

# An Ear to the Rail



**As difficult as it may be to conjure up the image**, this writer was once a card-carrying Boy Scout. And a favorite pastime for any young Scout of that bygone era was tramping off to who knows where, shod in his trusty hiking boots and bearing his well-stocked kit pack filled with outdoor essentials.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12:1-2

MARSHALLTOWN—THE HUMBLE TOWN IN WHICH I WAS BORN and raised—had many places suitable for such excursions when I was a lad. The bank of the Iowa River, especially behind the Old Soldiers' Home, was a perennial favorite, as were the deep woods located on the far side. One location that has remained firmly fixed in my memory was the rail line leading west out of town toward the hamlet of Albion—a handy five-mile jaunt.

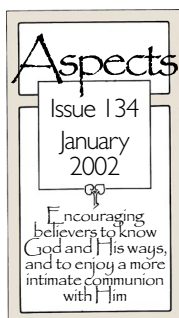
A hike along these tracks was always good for picking up rusted, discarded railroad spikes (good for tent pegs or a poor man's chisel); spotting bewildered pheasants rising out of the brush; and, best yet, meeting up with a passing freight.

The lay of the land between Marshalltown and Albion was mostly flat farmland, but still there were places along the line where we could no longer see very far down the tracks. At such bends in the road, the trick was to press your ear to one of the rails; through the cold steel you could hear the distinct humming and feel the faint vibration of a train approaching even from a considerable distance.

Jesus never prayed for the Father to take us out of this world.

"I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours... I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth." John 17:9,15-19

The spirits of this world can approach, as Sandburg's fog, on 'little cat feet,' or they can rage down upon our heads with the subtlety of a belching locomotive. They can please and stroke us, entice and even satisfy for a moment. They can take



the form of entertainment, literature, new ideas and fresh concepts, teachers—even pastors. But they are always there, and if we shrink from them or, worse, pretend that they aren't there at all, we deny God His sovereignty and grace, for why sacrifice Your only Son for a world requiring no redemption?

We are to be not necessarily preoccupied, but always vigilant with our ear to the rail, ready for whatever is approaching. We are to examine—we are to test—every breaching of our fragile sphere, be it through the ears, through our eyes, through any sense available to the evil one.

But first, we must test ourselves. Can we verify the presence of Jesus in our lives? If so, we must always be testing our actions and works; we must test what is in our heart, for the intentions of the heart color our perception. Then we must test counsel. What prophets instruct us? What is their source? Are we becoming wise, discerning channels of righteousness—or gullible buckets of slop? Finally, we must test the supernatural influences in our lives. What spirits are we listening to? Are they the spirits of this world, or the next?

## Keeping the Water Stirred

“IT IS A VERY TERRIBLE THING TO LET CONSCIENCE BEGIN TO GROW HARD, FOR IT SOON CHILLS INTO NORTHERN IRON AND STEEL. IT IS LIKE THE FREEZING OF A POND. THE FIRST FILM OF ICE IS SCARCELY PERCEPTIBLE; KEEP THE WATER STIRRING AND YOU WILL PREVENT THE FROST FROM HARDENING IT. BUT ONCE LET IT FILM OVER AND REMAIN QUIET, THE GLAZE THICKENS OVER THE SURFACE AND IT THICKENS STILL, AND AT LAST IT IS SO FIRM THAT A WAGON MIGHT BE DRAWN OVER THE SOLID ICE. “SO WITH CONSCIENCE, IT FILMS OVER GRADUALLY, UNTIL AT LAST IT BECOMES HARD AND UNFEELING AND IS NOT CRUSHED EVEN WITH PONDEROUS LOADS OF INIQUITY.” CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

THE VERY PROCESS OF SELF-EXAMINATION REQUIRES a standard against which we must compare ourselves. Every profession has an acme, a pinnacle of success, against which personal performance is compared: the actor has his Olivier; the preacher, his Spurgeon; the basketball player has his Michael Jordan; and the baseball player, his DiMaggio.

But the Christian cannot choose. The believer has but one standard: Jesus Christ. His perfection makes Him at once the finest and most frustrating standard, for we will never attain, but at least we can say, with the Apostle Paul,

...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to

which we have attained.  
Philippians 3:10-16

Testing, always testing. Always comparing. How can we accurately interpret the humming of the rail unless we keep the ear finely tuned? There are things bearing down on us—things both mighty and small—approaching just around the bend, just over the next rise. They may blow their whistle in warning, but they may also be atop us before we know it.

How will we react? Will we run screaming into the night, convinced of our doom? Will we stand our ground and hold up a strong hand of personal authority against the puffing behemoth? Will we cower by the roadbed, praying that its pounding steel will safely pass us by?

Reading through Scripture, it would be easy to think that the way to successfully prepare for testing those things around us would be to live a pure and unblemished life—like the life described by David in Psalm 26:

I do not sit with deceitful men,  
Nor will I go with pretenders.  
I hate the assembly of evildoers,  
And I will not sit with the wicked.  
But as for me, I shall walk in my integrity;  
Redeem me, and be gracious to me.  
Psalm 26:4-5,11

David couldn't truthfully say this about his own life, and neither can we; he did not lead a

“blameless life,” and neither do we. But even with the impurities in his life, David had a heart for God. And that is where the answer lies—in our heart. By keeping our heart tuned to the heart of God, we are able to discern His will; by keeping the water active and stirred, it will never

freeze over, hardening our heart against His way.

As the deer pants for the water brooks,  
So my soul pants for You, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.  
Psalm 42:1-2a

**I want a principle within** of watchful, godly fear,

A sensibility of sin, a pain to feel it near.  
Help me the first approach to feel of pride or wrong desire;  
To catch the wandering of my will, and quench the kindling fire.

**From Thee that I no more may stray**, no more Thy goodness grieve,

Grant me the filial awe, I pray, the tender conscience give.  
Quick as the apple of an eye, O God, my conscience make!  
Awake my soul when sin is nigh, and keep it still awake.

**Almighty God of truth and love**, to me Thy power impart;

The burden from my soul remove, the hardness from my heart.  
O may the least omission pain my reawakened soul,  
And drive me to that grace again, which makes the wounded whole.  
Charles Wesley

## Testing the Soil

WITH EACH PASSING YEAR OUR GARDENING becomes more meticulous, more scientific. In the beginning Linda bought her seeds at the local *Farm & Home*: beans, corn, carrots—by the scoop; drop the seeds into the ground and cover them over. Now she plants a specific variety of beans, from a specific source by mail order, and in one plot of ground she plants a certain kind of carrot that is good for fresh eating, while in another plot she plants a different kind of carrot better for canning.

More than that, she’s now taken to testing the soil prior to spring planting, to discover what nutrients need to be added. So we have, on occasion, mixed and dropped and shook up little test tubes, comparing samples of soil from the various gardens to colored charts. First we tested the soil’s pH level, then each sample of soil had to be ‘extracted’ by being mixed with distilled water and two tablets. Using other mysterious tablets, the resulting liquid was then tested for levels of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.  
Psalm 139:23-24 niv

Life in Christ is not a solitary event, but a rather messy process. Though God remains the

same, we grow and mature, slip and slide our way through our days doing stupid and inexplicable things, barely housebroken, all the while seeking a higher plane nearer to the throne of God. Our lives not only are grossly imperfect, they have an ebb and flow, never remaining the same from one day to the next. One moment of pristine holiness can be followed by abject depravity, then quickly followed again by the exquisite bliss of brokenness.

So our Custodian has His hands full. We can’t be trusted to begin at Point A and follow a straight, unaltered path all the way to Point B. The fleshly spirit would rather stumble along being distracted by pretty detours. In a word, we’re incorrigible.

Except, that is, through the patient ministrations of God and His Spirit. When we invite Them to come in and do regular testing of the foolishness built up within, we periodically expunge those impurities that have left us for so long fallow. Likewise, in Their wisdom They know precisely what must be added to bring us back up to peak fertility.

And the more often we get tested, the more steady we will be along the path that takes us up to that higher plane—the one resting so close to the throne of God.

# If the Truth Be Told

“DON’T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU HEAR. PUT IT TO THE TEST. CHECK IT OUT. MULL IT OVER. TALK IT THROUGH. THINK IT OUT. CHECK IT WITH SCRIPTURE. BE SELECTIVE. DON’T BE GULLIBLE. JUST BECAUSE A MAN WEARS A COLLAR DOESN’T MEAN HE’S TO BE CONSIDERED A “GODLY MAN.” JUST BECAUSE HE SPEAKS ON RADIO OR TELEVISION OR BECAUSE HE “SEEMS SO SINCERE” DOESN’T MEAN THAT HE SHOULD BE TRUSTED AND HAVE YOUR SUPPORT. JUST BECAUSE HE WRITES RELIGIOUS BOOKS OR HAS CHARISMA AND PRESENTS HIS MATERIAL IN A PERSUASIVE, INTRIGUING, INTERESTING MANNER DOESN’T MEAN HE IS REPUTABLE. THE NEW TESTAMENT COMMANDS US TO TEST THE SPIRITS!” CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING EXERCISE: Select a typical week and make careful note of every thing and everybody that teaches you during that seven-day period. Don’t forget—that list would only begin with your Pastor, Sunday School teacher or regular school teacher; the list would also include parents, children, neighbors, doctors, pharmacists, judges. But it wouldn’t stop there. The list would include talking heads on the television: newscasters, reporters, talk-show hosts and their guests, soap opera actors (or the writers that put the words into their mouths). Add to this every commercial you see. And don’t forget radio: newscasters, commentators, talk shows, Christian broadcasters, and even more commercials. Make sure you remember the printed word: newspapers, magazines, novels, manuals, and certainly the Bible.

Really, the list would be endless, because not everyone who teaches us announces their intentions—in fact, very few do. We are instructed every day by an endless procession of people and corporations wanting us to think or act in a certain way.

Compiling this list would be quite a project in itself. But if you are really ambitious, make note also of what it is you were being taught by these media. Make two lists: at the top of one write the heading *SCRIPTURALLY BASED*, and at the top of the other, write the heading *WORLDLY BASED*. Now, how much are you taking in of each?

What all of this vast wellspring of information represents is a form of prophecy. In Jesus’ time, and after, the land was crawling with prophets. Naïve individuals were repeatedly confronted by prophets and seers claiming to speak for God. Some were guilty of a calculated deception, usually for profit. Others were simply deceived themselves, thinking they were something they were not. Still others—the least populated category—were, indeed, prophets who illumined the word of God for the common man.

We need not be sidetracked in this modern era by the terms ‘prophet’ or ‘prophecy.’ Some hold to the belief that there is no form of prophecy at all after the sealing of the Biblical canon. Others assign the role of the prophet in

the modern church to pastors and teachers.

There is a balanced perspective in the following:

“ALL MAY AGREE THAT THERE IS NO NEW REVELATION TO BE EXPECTED CONCERNING GOD IN CHRIST, THE WAY OF SALVATION, THE PRINCIPLES OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE, ETC. BUT THERE APPEARS TO BE NO GOOD REASON WHY THE LIVING GOD, WHO BOTH SPEAKS AND ACTS, CANNOT USE THE GIFT OF PROPHECY TO GIVE PARTICULAR LOCAL GUIDANCE TO A CHURCH, NATION OR INDIVIDUAL, OR TO WARN OR ENCOURAGE BY WAY OF PREDICTION AS WELL AS BY REMINDERS, IN FULL ACCORD WITH THE WRITTEN WORD OF SCRIPTURE, BY WHICH ALL SUCH UTTERANCES MUST BE TESTED. CERTAINLY THE NEW TESTAMENT DOES NOT SEE IT AS THE JOB OF THE PROPHET TO BE A DOCTRINAL INNOVATOR, BUT TO DELIVER THE WORD THE SPIRIT GIVES HIM IN LINE WITH THE TRUTH ONCE AND FOR ALL DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS, TO CHALLENGE AND ENCOURAGE OUR FAITH.” J.P. BAKER, M.A., B.D., RECTOR OF NEWICK, EAST SUSSEX

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, and said, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Acts 13:6-11

**Open my eyes, that I may see**

Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;  
Place in my hands the wonderful key  
That shall unclasp, and set me free.  
Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

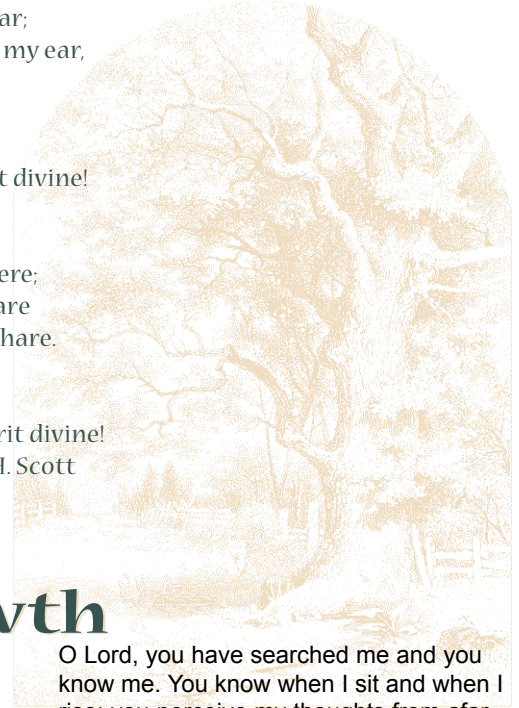
**Open my ears, that I may hear**

Voices of truth Thou sendest clear;  
And while the wavenotes fall on my ear,  
Everything false will disappear.  
Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!

**Open my mouth, and let me bear**

Gladly the warm truth everywhere;  
Open my heart, and let me prepare  
Love with Thy children thus to share.  
Silently now I wait for Thee,  
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Clara H. Scott



## Unsightly Growth

THE PREDOMINANT TREE AROUND OUR PROPERTY is the oak. The many flavors of oak on our land are a messy lot: they make good firewood, and can compose a stately congregation in the full splendor of summer foliage, but their limbs can be twisted and brittle, snapping off easily in storms. They also have a habit of sprouting new growth low on the trunk—growth that requires periodic trimming for the appearance and health of the tree.

When we first moved in, this maintenance hadn't been performed in some time, leaving the outlook from the house dark and foreboding. Rooms were dimmed, and vistas reduced by the clutter of unsightly growth on the oak trees. The removal of this growth brought sunshine and fresh air into the house again, lifting the spirits, as well as improving the appearance of the property.

This same work must be periodically repeated. For seemingly overnight the natural process of growth for the trees will once again leave things dark and foreboding, and it will be time for the unsightly growth to be removed. It will be time to once again raise the canopy to let in more sunshine and fresh air.

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.  
Psalm 139:1-3 niv

The life lived trudging upon the soil of this earth is one that requires periodic removal of those things that are the result of the natural process. As creatures of the soil, lofty goals and holy expectations are not sufficient to halt the spread of unsightly growth that diminishes our outlook.

The one who made and understands it all is the one who must prune and trim away those things for which we have no use. He is the one who removes every encumbrance that threatens the free flow of His fresh air and light. We must periodically present ourselves to Him, and bow before His strong yet tender hand, giving Him the opportunity to remove everything that has become a barrier to His grace.

Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord.  
Lamentations 3:40 niv

# No Game of Badminton

“WHAT MANY MEN DESIRE! THAT ‘MANY’ MAY BE MEANT  
BY THE FOOL MULTITUDE, THAT CHOOSE BY SHOW,  
NOT LEARNING MORE THAN THE FOND EYE DOTH TEACH;  
WHICH PRIES NOT TO THE INTERIOR; BUT, LIKE THE MARTLET,  
BUILDS IN THE WEATHER ON THE OUTWARD WALL,  
EVEN IN THE FORCE AND ROAD OF CASUALTY.  
I WILL NOT CHOOSE WHAT MANY MEN DESIRE,  
BECAUSE I WILL NOT JUMP WITH COMMON SPIRITS  
AND RANK ME WITH THE BARBAROUS MULTITUDE.”  
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *MERCHANT OF VENICE*, ACT II, SCENE IX

EACH OF THESE CONSIDERATIONS COULD by itself fill volumes, and none more so than our responsibility to be *testing the spirits*. In the limited space of this journal, justice cannot be done to the intricacies and convolutions of our relationship with the spirit world swimming about our heads. Were any of us to be privy to what is actually there—substantial yet unseen—we would certainly run screaming into the night, as convinced of our own madness as the ground beneath our feet.

For that is what the darker spirits represent for the Christian: utter madness. And the incessant conflict between the angels of light and dark—good and evil—must surely be something terrible to behold. By God’s grace we need not be spectators to this hideous confrontation.

The prophet Daniel came about as close as anyone would like.

In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a message was revealed to Daniel, who was named Belteshazzar; and the message was true and one of great conflict, but he understood the message and had an understanding of the vision... On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, while I [Daniel] was by the bank of the great river, that is, the Tigris, I lifted my eyes and looked, and behold, there was a certain man dressed in linen, whose waist was girded with a belt of pure gold of Uphaz. Daniel 10:1,4-5

Standing before Daniel was a grand and luminescent angel, sent by God to deliver a message in answer to the prophet’s three-week period of intensive fasting and prayer over the fate of Israel.

Then he said to me, “Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your

words were heard, and I have come in response to your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia.” Daniel 10:12-13

The angel’s identification of his antagonist as “the prince of the kingdom of Persia” does not refer to some member of a royal household, but to the satanic angel assigned to the Persian realm. All the while that Daniel had been in the throes of entreaty, God’s messenger angel had been on his way to him, but had been delayed by the attack from Satan’s angel—in fact, had been *overwhelmed* by him, requiring the assistance of Michael, one of the Lord’s “chief princes.”

Then he said, “Do you understand why I came to you? But I shall now return to fight against the prince of Persia; so I am going forth, and behold, the prince of Greece is about to come. However, I will tell you what is inscribed in the writing of truth. Yet there is no one who stands firmly with me against these forces except Michael your prince.” Daniel 10:20-21

The icy chill of dread can almost be heard in the angel’s voice as he explains that upon leaving Daniel, he must step back into the warfare raging in the spiritual realm. He knows that his adver-

“MY DEAR WORMWOOD,  
OUR POLICY FOR THE MOMENT, IS TO CONCEAL OURSELVES. WE ARE REALLY FACED WITH A CRUEL DILEMMA. WHEN THE HUMANS DISBELIEVE IN OUR EXISTENCE WE LOSE ALL THE PLEASING RESULTS OF DIRECT TERRORISM, AND WE MAKE NO MAGICIANS. ON THE OTHER HAND, WHEN THEY BELIEVE IN US, WE CANNOT MAKE THEM MATERIALISTS AND SKEPTICS. AT LEAST NOT YET. BUT IN THE MEANTIME WE MUST OBEY ORDERS. I DO NOT THINK YOU WILL HAVE MUCH DIFFICULTY IN KEEPING THE PATIENT IN THE DARK. THE FACT THAT “DEVILS” ARE PREDOMINANTLY COMIC FIGURES IN THE MODERN IMAGINATION WILL HELP YOU. IF ANY FAINT SUSPICION OF YOUR EXISTENCE BEGINS TO ARISE IN HIS MIND, SUGGEST TO HIM A PICTURE OF SOMETHING IN RED TIGHTS, AND PERSUADE HIM THAT SINCE HE CANNOT BELIEVE IN THAT, HE THEREFORE CANNOT BELIEVE IN YOU.” C.S. LEWIS

sary will now be joined by the satanic angel assigned to Greece, and he's grateful that at least the angel Michael will be standing by him.

What a horrifying spectacle must be this ongoing war "against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" that even a powerful angel of God would dread returning to it. Whether seen or unseen, these dark spirits are real, and every day they contend for our lives. So we must be vigilant to test everything that comes our way, giving no quarter to any dark evil camouflaged in robes of light.

The relationship we have with this dark spiritual realm is one of warfare. Jesus taught us to be kind and thoughtful to others of our own kind, giving of ourselves, showing compassion at all times. But nowhere do I read that these same considerations are to be extended toward the evil spirits that daily beat upon our lives. To the contrary, we are to

...be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Ephesians 6:10-17

### **We do not bow our knee to the prince of the air;**

We know the truth has set us free.  
And under our feet he will shortly be crushed;  
And having done all, we'll stand in victory.

### **Our hearts are set apart for the courts of the Lord;**

And we will not be bought or sold.  
By His Spirit in us we will overcome;  
Pulling down every stronghold.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but

### **Making war in the heavenlies,**

Tearing down principalities;  
Standing firm in Jesus' victory.  
Making war in the heavenlies,  
Casting down every high thing  
That exalts itself against  
The knowledge of Christ.

test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. 1 John 4:1-3

George Searcy



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