go

to the trouble of living that Christian life that I wish I had lived now. This place isn't worth all of the bad ways I treated both God and you.

Do you remember that one time I went to church with you that I mentioned a while ago? You didn't know it then, but the sermon almost convinced me when the minister started talking about how Jesus bore all of our sins, and then he asked the question that since God loved us so much how could we fail to show our appreciation to Him and not obey Him and live like we should? Not only do I wish now that I had told you how I felt, I wish I had done something about it. I think about that every time I try to look about me and see what this place looks like, but my eyes meet nothing but eerie blackness and darkness. I think about it every time the word water crosses my mind and about the comfort of our bed at night after a long day's work. There is no comfort here, only agony and loneliness ---and thirst. Oh, the thirst! If there were such a thing as last night, here, I would tell you that I cried myself to sleep last night thinking about you. The truth is, the tears have been just like the pain; they never stop.

What I am saying dear wife is that if I had everything to do over again, I wouldn't be here, and I don't want you or any one of our three kids to end up here, either. I said there is darkness here, but there is one exception to that. There is one place I can see. At least I think I can see it: It may just be my imagination. Whichever it is, it is a long way off on the other side of a real wide empty space. I think on the other side of it I can see some of those old people you went to church with; the ones who died years ago. They are smiling and happy. The place where they are is as bright as the noonday sun, while mine is darker than it was in that cave we went through that time, and they turned the lights off. Remember that? I see them over there all happy, and they never seem to be sick or appear to have any trouble of any kind. I guess that must be that place of paradise you always said you were headed for. Well, that is where I want you and Bobby, Taylor, and Angie to go, and not to end up here where I am.

Last night ---well not last night, there are no days and nights here, only nights. Anyway, some time ago I got to thinking about that time your mother tried to talk to me about my soul. That's what she called it. I answered her real harshly and told her to mind her own business. I never did treat her right after that and she knew it. Even though I avoided her most of the time she kept trying to be nice to me. How I wish I could tell you to tell her how sorry I am and how right she was, but then there are a lot of things I would say to a lot of people if I could. But that will never be.

Dear Anita, I am worried about Bobby. He's a teenager now, and I now know the example I set for him was not a good one. I was getting him to skip your worship to go fishing with me a lot. You didn't know this, and I know he would never tell you, but out

there in that boat we would have a beer or two together, and that crowd he has been running around with will surely keep him on the wrong path that I, his own father, started him down. I can't talk to you or to him, all I can do is exist in the terrible state of anxiety, and pray, yes I said pray, that he doesn't go down the same road I travelled, and end up at the same destination. Can you imagine, yeah, I guess you can imagine how bad it will be if I am responsible for him ending up here with me, instead of with you in that other place where I know you are going.

I guess that is about all I have to say except for one more thing about that time I went to church with you. I remember one verse now from that sermon. I can't quote it. I never did know much about the Bible you know. But I remember it said something about it wouldn't be of any good to anybody to gain everything in the world and lose his own soul. Then it asked the question what would somebody give in exchange for his soul? I know the answer to that question now, it's nothing! I hope you never forget that, nor let your sorrow over your knowledge that eternal torment is my sentence grieve you so much that you despair of the good woman you are, leave that good life you've always lived, and in join me here in this horrendous place. Please don't!