

## If God Is For You, Who Can Be Against You?

For the next 10 years, life for Jim and his mother was still difficult. Although they struggled financially and his mother's health had worsened, something was different. The young pastor had since moved away to start another church, while still in Saluda he had shown much kindness to Jim and his mother and had patiently taught Jim about God and His word in the Bible. Jim didn't really care anymore what people in the town said about him or his mother because he had come to believe in himself and was confident that God loved him and had a plan for him. He may have been penniless, but he wasn't poor. Jim figured God had made no mistakes, not even when he created Jim. Hardly a day passed that Jim didn't think about what the young pastor had said to him on that special Sunday years ago.

Jim was 16 now, with a part-time job after school at Mrs. Thompson's grocery store. The store also had a post office. In the morning, Mrs. Thompson would let Jim deliver the Saluda newspaper to make extra money. Jim was a hard worker, a quick learner, and so honest and dependable that Mrs. Thompson had begun letting him close the store at the end of the workday.

A self-taught business owner, Mrs. Thompson had stressed the importance of making a profit. By way of examples, she explained things in simple and sensible ways

like using a case of green beans to teach the difference between income and profit. She explained that in a case of green beans the revenue from ten of the twelve cans covered the cost of the case, but that only the revenue generated from the remaining two cans was the profit that could be used for expenses and wages. Thus, Jim developed an early appreciation for the difference between profit and break-even.

Mrs. Thompson was a charitable woman. She taught Jim about the importance of doing something well and finishing the job. There wasn't a day that went by that Jim didn't hear her say in a sing-song rhyme, "Whether a job's big or small, do it right or not at all, and once a job has begun, see it through until it's done."

Each morning before school, Jim picked up a bundle of newspapers from the front of Thompson's store, loaded up his bag with papers, and began to pedal his bike through the streets of Saluda. He wondered why some people seemed to have so much money while others seem not to have any. What did the rich do? How did they get their money? He had overheard customers at the store say that money was the root of all evil, but how could something as useful as money really be evil?

As Jim glided by the houses delivering papers, he accidentally tossed one against a huge oak tree in the Johnson's yard. As he stopped to retrieve the paper, he noticed the headline, "New York Billionaire Moves to Asheville Amidst Accusations, Donates Three Million Dollars to Local Orphanage." He read the headline again, this time focusing on four words, "Billionaire" and "Donates Three Million." Slowly and methodically, he straddled

his bike while trying to comprehend the idea of those four words. This time he pedaled slowly and wondered what it was like to be a billionaire. And how much is a billion, anyway, he thought, how could someone have so much money that they could give away three million dollars? Jim shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. He knew that a million was less than a billion, but both amounts were beyond his comprehension.

Jim continued to weave his way through his route but his mind was on the billionaire—the one only thirty-five miles away in Asheville. He wondered what it would be like to talk to him and if he would learn anything from such a rich man. But Jim knew better than to daydream too much. He knew what the chances were of a small-town teenager ever getting to talk to someone so important. He pedaled and tossed papers like it was second nature for him, still wondering if meeting the guy was ever possible and if so, how? Jim slowed his bike as he came around the last corner across from Thompson's store. He stopped for a moment, used one foot on the ground to balance the bike and remembered what the preacher had said so many years ago: "If God is for you, who can be against you?" With the thought foremost in his mind, he felt a surge of confidence wash through him. Lord willing, there had to be a way to meet the billionaire, and he was determined to find that way. After all, he realized he was now a child of God, and God would help.

In Saluda, there were not a whole lot of choices when it came to communicating with the outside world. There was the phone, the teletype machine and the postal service. That was it, but Jim was in a unique position after

working for the Thompsons for two years. He was one of only four people in Saluda who knew how to run the teletype machines. And as much as the wire seemed to be the quickest way to contact someone, he realized that he had only a name and the town of the billionaire and not his wire address. Even if he did, how could he keep from getting caught using the teletype for his own personal business? It could be risky putting his job and character on the line. Even though his mind was full of ideas, he could not think of a successful plan. Finally, he decided that after work, he would go fishing to see if any ideas popped into his head.

Jim made it home early from work that afternoon while it was still light outside. He was still thinking about how to make contact with the billionaire. He left his books on the kitchen table, hurried out the back door to the shed, picked up his fishing pole and stringer, and decided that today he would go fishing at his favorite fishing hole just across the valley. He stopped to dig for worms under the sunflowers where he could always count on finding the fattest and juiciest worms—a sure-fire feast for even the most discriminating fish. He dumped both worms and dirt into a paper bag, grabbed his poles and hurried to his trusty secret fishing spot.

Oak trees canopied around the edge of the pond, casting shadows across the water. Jim sat down on his familiar clump of moss and pulled an earthworm from the paper bag. He looked at the slimy, cool, wiggling worm and wondered why fish were so attracted to worms. He put the worm on the hook and with a flick of his wrist tossed the baited worm and bobber into a shady little nook along the

bank and waited for his bobber to move. It was then that his thoughts started to form with new strategy. Bait, he wondered, what kind of bait would he need to use for a billionaire? What does a billionaire want? What does he need? What is good bait? His thoughts were interrupted by a quick downward movement of the bobber. He instinctively jerked his pole, but no fish, just half a worm still dangling there.

After the first hour, Jim sat staring at the water, bored and unsatisfied with no new ideas. And since the fish weren't biting, he pulled the Farmers' Almanac out of his knapsack and started flipping through the pages. A particular section caught his attention. It was a section devoted to "top ten" lists. As he scanned the page, he noticed one particular list about what people wanted most. Number one on the list was the need to feel important. Jim had never particularly felt important. Getting picked on most of his young life had left him feeling unacceptable and, beyond the small world he and his mother shared, he could think of very little that helped him feel important. For a few minutes he just stared at the ground, lost in his own thoughts. If he wanted to meet the billionaire and the one thing people wanted most was to feel important, he figured he had to find out what was important to the billionaire. But, how could he possibly make a billionaire feel more important than he already was, the young man wondered. He pulled the newspaper out of his knapsack searching for answers. Again, he read the headline, "New York Billionaire Moves To Asheville Amidst Scandal." As he read the lines over and over, he locked in on the word, scandal. His thoughts were scrambled with unanswered questions, with

guessing about a world that was totally unknown to him. He knew about small town gossip but what could a person with so much money have done wrong to create a scandal? There must be another side to the article but what could it be.

Then Jim remembered how he had been ridiculed and picked on and how bad he had felt just because he didn't know his natural father. He reasoned that maybe the billionaire was getting picked on because he was different or because people weren't taking time to understand him. Jim realized that a plan was forming and he made a decision to send the billionaire a telegram when he got back to the store. He pulled out his writing notebook and started to compose a message.

Jim got to the general store the next afternoon and was excited. He had made up his mind to use the store's teletype machine to wire a message to the billionaire. He wondered if the man would respond. He wondered why he would respond to a young teenager from the hills. He had worked with the telegraph for only a year, but he had learned quickly and developed a rather sophisticated understanding of how the wires were routed and delivered. He decided that he would contact the hub router and get the appropriate number where to wire the message. He would say it involved an important financial matter. Although he doubted that others would agree with him, Jim rationalized that buying a billionaire a sundae was an important financial matter. When he contacted the hub router, he got the address and was able to wire the message before Mrs. Thompson returned to the store.

Several days went by, days turned into weeks and no answer from his wire. Jim decided that something must have gone wrong. His first thought was that perhaps the billionaire had not seen his wire. So he decided that he would continue wiring a new message every other day. Three months went by and still no reply. Of course, Jim had no way of knowing that the billionaire's office had not been amused and, in fact, wired back on one occasion that all such messages should stop immediately. Undaunted, Jim rationalized that the billionaire just hadn't had a chance to read the messages he had sent with the teletype since office staff kept intercepting them.

Another week passed before it all caught up with him. After school, when he walked into the store to start his shift at work, the first thing he saw was Mrs. Thompson and Sheriff Miller standing at the counter. Both turned to Jim and watched as he walked toward them. He smiled and nodded politely as he headed to his work station. But Mrs. Thompson grabbed his arm as he walked by.

"Jim, you should be ashamed of yourself." Her voice was stern and her face looked mean, quite unlike her usual manner. "If she wasn't sick, I would call your mother and tell her to take a switch to you."

"What are you talking about?" he asked. Jim, wide-eyed and caught off guard, shifted anxiously.

"You know exactly what I am talking about, young man," she said. "You have been sending wires to Mr. Robert Hudson without permission."

Sheriff Miller stepped in with a much softer tone and began to question the young man.

“Jim, I know you’re young, son,” he said. “But if you don’t stop sending the wires, you could find yourself up on harassment charges and then I’d have to run you in.”

“Cat got your tongue, boy,” asked Mrs. Thompson, not backing off a whit. “Put on that apron and you pick up that broom and start doing what I pay you for. And you better stop this nonsense or you’ll be looking for another job.”

Jim looked at the floor, disheartened and relieved at the same time. He still had his job and he wasn’t in jail. For that he was grateful. But he also knew that he was more determined than ever to get to Mr. Hudson. For reasons not yet clear to Jim, he believed whole-heartedly that Mr. Hudson would like him, that through meeting the man, Jim would have a chance at a better life than he and his mother had known.

All that afternoon, he swept, stocked, and kept busy with whatever he thought Mrs. Thompson would like done. And as deliberately as he worked, he worked in his mind to find a way to talk to the billionaire. Late in the day it hit him. What if he wrote Mr. Hudson a letter and ran it in the paper as an ad he thought. Certainly then someone would show the ad to the billionaire. He knew he had managed to save forty-nine dollars working at Thompson’s, but he also knew that he had no idea how much it would cost to run such an ad. He needed to find out, but first the letter he decided. In his letter, Jim chose his words carefully trying to share his feelings with Mr. Hudson.

Dear Mr. Hudson:

I'm a 16-year-old boy in Saluda, NC. Maybe you haven't heard of it before, but I'm right across the mountain from you. I deliver papers here in town and saw an article written about you in the "Saluda-Hendersonville News & Times."

Anyways, I just want to say not to let those people who are saying bad things get to you. I know how it feels to be different. The way I figure it, with you being a billionaire and all, that makes you kind of different too, not like us ordinary folks. I guess you're getting picked on because you got something they don't. I figure since you're smart enough to make a billion dollars, I also figure you are smart enough not to do what the newspaper says you might have done. I figure they're just looking for someone different to start rumors about. Don't worry, people do that to me, too, and I don't have but \$49 bucks saved.

You don't know me from Adam, Mr. Hudson, but I just wanted to tell you how I get through the tough times when people are picking on me. My pastor once told me that I'm a child of God and if I'm good enough for God, I don't care what the people have to say about me. You're a child of God too, if you chose to be, just a grown-up one, I guess. And so my question is this, if God is for you, who can be against you?

Well, I've said enough so welcome to Asheville and if you ever make it over to Saluda, please come in the Thompson's General Store and say hello. That's where I work after school as a clerk and with a little of

that money I have saved up, I'll buy you an ice cream sundae. One of those always makes me feel better no matter what's bothering me.

Sincerely,

Jim Smith

When he found out the cost of the ad, over fifteen dollars and almost a third of his savings, Jim knew he was taking a chance but the ad would be worth it he hoped. Besides, he thought he might learn something from the billionaire that would help him make his money back. More determined than ever, Jim mailed his letter to the paper.

At first the editor did not take the letter seriously, but after a quick phone call to Jim and some brief discussion, the editor told Jim he'd run it. It was set to run the following week in Friday's paper. When that day rolled around, Jim was out of bed and dressed in a matter of minutes. He kissed his mother and told her how much he loved her. He told her that it was a very special day and that he could not wait to share a surprise with her later. He bicycled into town with all the speed he could muster. His only thought was today he would get Mr. Hudson's attention.

At the general store, he ripped the brown paper wrapping around the stack of news papers. As he tore through the paper looking for his ad, he imagined Mr. Hudson reading his letter over his morning coffee. He scanned every page looking for his letter. Seconds of anticipation were turning into what seemed like minutes for Jim. It has to be here, he thought. He had invested, but

would it pay-off, he wondered. Finally, he saw the page, bold and printed with his words. Apparently, the publisher had been so touched by the letter that he had published it as a full-page ad on the back of the last page of the business section.

“Wow!” Jim exclaimed as his teenage heart raced with excitement.

Jim was so excited. He could hardly wait for school to be out so he could run down to the lumber mill where his mother worked in the office. The hours ticked by slowly as Jim waited for school to be out. And then it happened. A knock at the classroom door and a note was given to his teacher, Ms. Williams. His teacher read the note and looked up at Jim. She asked Jim if she could talk with him outside of the classroom and for him to bring his books. Outside the classroom, Ms. Williams was joined by Sheriff Miller.

“Jim I need you to come with me, son,” Sheriff Miller said, “Your mom collapsed today at work and she was rushed to the hospital over in Hendersonville. I want to run you over there.”

The ride was a short few miles that seemed to take forever. Sheriff Miller and Jim walked into the hospital and gave the receptionist his mom’s name. She picked up the phone and called to get her room. As she asked her voice suddenly change and her eyes withdrew. “Mr. Smith, they are waiting for you down this hall room 3b,” she said with a heartbroken stare. Jim didn’t understand her facial expressions, but walked down the hall she directed him and read each door for 3b. He entered the room and saw a nurse and

doctor standing in front of the bed. Behind them he saw his mother lying in the bed.

“Jim?” asked the nurse.

“Yes,” said Jim.

Her eyes filled with tears and she said, “Honey, I don’t know how to tell you this but your mother just passed away.” She reached out with loving and sympathetic arms to try to comfort the boy.

Jim stopped. Jim had heard what she had said, but couldn’t quite process it. He felt a lump in his throat as tears filled his eyes. He pushed past the nurse’s outstretched arms to his mother.

“Mama...mama...wake up mama. Mama. Mama! Wake-up! Maaaama...Nooo!” Jim grabbed his mothers limp cold hand, the warm hand that had loved him for so many years, and collapsed to his knees and began to weep in agony. As Jim wept, the doctor tried futilely to explain what had happened and how her lung had collapsed from scar tissue, but Jim heard nothing. He felt utterly lost.

The funeral was small. Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Jacobs helped Jim with the arrangements. Jim’s mother had managed to secure a small insurance policy that almost covered the price of the funeral.

For the next two weeks, Jim felt empty and lonely. He hurt. Mrs. Thompson was concerned about him being all alone. Jim assured her he would be okay and was confident that God would see him through. Mrs. Thompson knew he would be 17 soon and was a very responsible and capable young man. Yet, still she worried.

Weeks passed and Jim had forgotten all about the letter he had placed in the newspaper. Jim sat on the front

porch of Thompson's General store rolling his liberty silver dollar between his two thumbs and index fingers and then he remembered the letter in the paper. He had heard nothing. He believed in what he had done, but maybe he was being a little foolish in thinking a man like Mr. Hudson would actually care about his letter? He stared at the silver dollar that he rolled between his fingers and read again those four powerful words that had started him out so many years ago, "In God We Trust." A lot had happened and although he was in a lot of pain, he still had sense that maybe what he had done wasn't so silly. Maybe it would work. Jim knew God was for him so he would just wait.

Another two weeks passed and still no answer. It was Friday afternoon, February 23, 1951, Jim's first birthday without his mother and his hope for hearing from the billionaire had all but vanished. He was going to have Saturday off and was looking forward to a leisurely day of fishing to celebrate his seventeenth birthday. He arrived at Thompson's after school and walked by the soda fountain as he did every day, to put on his apron. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a gentlemen sitting at the soda fountain bar. He was different looking unlike most of Thompson's customers. For one thing, he was dressed in a dark grey pinstriped suit and polished wing-tip shoes with a smart hat that sat upon the soda counter beside him. Jim had not seen too many people dressed in suits, but from what he had seen in mail-order catalogs at Thompson's, he figured a suit like that must be expensive.

All of a sudden, Jim felt the adrenalin rush as his knees weakened, his stomach sank, and his heart pounded,

rendering him totally motionless. At the same time, Mrs. Thompson rounded the corner nearly bumping into him.

“Oh, Jim, there you are,” she smiled. “You have a visitor at the fountain counter, says his name is Hudson, Robert Hudson,” she said. With a sly grin and a quick wink, she disappeared into the stockroom.

Jim took off his apron, folded it neatly and laid it carefully on a box inside the stock room. Then he walked slowly behind the fountain counter trying to restrain both his excitement and fear. He instinctively took a deep breath, extended his right hand, and looked the billionaire right in the eye. “Hello, my name is Jim Smith,” he said.

Firmly gripping Jim’s hand and smiling warmly, the gentlemen responded, “Well, Jim, it’s good to meet you. My name is Robert, Robert Hudson,” Mr. Hudson said. “That is quite a firm grip you have there young man,” he said with a wink.

“Mr. Hudson, excuse me if you will, but I have dreamed of meeting you for more than a year,” Jim stammered. “Now, I can’t believe that you are sitting right here in front of me.”

“Well, Mr. Jim Smith, may I call you Jim?” said Mr. Hudson.

“Yes, ah, I mean, yes sir, Mr. Hudson. Jim would be just swell.”

“Well, Jim,” Mr. Hudson smiled. “I wanted to see the young man who has more persistence than virtually anyone I know. I have had people try to track me down for a lot of things, but nothing quite like this. I must admit that your letter published in the paper sure did get my attention.”

“Mr. Hudson, I apologize about...” Jim tried to explain.

“Shhhh,” the man whispered and then continued. “The first rule is do not apologize for something you really want to do. My old friend, Henry Ford, used to say, ‘Don’t explain and don’t complain.’ Now, what do you say we sit right here and get to know each other?”

The two of them sat talking for almost two hours. Mrs. Thompson had given her smile of approval each time she walked by and Jim found himself almost hypnotized by the conversation.

“I tell you what, Jim,” he said, “why don’t we go ask your parents what their plans are for the weekend, because I would like to invite you all up to my house in Asheville this Sunday.”

“Mr. Hudson, it’s just me now. My mamma passed away 5 weeks ago and she was my only family,” Jim said painfully. “I would love to come, but there is only one problem.”

“Jim I am so sorry to hear about your mother,” Hudson said empathetically. “What’s the one problem though?” Mr. Hudson asked.

“It’s my car, it’s not too good and might not make it,” Jim continued. “There’s a chance I could borrow Mrs. Thompson’s delivery truck,” he thought out loud. “I’ll find a way though.”

“I bet you will find a way and I like the way you said that,” Hudson said. “But let me help you out there. Why don’t I have my driver come and pick you up? You know us children of God are usually wrapped up Sunday morn-

ings, but what do you say I have my driver pick you up around 1:30 p.m.?”

“That would be great!” said Jim.

“Do you like to fish, son?” Hudson asked.

“Boy, do I ever,” he answered.

“Well, that’s great then, because I have just opened up three new trout ponds on my property and my manager tells me they should be just about ready to fish this weekend. If it’s not too cold outside, we’ll have a go at it and see what we can reel in,” smiled Hudson.

“We’ll be ready and thank you so much Mr. Hudson,” Jim answered.

“It’ll cost you,” grinned Mr. Hudson. “What do you say to buying me that ice cream sundae you promised? It’s mighty warm here in the store and that would hit the spot.”

“One ice cream sundae...correction, the best ice cream sundae in the Carolinas coming right up.” Jim said, grinning with elation and pride.

*Follow Me On...*

