

The Pocket-watch

Before the modern refrigerator, each household had an icebox, a large insulated chest that needed to be periodically stocked with ice in order to keep its contents cool. Each winter, ice from the lakes of the North was cut into blocks and stored in large warehouses under a layer of insulating sawdust. These buildings, called icehouses, were thick-walled and windowless with tight-fitting doors designed to protect the ice from heat. The story of the pocket-watch begins on a cold winter's day in one such icehouse.

It had been a busy day. The manager of the large icehouse in Wilmington, North Carolina had spent most of it shuttling back and forth between the loading dock (which faced the Cape Fear River), the icehouse, and the front office. It was his job to supervise the shipments of ice, from the unloading of the riverboats to the careful stacking of the blocks inside the warehouse. Tallies had to be recorded in the stock ledger and double-checked before the blocks could be covered in the thick layer of sawdust that would insure their survival until the summer months.

He found it bothersome to have to put on and remove his coat so often, but the chill in the icehouse had a way of seeping into his bones. He switched the ledger to his other arm, and reached inside his vest pocket for his pocket-watch, pulling on the watch chain. It slid out easily and swung back and forth — but only a clasp dangled from its end. He frowned and groped deeper into the pocket, then patted down his waistcoat. Finding nothing, he rummaged through his pockets one by one, deeper this time, searching for holes through which he may have lost his watch. He spun around and scanned the floor of the dim warehouse, looking for a glint of gold in the sawdust that carpeted the floor. The manager shouted for the other men to stop their work and help him find his pocket-watch. The workmen grabbed lanterns and raked through the shavings with their hands, searching for the precious watch. Soon the warehouse rang with the shouts of the men: “Joe! Have you searched down that aisle?” “Careful where you step!” “Bring more lanterns over here!” Even the clerk from the front office poked his head into the icehouse to find out the reason for the commotion. He soon ducked back into the office for his coat and returned to help in the hunt for the missing watch. After over an hour of fruitless searching in the frigid gloom of the icehouse, the men gathered in the office around the potbellied stove to warm their numbed fingers and discuss how they might find the lost watch.

“It’s no use, boss,” said one man, “We’ll have to come back tomorrow with some screens and sift the sawdust.” “We should get brooms and sweep the dust into piles until we find the watch.” suggested another. While the men deliberated, the office door swung open and the errand boy stepped in from the street. He placed a parcel on the clerk’s desk and squeezed between two of the workmen in order to get closer to the stove. The boy warmed himself, listening for a while as the men debated the merits of one idea over another. No one noticed him leave the cluster of men, pry open the heavy icehouse door and slip inside.

The manager listened to the workmen with a growing sense of gloom. He realized it was hopeless; the watch was gone for good. It would be next to impossible to find, and would probably end up crushed somewhere under the sawdust. The beautiful gold

pocket-watch had been a gift from his wife on their wedding day. It had been her father's, and she had wanted him to have it. What would he tell her now?

A tugging on his sleeve interrupted his thoughts. He looked down and saw the errand boy, woodchips and sawdust clinging to his clothing, cradling the missing watch in his hands. The manager was speechless. "How on earth did you manage to find it?" gasped one of the workmen. "It's dark in there!" cried another, "How could you see without a light?" The manager silenced the babble of questions and asked the boy for an explanation. "Well sir," said the lad, "I went into the icehouse, and lay down in the sawdust. It got very, very quiet, and soon I could hear the ticking of the watch. I waited until I knew for sure which direction the sound was coming from, and then I moved toward it. If I ever lost the sound, I only had to hold absolutely still, and I could soon hear it again."

This story of the missing pocket-watch illustrates the way that God seeks to speak to us, and how we often fail to hear His voice. Like the workmen searching for the watch, we are all seeking for truth and direction in a dark and confusing world. The one thing that will lead us to that hidden treasure is the quiet calling of the Holy Spirit. His voice is as different in nature from the clamor of the world as the quiet ticking of the pocket watch from the shouts of the men. Satan is doing his best to drown out God's soft but incessant calling by flooding our world and minds with motion and noise. As long as the warehouse was filled with the shouts and noise of the men, no one would hear the soft ticking of the watch.

The devil befuddles and distracts us under the guise of giving us knowledge. Our society is no longer presented with unbiased information and allowed to digest it to determine an appropriate response; instead we are force-fed a diet of shocking images and attention-grabbing headlines, all designed to titillate our senses. Our world has been reduced to sound bites and video clips that simultaneously stimulate our emotions and dull our intellect.

Our attention spans are being reduced through a cultivated desire for instant gratification and entertainment-based content. The Internet, video games, satellite and cable television, MP3 players, satellite radio and in-car DVD players ensure that not a waking moment exists without noise or images to distract us. We are given no space or silence in which to reflect on the consequences of our actions and our eternal destiny.

Modern morality is also delivered in the form of entertainment. Talk show hosts and radio personalities instruct us on what is good and what is deplorable in society. We are taught that truth is not absolute but relative, and ethics are situational. We are told that the highest moral position is one of tolerance, while ironically the one viewpoint that is not tolerated is one that holds to absolutes.

Nominal Christianity has also succumbed to the desire for showmanship and easy solutions: thoughtful, Spirit-led individual study of the Scriptures has been replaced with must-read Christian "best sellers" designed for mass-consumption. Heavily annotated new Bible versions instruct today's Christian on how to interpret the Bible: which portions are more authoritative than others and why clear directives from scripture could not possibly mean what they seem to be saying. Extensive study notes encourage the

reader to skim over difficult passages of God's Word, dwelling instead on their clarification as offered by human authors.

Instead of opposing the ways of the world, many churches openly embrace its methods and models to obtain results. Numbers and noise are seen as indicators of success. Ad campaigns, targeted marketing, and a plethora of special events and programs are used to boost attendance. By pandering to the carnal appetites of an increasingly demanding audience, the churches of nominal Christianity are forced to put on a bigger and bigger show.

In this increasingly confusing and clamorous time, we are in danger of missing the great truth that was revealed to Elijah: we will only hear God speak to us when we are ready and waiting to listen for His still, small voice. In the story, the pocket watch was never silent; it ticked off the minutes and hours for both the workmen and the boy — The difference lay in who was ready to hear its quiet call.