

## **“GHOSTS”**

*Romans 7:24, Psalm 38:4, Isaiah 1:18, 59:2*

I remember a town house. It was built by slave labor, late in the 1700's. There was a cyclone cellar and a tunnel of escape from it to the river. With the clay from the tunnel, they made the bricks. The live oaks from the grounds furnished the lumber. The great columns in front, like the two massive iron lions guarding its entrance, came by flatboat from Savannah. An arthritic old house, it disliked the river-wind at night and moaned as it shifted on its timbers. Kept shuttered since the civil war, but still occupied by two strange spinsters of unknown summers, it was but a stone's throw from home. It was the haunt of ghosts. “Hainted”, said the cook's children, giving it wide birth, and I, for one, believed them!

And it was so. Old ghosts lingered there in that house, shades of a bitter past. Much later, I learned it was a house of regrets: loves neglected there until they died, hates smoldering there from cradle to coffin, evil forces torturing each other, greed and fear and twisted pride, the family decaying with the house. Those members who could, fled it to forget. Of the two who remained when I could remember (the two spinsters): One, fell from the cupola? Or they said she fell. Anyway, she died when she hit the roof of the piazza; and the other tore the grosgrain ribbon from her throat, rouged her cheeks, pinked and crimped her hair, and was led away to Milledgeville to be institutionalized. We saw her going, willingly, one morning on our way to school. They called her Sally.

So the house was closed—except to the ghosts of misspent years. The iron lions remained on guard. The family's name was .....

And you ask me if I believe in ghosts? How many ghosts there are in every family's life: on any respectable street, behind the front of columns or picture window. What difference does it make? I know, I know it's hard to think of an air-conditioned, suburban house as being haunted, but.....

In every time, in every house: so many mistakes, so many regrets. They rise up out of the ruin of the years to haunt our happiness. How to rout them, put them to flight, be rid of them—that's the question. For you can't live in a house full of ghosts, no peace there. It's no good, this feeling guilty. Self-loathing, “O God, the things I've said, what I've done”,

**self-contempt:** no one can stand that for long. It's no fun. And it's not healthy. One falls sick--in the mind, in the body. To say, to have to say, "I hate myself", is soon to be ill. It's hard to live happy or healthy in a haunted house. It's impossible. The old psalmist knew he couldn't survive long under the specter of his past: "Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me (like ghostly hands), so that I am not able to look up (afraid to); they are more than the hairs of my head: therefore my heart faileth me (scared to death)" (Psalm 40:12). What about us moderns? Don't we moderns know this agony of shame? Of course we do, though we may call it by another name. We may call the specters that haunt us "nerves", "tension", "frustration", "maladjustment", "malaise", --but we panic just the same ("my heart faileth me"). It's the ghost of anxiety and guilt, call it by any name--the same old ghosts. And the reaction is still the same, scream: "Get me out of here!" Or, as Paul cried, "O wretched creature that I am (is there a tunnel of escape?), who shall deliver me (how can I get away?) from this living death." (Romans 7:24)

Money won't do it. I remember a fraternity man who thought his parents could buy him out of any scrape: automobile accidents, alcoholic sprints, abortions, anything. But can you buy a clean mind, a clear conscience, a new start, an honest heart? There are some things no one can pay your way out of. At twenty he had already betrayed so many--his family, his friends, himself--he was haunted, and drove his new Packard convertible off a cliff. His money didn't help. You see, solid gold lions on the doorstep are sorry guards against self-contempt. He never read a Psalm, but he would have felt blood brother to the prosperous, but pathetic, Psalmist who admitted, finally: "Mine iniquities are gone over my head: as a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me". (Psalm 38.4) What to do to rout the ghosts?

Well, money won't help. And neither will running. One can't run from the ghosts of guilt. They go with you. There's no easy escape route, no quick tunnel to the river. One can try running (of course, we all do): endless cocktails, endless soirees, endless agendas, "busy, busy, busy"--but if you've robbed laughter from a child's eyes, if you've hurt one who loved you, stolen money or meaning, or taken the joy of living from another's life--oh the ghosts go with you all right--and, then too, you must always come home at night to face what might have been. I've always felt sorry for old King Saul. What potential he had, but he was a mistaken man--selfish all his days. And suddenly, in age, it all began to pile up on him. And he tried money to escape and he tried running--and it didn't work. He had hurt too many. He was a haunted man.

**“If your sins be as scarlet, shall superficial remedies make them white as snow?” Isaiah 1:18) The answer--sadly enough, is “no”.**

**And why? Because as any prophet knows, “Your iniquities have separated between you and your God”. (Isaiah 59:2) And that’s the truth. There’s only one way back to the good life once you’ve left it--the life that’s kind and gentle and gracious and sweet and clean, and that’s by the route of God. Only God can cleanse the soul of it’s ghosts. Only He can reach that deep. Who else but God can forgive the past? Only He can retrieve it. Who else but God can help us recreate the present? Only He can touch and redeem it.**

**For the man and woman of faith, it is so simple a process--this seeking the help of the good God--so simple in its profundity--many a person will not try it. They would like to, but cannot bring themselves to trust it. It’s too much like admitting defeat.**

**But if you are defeated anyway, if your heart is haunted by old regrets, at least try this way to rout the ghost of yesterday. Try penitence, and you will find pardon; and with pardon will come purity; and with purity, will be peace; and with peace, the power to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again--the power to make a new beginning, to live again, and laugh again, and love again, and look to the future in faith and hope and not look back. - Amen -**