

**Children's Questions  
about  
God**



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## PREFACE

This book is a practical manual for adults. It has two purposes. First, it gives directions on how to respond to the theological questions of children. (“Where did the world come from?” “Who made God?” “Where is God?” “How come there are bad people?” “Why do people get sick?” Etc.) Second, it is intended to help adults get in touch in their daily lives with the basic realities of God and the supernatural.

For most modern Americans the word “theology” has come to mean either something abstract and ethereal, or something moralistic (a list of do’s and don’ts). This book is based on the assumption that theology is about everyday experiences of ordinary people. The reason so many adults have trouble with the theological questions of children is that the adults have lost touch with the realities behind such words as “spirit,” “angel,” “miracle,” and even “God.”

This book is designed to help adults get in touch in everyday life with those realities. It provides a series of exercises and stories to help God and the supernatural become real.

There are three sorts of contents.

First, there are chapters of *exercises*. These chapters give clear, detailed directions for responding to children’s theological questions. They provide simple exercises to be done, and clear, concrete explanations to connect the exercises to the questions the children have asked. These exercises are the most important part of the book and should be done repeatedly by both adults and children until they become a natural part of their lives.

The second sort of chapter consists of *explanations for adults* of the principles behind the exercises and stories. These explanations are *elementary* in the best sense of that word. They provide a clear and simple explanation of the *elements* of religion. The explanatory chapters and the chapters of exercises alternate through the body of the book.

A *story* provides the third sort of contents. It is intended to give a specific example of the sorts of religious experiences the children (and adults) are already having. It is also intended to interpret those experiences in a helpful way.

The theology of this book is basic, biblical Christian. Its focus is on matters so basic that most Christians should find its point of view congenial.

## Where Is God?

### A RESPONSE TO CHILDREN

Imagine a world in which all land animals other than human beings were extinct — a world in which the only animals besides us were fish and birds. Suppose you had never seen a land animal. Suppose you had only read about them in books.

In such a case imagine trying to explain to a child what a dog is. Imagine the child's confusion and your own. You would stumble for comparisons. A dog is like this or like that. The child would ask endless "why" questions. Why were there any dogs? What did they eat? Why did they look like that? Etc. The questions would be difficult to answer. You would be almost as confused as the child. It is hard to talk about things we have no experience of.

That's what it's like for many adults to try to tell children about God. We may have a strong faith in God, yet we have not seen him as we see the other beings of our world. Furthermore, several centuries ago we scientific human beings banished the spirits from our world; supernatural beings are no longer everyday beings for the modern man and woman. So telling our children about God and the supernatural is for most of us a confusing and frustrating experience.

What often happens is that we simply repeat the abstractions about God that we ourselves were taught as children. What is God like? Well, he's all-powerful and all-loving. Where is God? He's everywhere. Why can't I see him? He's invisible.

After a while the children give up. Some questions just don't seem to have good answers.

The exercises of this book are intended to build a firm foundation of religious experience. We are going to answer the children's questions by use of experience, not by abstractions.

The first exercise is an answer to the question, “Where is God?” It is the foundation upon which all of the book rests. It is an exercise in basic religious experience — our perceptions of the wondrous.

Imagine that Benjamin, aged four or five, has asked you about God. “Where is God?” Here is a response you might make:

**STEP ONE.**

Benjamin, the best way I know to answer your question is to *show you* where God is. Let’s play a game.

First, I want you to hold your mouth the way mine is.

*[Here hold your mouth wide open in an expression of surprised wonder, as you do when you gasp, “Aah!” But don’t say anything. Don’t make the sound. One step at a time.]*

Can you do that? Can you shape your mouth like that? Let me see you do it.

Good! Good! That’s right,

**STEP TWO.**

Now there’s something else I want you to do. Open your eyes wide too.

*[Demonstrate. Open your eyes wide in wonder. You’ll find it’s hard to do without also opening your mouth in wonder, as above. So let it happen. Do them both, but talk about the eyes. Still no sound.]*

See! See how wide open my eyes are! Now let’s see you do it.

Good! Good! That’s right.

**STEP THREE.**

There’s one more thing. Now you have to make a sound to go with your wide open mouth and your wide open eyes. What sound do you suppose that is? What sound do you make when you open your mouth that way and your eyes that way?

*[Children know the answer to that question, but if by some chance the child doesn’t respond or gets off the track, give some help. This is supposed to be fun, not a grilling.]*

Answer. Aah! *[In a gasp.]*

That's right! Aah! And notice — with your breath in! You make the Aah! sound by pulling your breath in real fast.

Let's do that together a few times. Aah! Aah! Aah!

OK. That's the first sound. Now we have another one.

**STEP FOUR.**

This time open your eyes wide, just the way you did before, only this time hold your mouth together almost as if you were going to whistle — like this. See! And now say Oooh! Oooh! Can you do that?

Oooh! Oooh! Oooh!

*[In contrast to Aah!, which is said at the top-back of the mouth, in a gasp, sucking in the breath quickly, Oooh! is prolonged, said smoothly, more caressingly, pushing the breath out in a column from the throat through the confined mouth and lips. Be sure to dramatize the two words, making them distinctly and enjoyably different.]*

**STEP FIVE.**

Now I have a question for you. When do you do that? When do you open your eyes wide and say "Aah!" and "Oooh!"?

*[Who knows what the children will say? I suppose they'll give examples. Encourage them in whatever, they say. Then pull it all together.]*

You know when we say Aah! and Oooh? When we see something **wonderful!** Those are **wonderful** things you were talking about!

**STEP SIX.**

Now let's practice. Let's look at some wonderful things.

Let's go outside and look at the stars.

*[Go outside. If it is daytime, look at the clouds or at the trees or at the tall buildings or whatever other wonder is there.]*

Look up there! Aah! Oooh! Isn't that wonderful!



And let's look at this flower! See inside it there! See those little kind of stems there? Those are called stamens. And see those little things there! Those are called sepals! Aah! Oooh! Isn't it wonderful.

A stone. *[Or other things. Same exercise.]*

**STEP SEVEN.**

OK. Now I have a question for you. What are you seeing? When you say Aah! and Oooh! what are you seeing?

*[Who knows what they will answer? But let them struggle with it for a while. Then finally say—]*

God! You're seeing God! God is everywhere! God is in everything! And sometimes you catch a glimpse of him. And when you do, you say Aah! and Oooh! That's what you say when you see God, when you catch just a little glimpse of him.

**STEP EIGHT.**

*[This step should be done at some time, but not necessarily right away. Do it if the children's attention and energy are still there. Otherwise wait to some other time.]*

Here's a story — the first story in the Bible — that tells all about how God is in everything, how everything comes from God and is going back to God.

Genesis 1: 1-2:4a.

*[Use a modern translation of the creation story. Don't use the King James or Douay versions. You may like the old-fashioned language, but it conveys the wrong impression to children. You want the children to get the idea that creation is about now, about their daily lives, not about relics in a museum, however beautiful. Read the story as poetry, as a thing of beauty, as a description of how much God loves the world — how good it is, how full of wonder!]*

## The Presence of God and the Supernatural

### AN EXPLANATION FOR ADULTS

The “Ooh!”-“Aah!” exercise is the foundation upon which everything in this book rests. Its purpose is to help us begin to notice the presence of God and the supernatural in our ordinary lives. We are all aware of big “Ooh!”-“Aah!” experiences — times when we are on a mountaintop or at the seashore or gazing up at the stars at night, times when we gasp out loud and are deeply filled with wonder and awe. But we don’t have to be on a mountaintop to perceive the wondrous. If we stop for a moment to look at a flower or a child or a blade of grass, we can become conscious of the wondrous. Furthermore, our lives are filled with small glimpses of the wondrous that we don’t notice. This exercise is intended to help us become aware of the wondrous that is a constant part of our lives.

For some of us, such an exercise may come as a surprise. We have been taught that God is invisible, that he is “up there” someplace, that he is so vastly different from us as to be far beyond our apprehension. So even though we may have heard that the Kingdom of God is within or that in him we live and move and have our being, the words have not sunk in. We do not expect to find God close at hand. This exercise is intended to change that expectation. It is intended to help us form an habitual way of looking at the world that *expects* to encounter the wondrous constantly. A world view that includes God and the supernatural as a matter of course — that’s our goal for our children and ourselves.

There are great obstacles to forming such a supernatural world view.

First, we get used to the wonder of things. When we see the ocean for the first time, we gasp, we cannot take our eyes off its vastness, we are entranced. But after we have lived on the ocean’s edge for a few months we begin to take it for granted, to pay attention to other things without being drawn to its vastness as we were at first.

We can see the same progression in small children. At first they gasp in wonder at all sorts of things, but then as they become used to the world around them they take these things for granted.

Second, we spend much of our time absorbed in the surface of things, in things as they present themselves to our senses and our minds. We taste ice cream and enjoy it. We *run and climb and use our muscles*, and enjoy that. We learn things and *think about* them and analyze them, and enjoy that. Most of our lives are spent in such ways, good ways, but while we are spending our lives this way, we may not be aware of the wonder in all things. This is the *natural* level of life; it is the level at which we exercise our natural powers, our abilities to enjoy and control; it is the level at which our human powers are more or less adequate.

Third, we have been educated to believe only in the natural world. The world of spirits in which our forbears lived has been banished. Our world is secular — that is, this-worldly, not spirit-filled.

We Christians and Jews of the Western world made a decision about our world view when we decided some centuries ago to become modern. We decided no longer to explain events in our world by reference to spirits. Why do people become sick? The answer used to be that spirits made them sick. Now we talk about germs and viruses and psychological complexes. Why does milk sour? A spirit used to do that. Now bacteria do it.

This step — the banishing of spirits — was essential to the formation of modern science. It was an historical good, but it was also a case of throwing the baby out with the bath. Germs and viruses may — and do — cause bodily illnesses, but so do sick or bad spirits. When we banished spirits from our world view, we also banished any realistic view of our inner life. Modern psychology is a great achievement, but it is grievously limited by its modern eyeglasses. We need once again to get in touch with the world of spirit.

I am not proposing that we re-adopt ancient and medieval errors. We cannot simply re-enter long-dead world views. But we can become sensitive to our own present experiences, and we can seek to find ways of expressing a fuller view of life than the modern secular view permits.

The “Ooh!”-“Aah!” exercise is intended to open our view to spiritual experiences we are constantly having, but which we tend not to notice and which

we seldom think of theologically. The kingdom within is constantly with us, but we just as constantly ignore and discount it.

## Where Do I Come From?

A RESPONSE TO CHILDREN

The child asks, “Where do I come from?” Here is a response:

### STEP ONE.

*[Do the “Ooh!”-“Aah!” exercise in an abbreviated form. Just have the children say “Ooh!”-“Aah!” and imagine seeing the wondrous. Ask the children what they are seeing when they say “Ooh!”-“Aah!”*

*Answers: Something amazing, something wonderful. God. The supernatural. Spirits.*

*This exercise should be done repeatedly. It should be a constant game. The repetition is essential for forming a solid foundation to a religious world view. It should be done at the beginning of every exercise, although as time goes on you may be able to make it shorter and shorter.]*

### STEP TWO.

Now I want you to notice something very carefully. When you do the “Ooh!”-“Aah!” exercise what happens to your eyes?

They go wide open! They open wide up! You can’t go “Ooh!”-“Aah!” without opening up your eyes.

I wonder why that is? Do you have any idea why your eyes go wide open like that?

*[At this question and all the questions in this exercise and the others, pause for the children to answer. Talk it over with them.]*

Is it so you can see something better?

What do you usually do when you’re trying hard to see something better?

I scrunch my eyes together when I’m trying hard to see something.

I’ll tell you why we open our eyes wide — because we are not seeing with our outer eyes. We are seeing with our inner eyes. We are talking with our outer



eyes. We are saying “Ooh!”-“Aah!” with our outer eyes because our inner eyes are seeing something wonderful.

**STEP THREE.**

Now let’s notice something else. Let’s go “Ooh!”-“Aah!” again and pay attention to what’s happening inside you. Do it now.

What happens inside you when you go “Ooh!”-“Aah!”?

I feel something right down here — right here in my stomach — a sort of gasp in my stomach, a sort of emptiness in my stomach, a sort of big space.

Let’s do it again, and feel what’s happening. Do you feel that gasp inside you? Do you feel that big space?

I think that when we go “Ooh!”-“Aah!” we are seeing in a different way. We are seeing something inside. We are seeing with our inner eyes and ears. We are opening up inside to a different world. That’s what I think.

**STEP FOUR.**

Now let’s look at a baby. See this baby I have in my arms!

*[If you have a real baby, so much the better. But if you don’t, no matter. Just pretend. Children have no trouble at all pretending, and it’s good to pretend with children because it tells them that pretending is a good thing to do — and it is. It is only our modern secular world — emptied of spirits — that thinks something is wrong or suspect about pretending.]*

Look! “Ooh!”-“Aah!” “Ooh!”-“Aah!”

God is in the baby! That baby comes from God!

**STEP FIVE.**

When you were born your mother and father [your father and I] [your mother and I] went “Ooh!”-“Aah!”. And your grandmother and grandfather went “Ooh!”-“Aah!”. And all your aunts and uncles went “Ooh!”-“Aah!”. And then your mother and your father showed you off to all the neighbors and they went “Ooh!”-“Aah!”. And then they brought you to church and everybody in church went “Ooh!”-“Aah!”.

What do you suppose that means?

You come from God! God is in you!

**STEP SIX.**

Benjamin [*or Suzie or whatever, the child's name*], will you go over there and stand on that step, please, and face me and say, "I am Benjamin. I come from God!"

*[When the child does this, go "Ooh!" - "Aah!" "Ooh!"-"Aah" several times with great enthusiasm.]*

## Spirits and Biology

### AN EXPLANATION FOR ADULTS

When adults hear the question, “Where do I come from?” we are likely to think of biology, of sex instruction for our children. That’s one kind of answer to the question, and it’s an important one. Children should be told the biological facts in appropriate amounts at appropriate times. But they also need — even more importantly need — religious instruction. Both kinds of instruction are valid. They are not rivals to each other. It isn’t as if one is true and the other false. In fact, there are even other kinds of valid answers to the child’s question. You can give an interpersonal, emotional answer to the question: “You come from the love of your father and mother.” You can give an historical, familial answer: “You come from a long line of farmers.” You can give an economic explanation: “You come from an increase in salary your daddy got the year before you were born.” There are many valid answers, not just one. Each kind of explanation has its place.

Religious explanation is the most fundamental of all explanations, because it deals with the final questions of life, the ultimate realities. The children — and we adults — need two things from religious explanation. (1) We need helpful labels to use in our thinking. Some examples of labels are “inner eyes and ears,” “Ooh!’-‘Aah!’,” and “seeing God.” These words mark important experiences for us. With them we can think and talk about religious realities. (2) The labels need to be tied to experiences we recognize. The trouble with much of the theological instruction we adults have received is that it is not tied to any recognizable experience for us.

## How Come We Do Bad Things? (I)

A RESPONSE TO CHILDREN, INCLUDING A STORY:

BENJAMIN AND THE GLOOM MONSTER

The child asks, “How come we do bad things?”

Here is a response —

### STEP ONE.

*[Do the “Ooh!”-“Aah!” exercise. Be sure from now on to include the significance of the open eyes. The children, who are well acquainted with their inner eyes, need to have their inner eyes named and affirmed. They are constantly being told that imagination is a bad thing, that it is not grown-up, that they should grow out of it, that they shouldn’t do it too much, etc. They need to hear strong messages that the inner eye and ear are good. So be sure to include that part of the exercise every time, and strongly. The children also need to hear that they come from God. So be sure to do the “Ooh!”-“Aah!” toward them frequently.]*

### STEP TWO.

To talk about why we do bad things we’re going to need to learn a different sound. First, turn your mouth down — like this *[downward curved mouth]*. Now say “Uuuuh.” *[Deep, grating ouchy sound, from the top back of the mouth, unpleasant.]*

What does that sound mean?

*Answer.* Something bad.

Do you ever feel that way?

Do you ever do anything that leads someone else to feel that way?

### STEP THREE.

A story —

BENJAMIN AND THE GLOOM MONSTER

It was the Fourth of July! Benjamin could hardly wait! There was going to be a parade!

“Mama, hurry up! Daddy, hurry up! We’ll be late for the parade!”

Benjamin’s mother was in the kitchen. There was a big picnic basket on the counter and she was reaching into the refrigerator.

Benjamin grabbed his mother’s skirt. He pulled.

“Mama, hurry up!”

“No, Benjamin,” she said. “Stop pulling at me. We have plenty of time.”

But they didn’t have plenty of time. Benjamin was sure of that. Again and again he tried to get his mother and his father to hurry up. But they were so slow, so slow he could hardly stand it. But finally they were ready, and they went to the parade.

There were bands — funny looking bands with big tall hats. And there were clowns. And there were soldiers. And there were flags, lots of flags. And there were old girls all dressed up and riding on top of fancy wagons. And there were some funny-looking old men riding on tricycles and going back and forth all over the place. And there were fire engines. And there were horses and policemen and people riding in cars. It was lots of fun. But then somebody said some prayers and there were speeches and Benjamin got bored.

Afterwards Benjamin and his mother and father went to the beach. They had a picnic and then Benjamin went swimming and then Benjamin started building a sand castle. Benjamin’s mother asked him if he wanted to take a nap over in the shade, but Benjamin said No he wanted to keep building the sand castle. And Benjamin made a bigger and bigger and bigger sand castle.

Finally Benjamin’s mother said it was time to go. Benjamin said, “No! Please, mama, let me play a little longer. I want to make the castle bigger.”

Benjamin’s mother said, “All right, Benjamin, but just for a little while. You’re getting tired and it’s time to go home.”

“I’m not getting tired,” said Benjamin. “I could play lots longer.”

So Benjamin worked some more on his sand castle.



Then Benjamin's mother said, "OK, Benjamin. It's time now. We've got to go."

"No!" said Benjamin, "Please, mama, let me play a little longer. I want to make the castle bigger."

"I'm sorry, Benjamin," said his mother, "but we can't stay any longer. It's time to go."

"Please, mother, please," said Benjamin.

"No, Benjamin, we have to go now."

Now something happened to Benjamin that I don't suppose has ever happened to you. His mouth turned downward — like this. His eyebrows pushed down too. And Benjamin just looked plain mean! And he felt mean too!

"I'm not gonna do it!" he said. "I'm gonna stay here!"

And inside, Benjamin felt as if he was pushing on something — or was it pulling? Inside himself he felt, "I'm not gonna let them make me leave. They're always making me leave. They're always doing bad things to me, and I won't let them!"

Benjamin was angry! And Benjamin thought of all the bad things his mother and his father had done to him, and how mean they were, and how they didn't really love him, and how all they ever wanted to do was spoil things for him, and how they were selfish, and how they were bad and he wasn't going to let them do this to him.

Benjamin was feeling very different from the way he felt at the parade or the picnic or while he was swimming or making the sand castle. The Gloom Monster had grabbed hold of Benjamin!

And now I'll let you finish the story. What do you suppose Benjamin and his mother did next? What do you do when the Gloom Monster gets hold of you?

#### **STEP FOUR**

We do bad things because the Gloom Monster grabs us.



THE GLOOM MONSTER

We do bad things because we let the Gloom Monster in.

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## Creation Theology and Sin

### AN EXPLANATION FOR ADULTS

In these instructions for children we are following a different order from the one often used in seeking to convert adults to Christ. Often preachers seek first to convince adults of their need for Christ by pointing out their weaknesses — their sin and confusion, their unhappinesses and failures.

There are several reasons for beginning differently here. First of all, we are dealing with children, and although children begin to have a sense of guilt at an early age and that guilt needs to be ministered to, nevertheless, it seems best to try to build and strengthen a sense of self-worth first, before addressing the problem of sin and wrongdoing. Second, in proceeding in this way we are following the order of the Bible itself. In the opening verses of the Bible, creation — and God's joy in creation — precedes the story of humankind's fall into sin. First we are told of our creation in the image of God; then we are told of sin. I will give a third reason later, but first I want to say more about sin.

There are two accounts of sin in the Bible. One is the story in Genesis of Adam and Eve. There we are told how the woman is tempted by the snake and how the man is tempted by the woman. The story is the story of temptation and free will. That's the story that most adult Christians have grown up on. It was the major Christian story of sin in the Middle Ages and right up until recent times.

But it is not the story of the New Testament, and it is not the story being told (principally) in these instructions. In the New Testament sin is caused by evil spirits. Jesus comes to drive out evil spirits. Paul sees sin not as something we do, not as a choice of our free will, but as something that possesses us, something that takes away our freedom. That's the story of the Gloom Monster. Modern men and women believe in Gloom Monsters — that is, evil spirits — once again. We see sin not so much as the result of wicked choices as it is of having a hang-up, of getting "hooked" by something or someone. Sin is something that happens to us, that takes us over. We do not so much freely choose sin — it's more like being smothered by something, surrounded by something and hemmed in by it. That's the picture we are painting for the children. They do bad things not so much

because they wickedly choose bad things, but because a Gloom Monster gets hold of them and leads them to do bad things.

There is truth, however, in the Genesis story. The difference in the two points of view is a difference in emphasis. I believe the children — and we — are now far more in need of hearing about the Gloom Monsters who seek to possess us than we are in need of hearing about the rules we are breaking, of the sins we are choosing to commit.

I said earlier that there is a third reason for starting with the “Ooh!”-“Aah!” experience and the inner eye and the Gloom Monster, rather than with the conviction of sin. It is this. Our everyday world is secular — a scientific world governed by human knowledge and skill, empty of spirits — and it is becoming more and more secular all the time. To the secular man and woman religion is becoming more and more optional, more and more foreign, more and more unknown. For secular man and woman the inner life is psychological, not spiritual. For secular man and woman the spiritual world is an ancient superstitious world that includes weird devils, evil spirits, magic, angels, miracles, and gods — an unbelievable, foreign world. If the children, if modern men and women, are to hear the truths of God, then God and the supernatural must become, once again, realities. I do not believe secular men and women can hear the story of our redemption from sin without first discovering the reality of the spirit. So that’s where I think we must start. We must first show, over and over again, the reality of the inner world of spirit as the foundation upon which the story of sin and redemption rests.

## How Come We Do Bad Things? (II)

A RESPONSE TO CHILDREN

### STEP ONE.

*["Ooh!"-"Aah! " — the inner eyes — the "Uuuuh" sound. Why do we do bad things? — because the Gloom Monster grabs at us and we let the Gloom Monster in. Look at the picture of the Gloom Monster.]*

### STEP TWO — THE TWO SELVES.

Remember our story from last time? How Benjamin went to a Fourth of July parade and then a picnic and then to the beach, where he went swimming and then built a big sand castle? Do you remember what happened when his mother said it was time to go?

Do you remember how Benjamin looked? Let's practice looking the way Benjamin looked.





THE "UUUH"-BENJAMIN

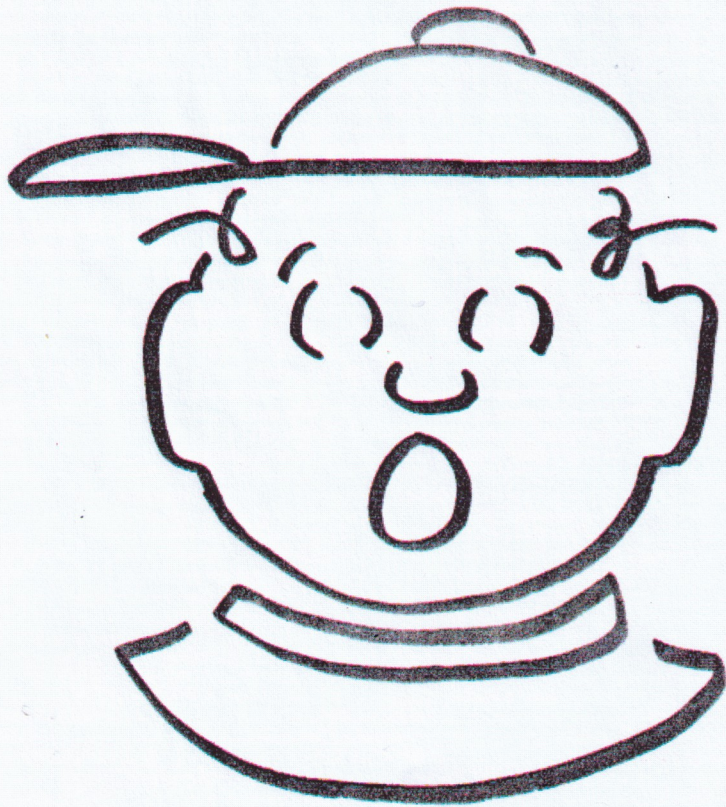
And here's a picture of how Benjamin looked. See that mouth! See how turned down it is! And look at those eyebrows! See how scrunched up they are!

What's going on with Benjamin? How come he looks that way?

Now how do you suppose Benjamin looked when he was at the parade? And during the picnic? And while he was building the sand castle'?

Here are some pictures of how Benjamin looked at the parade.





THE "OOH-AAH!"-BENJAMIN





ANOTHER "OOH-AAH!" - BENJAMIN

See that smile! And see those eyes!

Which of these three pictures shows Benjamin?

All of them show Benjamin! All three show ways Benjamin can be.

**STEP THREE — THE “OOH!” AND “AAH!”-SELF AND THE “UUUH”-SELF.**

We're all like that. We all have an “Ooh!”-“Aah!” self, and we all have an “Uuuh” self.

Let's practice that. I'll go first. Here's my “Ooh!”-“Aah!” self. [*Make a wondering face, wide open eyes, etc.*] And here's my “Uuuh” self. [*Turn down the corners of your mouth. Scrunch your brow, etc.*] Now you do it. First, be your “Ooh!”-“Aah!” self. Now, be an “Uuuh” self.

**STEP FOUR — THE REAL YOU.**

A big question: which one is the real Benjamin?

The “Ooh!”-“Aah!” self, the one who catches glimpses of God.

Which one is the real me?

Which one is the real you?

## Pitfalls in teaching about Sin and Goodness

### AN EXPLANATION FOR ADULTS

The instructions are now getting tricky. There are several pitfalls here. One pitfall is moralism and blaming. It would be very easy to say that Benjamin was a bad boy, that he should have obeyed his mother — and then go on and say that children should obey their mothers. That’s what children are expecting us to say. That’s what they hear all the time, and it’s not the Christian religion. They expect us to talk rules — “You should obey” — and to blame them if they don’t obey. But that’s legalistic religion, and we’re trying to teach the religion of grace.

Another pitfall is to go over the children’s heads. I don’t know whether this instruction succeeds on that level. We’re trying to teach the children the difference between being in Christ and being alienated from Christ, between being their true selves in God and being distorted selves fallen away from God. We’re trying to teach them the reality of grace and of original sin.

Above all we need to avoid any suggestion that they can be “good” or be their true selves — the “Ooh!”-“Aah!” self — by trying hard to be. You don’t get to be your true self by effort. So notice that the instruction is very careful not to say, “This is the way you ought to be.” Instead it tries to make the “Ooh!”-“Aah!” self attractive and the “Uuuh” self unattractive.

## How Can I Be OK? (I)

A RESPONSE TO CHILDREN

### STEP ONE.

*["Ooh! "- "Aah! " — the inner eyes — the "Uuuh" sound. Why do we do bad things? — because the Gloom Monster grabs at us and we let the Gloom Monster in. Look at the picture of the Gloom Monster. Show the pictures of the "Ooh!"-"Aah!" Benjamin and the "Uuuh"-Benjamin.]*

### STEP TWO — THE HUGGING EXERCISE.

*[Now give the children a big hug. If there are a lot of children, have a group of adults give the children hugs — big hugs.]*

Tell me how that felt. What did that feel like?

Warm. Good. Fun.

Where did you feel good? Where did you feel the feeling most of all?

In the center of my body. In the heart. Around my face. From **my** chest up.

### STEP THREE — WHERE THE WARMTH COMES FROM.

Look at this picture of Benjamin.

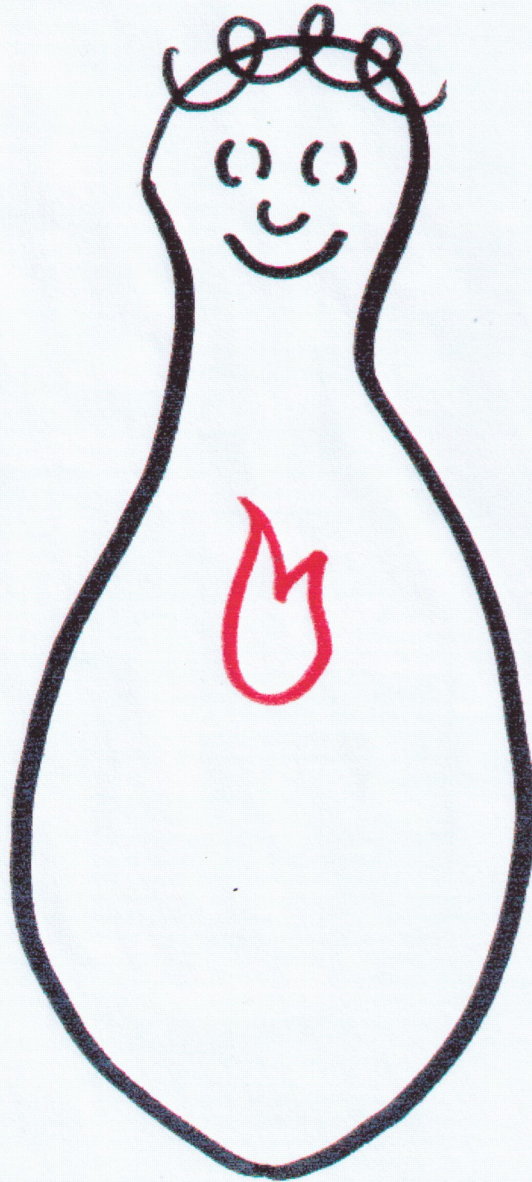




THE FLAME INSIDE BENJAMIN

You have a warm spot inside you.





BENJAMIN'S MOTHER



And so do other people.



BENJAMIN AND HIS MOTHER HUGGING

And when you show love to somebody, your warmth and their warmth come together. They flow together! They overflow!



BENJAMIN AND HIS FATHER HUGGING

And where do you suppose all this love comes from?



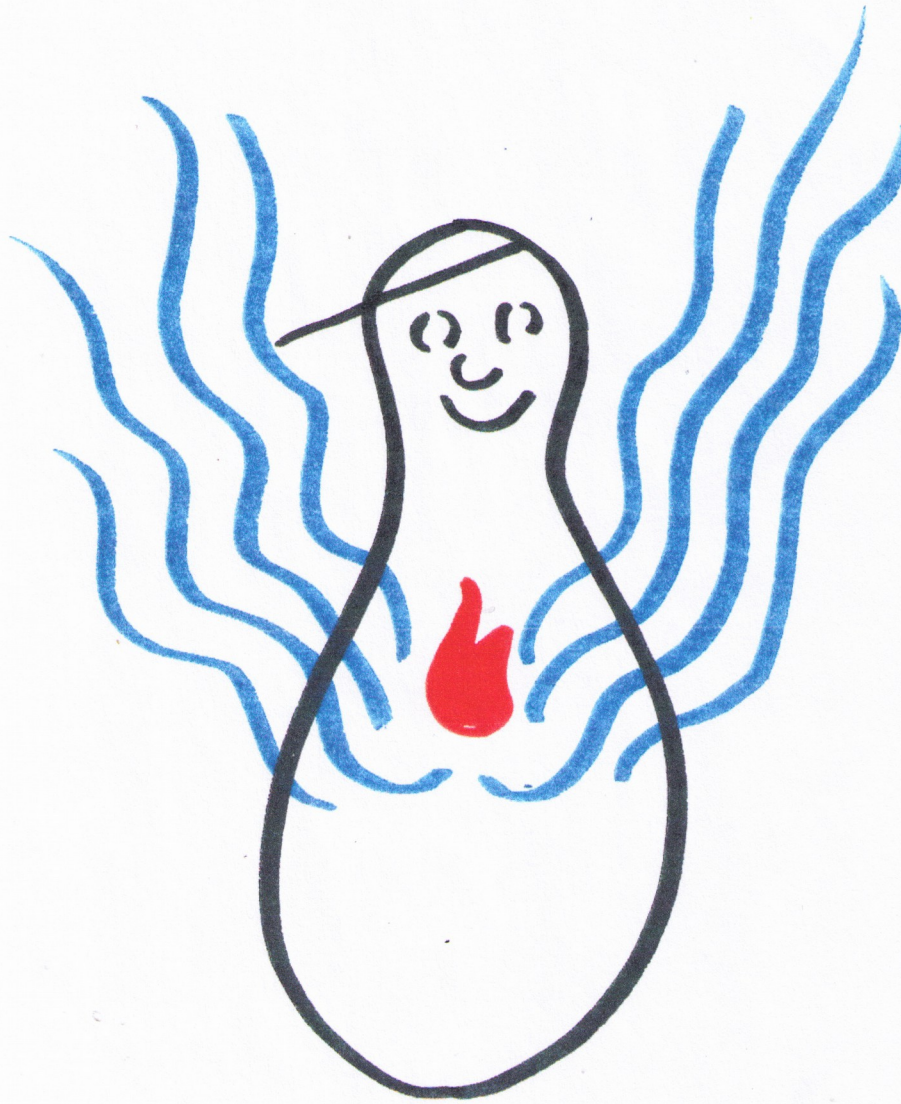


THE SUN OF GOD IS THE SOURCE OF LIFE

What do you suppose that sun is?

God.

God is down in your Center. That's why you feel warm in your heart when you hug. God's love flows from your Center all through you and out to other people.



THE FOUNTAIN OF LOVE



## Methods of Getting in Touch with God

### AN EXPLANATION FOR ADULTS

We have now talked with the children about two ways of experiencing God. One way is through the “Ooh!”-“Aah!” experiences. We catch glimpses of God when we gasp in wonder and awe at his creation. Another way is through experiences of love. God is love.

We have also been experiencing the presence of God within us. Inside us is a wondrous center. Inside us is a flame of love. God is within us.

Another way of getting in touch with God is through meditation. Classes in prayer and meditation these days often do exercises in what is called centering — exercises in getting in touch with the center of peace and love and wisdom within us — getting in touch, that is, with God at our Center. And everybody needs to learn how to do that, how to get in touch with their Center, but I haven’t been able to think of any way to teach that to children in a brief exercise. And I suspect that young children are not able to use the meditative methods of adults. First, they don’t need them. They tend to look at things very simply — right at the heart. So methods of stripping away complexity aren’t needed. Second, the instructions require a kind of concentration and discipline that is too adult. What children need — and what most of us don’t get as children is the example of their parents and elders practicing the presence of God. The children need to observe adults centering, stopping in the midst of the rush and anxiety of the world to get in touch with the Center of it all. I think that’s how children will gradually learn meditation and relaxation methods for letting God get in touch with them.

For example, what children need to see is something like this. Mama is all frazzled. She’s all upset. She’s getting to the point where usually she starts to holler and be very unpleasant. All of a sudden, instead of hollering, mama sits down, closes her eyes, places her hands quietly on her thighs, adjusts her body to get comfortable, starts to breath slowly. And then she just sits for a while, until finally she gets up and begins to talk in a calm, quiet manner. When the children ask what she was doing, she says, “I was listening to God.” And over the years the children see this. They learn how to do it themselves by seeing her do it. They

learn what it feels like. They learn how to do it in crowded places. They learn how to hear God speaking within.

That's what you and I (most of us) didn't learn as children. That's what we need to learn now, and need to learn to teach our children and grandchildren over a period of years.

One more comment. What we have done in the above exercise is to help the children and ourselves get in touch with the soul. Our soul is our inner self, the self that has the spark of God within. To know that you have a soul is to discover that God is within you.

## How Can I Be OK?(II)

A RESPONSE TO CHILDREN, INCLUDING THE REST OF THE STORY,  
BENJAMIN AND THE GLOOM MONSTER

### STEP ONE.

*[Do a refresher as before. Be sure to hug the children and to talk about the flame of love and where it comes from and who it is. Look at the pictures of love.]*

### STEP TWO.

*[Retell the story of Benjamin and the Gloom Monster from Chapter 5, perhaps in shortened form. Then ask the children what they think happened next? After talking it over, tell the rest of the story.]*

*The rest of the story of Benjamin and the Gloom Monster —*

The Gloom Monster had hold of Benjamin! When Benjamin's mother tried to persuade him to stop building the sand castle and come home with them, Benjamin shrieked, "No! No! I won't do it!"

Benjamin's mother tried to give him a hug, but Benjamin screamed and hollered and twisted it her arms and wrenched himself free and ran away.

"What are we going to do?" said Benjamin I s mother. "I'll just have to pick him up and put him in the car," said Benjamin's father. And so **lie** did.

Benjamin knew better than to run away from his father, so when his father came after him Benjamin just stood still, but when his father picked him up, Benjamin beat against him with his fists and began to cry. He cried all the way home.

Dinnertime was no fun that night. Benjamin wouldn't eat his green beans and Benjamin's father wouldn't let him have any dessert and Benjamin's mother said, "I think we'd better go to bed."

For once Benjamin didn't argue. He was tired, and sad, and didn't want to play. He just wanted to be alone.

His mother gave him a bath. At first Benjamin was angry. He didn't want a bath! But his mother was gentle and she began to sing a quiet song, a lovely little melody that Benjamin liked, and she put warm water in the bath tub, and she got his big boat and his little boat and she put them in the tub, and she got out the large soft brush to scrub his back with, and the bathroom felt warm and cozy, and all of a sudden Benjamin decided he wanted a bath, and he got in the tub and his mother washed him all over and scrubbed his back, and it felt so good he almost fell asleep!

When his mother tucked him into bed, she read him a story. Then she gave him a big hug.

Benjamin was feeling much better.

"There!" said his mother. "Now the Gloom Monster's gone! We chased him away!"

"The Gloom Monster?" said Benjamin. "What's that?"

"That's what was making you feel so bad," said his mother. "The Gloom Monster got hold of you and made you feel mad and bad and awful."

"I didn't see any monsters," said Benjamin.

"You don't see Gloom Monsters," said Benjamin's mother. "You feel them."

"Feel them?"

"Yes," said his mother. "You can tell when a Gloom Monster's after you by the way you start to feel. You start to feel mad and bad — and that's what you look like too. Do you know what you looked like, Benjamin, when the Gloom Monster had hold of you?"

"What, mama, what did I look like?"

"Like this, Benjamin, like this." And Benjamin's mother made the meanest face you ever saw, all tight and all scrunched up.

Benjamin started to laugh. "Did I really look like that, mama? Did I really?"

"Oh, yes, Benjamin, you did. You were the ugliest little, meanest-looking little boy you ever saw."

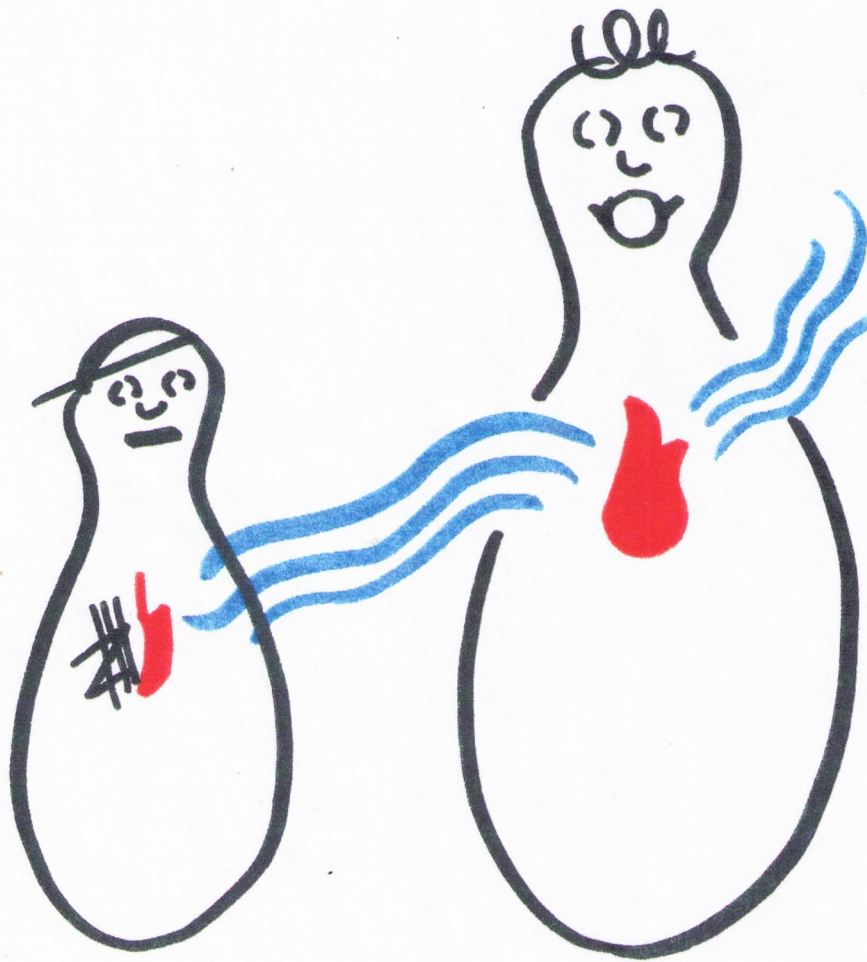
“Mama!” said Benjamin looking worried. “I don’t look like that now, do I?”

“No, Benjamin, you don’t. You look like **my** wonderful Benjamin, the real Benjamin, not the uuchy-Benjamin that sometimes takes over.”

And Benjamin and his mother hugged each other two or three or four big hugs — great big hugs — and kissed each other, and Benjamin’s mother tucked him in, and the next thing you knew Benjamin was fast asleep.

**STEP THREE — HOW DID THINGS GET BETTER?**

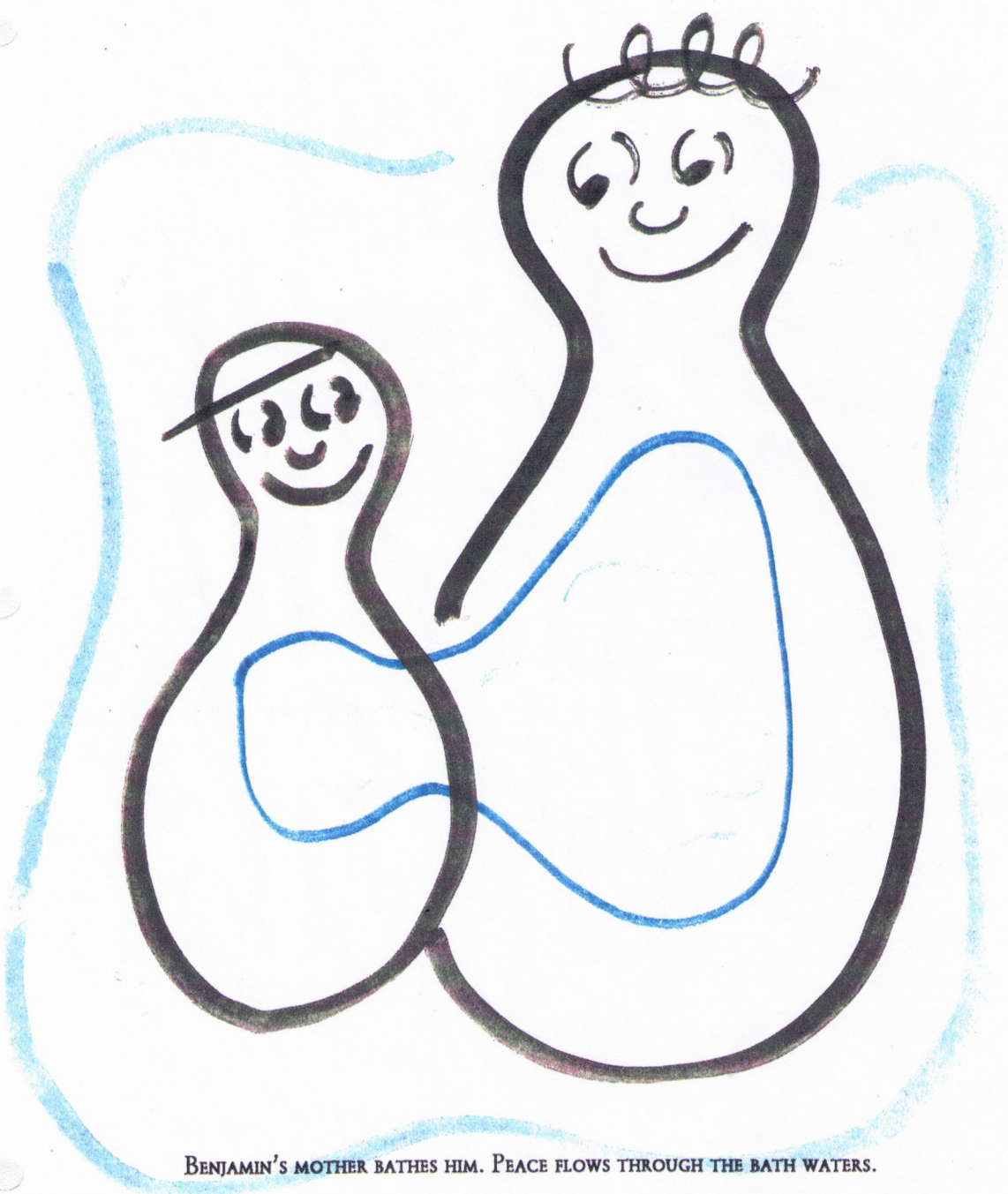
How did things get better for Benjamin?



BENJAMIN'S MOTHER SINGS TO HIM

What do you suppose the quiet is called?

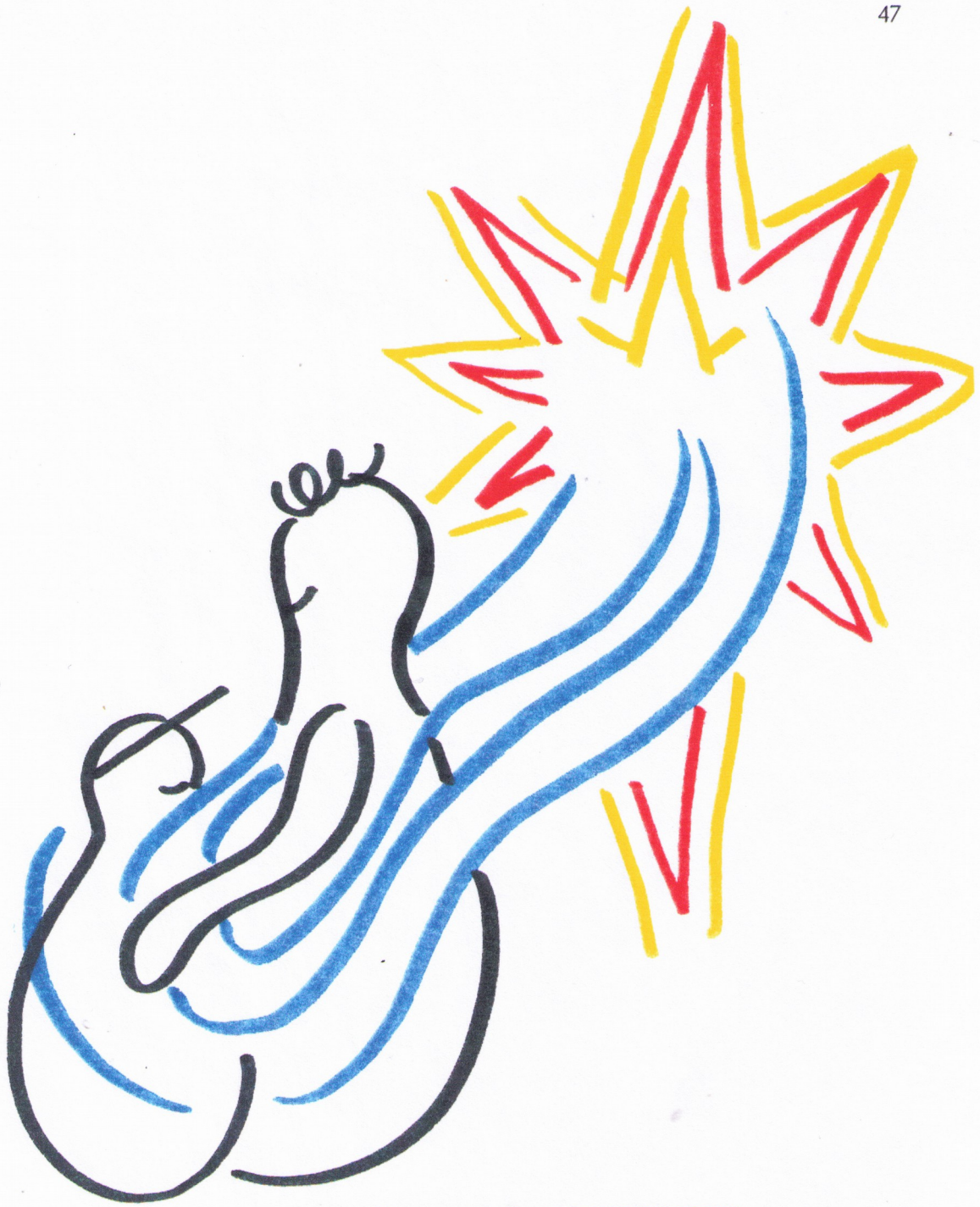
The quiet is called God.



BENJAMIN'S MOTHER BATHES HIM. PEACE FLOWS THROUGH THE BATH WATERS.



Benjamin and his mother talked quietly and hugged and the peace of God flowed in them.



THE PEACE OF GOD FLOWS IN BENJAMIN AND HIS MOTHER.

## More on Creation Theology

### AN EXPLANATION FOR ADULTS

We don't know how much of what you say in the above instruction will get across to the children on any particular occasion. Two things are important in it — the story and putting theological labels on the experiences in it. The story certainly would be familiar to them and to all of us, and adults need to learn how to interpret such ordinary human events theologically. From a very early age children need to learn that theology is about ordinary — but very important — events like taking a bath and hugging. They need to learn in practice what the labels “love of God” and “peace of God” mean. They need to learn that these words — and other common theological expressions like them — mean something they know about in their own everyday experience.

We could give a biological and psychological explanation to what happened. We could talk about what happens in the brain when the body gets tired, and we could talk about the attention span of children and their limited abilities of controlling their emotions and behavior. And those are important ways of understanding human life. We need biology and psychology in our world.

We also need theology, and we need to be sure to give it to our children. They need to know where to find God, and his love and peace, and how he works in us. And they need to learn about God little by little, incident by incident, conversation by conversation, just as they learn about all sorts of other things. So even if the children follow only a small part of what you say on any particular occasion, if such explanations and conversations keep occurring between adult and child, if they keep happening throughout their childhood — that's how their religious world-view is formed. And if those conversations do not take place, that's also how their world-view, a non-religious world view, is formed.

Notice also what kind of theology we are teaching here. As I mentioned once before, it is creation theology, a theology founded in the doctrine of creation. We could have come down hard on sin and repentance and forgiveness in the above instruction — after all it's about a boy who has “misbehaved.” We could have talked about how Jesus loves us and makes forgiveness possible. And that's an

approach that at some point needs to be taken. That's redemption theology, But I believe that at this time in our world creation theology is far less known and far more important. I believe our world is going to destroy itself unless we begin to live a creation theology. We modern human beings need to see and feel the spiritual presence in the world, and so in these instructions we emphasize that view of the world.

The heart of creation theology is the presence of the supernatural within the natural. Creation theology teaches us to open our inner eyes and ears to the presence of God and the supernatural all around us and within us. It is a theology of awareness. It answers questions by showing us how to open our inner eyes and ears to the presence of realities we may have been only dimly aware of. It is a theology of spiritual exercises and methods. And that's what to do with the children in these instructions — and with ourselves. We've been doing spiritual exercises that bring us into touch with spiritual realities and that we can use over and over again in our daily lives.

Another aspect of this approach is to emphasize the action and power of God instead of human action and power. We have not been telling the children to be good. We have not been telling them to try harder. Instead we have been teaching them how to become aware of God in them, how to relax and let God lead them and strengthen them. I believe this is what Paul was teaching when he said we are justified by grace through faith and not by works. He meant that we are made right when we rely on the action of God in us, rather than when we rely our own human powers. And that's what we are trying to teach in very practical ways.

I was brought up on sacraments and works. I was taught to rely on the action of God in sacraments and then go out and work hard. It is only as an adult that I have been learning the classical Christian methods of getting in touch with God and relying on his power. If our children are to be authentically Christian, you and I need to re-train ourselves. We need to set out deliberately on a course of spiritual exercises. I recommend to all of us the ones we have been teaching the children. The "Ooh"- "Aah!" exercise, for example, is not just for children. You and I need to practice becoming aware of our own Oohs and Aahs, and thus to practice the presence of God.

Redemption theology is for adults — and, more specifically, for adults who are already well grounded in creation theology. There is a place for repentance of sin. There is a place for confession. There is a place for pleading the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. There is a place for walking the way of the cross ourselves. But without a foundation of creation theology, without a lively sense of the presence of God and the supernatural, redemption theology is in danger of falling into harshness. So let's work on creation theology.

Let's open our inner eyes and ears to the presence of God in his creation.

## How Can I Be OK? (III)

A RESPONSE TO CHILDREN

### STEP ONE.

*[Refresher as usual, except now add the pictures of the bath — of the peace of God flowing from God through Benjamin and his mother.]*

### STEP TWO — SEE THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

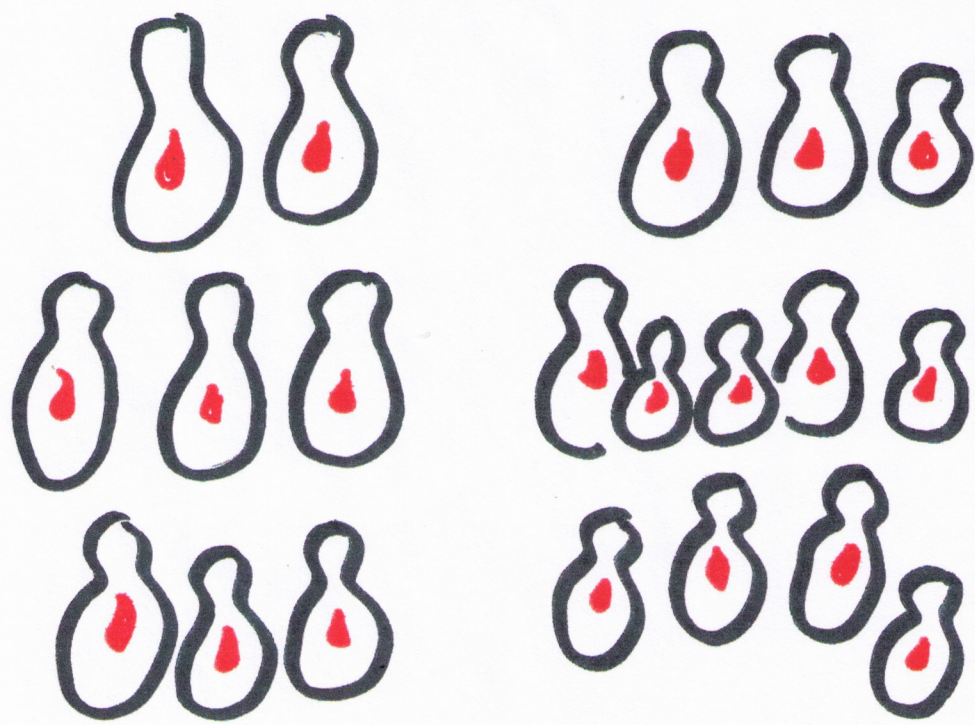
*[This exercise was originally done by the author in church. I had the children stand on the chancel steps in the front of the church and look at the congregation in the pews. You will need to adapt it to your own situation. Perhaps you can have your child, or children, imagine their own worshiping congregation, or a gathering of your larger family, or of friends. I will phrase this instruction as it applies to a church. You may need to reword and re-interpret it to fit other human circumstances.]*

Imagine you are at church. Stand on the steps at front and now look out at all the people. What do you see?

People, parents, brothers and sisters, friends, big people, adults, etc.

Now do “Ooh!”–“Aah!” *at them!* “Ooh!”–“Aah!” “Ooh!”–“Aah!”

Why do you go “Ooh!”–“Aah!” at them?



THE PEOPLE OF GOD—THE FLAME OF GOD IN THEM

What happens when you go to church? How do the people there act toward you?

They smile, laugh, hug, go “Ooh!”–“Aah!” (maybe not out loud, but inside), take communion with you, love you.





THE LOVE OF GOD SURROUNDING, FLOWING THROUGH THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Do you know some of the names for the People of God?

The church, the Body of Christ, the New Israel, the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Bride of Christ.

And do you know what happens when we all take communion?



COMMUNION

**The People of God**

AN EXPLANATION FOR ADULTS

The above has been an instruction on the nature of the church. We are living in a time when large numbers of people feel no need for the church. I think that is for three reasons: First, they do not have a sense of the presence of God in ordinary life. Their “Ooh!”-“Aah!” awareness is not a constant companion; it comes only at special moments. So for them religion is a matter of doctrine, ceremony, and morality; it is not a living presence of God. Consequently they see the church as a moral guardian and as a teacher of doctrine; it does not occur to them that the church is a living presence, a source of joy and gladness. Second, they see the church as an institution. The church has officials — ordained ministers. It performs ceremonies — baptisms, marriages, funerals, Easter and Christmas services. And especially pious people can go at other times. It teaches children; so you ought to send your children to Sunday School. But that’s it. In short, they do not see the church as a People filled with God. That’s what we’ve been working on in the above instruction — to help the children, and us, see that the church is a Spirit-filled People.

Another problem we have had over the last several centuries — and especially we Americans have had it — is extreme individualism. That’s the third reason many people feel no need for the church. Religion is between each individual and God. Me and God. So what do I need other people for? What do they have to do with me and God? The answer we’ve been giving is that we need each other for getting in touch with God. We need the love of God flowing through the People of God.

In my church life I come away Sunday by Sunday feeling an enormous lift. Something really happens in my church every Sunday and I can feel it — something really life-giving. I am nurtured and supported and lifted up. I can’t imagine living without it. That’s what I have been trying to convey in the above instruction; that’s what I want all of us to experience, children and adults alike.

I developed these instructions originally as a series of “family sermons” for use during the summer of 1987 at Trinity Episcopal Church, Marshall, Michigan.

They were a lot of fun to do. What happened was not just between me and the children, with the congregation looking on as mere spectators. For many years I have instructed children's classes, and this experience was very different. The adults did not merely watch. They were deeply involved. They laughed and Oohed and Aahed. They leaned forward to watch. They surrounded me and the children with love and interest. The room was filled with the Spirit, and that was the most important thing that happened during the instructions.

Similarly for you and the children with whom you do these exercises. The Spirit that flows between you is the important experience, and you must not overlook what is happening. You are not merely conveying ideas to the children. You are opening yourself and them to the Spirit, and that's what this instruction is intended to help them see.

Have you been noticing that? Have you been aware of what has been happening to you and to the children?

Or have you thought of this as a series of lessons taught by you — perhaps very lively ones, interesting ones — but lessons nevertheless? Certainly they have been that. But is that all?

It is not.

We human beings come together — you and the children come together — because, first, we need each other. Human beings are capable of getting in touch with God individually — sometimes. But not regularly. I am not peaceful enough, not faithful enough to do it well on a regular basis by myself. I need the church, the People of God, to help me. They need me. We all need each other. And when we do exercises such as these with children we are living out that truth for the children and for ourselves.

Second, we have the promise of God: when we gather in Jesus' name he is in the midst. And that's something that happens even when we don't do things well — Jesus is still in the midst and the presence of God flowing through us is still a reality. Being the People of God does not depend on our knowing clearly what we're doing; it depends only on our baptism and our keeping our side of the promise of God. He promises to be in our midst when we gather; it's up to us to gather.



## Getting Sick and getting Well

A RESPONSE TO CHILDREN

The child asks, “Why do people get sick?”

Here is a response—

**STEP ONE.**

*[Refreshers, as usual.]*

**STEP TWO—TOUGH CUSTOMERS**

The first part of the answer: the world has a lot of Tough Customers in it. We’ve already met two Tough Customers.

Who are the two Tough Customers we’ve already met?

The Gloom Monster.

Benjamin when he’s in the grips of the Gloom Monster.

Some others—

Wild animals if you get in their way: lions, grizzly bears, tigers.





TOUGH CUSTOMERS: LIONS, GRIZZLY BEARS, TIGERS.

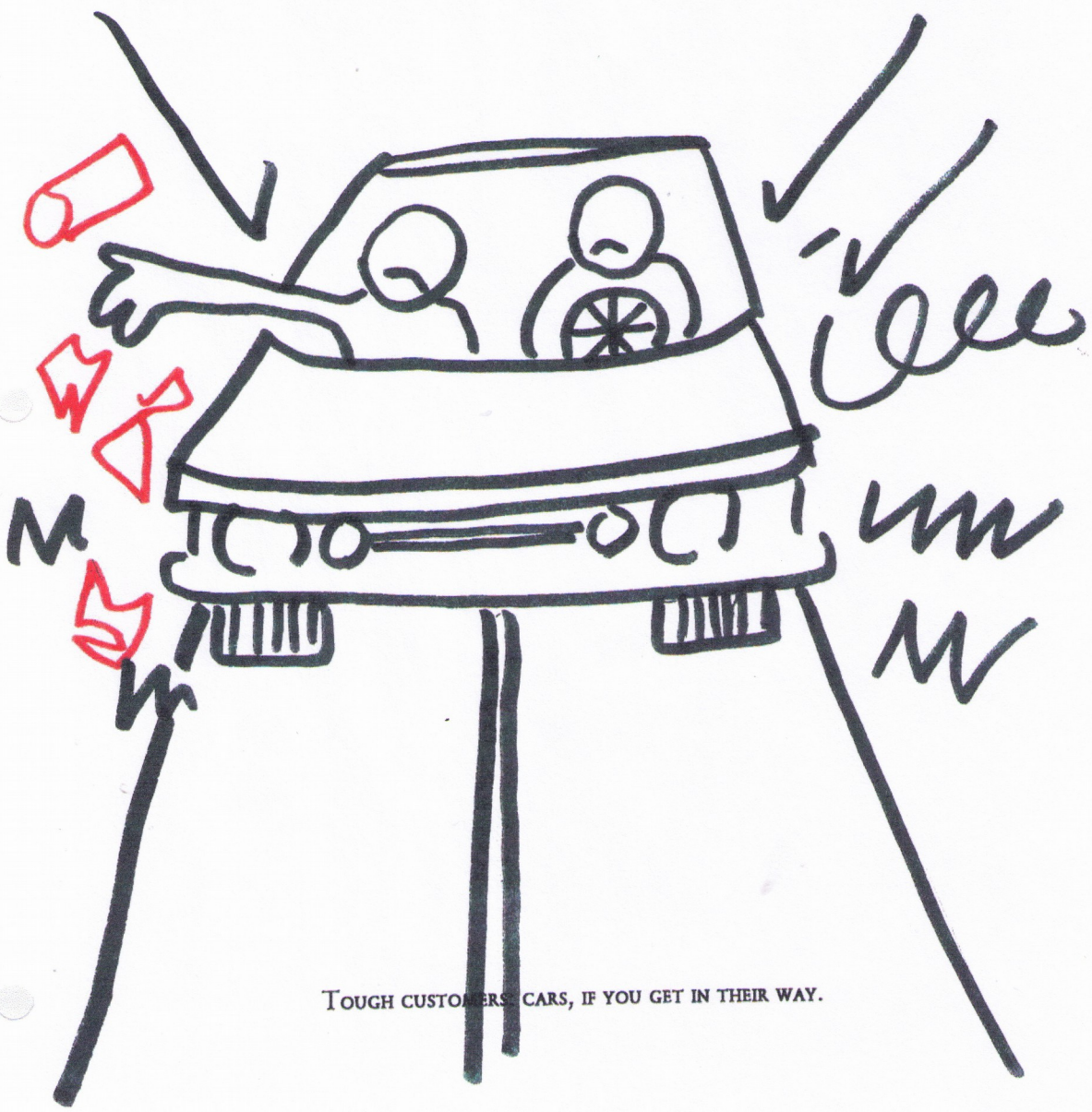
Big boulders that can fall on you.



TOUGH CUSTOMERS: BOULDERS THAT CAN FALL ON YOU.

Cars, if you get in their way. Careless people.

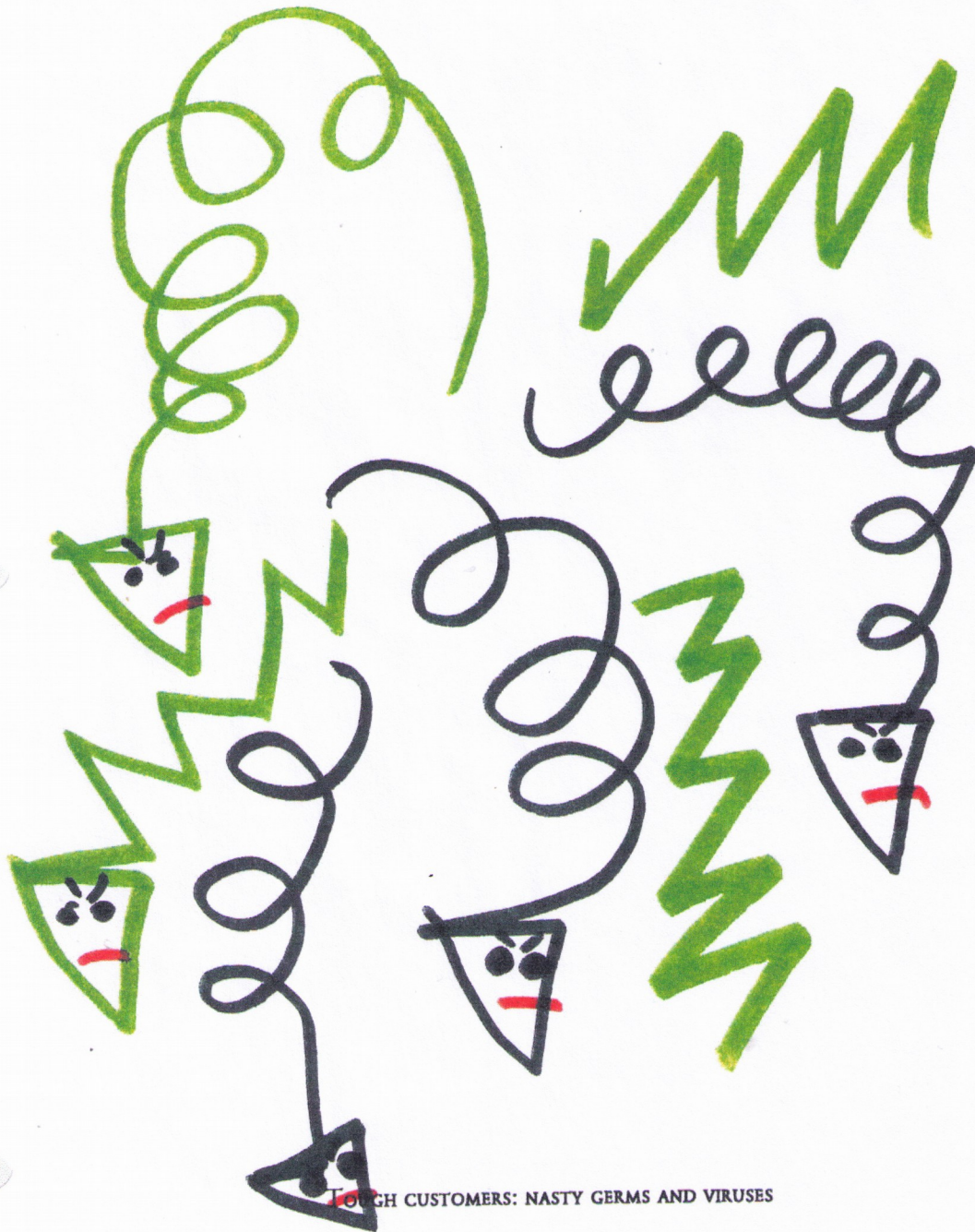




TOUGH CUSTOMERS' CARS, IF YOU GET IN THEIR WAY.

Nasty germs and viruses.





TOUGH CUSTOMERS: NASTY GERMS AND VIRUSES

We get sick when a Tough Customer attacks our body-

How do we get well?

**STEP THREE — SOME OTHER TOUGH CUSTOMERS**

There are some other Tough Customers — on our side.

Who do you suppose is the biggest Tough Customer of all?

God, and he doesn't want you to be sick or hurt. So he fights on your side.  
What we have to do is to let him in on the fight.

Another one?

Jesus.

Another one — this is a bunch of them.

The church.

Still more —

Doctors, nurses, medicines, some kinds of machines.

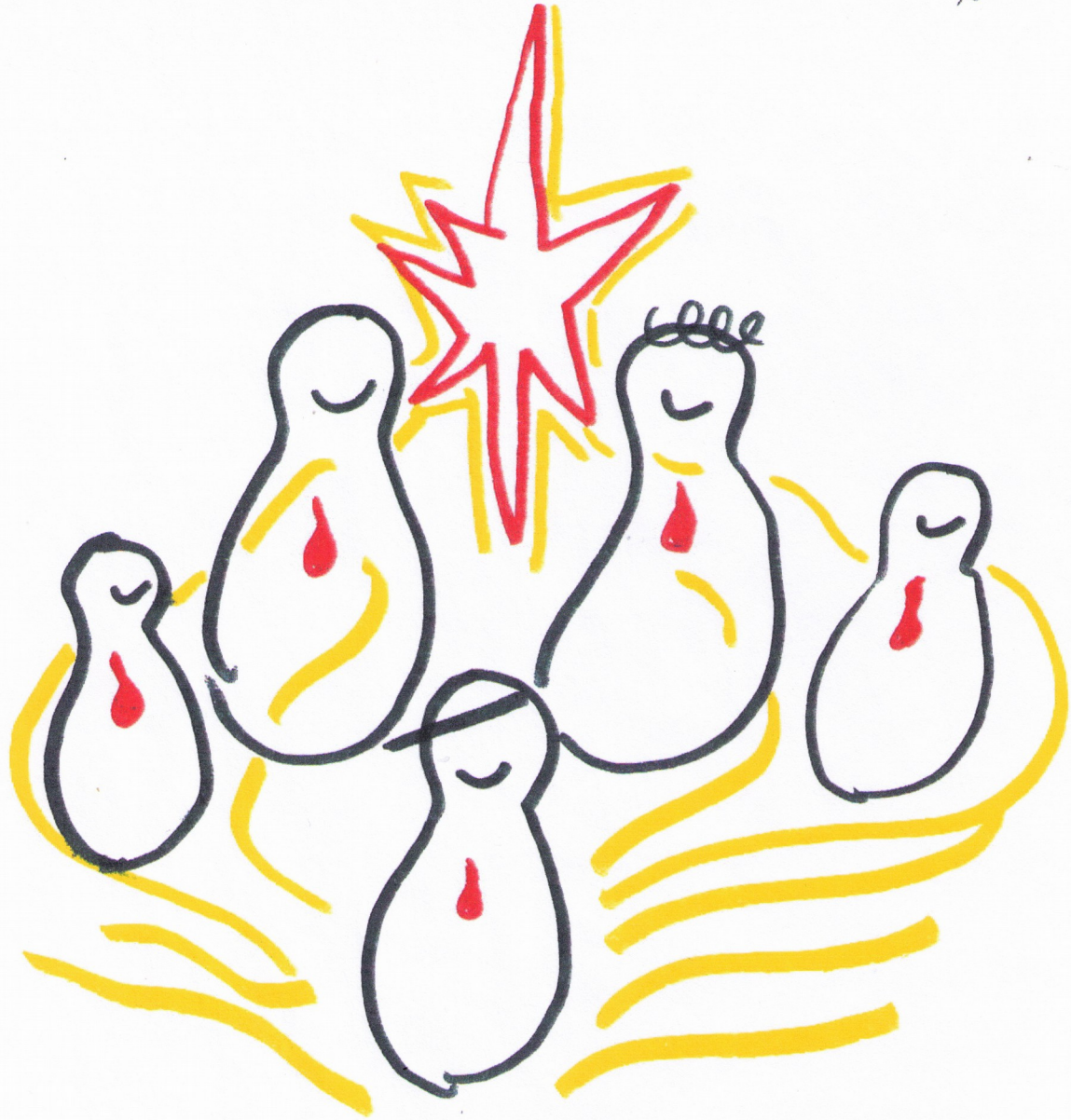


TOUGH CUSTOMERS: DOCTORS AND NURSES

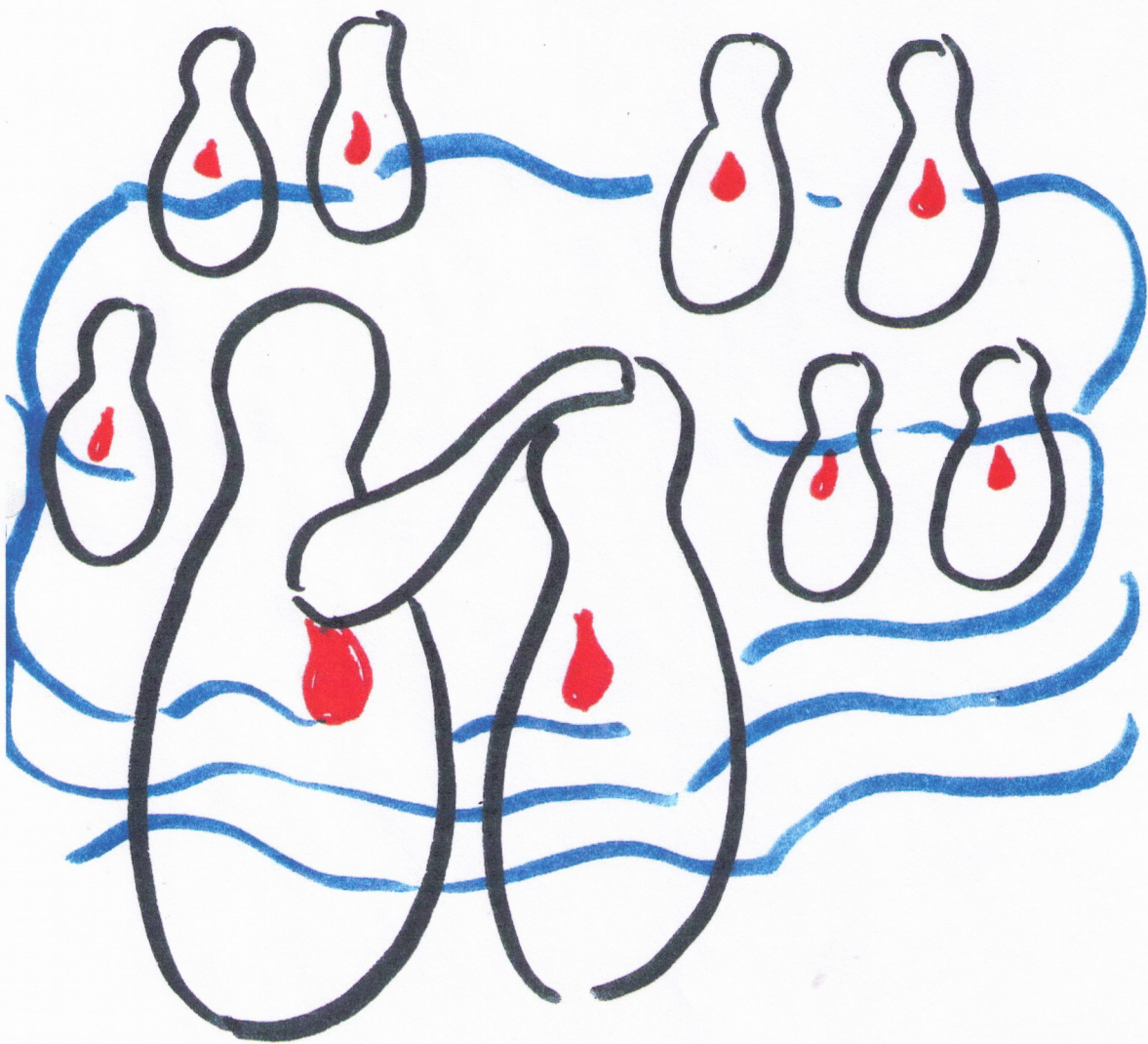
**STEP FOUR — HOW THE GOOD TOUGH CUSTOMERS WORK**

Love, strength drive away the Gloom Monster — fight with him.





LOVE FROM PARENTS AND BROTHERS AND SISTERS DRIVES AWAY THE GLOOM MONSTER AND HEALS



HEALING IN THE CHURCH THROUGH ANOINTING AND PRAYER





THE SICK PERSON PRAYS AND HEALING COMES.

God works through doctors and nurses to heal broken bones.



GOD'S HEALING POWER COMES THROUGH MEDICINES AND BANDAGES AND ALL SORTS OF WAYS

**Spiritual Healing and Satan**

AN EXPLANATION FOR ADULTS

A lot more could be said about sickness and healing. For example, many of us remain ill for long periods of time because we get in the grips of the Gloom Monster and can't get free. We get depressed and expect the worst, and the worst happens.

I hasten to add that not all long-term illnesses are like that. Sometimes the Gloom Monster is the primary cause of our illness, but sometimes not. Sometimes physical causes are primary. But even when physical causes are primary the battle with the Gloom Monster is very important. If you're seriously ill the Gloom Monster moves in to catch you if he can.

So we could talk about those spiritual battles, but that's too much in one session with the children. The primary point in the above instruction is for them to see that healing comes from God and that it is a whole of body and spirit, that illness is not just a bodily thing, not just something for doctors to heal with pills and machines.

By now, also, I hope you have all recognized that another name for the Gloom Monster is Satan. For some reason you and I have no trouble believing in the Gloom Monster. We know exactly who he is. But Satan is another matter. I hope that we modern men and women will begin to understand better what our ancestors were experiencing when they talked about devils and evil spirits. Our world is different in a lot of important ways. but the fact is that our ancestors were not just ignorant and superstitious. Our world contains realities of the kind that led our ancestors to talk of devils and evil spirits. We know what Gloom Monsters are — and even worse spirits of evil than that.

One final comment. I hope you are aware of the basic method we have been following in these instructions. Over and over again we have been doing two things: (1) appealing to some everyday experience, and (2) putting a theological label on it. Common experience, recognizable experience, and theological label.

That's how you go about answering children's religious questions — anybody's religious questions.

## On Seeing God

Some readers may be troubled by the foundation upon which this book is built. "You're claiming that we can see God!" they may say, "but both theology and the Bible tell us that God cannot be seen."

The objection is well grounded. Traditional theology teaches that God is so vastly beyond us that any "glimpses" of him we may catch can only be faint reflections of his reality. And the Old Testament teaches that to see (or hear) God is to die:

[The people of Israel] said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." (Exodus 20:19)

The people of Israel said to Moses, "Behold, we perish... we are all undone. Every one... who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die. Are we all to perish?" (Numbers 17:12,13) In the New Testament Jesus himself says, "No one has ever seen God." (John 1:18) And John repeats this teaching in his First Letter. (1John 4:12)

How, then, can we be justified in teaching children that they can see God?

The Bible also records many encounters between human beings and God, many occasions upon which God is "seen" or "heard." God spoke to Noah. (E.g., Genesis 6:13) He spoke to Abraham. (E.g., Genesis 12:1) He wrestled with Jacob. (Genesis 32:22-32) Moses saw God on Mount Sinai. (E.g., Exodus 3, 33:18-23) Elijah saw God on the same mountain. (1 Kings 19:11,12) Isaiah had a vision of God in the heavenly session. (Isaiah 6:1-8) Over and over the Old Testament witnesses to encounter between human beings and God, at the same time teaching that such encounter is not only awe-inspiring but dangerous.

We can only conclude that the word "see" is being used in different senses. In one sense, for example, Moses sees a burning bush, but in another sense he sees God. In one sense the prophet Isaiah is seeing God, but in another sense he is "having a vision" or "dreaming" or "having an ecstatic experience." The point is that "seeing" or "hearing" spiritually is not identical to physical seeing. You do not "see" God or angels the same way you "see" colors. To see spiritually requires inner



sensitivity and attention. If Moses had had a companion on Mount Sinai it is quite possible — even likely — that while Moses was seeing God, Moses' companion would have seen only a burning bush. Physical sight is merely given to us. We open our eyes and we see. Spiritual sight is not like that, especially the deepest. When Jesus says that no one has ever seen God, he is warning us that spiritual vision does not come to us as physical vision does. Spiritual sight requires sensitivity and attention to the inner. If we want to know the Kingdom, Jesus is saying, we must not think that it will be given to us as physical vision is given; instead we must open our inner eyes to the Son.