

One Old Mule



By Dan Caldwell

(Chapter Twenty)

After crossing the Lonesome Mountains the old gray farmer and his mule found the pulling to be much, much easier. The trail there was level and much used. Consequently the two men made much better time and wound up at sunset at an old friend's house.

Drew Wilson, who had been a friend to the old gray farmer for many years, lived near the crossing of trails at the headwaters of the right fork of Straight Creek above Pineville. Here was the settlement of Bledsoe. Here was the headwaters of two young rivers. One flowed south down the Beech Fork and joined the Middle fork of the Kentucky river at Asher and continued on toward Hyden. The other flowed towards Pineville and joined the famed Cumberland river north of the town. This was good land and rich. Many acres of bottomland could be found here and Drew made much use of it.

"Get yore self down and get'n the house." he had welcomed the two as they drove up. "The wife'll set another place er' two fer supper. Yore just in time."

"Shore sounds good." answered the old farmer, "We're on our way to Harlan for supplies."

"Heard you were building something back there in Sandy Fork?" Drew looked at Ben.

"Mine." Matthew answered, "I'm Matthew Hawkins, Ben's oldest son."

"Naw! Little Matthew? Shorely not. Ben, has it been that long?"

"It's been a while." the old gray farmer had answered, "It surely has been a long time."

A young lad had come then from somewhere behind the house and had taken the old mule and wagon. He had unhitched the wagon and had taken the old gray mule to water and feed.

As Matthew had suggested, it was a full moon and they had continued farther into the night and had indeed topped the Pine Mountains before they camped. Harlan lay in the valley just below them! It had been good to see his old friend and the old gray farmer had promised to come again and to bring Elizabeth. Now, as he drove steadily onward, he allowed his mind to wander backwards through the years. Since he had last seen Drew he had raised seven children. He and Elizabeth had grown silver with the years but those had been good years, filled with joy, hard work and contentment! The old gray farmer began to whistle a tune, softly while the old gray mule plodded along. The wagon rocked back and forth along the trail, bumping and creaking as the wheels followed the long used ruts, raking and grating against an occasional stone or bouncing over tree roots that ran across the trail here and there. Ahead was the steep grade that would take him back down into the Sandy Fork!

After camping at the top of the Pine Mountain, the two men had continued to Harlan and had, after much negotiation with the merchants there, acquired the windows as well as many other necessary items. Matthew had said, "Father, you go on ahead. I'll be along to catch up with you a little later. There's another thing or two that I need to do while I'm here and there's no reason for you to have to wait. I'll catch up somewhere along the trail."

The old gray farmer pulled on the reins, "Whoa Jim." he said "We best wait here for a while. We can't get down that grade there anyway without Matt to help us hold the wagon."

The trail down into the Sandy Fork was steep. The two men had helped to push the wagon as the old mule had strained to pull it the last few feet as they were coming up. Now, with the wagon heavily loaded the old farmer feared that the brakes would not be enough to hold it away from the mule. What if the wagon tipped over. What a mess that would be! What a loss of merchandise. There was flour, sugar and coffee as well as a few special treats that the old farmer had slipped aboard for his precious Elizabeth. No! He would not try to go down alone. He would wait for Matthew.

Pulling on the reins the old farmer guided the old gray mule into a wide area between some giant hickory's that grew beside the trail. Here he unhitched the wagon, careful to place a stone in front of the wheels, and removed the gearing from the mule. "Whatever is keeping Matthew?" he thought as he lay the gearing across the tailgate of the wagon. He had said that he had a few other things to do. What business could he have in Harlan? He had lived away in the northern Indiana area for years and years. What could he have to do in Harlan? The old gray farmer and his mule had come along on their way slowly, but steadily, until late evening and had camped just a mile from the Lonesome Mountains. They had risen early this morning and had continued on until now. Still Matthew had not caught up. Another hour would see the setting sun and it would be too dark to attempt the trail down! As he thought on these things the old farmer patiently curried the mule, rubbing his legs and sides gently to smooth the hair and spoke softly to him.

The old mule grunted and snickered, shaking himself with short quirking of his muscles as they rippled under his old gray coat. His ears pointed forward as though he was listening intently to something in the forest. He seemed unusually nervous and the old farmer could not understand why. From the tree overhead came the call of a gray squirrel. His noise, though familiar to the old farmer, seemed different somehow. Louder, urgent, as though barking a warning. Could he be perhaps heralding an early winter. Or maybe there was an unusually hard winter on the way?

Or maybe he was just scolding to be heard. From almost under the feet of the old mule ran a chipmunk, chattering noisily, his shrill chirping fading as he ran along a fallen log and disappeared into his den. The old mule suddenly whirled about and faced the trail down which they had come. Both ears perked forward and he whinnied softly.

"What is it ol' fellow?" asked the old farmer, "What's the matter? Easy boy. Easy now." From back down the trail came the distinct sound of shoe against stone. And what was that other sound? A wagon? But how and where could it have come from? The old gray farmer and his mule had only now come from there and there were no other wagons along the way! As the old farmer gazed intently back down the trail, straining his sharp eyes for some movement, the old gray mule snickered loudly and blew a sharp blast through his nostrils, shaking his head up and down.

The trail behind them was plainly visible for nearly a quarter mile and there, way down at the end, came a new, huge wagon rolling quietly along, being pulled by one of the biggest mule's that the old gray farmer had ever seen!

"Just you look at the size of him." the old farmer said to the old gray mule, "That fellow is a monster!"

The old gray mule snorted and paced back and forth nervously. Suddenly he let go with a loud and rare braying, shaking his head from side to side. The sound nearly deafened the old farmer.

"Whoa now old fellow, settle down. You don't want to make that big fellow mad at you for sure!" The old farmer took hold of the halter and patted the old mule on the side of his face, speaking softly and rubbing him between the ears to settle him down. "It'll be alright." he laughed.

Soon the old farmer could make out that the driver was wearing a brand new hat. He looked familiar to the old farmer, just the way he moved back and forth on the seat, but who would be coming along the trail at this time of evening?

"Matthew!!?" exclaimed the old farmer as the wagon drew closer, "It is you! What are you doing with that wagon? where did he come from?," he asked, pointing to the big red mule.

Matthew laughed loudly and said, "Whoa, Joe. Whoa big fellow." He laughed again as he pulled harder on the reins. "Whoa mule. WHOA!!! There now, turn in there."

With much effort Matthew finally persuaded the big mule to pull alongside the other wagon and stop.

The old gray farmer, speechless by now looked at Matthew, his son and could not make words. His eyes held all the questions. Finally he did speak, "Where did all this come from and how?"

Matthew laughed again at his father's astonishment and began to explain. "You remember when Sarah and I, and the children came we were walking? I had left my car at a friend's house near Harlan. There are no usable roads in the Sandy Fork so if Sarah and I plan to live there it surely makes sense to have a mule and wagon, right? Well, I traded!"

The old gray farmer could not speak. He simply shook his head and looked away down the valley into which they would soon have to travel. His heart filled with pride and gladness at the thought. His son!! His grandsons and his granddaughter!!! Here with he and Elizabeth in the Sandy Fork. What a gift. He looked again at Matthew and the huge red mule, then spoke.

"What's in the wagon?" he asked.

"Let me show you," Matthew answered.

Inspirational Thoughts Into God's Word

By Lynetta Hunter

(Is 53:11) Responsibility is a great attribute. To have obligation and to be held accountable strengthens leadership and honesty, and is even forced in legality. The judicial system has come up with ways to vindicate a person's misconduct and justify it by payment or time served.

Sin, inherited from Adam, is a wrongdoing that attached to all mankind with no form of earthly vindication. God would accept only one way for sin to be justified, and that was through the atoning sacrifice of His Son. Mankind stood helpless, no way to defend our self, no advocate to speak with words of wisdom, no counselor to explain our reason for unrighteousness, and no one to pay our bail. Then Jesus stepped in.

Apostle Paul said it was unheard of for one to willingly give his life for the sake of someone else, especially when that someone is selfish, ennobled, and unworthy. Yet Jesus died while we were yet sinners. God showed and proved His unconditional love by reconciling our relationship with Him, in spite of conflicting opposition (Rom. 5).

Jesus accepted the responsibility for mankind's sin, even though He was sinless (2 Co. 5:21). The anguish, or agony of His soul wasn't in vain, it accomplished exactly what it was meant to do, which was justify (declare free from the guilt of sin) mankind. Through His pain, sin was acquitted, appeasement was made, access into faith and grace was granted, and many are made righteous because of the only Righteous One.

Yards to Paradise

Landscaping with Daylilies

By Max Phelps



More common than you may imagine, mulberries and the month of June go together. The birds definitely love the fruits. (And I've picked a few from at least three of my customers yards lately.) Everybody who has tried them seems to like mulberries. But not everybody wants a tree in the yard.

Convention says they are a messy tree, with fruit on the sidewalk and bird poop on the automobile.

While there is a degree of truth to those perceived problems with having a mulberry tree,

have you ever considered it may not be all bad? And, what tree doesn't have some negatives to go with the positives? Take maple trees: most produce seeds that fly around in late spring like hundreds of toy helicopters, and the ones that don't produce so much pollen no wonder allergies are worse than they were a generation or two ago. Bradford pear trees may look shapely, and the blooms are pretty, but they are short-lived and fare poorly in wind or ice storms. So, a mulberry isn't the only tree with a few negatives.

Let's take another look and investigate some potentially good things about the mulberry tree.

It's not apt to blow over in a windstorm. It is not likely to need spraying for bugs, beetles or bagworms.

It has big attractive leaves, similar to a basswood or catalpa. While it's blooms are inconspicuous, the fruits are loved by birds, squirrels, and just about any other critters who can get to them before they are gone. A care-free tree, the mulberry may not even be noticed except when it has ripe fruit.

About those fruits: they are delicious! I know I love a handful of ripe mulberries. And, birds love them so much that they tend to leave cherries, and blueberries and gooseberries alone until all the mulberries are consumed first. Consider the mulberry tree as your decoy so that you get a chance to harvest your other fruits, even if you don't buy netting and cover them.

There are native mulberries, this works for those folks who like natives in their yards. (Believe me, Bradford pears are not native.) And there are Russian, Chinese, Pakistani, Iranian and other mulberries if you want to investigate and place an order with some nursery specializing in fruiting exotics. There are even white-fruited mulberries for those worried about purple stains on their white car hood. (I've not eaten any white ones, but am told they are very good also.)

Also, mulberries have so many small seeds, sort of like blackberries do, that they get distributed about the neighborhood by the wildlife, just like hollies, walnuts and any other tree with seeds and fruits. From seed to a small tree in 3 to 5 years, seedling mulberries will do well if you find one and just let it grow.

For those who want to grow mulberries for their delicious fruits, (or even for raising silk worms if you're so inclined), a good fruit or orchard catalog will offer several options. I am thinking Raintree Nursery in Washington state. But I'll bet you will find more online or when the garden catalogs hit your mailbox next winter.

Mulberries could be used more often in landscapes in my view. Just maybe I've given the idea to someone who will plant a mulberry tree...or let a wild one grow that the birds may have planted.

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