

# Just a Cat

## SHE WAS JUST A CAT.

A stray. On September 14, 1996, she emerged from the woods and took up residence at our home. In fact, she was undisciplined, unintelligent, and scatterbrained. She didn't know what a cat box was for.

She had few if any social skills. Beyond that, she had a list of chronic physical problems, requiring more than the typical number of expensive visits to the vet. So it really was no big deal when early last week those chronic problems reached an untenable point, and we had to put her to sleep.

She was just a cat. Right?

No, Angel was a much-loved member of our family, and her passing has left a new scar on our hearts. More than that, however, over the last nine years Angel was a valuable pipeline for God's truth. Through her small life we learned many lessons about God working in our own. For example, not long after she arrived, she taught me all about priorities, and how my spiritual "appetite" had become, over time, skewed...



Desperate hunger can be a terrible thing, wreaking havoc in the body. My first sight of Angel had been of her chasing a butterfly; she had been reduced to that pitiful level of sustenance. And since that first day, no matter what we do to make her feel at home, no matter what we do to convince her that everything will be all right now, Angel still has but one purpose in life: to keep her belly full.

She cannot forget that painful memory of going hungry. Even if she only ate moments before, if she hears me filling her bowl she comes running. When we step outside to pick up her food at night (so the possums don't get it all) she will quickly stick her head in the bowl and start eating—just to keep us from taking it. For her, nothing is more important than regular, steady nourishment.

Angel's single-minded determination to never again be without food is a painful reminder of how easy it is to get my own priorities mixed up. You see, there was a time when I was desperately hungry; there was a time when I was chasing after fluttering pretty things that held no nourishment whatsoever. Oh, I knew what real food was; I had been fed it in abundance years before. But now I was chasing after vapors while my spirit wasted away.

Then came a day when, gaunt and malnourished, I was offered a heaping bowl of restoring food—and I filled my soul to overflowing and, for awhile, I was desperate to keep feeding at that source of nourishment. I had a single-minded purpose in life: to keep my spirit always filled to overflowing.

But slowly, over time, I forgot what it felt like to be hungry. Other things became my priority. Oh, I was never again reduced to my previous, wasted condition, but I also found that I had lost that singular determination to keep my spirit filled to overflowing. I had lost the hunger.

As the deer pants for the water brooks,  
So my soul pants for You, O God.  
(Psalm 42:1)

O God, let me never again forget how it felt to be without you.

Physically, Angel is fairing just as well. Her ears have healed, she has filled out, her coat is thick and luxuriant, and she is filled with energy and vitality, loving to race up the trees in her play.

When I look at her now, and run my hand over her filled belly, I can't help but think back to that September day when she traipsed out of the woods and into our lives—gaunt, pregnant, and desperately hungry. When I look into her shining, attentive eyes, I remember the hollow gaze they had just two short months ago. And I imagine that Angel has much to be thankful for.

As do I. And just as Angel has her benefactors, so I have mine. I have someone who gives me shelter and food, and who cares about my health and well-being. I have someone who loves me, someone who has an interest in my future and my happiness. I still remember how I was before I met my benefactor.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.

(Colossians 1:21 niv)

But now, because of Him, I am different, I am healthy—I have a future.

But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—

(Colossians 1:22 niv)

And so, tomorrow, I will be giving thanks.

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

(Colossians 3:17 niv)

## Mouse Parts

During Angel's first winter with us, we observed another odd practice related to her diet.

Angel likes to take her dinner with her to bed. All snug and secure in her igloo out on the deck, she likes to bring to her bed the evening's kill. We're not yet sure whether she secrets it away for a midnight snack, or just prefers to eat in the peace of her abode. Whatever her reasoning, when we upend Angel's small house, so as to remove and clean the blankets, it's usually necessary to shake out a small cloud of bird feathers and the odd assortment of mouse parts.

Cats are typically fastidious animals; it's not been our experience that a cat would choose to sleep atop its dinner. But Angel has previously established herself as a cat intent on nourishment. She is determined to never again go without. So if she chooses to bed down with the odd snowbird or

mouse, to keep it handy for those late-night stomach growlings, then (as long as she's not sleeping with us) she is certainly free to pursue this rather odd habit.



## Thanksgiving

A couple of months later, just in time for the holiday, Angel gave me a lesson in Thanksgiving. By then her health was dramatically improved, she was happier, there was a spring in her step, she was settling into her new home. Her behavior and attitude were improved, and clearly she was grateful.

Earlier this fall, in preparation for the approaching winter weather, my father-in-law and I made Angel a "house" from an old, discarded, cherry picker bucket (the kind linemen work from when servicing power lines). Angel took to her new home immediately. We placed her food and water under the stoop, but rain and weather could still get in through the cracks between the boards and through the steps. So last week I covered the top of the stoop with plastic, and nailed boards over the openings around the steps. Now Angel has her own protected porch just in front of her house. Now rain won't drip down into her food, and snow won't drift in around the entrance to her house.

Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.

(Ephesians 4:25-27)

Angel's nocturnal habits got me to thinking about those things we take to bed with *us*. What wakes us up in the dead of the night is very often the result of what we've carried there with us. Just as pizza or chili consumed just before bed will remind us of their presence at two o'clock in the morning, bad thoughts and troubling feelings will rouse us from slumber as well.

Very often what awakens us in the dead of night are troublesome thoughts that should have been left behind—or, better yet, handed over to the custody of the Lord. It would be easy to assign blame for these interruptions to the wiles of Satan, but James tells us that we do it to ourselves:

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

(James 1:14-15 nkjv)

Our pride tells us we have every right to be angry with that brother or sister, that we are correct in our judgment of a bad situation. But how many sleepless hours have been wasted over such pride and bad judgement?

When we eat a bowl of chili before retiring we may only raise the stock value for Pepto Bismol or Roloids, as we treat the temporary discomfort. But when we take to bed with us the bile of anger and bad feelings, we risk permanent damage to the body of Christ.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

(Philippians 4:8)

## Night Visitor

We live in a finite world. As every harried executive and every mother of small children knows, there is only so much of us to go around. Physically, we are bound by the limitations of body weight, size, and muscular strength. Mentally, there is a point at which our intellect turns to mush and the brain cells switch into neutral. Emotionally there is a limit to the number of sad movies we can watch before we're reduced to a quivering, blubbering mass. We are who we are, and there is only so much of us to go around.

We also live in a world bound by strict boundaries of space and time and physical laws. Rise high enough into the sky and the oxygen runs out; stay up to watch midnight arrive, and 12:01 of the next day will surely follow; jump into the air and you will, every time, return to terra firma.

Every night a possum visits Angel. He's not paying a social call, but coming to check the contents of her food bowl. If any food remains he will eat it; if any water remains in her other bowl, he will tip it over. This is what possums do. They go to school to learn how.

Because Angel is a lovable but hopelessly thickheaded cat, she hasn't quite grasped that she'd better eat up her food before dark, because whatever is left after sundown will be consumed by the night visitor—and no more will be forthcoming until well after dawn. That's all she gets for each day, and if she lets someone else eat what she's given, then she's just out of luck.

We each have only twenty-four hours to each day. We each have only a given amount of energy and stamina, only so much to give before our brain turns to mush. God gives us all the same number of hours in each day, and to each he assigns a given capacity with which to move through each day. The Lord fills up our bowl every day. He says, "Here is your Spiritual nutrition, here are the talents and skills I've assigned you, here is the full depth of your abilities. Now, have at it."

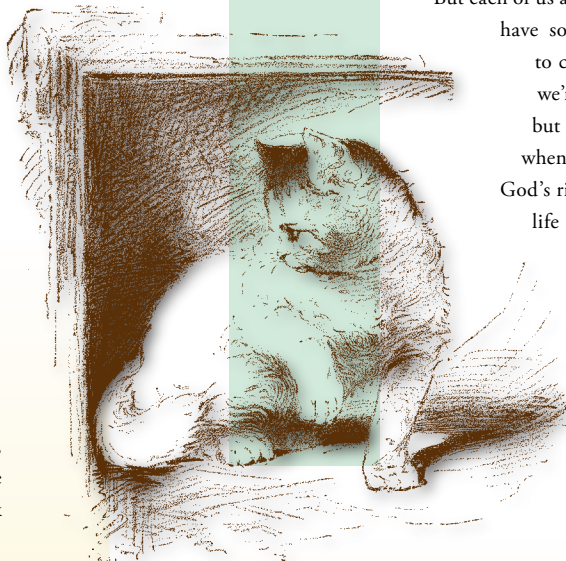
But each of us also have our night visitor. We each have someone or something that comes to consume what we've not used. Oh, we're lovable and well-intentioned, but we can also be a bit thickheaded when it comes to making the best use of God's riches. So something steals into our life and sucks up what remains, and tips over and wastes whatever it doesn't consume. And we go hungry till dawn.

I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end. I know that nothing is better for them than to

rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God.

I know that whatever God does,  
It shall be forever.  
Nothing can be added to it,  
And nothing taken from it.  
God does it, that men should fear before Him.  
That which is has already been,  
And what is to be has already been;  
And God requires an account of what is past.

(Ecclesiastes 3:10-15 nkjv)



## A Quick Forgiveness

After living with us for more than a year, Angel still was uncomfortable with affection, and her social skills remained quirky at best.

It's not uncommon, when visiting neighboring farms or homes, to come upon dogs or cats who are being forced to live something less than ideal lives. Dogs are given a filthy blanket by the back door and expected to live with the rain that pelts their face, or the snow that collects on their matted fur. Cats are left to fend for themselves, to multiply and divide according to the whims of nature, or the landowner's neglect.

Not so here. God has given man the beasts of the field to manage—but not to abuse. We are all God's creations, and are to treat each other

with respect. Because this is the philosophy of this household—one in which even marauding mice are gently caught and released (at least, that is, by the humans)—it came as an unpleasant surprise the other day when Angel slashed my face with her claws.

We're a hands-on family, and whether they like it or not, the four-footed members get their share of hugs. Cats, especially, don't mind a little face rubbing from time to time, so it was a natural move for me to bend down to greet Angel, placing my face close to hers.

Apparently for this newest member of the family—who joined us one day from out of the woods, starving and pregnant—my face came a bit too close for comfort.

In a split-second she slashed my face, from just under the left eye and down the cheek, leaving me a bloody mess. Had she aimed just one centimeter higher, I would surely now be a writer of debilitated foresight. Angel was unapologetic, but after nursing by my good wife, the injuries were considerably improved, leaving my grizzled visage only slightly less pretty.

Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity  
And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?  
He does not retain His anger forever,  
Because He delights in unchanging love.  
He will again have compassion on us;  
He will tread our iniquities under foot.  
Yes, You will cast all their sins  
Into the depths of the sea.

(Micah 7:18-19)

Angel didn't mean to hurt me; it was pure survival instinct on her part. It's true that she's not terribly bright, but she's not mean. For a

quick moment she simply forgot that I was not a threat. So I bore her no grudge. She was forgiven her transgression even as the blood oozed from between the fingers clutching my wounded face.

We have a God like that. In fact, we have a God who demonstrates an even higher form of mercy, in that He forgives even transgressions we commit without ignorance. We are not simple-minded beasts who live by instinct, but crafty creations of a "higher" order. We seldom sin accidentally; there is more often a self-serving motive behind our actions.

Yet still God forgives quickly—as quickly as those claws raked my cheek. When we come to Him on our knees, confessing the wrong, His compassionate response is swift and thorough.

Angel and I made up within the hour. She still rubs against my legs and permits me the privilege of filling her bowl. I still give her a good rub—albeit at arm's

length—and enjoy her scatter-brained company. Our relationship is not tainted by a momentary mistake she made before.

She didn't know any better.  
She's just a cat.

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.

(Luke 23:33-34)

