

"An Exceptional Book"

by Jerry Hopkins

Over the years I have read several thousand books. A handful of those books I would rank highly exceptional. I've read all kinds of books – novels, non-fiction, history, science, self-help, theology, biblical studies, commentaries, scholarly studies, philosophy, classics. A few years ago my friend, Editor Gary Long, who managed Particular Baptist Press, sent me one of the best books I have ever read. Gary and assistant Terry Wolever edited *The Works and Letters of Cleve Brantley*.

Brantley only had an eighth-grade education, but he had a great thirst for learning. He gained the use of Hebrew and Greek through self-study, read theology and biblical studies. He studied constantly, authoring theological and biblical studies and also poetry. One of the most moving stories I have ever read will give you an insight into this unique individual's thinking. Here is that brief story from a letter to Editor Long.

My Friend Leslie by Cleve Brantley

Years ago I had a friend. His name was Leslie. We were seven. It was my second school.

Leslie had a crippled foot. He was born that way. Leslie could not run and play. He walked with a crutch. I loved Leslie.

We went to this one-room school. We had to stand on the stage by teacher's desk and recite our lessons. Leslie could not recite. He could not learn anything from a book. Folks said Leslie was not right in the head, "tetched."

The teacher made Leslie stand in a corner on the stage because he could not recite. He would just stand there by teacher's desk on his crutch, his crippled foot all drawn up by his side. They laughed at Leslie and Leslie cried.

When teacher made Leslie stand in the corner I was furious. I thought it was cruel. I said so, for which I got to stand in the other corner. I was elated. I had won a victory. Leslie and I exchanged furtive glances behind teacher's back.

We went to church at the school house. I and Leslie sat together by the window. The preacher preached about two hours on what a shame was that people were afflicted like Leslie. It was plain that he did not approve of the way God did things. He called Leslie by name and said the devil gave him the crippled foot.

Leslie paid no attention at all to the preacher. He just looked out the window at the birds flying by and the flowers blooming in the field.

After church Leslie went home with me. That afternoon we went in to the woods. Leslie swore me to secrecy. He said, "I'll tell you why I have this crippled foot but you must never tell anybody." I promised. Leslie said, "God gave me this here crippled foot so I wouldn't run away."

Why do I tell it now? I have not told it before. Leslie will not mind. Leslie is dead. We moved away. I never saw Leslie again. Leslie died the next year.

Last October after I visited you in Springfield, I took my son Jim to Oklahoma. He wanted to go. We visited all the old places where he grew up. I showed him where he was born and where Leslie and I went to school. We visited the cemetery near there where mother, and father, a brother and many kindred and friends sleep. There was a grave there which I had noticed several years before. I pointed it out to Jim. There was no name. There was a small cement slab at each end with glass marbles embedded. I told Jim, "That was a little boy, a son of poor parents, and those are the marbles he played with."

The cement is crumbling. We looked closer. Scratched faintly in the cement near the ground were the initials L. M. According to a man who has lived there all his life, it is my friend Leslie Mason.

It happened many years ago,
The time seems far away,
But I remember and I know,
What I heard Leslie say,
“God gave me this here crippled foot,
So I’d not run away.”

The people did not know why Leslie had the crippled foot. The preacher did not know. But Leslie knew. And I knew. I love him still.

I believe God spoke directly to Leslie. How else could he have known? No, Leslie could not learn from books. But Leslie knew God, Jesus and the angels. He knew them well. He talked of birds and the flowers and he said God made them.

Leslie was the only theology teacher I ever had. What he said about his crippled foot is still my theology.

This true story from one of the best biblical thinkers and writers that I’ve discovered has confirmed in my thinking something I learned many years ago while holding a church meeting in Williamson, West Virginia. We had an exceptionally good meeting with many making decisions and recommitments to the Lord and to His Church. One who came in that meeting was a young man who was greatly touched and who clearly expressed that he wanted to know God through trusting in Jesus Christ. He was determined and joyous in his decision that night. Several after the service were upset because they believed a Down Syndrome youth didn’t have the understanding or capacity to make such a decision. They opposed his being accepted, baptized and becoming a member of the church. At that time I spoke my heart to those misguided and ill-informed people saying, “God comes to us where we are. He comes to us as we are and He reveals Himself to us, speaks to us and shows Himself to us and takes up residence in us.”

This is what it means to become and to be a Christian. No one can become a Christian without God's witness and work in his heart and mind because all men are spiritually dead. Without God's convicting work they can never come to know Jesus and His Father. So we ought to realize the truth of Jesus' statement, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by Me" (John 14:6).

Let me hear from you on what you think about learning to know God and coming to Him. Share that with me at drjerryhopkins@yahoo.com . You may also reach me by "snail" mail at Dr. Jerry Hopkins, P. O. Box 1363, Marshall, Texas 75671. *Dr. Jerry Hopkins is a historian and retired university professor*