

# PORTRAIT OF OBEDIENCE

*Biography of R. T. Ketcham*



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J. MURRAY MURDOCH

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*Portrait of Obedience: The Biography of Robert T. Ketcham*

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To  
MOTHER  
in loving memory of  
DAD

They taught me the meaning of service.

# Contents

*Foreword*

*Preface*

1	Allegheny Mountain Boy	15
2	First Priority	27
3	The 'Reverer'	35
4	Early Battles with Modernism	47
5	In Brookville	55
6	Denouncing the Klan	63
7	The Rise of Fundamentalism	73
8	Personal Tragedy	83
9	Honeymoon at the Convention	91
10	The Baptist Bible Union	97
11	Defenders of the Faith	105
12	A Failed Last Stand	113
13	Introducing Separation	127
14	Communism and Compromise	139
15	President of the GARBC	149
16	Lois at Death's Door	159
17	Reorganizing the GARBC	171
18	'Brother' Frank	181
19	Continued Separation	193
20	Attacked and Affirmed	203
21	The Thorn of Satan	213
22	GARBC National Representative	219

23	The Answer to Modernism	227
24	Building an Association	237
25	Of Battles and Sermons	249
26	A Toll of Energies and Emotions	259
27	Fifty Years in the Ministry	271
28	Second Retirement	285
29	Called Home	297
	<b>Appendices</b>	
	<i>A Chronology of Events</i>	303
	<i>Did You Leave Something on the Stairs?</i>	306
	—Robert T. Ketcham	
	<i>Memorial Service for Robert Thomas Ketcham</i>	317
	<i>Hat on His Head, Cane in His Hand</i>	327
	—Donn W. Ketcham	
	<i>Champion of God</i>	329
	—Paul N. Tassell	
	<i>Scripture Index</i>	331
	<i>Subject Index</i>	333

# Foreword

THIS BOOK needed to be written. One could not say the same of many works pouring from evangelical publishers today. Some writers should have spared themselves the effort. But the life of Robert T. Ketcham is a vital message. In fact, several messages.

His platform ministry was unforgettable. Few men have manifested such power and true eloquence in preaching.

His endurance of a severe physical affliction is another message. Mortals of lesser mettle would have given up in discouragement and resigned themselves to a limited, mediocre role in life.

And, of course, his life was woven together with the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches for almost half a century. His biography will provide a better understanding of the background, origin, and development of the movement God so evidently honored.

Dr. Murdoch, however, has wisely chosen to center this writing on another word: obedience. This would have been Dr. Ketcham's own choice; he often declared he had nothing to give God but that. And we receive a new insight into the meaning of the word. Obedience, an abstract term, is best understood when personified. That is how we visualize God—as revealed in His Son. So obedience is best understood when demonstrated in a life. May the portrait unveiled in these pages give us all a greater understanding of that blessed quality.

It is an honor for me to write this foreword, and I do so with gratitude to God for Dr. Ketcham's influence in my own life. He performed the marriage ceremony, uniting my wife and me. Later, he was the key factor in our becoming involved with Regular Baptist Press. Before that, my first pastorate

was relatively near the city where he was then ministering. The frequent opportunities for observing him and associating with him were immeasurably helpful to a young pastor.

Then it became my rare privilege to be a co-laborer with him for over ten years in the Association's national office. And I came to know Dr. Ketcham in a new way. It is one thing to see a man in a pulpit and hear him preach. It is another to work side by side with him in close, often pressure-filled situations. However, this "knowing by experience" did not extinguish my respect and affection for "Doc." And out of this background I can say with total sincerity that he deserves to be memorialized in biographical form.

I am glad this fine work has been produced. May God use it to deepen discernment, dedication, and the spirit of obedience in thousands of hearts.

*Merle R. Hull*

*Regular Baptist Press*

*Schaumburg, Illinois*

# Preface

MY FIRST CONTACT with Dr. and Mrs. Robert Ketcham occurred approximately thirty years ago in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. Most of Mrs. Ketcham's family resided in the Lock Haven area, and many attended the First Baptist Church, which my father, Henry Murdoch, pastored at that time. During Dr. Ketcham's visits to Lock Haven, he and my father developed a lasting friendship. This was typical of the relationship Ketcham had with many pastors throughout the country. Thus, my early associations with Dr. Ketcham were of an informal nature. He always had time for a few minutes with the "preacher's kid."

Through the years of my training in both undergraduate and graduate school, Dr. Ketcham manifested a sincere interest in my life. During my graduate school years, we fellowshiped together in the Belden Avenue Baptist Church of Chicago. In this context our friendship grew, and I began discussing with him the possibility of writing his biography.

For many years Dr. Ketcham had been opposed to the idea of anyone writing a book such as this. He was very concerned that the project would appear to be self-vaunting or self-exalting. This was the last thing he wanted. In my contacts with Dr. Ketcham, I found him to be totally committed to the conviction that "in all things" Christ must have "the preeminence." It was only when he became convinced by longtime associates that his experiences might be used of God in the lives of others that he agreed to the project.

Thus, in approaching this volume, I encountered a variety of concerns. How should I write about a man I have known and loved for most of my life? How could I relate his experiences while exalting his Savior? What form should such a volume take?

After much prayerful consideration and reflection, I determined to write a devotional biography. In no sense is this volume a critical analysis of the man's theology or his actions. Instead, it is the account of an Allegheny mountain farm boy with a limited education and a severe physical handicap who promised God the only thing he had to offer—obedience. Each experience in Dr. Ketcham's life reinforced the principle that obedience is all God expects from anyone. The story of Robert Thomas Ketcham is the story of God's sufficient grace in the life of His obedient servant. Thus, the message of this volume is simple: God rewards obedience.

As a historian, I was captivated by the manner in which Dr. Ketcham's life was rooted in the history of fundamentalism. In order to portray him correctly, I felt it important to show some of the conflicts within the Northern Baptist Convention. It also seemed necessary to present briefly the development and decline of the Baptist Bible Union, a movement in which Dr. Ketcham was deeply involved. Finally, since in many respects the story of his life is the story of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, some history of the Association has also been included.

Dr. Ketcham was a vital part of the history of the Baptist fundamentalist movement. He was by no means the only figure, but he was an important figure. His life was devoted to the defense of Biblical Christianity. It is my prayer that this volume might help the reader achieve a more complete understanding of fundamentalism in its historic context.

Since no formal bibliography is included, it is important to say a word about the sources used in the preparation of this work. Because the volume revolves around the ministry of one man, I depended heavily on his writing and the material in his personal files (referred to as Ketcham Papers in the endnotes). Ketcham's books and pamphlets, the twelve GARBC literature items, and his innumerable articles for the *Baptist Bulletin* and other Christian publications provided a wealth of information. Many of his sermons have been preserved on tape, and these messages contain significant insights into his personality and life. In addition, between 1968 and 1972, I conducted a series of recorded interviews with Dr. Ketcham. I also conducted recorded interviews with D. A. Waite and Beauchamp Vick, while taped reflections were received from Donn Ketcham and Ruth Ryburn.

Three periodicals were of particular importance. In the early years of the liberal-fundamentalist controversy, the *Watchman-Examiner*, edited by Curtis Lee Laws, was significant. After the formation of the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, the *Baptist Bulletin* (originally *The Bulletin*) was of utmost importance. The *Fundamentalist*, edited by J. Frank Norris, was of value in researching the contacts between Norris and Ketcham. Other periodicals and monographs of significance are noted with full bibliographic data in the footnotes.

I would also like to say a word about Mrs. Ketcham. She is one of the finest godly women I have had the joy of knowing. As a young adult in her couples Sunday School class at the Belden Avenue Baptist Church, I marveled at her spiritual insights. I am sure that her husband profited frequently throughout the years from those insights. He often publicly expressed his gratitude to God for his beloved wife. I wish more space in this volume could have been devoted to her role in his ministry, but many of those experiences remain hidden in the hearts of Dr. and Mrs. Ketcham.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all those who have contributed in a variety of ways to this project. I will leave most nameless and trust that they understand my gratitude. However, I must publicly thank my former secretary, Miss Mabel Young, who spent countless hours in the preparation of this manuscript. My wife, Ruth, joined Miss Young in typing the final draft. Sons, Jim and Mark, along with their mom, patiently awaited the completion of the project. I am grateful to my family for their encouragement in the past months.

It is my desire that God will use this volume as a testimony to the saving power of Jesus Christ for any who do not know Him as their personal Savior. For those who are born again, may it be a challenge to obedience.

*J. Murray Murdoch*  
*Cedarville College*  
*Cedarville, Ohio*



"When boys wore skirts!" Robert Ketcham, age three, in Nelson, Pennsylvania

## CHAPTER 1

# Allegheny Mountain Boy

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“I tried the experiment of hanging on to my cigarettes and my pool playing. . . . I got nothing out of this but a spiritual stomachache, and everybody around me got a spiritual headache.”

THE YOUNG MAN’S hand shook slightly as he nervously tore open a letter postmarked Roulette, Pennsylvania. His brow wrinkled in confusion as he quickly scanned the contents of the short note from the church clerk of the First Baptist Church of Roulette. Then, clutching the letter in his hand, he quickly made his way to the Galeton Baptist Church and his friend and pastor, Harry Tillis. Bursting into the church, young Bob Ketcham breathlessly approached his pastor: “Harry, what does this mean? A church at Roulette wants me to candidate! A candidate. Am I running for something?”

Young Bob had absolutely no idea what “candidate” meant. Tillis smiled and replied, “Well, Bob, they want you to come and preach a sermon. If they like you, they’ll call you as their pastor.”

“SERMON!” roared Bob. It was hard enough to distinguish if the roaring young warrior was asking a question or making a statement, but Tillis recognized the volatile and emotional reaction as being typical of his young parishioner.

“Yes,” the pastor chuckled, “a sermon.”

This time there was no mistaking the response. It was very clearly a question: “Harry, where do you get ’em?”

“Why, Bob, you make them,” Tillis responded. Then recognizing the consternation on the face of the young man, the kindly pastor put his arm around

Bob's shoulder and quietly explained to him that sermons had to be developed by carefully studying God's Word.

Young Robert turned and slowly walked away from his pastor to make his way home. He failed to notice the heat of the summer day as his mind was filled with thoughts of "making" and "preaching" a sermon. As he traveled homeward lost in his thoughts, he hardly noticed anything or anyone. He knew that Roulette was a tiny town about thirty miles west of Galeton. He also knew that the Baptist church there was very small. But for someone who had never "made" a sermon, the very thought of "making" one and then "preaching" it—even before a small congregation—was awesome.

As the young candidate sought God's help in preparing that first sermon, he could not help reflecting on his life. In spite of the fact that he had just passed his twenty-third birthday, he felt strangely young, and the memories of his childhood danced vividly across his mind.

ROBERT THOMAS KETCHAM was born in Nelson, Pennsylvania, on July 22, 1889, to Charles O. Ketcham and Sarah Bullock Ketcham. His parents were active members of the Methodist church, and his mother was one of the outstanding soprano singers in the area.<sup>1</sup>

Nelson was a small community nestled in the highlands of northern Pennsylvania almost to the New York border. The area was mountainous and rough. Heavy forests surrounded Nelson and the other small towns and draped them marvelously in the beauties of God's creation. Mountains crisscrossed throughout the region, topped by oak, maple, walnut, and hickory trees in abundance that stretched lazily upward as if drawn by their Creator. In the autumn months, these stately trees, clothed in the beautiful hues of the rainbow, majestically stood in vivid testimony to the marvels of God's creation.

Bob had little opportunity to know his mother. She died in 1896 before her son was seven years old. This loss was difficult for the youngster to understand. He had not yet learned that his Heavenly Father was too wise to make mistakes.

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1. There were two other children in the Ketcham family. Bob's only brother, Harry, came through this same process, which eventually led him into the Baptist ministry. He was known across the United States as an outstanding preacher of the gospel, ministering for over forty years until his death. When Charles Ketcham married Louise Elliot, Robert and Harry gained a sister, Grace. She was Mrs. Marlin Canavan of Elmira, New York.

In March 1898 God provided a stepmother for the lad when Charles Ketcham married Mrs. Louise Elliot. Widow Elliot was an active member of the Baptist church in her hometown of Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, a community located almost directly south of the Ketcham home in Nelson. Thus Charles Ketcham changed from the Methodist church to the Baptist church.

As he thought back on the years prior to his salvation, Bob marveled at how God had directed his life in such an unmistakable manner. His own mother was a precious and godly woman whom he dearly loved. He often said, "She was a mother beyond description as to her sweet Christian character and godly motherhood." However, had she lived, the Ketcham boys would doubtlessly have been raised in the Methodist church. But the death of his mother eventually led Robert into Baptist circles where he would have opportunity to meet certain people who would shape his life in years to come. Thus, even before he accepted Christ as personal Savior, God was preparing young Robert for the appointed field of service.

WHEN ROBERT was eleven years old, the Ketcham family left Wellsboro and moved almost due west through the region known as Pennsylvania's Grand Canyon to the little town of Galeton. Pine Creek proved to be a superb fishing place for the Ketcham boys, and the chilling waters of this mountain stream frequently provided a welcome respite from the heat of summer days. The large forests were still another source of recreation.<sup>2</sup> Although he was only eleven, Bob was expected to share in the responsibilities of the farm or on his father's milk route.

As Robert worked side by side with his dad, he closely observed his father's actions. On cold winter mornings, he watched his father breathe heavily on the bit to warm it a little before placing it in the horse's mouth. He was fascinated by the way the steel would become frosted. One day he went out to the woodshed and took down a double-bit ax. He breathed on it and watched it frost. Gradually, the frost dissipated, and the youngster breathed heavily on the ax again and watched it frost. He repeated this process again and again. Unfortunately the lad got his mouth too close, and his tongue froze fast to

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2. The Pennsylvania forests and the resultant paper industry provided the basis for one of Dr. Ketcham's most popular series of messages, "The High Cost of Writing Paper."

the freezing ax. Bob ran screaming into the house, holding the ax with both hands while the ax held his tongue.

Charles Ketcham frequently suffered from migraine headaches, and when he had a headache, he did not always think clearly. Instead of pouring lukewarm water over the ax to release the boy's tongue, he ordered his son to put the ax—and his tongue—on the stove. Robert leaned over the wood-burning stove and waited for the ax to thaw. But the combination was too much for his system, and in a matter of moments his nose began to run—as a youngster's nose is prone to do on a cold winter day. This merely added to Robert's horror, as he thought his insides were coming out. He started screaming, "Cut it off! Cut it off!" Eventually the heat loosened the ax's grip on his tongue, and tragedy was averted.

In spite of the testimony of his mother and father, Robert entered his teens without claiming Christ as his personal Savior. He knew the Lord Jesus had died for his sins. He knew salvation came only through Christ. The positive influence of his parents' testimony was such that he knew Christ had performed the miracle of salvation in their lives. But his heart was hardened, and all his head knowledge was to no avail as he steadfastly refused to yield his life to Christ.

One of Bob's favorite pastimes was reading Diamond Dick novels. But these volumes were off limits in Deacon Ketcham's home, and the point was nonnegotiable. The senior Ketcham had a milk route, and his son was expected to help with it. Bob always tried to deliver on the right side of the road. While delivering milk to the drugstore, he would pick up a Diamond Dick novel and smuggle it home. After everyone else was asleep, he would light his lamp and read through the novel. The book was then hidden under his mattress until he could smuggle it out of his bedroom and burn it in the wood-burning stove or dispose of it in some other manner.

While Dad, Bob, and Harry did the early morning chores, Mom Ketcham would eat her breakfast and then prepare a large meal of buckwheat pancakes and sausage for her boys. While the fellows ate, she went upstairs to make the beds. One awful morning Bob's mother ordered him up the stairs. By the tone of her voice, Robert knew full well that something was wrong—and he had a pretty good idea what it was. As he started for the stairway, each foot felt as

though a cement block covered it instead of a boot. He knew what awaited him. It was more than physical punishment. He knew he would find his godly mother in tears, tears that graphically demonstrated the heartache she felt over his willful disobedience.

As young Bob sat at his desk to prepare his sermon, tears welled in his eyes as he thought of the many times he had broken the hearts of his parents. Though he loved his mom and dad dearly, his personality had borne the unmistakable trait of stubbornness. Stubbornness correctly channeled can be used of God to give a man determination, tenacity, and perseverance amid difficult trials. But in Satan's hand, it was a tool used to cultivate rebellion in the heart and life of the young farm boy.

As time passed, the discipline of a Christian home as exercised by godly parents was not acceptable to young Robert. At the age of sixteen he served notice on his father that he was leaving home and would shift for himself in the big, wide world. Charles Ketcham, his heart aching with love, followed his son out of the rugged farmhouse. He tried to embrace the lad, but Bob refused to allow it. As the boy marched stiff-legged out the gate, his father called after him, "Son, if you ever bump up against a row of stumps you can't pull, just call on Dad."

Robert turned, his face reddened by the anger surging within him, and looked back at his father. Glaring directly into those eyes that he knew so well, he assured his dad there would be no such emergencies. Then he turned on his heel and brusquely marched down the road. As he moved away from the family home, he could feel his father's loving eyes burning into his back.

Before he was a hundred yards out of sight, Bob knew exactly where his father was. He had found him there on another occasion when he had broken his father's heart. His dad was in the old hay barn, praying and wetting the hay with his tears. After Bob returned home, he asked his dad if his suspicions were correct. Charles admitted that he had in fact been in the barn at prayer that day. As young Robert walked away from his home, his father poured out his heart to God: "Lord, there goes my youngest son. You follow him and bring him back. I can't."

Thus, off marched the young rebel, sure there was not a stump in all the hills of Pennsylvania he could not pull. Little did he know the emergencies

that lurked before him, but he began to learn the truth in a hurry as he encountered stump after stump that he could not budge. Usually these were “stumps” of his own sinful making; and usually he had to have his father come and pull him out of the tangled messes into which he wandered. But still the stubborn lad refused to recognize the God of his earthly father as the answer to the needs of his heart.<sup>3</sup>

Finally the Spirit of God penetrated the hardened heart of young Bob Ketcham. On February 16, 1910, the twenty-year-old Allegheny mountain lad yielded to the Spirit of God and claimed the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. His conversion took place in the Galeton Baptist Church. Gradually things began to change, but the first year of Ketcham’s Christian life was anything but a roaring success. He tried to hang on to all of his old habits, and that simply did not work. He often described those early months of his Christian experience: “I tried the experiment of hanging on to my cigarettes and my pool playing and my tenor singing and fooling around with the young people in the Galeton Baptist Church on Sundays. I got nothing out of this but a spiritual stomachache, and everybody around me got a spiritual headache.”

IN 1911 the noted Bible teacher W. W. Rugh went to the Galeton church for a one-week Bible conference. His topic was the tabernacle. The young convert was not very fond of preachers, regarding them all as “sort of stuffed shirts.” The only preacher Bob had any love for or confidence in was Harry Stewart Tillis, the pastor who had preached the night he was saved. He liked Harry Tillis, and he liked the two-fisted approach Tillis used in the pulpit. Years later, when thinking about Tillis, Dr. Ketcham would smile and say, “When that man went out of the pulpit, you knew a sermon had been preached!”

But this Rugh fellow was another matter. Bob was not at all eager for this new preacher to come to town, even for a week, so he did not plan to spend much time in church that week. However, Rugh arrived in Galeton with a huge chart on the tabernacle that stretched across the entire front of the church. This chart attracted Bob. He had never before seen anything even remotely like it.

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3. This unscheduled trip from home interrupted Bob Ketcham’s schooling and was one of the reasons he never got a formal high school education.

As Rugh spoke that Lord's Day, he described Jesus Christ through the vivid types of the Old Testament and illustrated his points by frequent references to the mammoth chart. Bob was so fascinated by the messages on Sunday that he decided to go back to church on Monday night instead of going to the pool hall. Again he enjoyed the unique ministry of W. W. Rugh. Consequently, he forsook the pool hall on Tuesday evening and returned to church for an unprecedented third night in a row!

That Tuesday night the preacher made a remark that jarred the young convert as it registered on his mind. Rugh said: "God the Father loves every Christian just as much as He loves His own dear Son." Bob Ketcham sat bolt upright! He looked first at Pastor Tillis, and then at Deacon Playfoot, and finally to his own saintly father. Were these men going to do something to stop this blasphemy? His father was a deacon. He was a man of courage and conviction. Surely *he* would do something if no one else would! Bob glanced around the sanctuary once more. As it became obvious that the leaders of the church were not going to challenge the remark, he eased back into the pew, but the preacher's statement continued to burn in his mind.

Wednesday night marked Bob's fourth consecutive evening away from the pool hall. As he sat with his eyes fixed on the preacher, Rugh said, "God has given every believer the same standing, favor, and acceptance before His holy face that He has given His own dear Son."

Again Bob sat upright. Again he looked to Pastor Tillis, Deacon Playfoot, and his deacon father. Again he realized that all these saints were going to allow the preacher's utterance to go unchallenged! Wondering why the "old heads of Israel" were not putting a stop to this kind of "blasphemy," Bob decided it was his responsibility to do something about it. He stood to his feet and shouted: "Mr. Rugh, I don't believe that!"

The sanctuary became silent. Pastor Tillis winced visibly. Deacon Charles Ketcham looked first at his son and then down at his hands as the flush of embarrassment crept quickly up his neck and flooded his cheeks. Meanwhile, Bob stood before Rugh, firm in his conviction that the preacher was doctrinally incorrect. He wondered if the preacher would leave the pulpit and put one hand on his neck and one hand on his head and twist in opposite directions until something cracked! But that was not the way Rugh did business.

Rugh was a warm and compassionate man with a heavenly smile. He unleashed that smile on the tense young man who stood before him and said, “You don’t?”

The youth replied, “No, Mr. Rugh, and furthermore, I don’t believe what you said last night about God the Father loving every Christian as much as He loves His own Son.”

Rugh responded with another question, “You don’t believe this is true?”

The quick reply, “No, sir,” came back to him.

Rugh continued his interrogation of Bob Ketcham right there in front of the pastor, his family, and the whole church: “You don’t believe God loves you as much as He loves Jesus Christ, and you don’t believe God gave you the same standing before Him that His Son has?”

Again the reply was, “No, sir.”

This time Rugh’s question was brief but to the point, “Well, Robert, wouldn’t it be nice if it were true?”

For the first time in the exchange, the young man’s confidence wavered. The preacher had tricked him. The only possible answer to that question was yes, but he still felt the statement was wrong. Instead of answering, Bob’s eyes wavered, and he looked to the floor.

When he looked up to Rugh’s smiling face, the preacher asked, “Well, Robert, would you believe it if you saw it in the Bible?”

Stunned by the question, Robert realized he was on the ropes. He had stood to question the preacher, but now he was being questioned. He knew there was only one answer to the question he had asked. So he raised himself on his toes and with assurance and finality said, “Yes, I’d believe it if I saw it in the Bible. But it isn’t in the Bible, because it isn’t true.”

Rugh looked at the cigarette-smoking, pool-playing babe in Christ who was telling him what was and what was not in the Bible. With a patience born out of years of experience, Rugh invited Bob to turn in his Bible to John 17:23. This forced Bob Ketcham to admit to the preacher—and to all the congregation—that he did not have a Bible, a fact which Rugh had known all along! Rugh moved from behind the pulpit and made his way to where Robert was standing. He handed Bob his own Bible and repeated the order to turn to John 17:23. Robert took the Bible and started to search for John. He knew John was in

there somewhere, but he had no idea where, so he kept searching. While he searched, Brother Rugh just stood there smiling and let him stew.

Finally Bob found a John way at the back of the Bible near Revelation, but it did not have seventeen chapters. When he informed Rugh of this fact, the congregation snickered in recognition of Bob's mistake. But the preacher took his Bible and explained the difference between the three Epistles of John and the Gospel of John. Then Rugh took the Bible, located John 17:23 for the embarrassed lad, and told him to read it. Robert slowly read: "I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and *hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.*"

As Robert staggered at the impact of those words, Rugh made a few comments that went unheard, and then instructed the youth to turn to Ephesians 1:6. Bob had no idea where, what, or who Ephesians was. He decided to start at the beginning in his search. He skimmed past Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and on through the early books of the Old Testament as Rugh stood watching. Finally, the preacher took the Bible and found the verse for him, and once more Robert read aloud: "To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved."

No literal scales dropped from Robert's eyes and rattled onto the seat in front of him, but what transpired could not have been more real. Like the snap of a finger, the scales of confusion fell, and Robert understood the miracle God performed when an individual accepted Christ as personal Savior. He realized that God saved him not only to get him out of Hell and into Heaven, but that He had placed the same arms of love around Robert Thomas Ketcham as had been put around His own dear Son. He understood that God had set him in the heavenlies at His own right hand in the person of Jesus Christ, and that Robert Thomas Ketcham and every other believer is accepted in Christ and reckoned to be as holy and as righteous and as acceptable to God as God's own dear Son!

Robert's knees weakened. He dropped into his seat, laid his head on the pew in front of him, and cried like a baby. Finally, with sobs still racking his body, he prayed aloud: "Dear Lord, if this is the way You saved me, then all I ever hope to be or have is Yours forever."

Pastor Tillis, Deacon Playfoot, Charles Ketcham, and virtually everyone

else in the congregation wept unashamedly as they, too, grasped the beauty and meaning of Rugh's point. That night the whole Galetton church got a new look at what God does when He saves a person. And for the young man who had challenged the old preacher, the new understanding of the miracle of salvation was to be used by the Spirit of God to work a permanent transformation. Old habits began to fall by the wayside, and for the first time since his salvation, Robert realized that normal Christian living involved more than regular visits to the church. It also involved the obedient application of the Word of God to the life of the child of God.