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Rolfe Barnard  
(1904-1969)

Rolfe Pickens Barnard was born on 4th August 1904 to James and Julia Barnard in Gunterville, Alabama. He often stated that his father and mother gave him to God to be a preacher while he was still in his mother's womb. He grew up in a good home and was taken to a Southern Baptist church and Sunday School during his youth. Like so many children, he made a decision to be baptised and join the church when very young, but without being truly converted. When he was eleven years old, a missionary visited the church in the little town where he lived and asked all who were willing to 'go where ever the Lord wanted them to go' to come forward. Soon Rolfe was walking down the aisle and made this commitment. He seemed to sense from that time that God's will for him was the Christian ministry.

In a remarkable sermon entitled 'Saved From Infidelity,' Barnard explains how he struggled with the seemingly inevitable course to which he was destined: preaching the gospel. He was evidently a precocious youth for he entered Hardin Simmons University of Abilene, Texas at the age of 15 to study for a legal career. While in college he sought peace with God for his troubled conscience, but whenever he thought of God he thought of preaching, and this he had rejected. He was willing to do anything but that. He evaded the issue by long hours of weeping and praying. He 'rededicated himself to God', in fact he did 'everything he knew to do'. But the storm within continued to rage. Rolfe was in a terrible agitated state.

Then his rebellion reached a point where he said, 'God, keep your hand off me.' His heart hardened and he turned to infidelity. This, as he said, gave him an 'alibi' or 'hiding place' and enabled him to sleep'. His determination to avoid the ministry led him to abandon the evangelical faith (outwardly at least). He became an outspoken infidel on the faith college campus and his bold disposition and intellectual acumen made him a natural leader of the unbelievers. An infidel club was organized and he was its president. Rolfe Barnard was declared all-out war on God!

On Friday nights 300 young rebels gathered to poke fun at the Bible and dare God to do anything about it. Leading them in their blasphemy was a tall, angular youth who had been dedicated to God as a minister from his mother's womb. When this young man was leading the skeptics he was haughty and presumptuous, but at night, when alone, the God of his parents loomed large before him and the gathering clouds of his wrath frightened him. Remarkably, he would curse God during the day and pray to him at night. These are his own words, 'I say to you, and this is the truth, before I could sleep at night I'd get down on my knees and say to God, "If you'll not kill me tonight, I'll surrender to you tomorrow."' Rolfe Barnard became, literally, one of the most miserable men walking the face of the earth, He was a hard and bitter young man, determined never to serve God or even darken the doors of God's house.

On graduating from law school, he was offered a junior partnership in an outstanding Texas law firm, but instead he decided to move to the Panhandle area of Texas to teach in a school. He did not explain this move. In Texas, at that time, one had to be a church member in order to teach in a school, so he joined the church the first Sunday after moving to town.

Although he was now a church member, he never attended. In fact he remained a confirmed infidel. 'For years,' he said, 'I blasphemed everything high and low, but they kept me on the church roll.' When he moved from one place to another he moved his letter of membership, but never participated in church activities. Then a remarkable thing happened. A church elected him to teach a men's Bible class, shortly after he had joined, and he felt that to keep his reputation he should accept.

The incredible situation existed of Rolfe Barnard moving into a new community and being elected to teach a men's Bible class while he was shaking his very fist in the face of God. This type of situation is perhaps more common than one might suspect, especially in some parts of America where membership in a church is essential to social status, and in some cases one's occupation depends upon it. As a Bible teacher, Barnard was a big success. The people were impressed with

th His knowledge of the Bible and ability to communicate. After he became an evangelist, he described himself during those days as a 'hypocrite' and 'devil'.

Then the event occurred which forced Barnard's hand, as it were, in the great issue between him and God: whether he would surrender to preach. The pastor of the church resigned, and Sunday after Sunday there was no preaching. After Sunday School the people simply went home. Given the battle in his heart he had been fighting for so many years, this created a dilemma in Barnard's mind too great for him to bear. One Sunday he went home to his boarding house, entered the bathroom and locked the door. There, as he later said, 'The battle was fought out.' God won. Rolfe Barnard got up from his knees and went directly across town to the home of the Sunday School superintendent who was asleep in a rocking chair waiting for dinner. On a table a gramophone was grinding out some music. The young Sunday School teacher walked over to the Superintendent and woke him. 'Brother Mills,' he said, 'I've come to tell you, the Lord has saved me and I want to preach next Sunday. 'I will let Barnard relate the conversation between him and the layman in his own words.

The Superintendent said, 'Well, it's about time.' He sure let me down. I had wanted him to say, 'Oh, isn't that wonderful.' Instead he said, 'Well it's about time.' I said, 'What do you mean?' He said, 'Things have been going on. A couple of letters came to Panhandle, Texas post office. One of them was addressed to the Superintendent of the Sunday School of the First Baptist Church. the other was addressed to the Pastor-"didn't know any names". They were identical letters. So me old white-haired woman from Abilene, Texas said, "My boy's coming to your town to teach school. He's called to be a preacher. He's not even saved. He's in an awful mess." She said, "If you could find it in your heart, build a fire under him. Don't let him have a moment's peace." And he said, "Boy we've been doing it. We knew you weren't saved, but we elected you to teach a men's Bible class. We've been meeting once a week and asking, "Lord make the fire a little hotter." we've been waiting.'

The letter had come, of course, from Rolfe's mother. The method the Texan Baptists used to build a fire under Rolfe Barnard was a strange one, and one we could easily criticise, but God moves in a mysterious way and over-ruled the mistake of his people in calling out his chosen servant and sending him on his way.