

Grumpy Ned

Nedworth Mogumphry Flandering, otherwise affectionately known within the community as "Grumpy Ned", was a man true to his name as he was grumpy and ungrateful about *everything*. And I do mean *everything*. In his mind nothing was ever right, or warm enough, or cool enough, or worthy of any kind of praise. Everything was always bad, and nothing would ever make it better. That was how he lived his life day after day. But when God gets a hold of you, even the most seemingly horrible of things have a way of changing for the better. And that's exactly what happened to Ned. He had an encounter with God that he would not soon forget.

Dennis, the town barber, looked up from his work and noticed an all too familiar face strolling down the street towards his shop. He frowned.

"Oh great. Here comes Scrooge," he muttered.

Thomas Dandow, the new pastor at the little town's First Baptist Church, looked up from the sports section and curiously studied the older man.

"Scrooge?" he asked with a hint of confusion. He then grinned slightly, and asked, "Who are you talking about?"

Dennis grunted and nodded in the direction of an older man as he strolled by the window, a look of anger and stern dissatisfaction on his face.

"Nedworth Flandering, the grumpiest man alive. Everyone around here calls him Grumpy Ned," he said with a clear distaste in his voice. "Nobody in this town likes him. He's always mad about something, never grateful, never generous, it's always someone else's fault," he continued.

He then turned and looked at Thomas briefly, snorting slightly as he did, before returning to his task of clipping hair.

"I'm not a spiteful person, Father..."

"Pastor," interrupted Dennis. "I'm Baptist, not Catholic."

This drew a slight, but brief grin from Dennis.

"Sorry, force of habit."

Thomas laughed.

"No problem. Please, continue."

"Anyhow, as I was saying, I'm not a spiteful person. But Ned is one of those guys you just wish would do the world a favor and die. It'd make the rest of us a lot happier."

Thomas put his paper aside and looked at Dennis with greater curiosity. Being new to the community, he was interested in learning all he could about the people and the town he would now be one of the two primary spiritual leaders of. The only other church in town was a small Catholic chapel on the northern edge of the sleepy little burb.

"So why do you call him Scrooge? Is he greedy like the character Dickens created?" he asked.

Dennis thought about this a bit.

"No, it's not that he's greedy with his money...well, he is to a degree, but not *that* greedy. Mostly it's because he's completely ungrateful for everything. As I said, as far as he's concerned nothing is every right, and even when it is he's never going to admit it. He always finds something wrong, and every reason in the book to complain and be grumpy. It makes one's blood boil."

Thomas thought about this quietly as he contemplated this new revelation.

"Does he go to church anywhere?" he asked.

Both Dennis and his customer snorted in unison.

"He'd never darken the doorsteps of Hell, let alone a church," muttered the customer.

Dennis laughed.

"I couldn't have said it better myself," he chuckled.

However Thomas said nothing, merely listening and studying the two men. Their conversation then drifted back to the little tidbits of town gossip they'd been discussing before. Most of it didn't interest him, even though he anyways listened for possibly useful information. Eventually he picked up his paper and went back to reading. But in the back of his mind he couldn't let go of the thought of Ned. Ever soul mattered to him, even one as supposedly grumpy as Ned.

One of the deacons at church walked up to Thomas as he stood by the door leading out of the church and shook his hand.

"We're so glad to have you here, pastor. Your sermon was exactly what we needed to hear, and it was especially refreshing after so many years without a pastor of our own," he said.

"You're welcome. I'm glad to be here, and pleased that God called me here. However, you've never told me why you were without a pastor for so long," said Thomas.

The deacon gave a smirking frown.

"Small town problems. Most seminarians only want to preach in the big towns and at the big mega churches. So trying to find one to pastor our little country church proved to be nigh on impossible. The ones who were willing weren't qualified and the ones who were qualified weren't willing. The only reason the Catholic chapel has a priest is because the local Cardinal ordered him to come down here. Otherwise nobody would've there come."

"Is it something to do with the town?" asked Thomas curiously.

"Other than being small and in the middle of nowhere? Not really. It's mostly that we're so far off the beaten path that nobody from the outside wants anything to do with us. If it wasn't for the fact that most everyone who lives in this town is a pensioner, or can't find anywhere else to live, we probably wouldn't have any residents. There's no jobs to draw anyone to this place, and most of those who do have jobs around here run their own stores serving the handful of residents. If you hadn't been willing to come, I don't know what we would've done."

"God sent me. I merely obeyed," said Thomas with a smile.

The deacon smiled in return.

"And I'm glad you did."

Just then an older car, not very notable in and of itself, save only for its driver, rolled up to the front of the church, honked profusely at several people who were crossing the street, and then drove on. This made the deacon frown.

"Ugh, I hate that man," muttered the deacon.

Thomas waved a finger slightly.

"Be careful. Jesus said that to hate another is the same as murder," he said.

The deacon waved dismissively.

"I don't mean it in that way. What I'm trying to say is that he is an endless source of frustration. Always ungrateful, always angry, always grumpy about something. He's not called 'Grumpy Ned' around these parts for nothing, ya'know."

Thomas pursed his lips slightly as he watched the car slip away down the street.

"I know. I've already heard about him from the barber. Do you know where he lives?"

"What? Dennis?"

"No, Nedworth Flanders. The one you call Grumpy Ned."

The deacon looked at him in surprise.

"You actually want to know where he lives!? Whatever for!?" he asked incredulously.

Thomas cocked a eyebrow slightly.

"I want to go visit him. I am the pastor, after all, and that *is* my job. Well, part of it, anyways."

The deacon looked at him in disbelief.

"You actually want to go talk with him!?"

"I do."

The deacon grunted.

"That'll be a one sided conversation for sure," he muttered.

Thomas narrowed his eyes as he studied the deacon causing the man to sigh and blush slightly in embarrassment.

"Yeah, sorry. I know it's not very Christianly of me to act that way. It's just...well, alright, I'll go get you his address. It's not that hard to find," said the deacon.

"Thanks," replied Thomas.

He then looked back down the street towards Ned's car as it vanished into the distance. He then sighed slightly. Clearly he had more things to fix in his new home town than just a grumpy old man with an ingratitude complex.

Thomas sat quietly in front of his church and looked up at the alter before him pondering in his mind what he should do. There were many things on his list to do, such as people to see, counseling, sermon preparation, and so much more. Yet all he could think about at that moment was spending some quiet time alone with God. He'd half expected to find himself desperately seeking something to do, given the slow, sleepy nature of the little town he'd become pastor to. Instead, he found himself just as busy now as he'd been in his prior church in Cincinnati. How it was possible that such a tiny little church of just sixty members could keep him as busy, if not more so, than one of over six thousand, he did not know. Just then he heard the rear doors swing open briefly, and then close again. Soft little footsteps down the carpeted center aisle soon followed. This drew a grin from him. He knew that sound, and the sweet, wonderful person attached to them.

"Hello, Mrs. Bates," he said.

A little old lady, looking like a picture perfect snapshot ripped out of 1950's America, came strolling down the aisle and up to him.

"Good evening, pastor," she said in her sweet, but quavering voice.

"Come to pray again?" he asked.

The old lady only smiled, knowing that he knew the answer, and was only being polite and cordial to her. Everyone who knew Mrs. Bates knew she came to the church every evening around the same time to pray. It'd been her tradition to do so for the past forty years, and the arrival of a new pastor wouldn't change that. However, this night, for the first time in quite some time, things would be different.

"Normally I would. But not tonight. I come with a message for you," she said.

Thomas turned and looked at her curiously.

"Does someone need me for something?"

"God does," replied Mrs. Bates.

Thomas, being a good study of people's thoughts and emotions, took careful notice of her expression and realized that she wasn't being cute or funny. She was dead serious, and whatever she had to say was apparently very important.

"I'm listening," he said.

"God wants you to speak with Mr. Flandering."

Thomas cocked his head slightly.

"The gentleman everyone calls Grumpy Ned?"

"One in the same."

"What does He want me to speak to him about?"

"God is about to teach Mr. Flanders a lesson. However, you are not to be his teacher, but rather his guide. As he is led through his training you are to be there to answer questions and help him discover what he must learn in order to grow and change as God wishes him to."

Thomas had gotten vague third party messages from God plenty of times before, but this one seriously taxed his faith, and his understanding. To his surprise, Mrs. Bates seemed to know this instinctively, despite him displaying his best possible poker face to her. She smiled, causing him to cock an eyebrow in curiosity. Either she was a mind reader, or she was more anointed by God than he was. Neither prospect made him feel better.

"Do not try to understand what God is doing. Merely follow and He will lead you in what you must say and do as He teaches Ned the lessons he must learn," she said.

Cast iron poker face or not, this caused Thomas to furrow his brow.

"Sounds simple enough," he said.

"Oh, it will be anything but simple. Even so, trust God and He will guide your steps."

The old lady then turned and slipped out of the chapel. Thomas quietly watched her go, and then turned towards the alter.

"Alright, Lord, your servant is willing, but not sure where to begin."

He then felt a still, small voice echo in his heart.

"Go, and I will show you."

Ned looked up from his newspaper as the doorbell rang. He muttered angrily to himself as he extracted himself from the chair and made his way to the door.

"Who is it?" he said grumpily as if doing an almost perfect Ebenezer Scrooge impression.

"Thomas Dandow, the new pastor at the First Baptist Church," came the reply.

Ned stopped dead in his tracks with an unbelievably contorted look of disgust on his face.

"The pastor!? I don't need no religion from you, nor anyone!" he barked.

"I'm not here for myself or the church. I'm here because God sent me."

An eyebrow went up slightly.

"Oh really? And what does He want this time?" barked Ned sarcastically.

"This time?" wondered Thomas in surprise. "How many times has God reached out to this man?" he thought.

He was surprised when he felt almost what he would describe as a divine sadness fill his heart.

"Far too many," replied the still, small voice.

This nearly caused Thomas to start crying. But he knew this was not the time for tears. At least not yet. So he straightened himself and steeled his commitment.

"God wishes to instruct you, and has asked that I be your guide during the lesson," he said.

This surprised Ned. Of all the religious pitches he'd heard before, that one was new. There'd been plenty of other people from either of the two churches who'd come to his front door before. But most were either looking for donations, or seeking to make him a new convert. This time however it was neither, and he wasn't quite sure what to say.

"And what, pray tell, is it that God wishes for me to learn?" he eventually asked.

"I don't know. I am not sent to teach you the lesson. God has reserved that honor for Himself. I am merely here to be your guide through the lessons you will soon be given."

Ned furrowed his brow. That was certainly different than what he was used to hearing from the local "church" folk. Nothing Thomas had said sounded to him like proselytizing or money seeking. Perhaps this time would be different, although he wasn't about to put too much hope on that. Even so he'd at least give the man a chance. If nothing else he'd at least earned that privilege. He walked up to the door and threw it open. Waiting on the other side, much to his surprise, was not someone dressed in liturgical clothing, or a pastor's collar and black suit, or even anything like that. It was just an average looking guy in blue jeans and a simple t-shirt that read, "Gone fishing. Back soon." This was definitely not the typical "Christian" or "religious" person he was used to seeing. He could almost picture Thomas standing there with a pole in one hand and a tackle box in the other.

"May I come in?" asked Thomas.

Ned turned and stomped away.

"You may. But don't get yourself too comfortable."

Thomas took that as a yes and proceeded to step inside and close the door behind him. He then watched as Ned sat down in a nice arm chair in the living room and stared back at him.

"Well? You just gonna stand there!?" barked Ned.

Thomas looked around the room and noticed another arm chair just across from him on the other side of a small coffee table. He took a seat and studied the man, and then his surroundings, the furniture, the walls, even the window dressings, carefully taking in a great deal of information about him without Ned so much as saying a single word.

"So you were once an office worker," he said matter of factly.

Ned seemed surprised by this.

"How do you know I worked in an office? Nobody here knows what I did for a living."

"The way you sit. The mannerisms you present. Even the choice in furniture and it's layout. All of it is influenced by your time working at an office job. I would even believe, perhaps, that this office was in a factory, maybe even down in the area where quality control was managed."

Ned studied Thomas for several moments, and then a slight grin appeared in one corner of his lips, something most people hadn't seen in years.

"You *are* observant. I'm impressed," he said, pausing briefly to study Thomas further. "You would be correct in your assessment, if only partially. I did not just work in a factory office. I *owned* the factory and the office. We manufactured car parts for the big three automakers until one day when the stock market crashed and I nearly went bankrupt. It was at that point that I sold out to a competitor and then retired to this worthless little town."

Thomas continued to study the old man, trying to understand him better and perhaps determine what God was intending to teach him.

"Interesting. And what did you do before your owned that company? Any hobbies or other occupations you enjoyed regularly?" he asked.

Ned studied Thomas through narrowed, slitted eyes as he waited for him to launch into a sales pitch about giving to this charity or that one or some other. But, much to his surprise, there was no indication that Thomas had any anterior motives for being here; a refreshing change from what he was used to seeing from the other towns folk. He then began to cautiously but astutely share other details of his life. Even so, there was still no sales pitch. Not even one for the church. That surprised him the most. Most had tried to get him to come to their church at least once, and yet Thomas wasn't saying a thing. So Ned decided to probe. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands, twitting his thumbs as he smiled with a slightly devious grin.

"Pastor, let's cut to the chase, shall we? This visit isn't about being neighborly or getting to know me better, or even teaching me a lesson, is it? It's about the two things that seem to be oh so important to everyone in this village, and that's money and membership. You'll first want my money,

and then you'll want me to join your little club and take from me the rest of what you haven't already siphoned off me at the start. Am I correct?"

Thomas crossed his arms and stared at Ned.

"With all due respect, sir, I don't want either your money, or your membership, or whatever dishonest thing you think I'm after. I am here only in obedience to God, and not for any personal gain on my part, nor for my church, or anyone else in this town. I came in this door with nothing more than the cloths on my back and I will leave with the same. Not one red cent of your money nor second of your time shall leave with me. As I said, I didn't come here for any other reason than obedience to God," he said firmly.

Ned again studied Thomas. The incredible degree of honesty in that statement surprised him.

"Well then, isn't it time to begin the lesson? If you're not here to take from me, then clearly this lesson you spoke of must be the truth. As such I am ready to learn all that your God wishes to teach me, as I am most interested in learning what He wishes to show me," he said with a hint of sarcasm.

Just then Thomas felt the voice of God speak into his heart, and the message surprised him.

"The lesson God wishes to teach you is gratitude. Everything you are ungrateful for will be taken from you. Only those things for which you show gratitude will you be able to keep. And anything that you have lost through your ungratefulness will be restored to you when you again become grateful for its presence in your life."

Ned grinned sarcastically. This "message" from God was the most ridiculous piece of tripe he'd ever heard. Clearly someone was either pranking him, or this was likely the best disguised sales pitch he'd ever seen.

"Oh really. Then if I was ungrateful for you, would you leave too?" he quipped.

"If it were God's will, then yes."

Ned gave a sly grin and snorted slightly.

"Then I am ungrateful for you. Now leave!"

Thomas stood up from his chair, nodded slightly, and said, "As you wish."

He then stepped out the door and closed it behind himself. Ned chuckled slightly to himself.

"What a deluded fool," he said softly, with a hint of bitterness in his voice.

Then he remembered something. Just as he'd said, Thomas hadn't asked for a single penny or second of his time. Clearly he was telling the truth when he'd said he hadn't come for either. He'd at least been honest about that. This then brought another thought to his mind. If Thomas hadn't been there for personal gain, then was it possible that what he'd said about his mission from God was true? This left him thinking about that for the rest of the afternoon.

The next morning Ned woke to the sound of birds outside his window as the morning rays of sunshine trickled through the valance. He rolled over slightly and looked up at the ceiling. A twinge of agony leapt through his back as he did this causing him to swear.

"Stupid bed. I wake up every morning with a sore back and achy bones because of this worthless piece of steal and cloth," he muttered.

Eventually he threw back the covers and sat up, albeit slowly. His body popping and groaning as he did, making a symphony of sounds not unlike a tortured three piece band. He eventually dragged himself to his feet and did his daily morning shuffle out to the kitchen. Once there he shuffled over to the refrigerator, grabbed out a gallon of milk, snatched a bowl and spoon, and a box of cereal off the counter and then sat down to breakfast. As he ate his cereal, he contemplated what Thomas had said to him the previous day.

Eventually he finished his breakfast and then decided to get dressed. While he didn't have

anywhere to go for the day, it still didn't hurt for him to get out of his pajamas. He put his bowl and spoon in the sink, shuffled into the bedroom, and then paused in the doorway as he noticed that something was very wrong about the room. After a moment he realized what it was. Much to his surprise, his bed was gone. All that remained now was a pile of sheets, and his blankets. He stood dumbstruck by the fact that anything like that was possible! The bed was large, extremely heavy, and had taken four beefy men from the furniture company to bring it in and assemble it. There's no way anyone could sneak it out of the room in such a short time, and quietly either. There had to be an explanation for what he was seeing.

He almost wondered if he wasn't hallucinating. He'd never had that happen before, but there was always a first time. So he walked over and poked at the blankets. Underneath them he heard a hard thump, thump. He brushed them aside with his cane and spotted two hard side luggage cases underneath. He furrowed his brow. Those had been under the bed, last used several years back when he'd gone out of town for a week. Perhaps he wasn't hallucinating. He quickly shuffled out of his room and over to the nearby phone table. He dialed the police.

"Police department. What's your emergency?" came the voice.

"I'd like to report a theft! Someone stole my bed!"

"Is this Mr. Flandering?" came the reply.

Ned was surprised at how she knew that, but wasn't about to ask how.

"It is," he replied.

"Alright, sir. We'll have a unit over to you shortly."

The call then ended. Ned hung up the phone and then headed into his room to get dressed. No point having the police see him in his pajamas. He quickly slipped into his day cloths and, while he was finishing up, he opened the drawer to his dresser and pulled out a pair of socks. However, as he tried to close the drawer it stuck. Ned struggled to close it again.

"Stupid, worthless piece of junk," he said under his breath.

Finally the drawer closed. He then went into the other room and got dressed, finishing up just as the door rang. Ned hurried over to it and, upon opening it, was pleased to find two policemen standing on the other side, neither of which looked pleased to be there.

"Mr. Flandering, we were told that someone stole your bed," said one of the officers.

"Yes, sir! Snatched it right out from under me while I was eating breakfast!" barked Ned.

"May we come in and see where it was stolen from?"

Ned gestured politely, and said, "Right this way."

He led the two men across the living room to his bedroom and was about to step inside when he suddenly paused in the door, his eyes wide in surprise. The two cops studied him curiously.

"What's the matter, Mr. Flandering?" asked one of them.

"They got my dresser too!" he said in surprise. "It was...but...how could they!? I was just in here not five minutes ago, and when I come back in, it's gone!"

One of the police officers gently moved Ned to the side.

"Allow us to investigate," he said.

Both of the policemen then looked through the door and saw both a pile of blankets on the floor, and now a pile of cloths. One of them leaned down and studied the floor, and the wall behind it, making careful observations of the room as they did. After a few minutes they returned, took a statement from Ned, and then left. But as they were leaving, after closing the front door behind them, one of the men looked at the other suspiciously.

"I think the old man's flipped his wig. I didn't see a single bit of evidence that there's ever been either a bed, or a dresser in that room," said one.

"Do you think he's lying?" asked the other.

"I don't know. But he's clearly never had anything stolen. I think he's just confused."
"Should we contact his doctor?"
"I believe that'd be a good idea."

Thomas knocked on the door of Ned's house and waited patiently for the old man to answer. He'd been in the middle of bible study that morning when the Holy Spirit prompted him to go visit again. He wasn't sure he'd get a warm welcome, as he'd had a very cold send off the day before. But, being obedient, he'd gone back again as requested. He knocked again and this time the door opened. But the look on Ned's face told him this wouldn't be a good visit.

"What do you want?" barked Ned.
"God sent me to..."

The door slammed shut. Thomas blinked slightly and stared at the door for several moments before turning to walk away. But the Spirit wouldn't let him. So he turned back to the door. But before he could raise his hand to knock, the door swung open again. Ned and Thomas stared awkwardly at each other for several moments before Ned opened the door fully and motioned for him to come inside.

"Get in here," said Ned angrily.

Clearly something was bothering him. Or at least that's what Thomas hoped, because if this was the normal Mr. Flandering, this would be an interesting visit. Thomas stepped inside and waited for Ned to close the door behind him.

"How can I help you today?" he asked after a bit.

Ned fidgeted anxiously, as though highly bothered.

"Well, perhaps you can help me answer some questions. The police don't seem able to. They called my doctor to see if I was being over medicated."

"And?"

"Well!? What do you think! He told them I'm not on any medicines! A lot of good it did calling them. All they did was take a report and haven't done anything since!"

Thomas perked up slightly.

"They took a report? Was something stolen?"

"Yes, my bed and dresser!"

"Can you show me?"

Ned motioned for him to follow. The two men walked into the bedroom and stood in the door as Thomas studied the room. Just from what he could see there was no evidence that there'd ever been either a bed or dresser in the room. Yet, given the two disorganized piles on the floor in front of him, he suspected that something had. Otherwise, why would they be there? Especially given Ned's background. He then spotted a small night stand which sat to one side of the room and was in just the right place to have been next to a bed. There was even an alarm clock and a small lamp, perfect for bedside reading, sitting on it. Clearly this wasn't just randomly put there. It'd been placed there for a purpose. But now it's purpose seemed to have gone away. Just then a thought crossed his mind.

"How is your arm chair doing?" he asked.

"My...armchair!? What has this got to do with that worthless thing!?" barked Ned.

"Possibly everything," said Thomas as he stepped out of the bedroom.

He then walked into the living room and, just as expected, he found an empty space against the wall where Ned's chair had been. Ned soon followed and he too noticed the empty place where his chair had been and gasped in shock!

"What is happening to me!? Are there little gremlins in this place taking all my things!?" he

exclaimed in disbelief.

Thomas turned to him, and said, "No, this is God's doing."

"WHAT!?"

"Remember what I told you yesterday? For everything you're ungrateful for, God will take it away. Only those things which you are grateful for can you either keep, or have restored to you."

"Why would He do this to me!?"

"To teach you to be grateful."

Ned began to grow furious.

"You! You're insane! Get out of my house!" he roared.

Thomas bowed slightly and then stepped out the door. Ned then stepped over to the phone to call the police and report another theft. However, when he dialed the police department, all he got was a generic "The number you are trying to reach is not a valid number" message. He looked at his phone in disbelief and then checked the call history. It was the exact same number he'd dialed before. So he tried again. Same message. So on a whim he tried dialing 911. He got the same message. He slammed the phone down in anger.

"Stupid phone service. It works one moment and then fails the next."

He stormed out of his living room and into the kitchen to do the dishes. When he returned he noticed that not only was the phone gone, but so was the phone book and the stand it'd sat on. He blinked slightly. This was getting creepier by the moment. Finally he decided that, if the phone system was down, and he was now without a phone besides, he'd just have to go downtown and speak directly with the police. So he got into his car, drove down the street and up to where the police department was supposed to be. However, when he arrived all he found was an empty, grassy lot.

The building, the parking lot, and the police department itself were all gone. In fact, it looked as though there'd never been a building there to begin with. Ned climbed out of his car and studied the area in confusion. Everything else was the way it'd always been, save for this one spot. As he was contemplating this, one of the local ladies, out for a stroll with her little schnauzer poodle, walked by. He flagged her down.

"Madam, what happened to the police station?" he asked.

The woman looked at him in confusion.

"What police station?" she replied.

"The one that was here," said Ned, waving his cane in the direction of the grassy lot.

The woman gave him a look of incredulity.

"You should know as well as anyone else that there has never been a police station in this town, and never will be. We're not big enough to have our own."

"Then who polices the town!?"

"The county sheriff and the state police. Who else?" said the woman indigently.

Ned studied the woman with suspicious curiosity, and then realized that she indeed was not lying. She actually believed every word of what she'd said. He huffed angrily and then strolled across the street to the hardware store to pick up a new phone. After that he would have words with the local phone company about his horrible phone service. He strolled into the hardware store and up to the counter where a middle aged man in a red apron stood watch over the counter.

"Good morning, Mr. Flanders. How can I help you?" he said, doing his best to be hospitable.

It was very clear that neither he, nor really anyone in the town, liked the old man.

"I need a new phone. Someone stole my other one," said Ned.

This drew a stifled snicker from the man behind the counter.

"Really, that's too bad," he said clearly disingenuously. "What kind would you like?"

"I need a regular house phone," said Ned, ignoring the man's obvious rudeness.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we're all out of house phones."

"You're out of house phones!?" snapped Ned.

The man shrugged.

"Sorry. There's not much call for them anymore."

Ned snorted and began to storm out of the store.

"You're all a bunch of worthless clods. I'll go somewhere else then."

The man in the red apron cocked an eyebrow slightly, and said quietly, "When it comes to you, I have no problem with that."

Ned walked into the town post office, a place that felt not much bigger than a postage stamp itself, and up to the tiny little counter.

"How can I help you today, sir?"

"I need stamps," replied Ned.

"Self adhesive or traditional?"

"Give me self adhesive."

The man grabbed a book of stamps, and said, "That'll be \$9.80, please."

Ned grumbled under his breath as he pulled out a \$10 bill and handed it to the man. Twenty cents in change later he was walking out the door, still muttering under his breath. He then stopped at the grocery store, the pharmacy, and two other places before returning to his car. As he was pulling out his keys, he noticed that, much to his surprise, the place where the hardware store had been was now a grassy, empty lot. He looked back at the empty lot where the police station had been, and then over at the now identical lot across the street. This was really starting to get strange. Thinking back to the other events of his morning he climbed into the car and began to drive through town. As he did he found that the post office, the pharmacy, even the local grocery store were now gone, again replaced by empty, untended lots filled with wild green grass.

He turned back towards home and soon drove into his garage, still contemplating all that'd happened. He got out of his car, walked inside and explored the house. Nothing else had disappeared while he was gone, so he was thankful for that. Even so, he wondered about and pondered the events of the day. Evening soon came and he found himself watching TV, enjoying the normal prime time lineup of shows. As he did he thought about his pills. He hated taking all of them, but as it was required to keep his health in check, he tolerated them. But that was about all. However, without a pharmacy in town anymore, he wondered what he'd do about getting more of them.

"I'll probably have to take the stupid car over to the next town to get my prescriptions fulfilled. Either that or convince that doctor of mine to do that for me, not that he'd care," he muttered.

Eventually he turned off the TV, curled up on his sofa wrapped in his blankets and comforter, and then fell asleep. The next morning as he was preparing his breakfast he noticed that the pills that normally sat on his counter were gone. Even more concerning was that his car was gone too, as well as several other things. Stepping outside he found that the trees on his lawn, and even several of his neighbor's houses were gone, including their occupants. All that remained were empty, grassy lots that showed no signs of occupancy ever. Ned was getting seriously worried. If things kept going like this, he worried that he might be next on the list of people, places and items that would just "go away" like so many others had already. As he was contemplating this, Thomas appeared on the sidewalk.

"Good morning, Mr. Flandering," said Thomas.

"You're not going away soon too, are you, preacher?" asked Ned.

Thomas looked around the area and noticed that even more things were gone this morning. He looked back at Ned and began to understand what was happening.

"At least that explains what happened to the diner," he thought. "May I never be ungrateful to you, Lord, for anything, lest I become like Ned," he prayed quietly.

As Thomas was praying, Ned pointed a finger at him, and said, "This has something to do with you, doesn't it? This is that curse, that spell you put on me!"

"I placed no curse on you," said Thomas kindly. "I am merely the servant of God. If anything has happened, it is by His hand alone to teach you to be grateful for all you have."

Ned snorted.

"Well, you can tell Him to stop because I won't be grateful for anything, not so long as He's doing this to me! Not for you! Not for this lawn! Not for anything!"

Just then, right before their eyes Ned and Thomas watched in amazement as the lush green lawn of Ned's house immediately turned brown and crumbled away as though consumed by fire. Ned's eyes grew wide, and then narrowed in anger.

He pointed an angry finger at Thomas, and said, "You, and that God of yours, stay away from me! I don't want anything to do with either of you! Now get off my property!"

Thomas sighed.

"As you wish."

He then turned and walked away. Ned in turn walked back to his house, stepped inside, and then slammed the door.

Ned awoke the next morning to total silence in his house. Not a bird was singing, nor the coffee pot peccolating, nor even the sound of the fan he always left running in the living room. He slowly opened his eyes and looked around the room. It was at this moment that he realized that it was completely empty! To add insult to injury he found that he was laying on the floor covered in only his big, fluffy comforter and nothing else. Everything else was gone! Concerned, he got up and then walked through the rest of the house and, while a few items were missing, most of his other things were still there.

He then walked out his front door and was shocked to find that, not only was his driveway gone, but so was the street and every single house on it. It was as though he were now living deep in the woods miles from any civilization. Thinking about this he hurried around the side of his house only to find that the power pole, power meter, and electric line running into his house were gone. He hurried back into the house and found his refrigerator sitting silent in the kitchen. Inside it was still cool and the freezer still frozen.

But without power it would be room temperature within a day or less. Realizing this he took the rest of the milk out of the refrigerator and anything that might spoil, and put it in the freezer. If his half gallon of chocolate ice cream melted it wouldn't be as big a loss as his milk. At least the frozen things would keep that from spoiling before he could use it. As he was making adjustments in his living arrangements to compensate for the loss of power, a knock came at the door. He hurried over and opened the door to find Thomas standing there. He became instantly irate.

"Go away! You and your....God got me into this mess!" he barked, and then slammed the door.

But Thomas didn't go away. He found it incredibly odd to see one of the most modern, well developed suburbs in the entire town now reduced to nothing more than a wilderness. As he considered this he was beginning to understand what God was doing, and how it all related to the lesson that God was trying to teach Ned. So whatever happened, this was all God's will and His plan to reach the old man and teach him an important lesson about gratitude.

"Dear Lord, I pray that you never have to go this far with me to get my attention on anything, be it big or small," he prayed quietly.

"This is not for you. It is for him. I still have much he must learn," came a still, small voice in his heart.

"I know, Lord. I just don't ever want to be this stubborn or blind to Your leading in my life."

"Fear not, child, for you are greatly loved."

Thomas smiled.

"Thank you, Lord."

He then looked around the now heavily wooded former suburb and contemplated what was happening. It was beginning to worry him.

"Lord, how much longer will this need to continue? And how much more must be lost before this is over? We've already lost most of the town, I can't bear to see more of it disappear."

But only silence greeted his question. He stood there quietly, looking for an answer that clearly wasn't to come. Eventually he turned his eyes to Heaven briefly, and then back at the house.

"What shall I do, Lord? Remain or depart?"

"Stay. He will soon need you," came the reply.

"As you wish, Lord," replied Thomas.

He then walked across the porch, sat down on the empty deck, and leaned against the siding. Unconsciously he prayed that the house wouldn't suddenly go away. That would create quite an awkward situation for him if it did. He quietly waited, praying, and asking God to open Ned's heart and let him see what was causing these things to happen to him. About noon Ned peaked his head out the doorway and spotted Thomas just sitting there quietly praying.

"What are you still doing here? I told you to go away!" he barked.

"God told me to stay, so here I will remain until told otherwise," replied Thomas.

This simple statement had a surprising impact on Ned. He studied Thomas for several moments before his eyes drifted out into the woody expanse around him, pondering all that had happened to him, including all that he had lost.

"You're very faithful to that God of yours," he said after several moments.

"I am."

"Why?"

"Because He's done so many amazing things for me. But most importantly, He took away my sins and saved my soul from Hell."

"So He's taken things away from you too, eh?"

"Yes. But the things He's taken away have only been evil, and the things He's given me in return are only blessing, righteousness and goodness."

Ned pondered this.

"So He took one thing away and gave you something else? How does that seem fair? He's only been taking from me and not giving a single thing in return!"

"Actually, He has. You just don't realize it."

"What has He given me!? All He's done is take and take and take!" barked Ned.

"He has given you wisdom and experience, and He is right now teaching you to cherish and be grateful for all things, even though you are not yet willing to accept such a gift."

"Well, He can keep His gifts! I want my things back!"

Thomas nodded.

"And He will gladly give them back when you decide to be..."

The door slammed shut with such bone jarring force that Thomas thought he heard wood crack. He sighed in frustration.

"How much longer, Lord?"

"It will be soon. But until then he must suffer more loss. Now return to your home for there is

still much I have to teach him. I will call you when I have need of you again," said a still, small voice in his heart.

"Yes, Lord."

Ned awoke the next morning to a sound like an echoing cave. Drips of rain cascading down from thunder soaked clouds beat heavily upon the roof and created a discomfoting echo throughout the multitude of bare walls and empty rooms within the house. His ears picked up on the sound that was nipping at his ears and didn't like its cadence. He slowly rolled up onto his hands and knees and then onto his feet. He looked around for his cane, but there was no sign of it anywhere. All that remained in the room was his comforter and nothing else. Slowly and painfully he walked into the kitchen only to find it bare, as though stripped to the walls, boxed up, and shipped off to lands unknown.

The plates were gone, and the stove, the fridge, and even the very cupboards and counters that had always been a part of the room. In some ways it reminded him of what the place looked like the day he bought it. However, this morning he wasn't angry. It's as though he expected this. Not a whimper or a cry echoed from his lips. He just sat there, quiet, waiting for an answer that didn't want to come. He was still angry at God for taking all of his things. Yet the words of Thomas just wouldn't leave his mind. Feeling a little cold he walked into his bedroom expecting to grab some warmer cloths. But, completely unsurprising to him, his room was bare to the walls. Not a sock nor a shirt, or even a stitch of drape remained. It was just bare, echoing emptiness.

He sighed in disappointment, and then trudged solemnly back to the living room half expecting to find his comforter gone as well. However, much to his relief, it wasn't. He quietly picked it up off the floor, wrapped it around his shoulders, and then strolled to the front door, grateful for its all encompassing warmth. He stood there quietly for several minutes watching the pitter patter of rain outside and soon noticed that every tree and stick of grass was gone. He opened the door in disbelief and studied the barren, almost desert like scorched landscape that now spread out from his house in every direction from horizon to horizon. At first he thought that a bomb had gone off as everything was blackened and charred and the color of ash.

He then looked up and down the barren, desolate landscape, praying and hoping that Thomas would show up and bring with him some answers. But Thomas never appeared. Eventually Ned sat down on the porch and leaned against the siding in the same way Thomas had before and watched as the rain continued. Hours and hours went by and there was still no sign of Thomas anywhere. He sighed slightly as he studied the barren world around him in abject dismay and sadness. What he had once taken for granted, he now again longed to see. He also began to realize just how ungrateful he'd been for all of it. Eventually, to his dismay, the cool, refreshing rain that had been falling slowly around him was replaced by clear skies, dry, scorching sun and blistering heat.

Ned soon took the comforter off and tied it up in one corner of the porch to act as a sun break against the brilliant midday sun that now beat down upon the porch and turned both it, and his house, into a unbearable oven. As he hid under the cool, comforting shade of the comforter, he marveled at how quickly it'd gone from keeping him warm and dry to keeping him cool. Soon the day turned into afternoon, and then evening, and with the going down of the sun the heat of day turned into the frigid cold of night. As it began to get colder Ned took down the comforter and at first wrapped himself up in it. But as the winds became stronger and colder he slipped inside, thankful for both the protection of the house, and the warmth of the comforter.

As Ned awoke the next morning he rose from his place on the floor half expecting to find both

the comforter and the house gone now too. After all, why shouldn't they. Everything else had been taken away from him. So why not those? Even so he was grateful for them; grateful in ways that he'd never been before. Just then a knock came at the door.

"Come in," said Ned, his voice cracking slightly with dryness.

It was at this moment that he remembered he hadn't eaten or drank in two days. He was both hungry, and extremely thirsty. A moment later the door opened and Thomas stepped through with a large bottle of water in one hand, and a plate of sandwiches in the other.

"God told me you'd need these," said Thomas.

Ned's eyes lit up. He watched as Thomas set them down in front of him, and then took a place on the floor across from him. But before Ned could even touch the food or water, it vanished.

"No, no!" he cried.

Thomas knew what it meant, but he didn't say a word. He merely sat there, waiting on God for what to do next. He then oddly felt led to pray for the food, even though it'd vanished.

"Lord, we give thanks in gratitude for your provision and your mercy and your meeting of all our needs. Bless this food and water to our bodies, and let it nourish us to our health and well being. In Jesus name, I pray, amen," he prayed.

He then looked up at Ned and studied his face. Even though the food and water hadn't reappeared yet, the prayer seemed to have a surprising impact on the old man. It was as though a light bulb had gone on in his mind and he was beginning to understand the purpose of all that'd happened to him. It wasn't long before tears began to trickle down his cheeks as he drew his comforter up around his shoulders. Eventually he began to sob.

"God, I know I don't really know you, but it's clear that you know me, and far, far better than I even know myself. I have been a selfish, greedy, ungrateful old man, thankless for all I have been given and the blessings and bounty you have provided me throughout my entire life. Forgive me for my ingratitude, for my thanklessness before Your hand of blessing. And even though you have rightfully taken all this from me, I wish to express my gratitude for everything you've given me, even though I do not deserve it. I pray and give you my thanks. I do not deserve anything that you have given me, but I am grateful for all I once had, and what I have now."

And with that, the food and water reappeared in front of Ned. But he didn't immediately dive into it or partake of it. Instead he again bowed his head and prayed.

"Lord, thank you for giving me back this food. I am ever grateful for your mercy and kindness and blessing, even though I am most unworthy," he began.

He then pulled the comforter even closer around him as he gently brushed the floor with his fingers, ashamed of how he'd been.

"I thank you for these blankets that have kept me warm when it was cold, and protected me when the sun bore down upon me. For this house in which I sit that has provided me with shelter at night and protection from the rain. For this dear, wonderful man whom you sent to be my friend, of which I have been most ungrateful for his presence. And for you, God, for showing me the importance of gratitude in all things. Even the simplest of all blessings."

He then raised his head and looked at Thomas.

"I have not properly thanked you for being obedient to your God and staying by my side through this trial as your God has tried to teach me the things I needed to learn. And even though I am not worthy to ask you this, especially after how I've treated you, I wish to know your God. Could you properly introduce me to Him?"

Thomas smiled.

"I'd be glad to."

Thomas then opened his bible and led Nedworth Mogumphry Flandering to salvation in Jesus

Christ. And from that day forward, he was no longer known within the community as Grumpy Ned. For after his conversion and the change God rendered in his heart, Ned became known as Grateful Ned, and the Generous Mr. Flandering. Never again to his dying day was he ever grumpy, nor ungrateful for a single thing that God had given to or done for him. And even though God didn't give back everything He'd taken from Ned, Mr. Flandering was still thankful, not just for the things that God had returned, but also for everything He'd kept, including the comforter he now so deeply cherished as a reminder of the lessons that God had taught him. And for that he was forever grateful.

The End