



On The Road With Rick...

**January 2009
Message #1
From the desk (or in this case, the
kichen table) of Rick Hagans**

Writing a monthly message for this newsletter is quite intimidating for me, fearful to be honest. Preaching has always been easy for me. I'm a talker. I've preached since I was 9 years old. But writing, whew, my palms are sweaty even with this prelude. You've got to remember, I'm from Alabama, the home of Harper Lee and Truman Capote. Now those were writers. I've grown up listening to the words of another Alabamian, sung on every radio station, "Hear the lonesome whippoorwill, He sounds too blue to fly. The midnight train is whining low, I'm so lonesome I could cry." That'd be Hank Williams and that'd just about make me too scared to even try to write.

It doesn't help that my hero, mentor, spiritual father, David Wilkerson, has written dozens upon dozens of books, great books, books that have touched millions. Brother Dave writes monthly messages, not brother rick...But then to be perfectly honest, it was Brother Dave who asked me years ago, "Why don't you write a monthly message to go with your newsletter?" His question was more of a charge, but I retreated.

A man can simply retreat so far and not be a coward. So, here's my first attempt at a monthly message. I realize it won't win a Pulitzer Prize like Harper Lee's "To Kill A Mockingbird," or top the charts like Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry. I hope Alabama will forgive my ineptitude. I hope even more that you, my friends, will somehow be touched by it.

Strangely enough, and totally unplanned, my message, like Lee's "mockingbird" and Williams' "whippoorwill" deals with our fine feathered friends. It's titled, "This Is For The Birds."

This Is For The Birds...

**"Behold the fowls of the air"
Matthew 6:26
(or as we paraphrase 'round
here, "Watch birds!")**

I'm writing this as I finish one of my last cups of coffee for 2008. I would dramatize and say *my last cup of coffee for the year*, but I don't want to dramatize, besides, knowing me, I'll probably have another.

It is the end of the year and I'm pretty much where I was at the end of last year, sitting at our kitchen table with the afore mentioned cup of coffee, my Bible, paper and books scattered everywhere. This is where I do my morning and often evening devotions, which may seem a little weird when you consider I have a lovely, large office just one floor above the kitchen. So why am I here? Is it to be close to the coffeepot? No, not entirely. Is it to have Kim and the kids close by? No, though they are nice to have near by.

The reason I'm here this morning is the same reason I was here 365 days ago and most days in between, when I was home. It seems I've gone to the birds.

No, I didn't say birdy (at least I hope not), but simply put I have become a bird watcher and Kim's kitchen window offers me the best view. I know that sounds strange to those of you who know me, but it's true, Rick Hagans, formerly known as "The Great White Hunter" (at least I'm white and I do hunt), has become a bird watcher. In fact, I don't just watch birds, I feed them too. I have seven feeders in a patch of woods just outside our kitchen window. I have two large hopper-type feeders which I fill with a mixture of milo, sunflower and cracked corn. There are two because one is "squirrel-proof" and the other is a first come, first serve. I figure squirrels need to eat too. I also have two sock type feeders that I fill with thistle seed for the gold finches. There's a large platform type fly through feeder that cardinals, wrens and cedar waxwings love. In the spring I'll put meal worms on it and even the shy bluebirds will come in for a bite. My suet feeders are set out for the nuthatch, titmouse and assorted woodpeckers. I even scatter corn on the ground for the crows. I wish we had ravens, but in LA (lower Alabama) a crow is as close to a raven as we get.

You should have seen me just days ago, it was nearly Christmas, Kim and Dreamer were in the kitchen baking Christmas treats while I was there beside them with my own huge mixing bowl. I was up to my elbows in peanut butter, oatmeal, assorted nuts and pure old fashioned hog lard. Thankfully, I wasn't making cookies, but a special batch of suet for my bird feeders. Come Christmas any bird in my vicinity would be blessed. But why?

Why do I go to all the trouble to feed birds? I've asked myself that same question. I've even done a pretty exhaustive study of birds in the Bible and I've come up with not only a few good reasons as to why I watch the birds. I've also found a few reasons why you might want to turn off your big screen T.V., take the ipod speakers out of your ears, turn your cell phone off (not just to vibrate), Take a step outside and look up...

Jesus was a birdwatcher. He must've been, He helped His Father create them. Genesis 1:20-21 says, "God created

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“every winged bird” and after He looked at them (bird watching), He saw that “it was good”. Who can’t watch a purple martin dip and soar on a warm Alabama summer evening and not feel good. I believe God created the birds as a natural pick-me-up. He put something in the hearts of man that responds to flight. King David expresses what we’ve all felt in Psalms 55:6, “Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then I would fly away, and be at rest.” The truth is our weight and the weightiness of our soul binds us to earth, but when we watch an eagle in the morning sky, at least for a moment, we too soar.

Jesus wasn’t just a birdwatcher, He taught us to, “Behold the fowls of the air...” (Matthew 6:26) John Stott, pastor, theologian, author and avid bird watcher himself, says an accurate modern day paraphrase of that verse, Jesus’ command would be, “Watch birds!” That’s certainly how we’d say it here in Alabama. Watch birds, but why? We watch birds for the very reason Jesus continues in Matthew 6:26, “Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”

In this day and time of economic uncertainty, when you don’t know where your next paycheck is coming from or what’s happening with your retirement account, you can know this, your Father will take care of you. If He feeds and fends for the “fowls of the air”, He’ll feed and fend for you. Jesus reminds us that while not a sparrow falls from the sky without God knowing, He knows even more of your need. He tells us, “So don’t be afraid, you are more valuable than many sparrows.” (Matthew 10:29,31)

Psychologists tell us that the season right after Christmas can be the most depressing time of the year for many. Your family goes home. You didn’t get that Christmas bonus you were counting on, the one you actually needed this year. There are a lot of reasons people feel down and blue. Even the weather seems to turn against you with day after dreary cloudy day. The bottom line is that after Christmas, many people feel like they’ve hit bottom. Just because you’re a Christian doesn’t make you immune to times of doubt, depression and despair. There’s no need to try and hide it from God, He knows your heart. He is the one who wants you to look up to Him for your help and one of the ways He’s arranged to get your attention, to get you to look up from your pit is...birds.

Isaiah 40:31 promises that, “They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles...” You may seem tired out, left out, run over and about to give up, but don’t you dare. Look up, and get ready to lift off. Remember, to “Behold the fowls...watch birds.”

Maybe you’ll remember the little ditty we learned way back in elementary school. The simple truth it reminds us of still rings true.

Said the robin to the sparrow,
 ‘I should really like to know
 Why those anxious human beings
 Rush around and worry so’
 Said the sparrow to the robin,
 ‘Friend, I think that it must be
 They have no heavenly Father
 Such as cares for you and me.’
 (E. Cheney)



The truth of the grade school poem is the opposite of this rhyme. We do have a heavenly Father who cares for us all. If He has made a way for the birds to live He has certainly made a way for us to find life. The birds feeding outside my window remind me that my Father is watching over me. I’m telling you, this isn’t “just for the birds.”

And less you think me a simple Alabama country boy, read here what another preacher far more learned than me has to say about the matter.

“You see, He is making the birds our school masters and teachers. It is a great and abiding disgrace to us that in the Gospel, a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men. We have as many teachers and preachers as there are little birds in the air. Their living example is an embarrassment to us...Whenever you listen to a nightingale therefore, you are listening to an excellent preacher...It is as if he were saying, “I prefer to be in the Lord’s kitchen. He has made heaven and Earth, and He Himself is the cook and the host. Everyday He feeds and nourishes innumerable little birds out of His hand.”

(Martin Luther)

Christmas this year has been especially warm in Alabama. I’ve not only been able to sit at our kitchen table and watch the birds at my feeders, most days I’ve been able to open the windows and listen to them sing. Kim and Dreamer gave me a beautiful new bird book for Christmas, “The Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s Bird Songs”. Not only does it have beautiful drawings of 250 species of birds, but by pushing a single button on it’s cover I can hear each bird’s specific call.

As a boy my mom would often roam the woods with me. It was from her I learned to identify many a bird without actually ever seeing it. While I was never the young Roger Tory Peterson or a John James Audubon to be, I did





learn to identify many a bird by their whistle, song or call.

Ever since those childhood rompings in those cool creek bottoms and dappled pine thickets, the simple sound of a bird's song has stirred a note in my own soul. Growing up in a small country church where God somehow miraculously touched my heart even while I was yet a boy, whenever my soul was strangely stirred back then I learned to look up, to sense that maybe the Heavenly Father had something to say to me. If He could call out to Samuel when he was still small enough to be in 'pull-ups' (I Samuel 2:18) I reckoned He could speak to me in dungarees. And often the sound that signaled me to look up was some mockingbird's song in a crab apple tree or migrating geese high in the night sky, or a wood thrush hidden in the fence row briars. As a boy, the most I did was stop, look up (or around) and listen. But now, I've learned some life-lessons from those birds.

God put a song in all creation's heart.

The song is in the sparrow's heart (or in the lark's or the yellow hammer's). God created over 9,000 different species of birds and He put a song in each of their hearts. No doubt, a nightingale's serenade is more melodious than the raucous "caw-caw" of a crow. Though their tunes be far different, the truth they both seem to be saying is the same, "God made me...I'm here...He meets my needs... I'm glad to be alive..." Psalms 104:10-12 puts it like this, "He sends forth springs in the valleys; they flow between the mountains, they give drink to every beast (and bird) of the field...beside them the birds of heaven dwell, they *lift up their voices* among the branches." God meets their needs with food (Matthew 6:26) and here in Psalms, with water so they "lift up their voices among the branches." The King James Version more appropriately here translates "lifts up their voices" as to "sing". The birds "sing" among the branches. And indeed, anyone who has ever walked through the woods after a summer rain will testify, it's true, the birds do lift up their voices and sing.

I've already told you we would do good to be a bit more "bird-brained" (trusting God to meet our needs). Now I'm going to tell you we'd do well to have more of a bird's heart as well. That is to have a heart filled with praise for a God who loves us so. Scripture mentions praise and worship over 320 times. Singing is associated as the form of expressing that heart of praise 120 times in the Bible. In fact, in the same Psalm mentioned above where God says the birds "lift up their voices and sing" (verse 12) King David, only 21 verses later says this, "I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praise to my God while I have my being." (verse 33). King David, a man with a heart likened unto God's own heart, in this verse has a heart like the bird's and he sings (same Hebrew word) like the birds too. The birds were right and we'd be right to join them.

Because I know almost every one of you reading this newsletter (Hi Randy, Hi Mr. B. Hi all of ya'll), I know what some of you are thinking, "I'm just not a singer." "Pastor Carter can sing, Dallas Holm can sing. The Sextons can sing, _____ (fill in the blank with your favorite gospel singer) can sing. But me, I'm no singer." Hey, I'm with you, I'm no prize winning vocalist either, but we're all still called to sing. I've found, if my heart is full, it spills over and out as praise.

There's a true story I love from the great Welsh Revival. *It seems a local coal miner known for his loose tongue, foul mouth and oft drunken fits, got saved. This particular miner was so saved, in time he began to come home late every night, not from some tavern, but from some church's meeting. Late as it was, he came home most every night singing at the top of his lungs some song of praise. Now while this fella was saved, God had given him a brand new heart, it seems his tongue and vocal cords were the same. He had a harsh, broguish accent, a loud twangy voice and absolutely no sense of tune nor timing about him. To put it kindly, he was a "terrible singer".*

Finally, after weeks and weeks of hearing him come home singing his new song of praise, a neighbor shouted out, "I wish you'd shut up!" The man graciously replied, "I can't, me God's put a song in me heart like the nightingale's song." The neighbor came back with, "Well, you don't sound like a nightingale...you sound more like a crow!" To which the sanctified coal-miner came back with, "Well, as best as I can see it, the crow's got the need to praise Him too."

So, whether you've got a voice like a nightingale or the vocal cords of a crow, it doesn't really matter. What counts is do you have the heart of a bird? A heart full of praise...

The birds of the air seem to have their spiritual physiology more in order than a lot of people I know. Their "bird brains" seem to know they have a Heavenly Father who cares for them. Their "bird hearts" seem naturally filled with a song of praise. And their "wings" (likened to our limbs) are used to either mount up and fly, which is synonymous with spiritual growth, or to gather the hurt and needy under their wings.

Finally, I've learned from my feathered friends the power and beauty of their song. I mentioned that the birds seem to have a heart full of song, thankfully they don't keep it there. So, we would do well to not only have the brain, heart and wings (limbs) of a bird, but finally, we need the mouth of a bird. Not that we would spend the day in aimless tweet or cackle (too many preachers I've heard seem to have that bird trait down already). What God wants us to have is a mouth that offers comfort to the needy, instruction to the naive, caution to the reckless and if need be, rebuke to those in willing

**The birds were right...
and we'd be right to join them**





error. He wants to fill our mouth with a song of praise. Psalm 40:3 says, “He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.” Like the birds in my backyard singing their heart songs, God wants to put a song in our heart so we can sing it for the world.

You may not feel like singing right now. These days have been difficult for a lot of you. I’ve heard from so many of you about losing your jobs, sickness in your families, some of you just found out you have cancer, some of you have lost your life’s savings. Just yesterday, one of my friends buried his wife who died on a Christmas mission trip to Israel. Another friend left yesterday to take her husband’s body home to Ohio, to bury him. I’m not naive, neither am I a Polly-Anna T.V. preacher who’ll lie and tell you the sky is always blue. What I will tell you is what I’ve learned from the birds, sing anyway.

The 91st Psalm was written not by the prolific psalm writer David, who was poetic, a singer, but by the crusty old desert wanderer, Moses. In it God’s provision and protection is likened to finding cover and comfort under God’s wings:

“He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge.” (Psalm 91:4)

Jesus expresses the same sentiment when He wept over Jerusalem and said, “...how often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling.” (Matthew 23:37)

Don’t be “unwilling”, let the Lord gather you under His wings. Then be like a bird yourself and take somebody “under your wing”.

Have the brain of a bird--look up and know your Father cares for you
 Have the heart of a bird--fill your heart with praise
 Have the wings (limbs) of a bird--take somebody under your wing (aka, Hug Somebody!)

I came across the following poem, written by a lady named Mary Sorrell. Mary came to faith in Christ late in life. She wasn’t raised with all the churchy-way of speaking rote religious slogans that hide the heart. In fact, Mary suffered a stroke that deprived her of all speech. It was then, in the dark room of her silence she so aptly, beautifully penned these words.

*In a gray sky,
 On a gray day,
 A brown lark sang
 Her roundelay.*

*With trembling voice
 And quiv’ring wing,
 She hovered low
 To softly sing.*

*No sweeter song
 I ever heard
 Than from the throat
 Of that small bird.*

*She trilled and trilled,
 Then flew away,
 Into the sky,
 And sunless day.*



Like Mary Sorrell’s lark, our sweetest song can come in our darkest day. The world sings when all is well. We sing because He is Lord.

I don’t know what you’re going through right now. If things are great, don’t feel guilty--just give Him glory! If things seem dark and gray and dim, learn a lesson from the birds...and sing. Heaven and hell and all of us in between are listening.

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