

REAL THINGS

BY EVERETT WILSON



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Everett Wilson

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Prologue

The real things haven't changed. It is still best to be honest and truthful; To make the most of what you have; to be happy with simple pleasures, and to be cheerful and have courage when things go wrong.

– Laura Ingalls Wilder

1982

On a fine September morning as he sat at his desk before his first class, Greg Thompson received a telephone call that reminded him of the day he ceased to believe in God. “Thompson.”

“Dr. Thompson. This is Christopher Samson. We met—”

“Yes, Pastor, I remember. We visited your church when my parents were in the city. How are you?”

Samson ignored the standard greeting. He knew enough about Gregory Thompson to state his business and get off the phone.

“Alex Larson asked me to call you. He is coming through two weeks from today and asked me to check whether you might be able to see him. He asked me to make arrangements, if you are free.”

Thirty years and three hundred miles dissolved in Greg’s mind. For a few moments he was not a distinguished professor and scholar, not the husband of Annette and the father of Bill and Mary. He was a fourteen-year-old boy lying in a hospital bed, devoured by pain, awakening briefly to the awareness of a man’s hand covering his, and of a bowed head reflecting the light from the hallway through thinning mouse-colored hair, and of a man’s voice praying aloud. That was his most vivid and lasting memory of Pastor Alex Larson, now President Alexander Larson of the Evangelical Lutheran Conference. He must have been ten years younger than I am now, Greg thought.

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The pause in the conversation was imperceptible as Greg flipped through his appointment book. "I would like very much to see Dr. Larson," he said. "When exactly is he available?"

They negotiated.

"Very good," Greg said, summing up. "At the Faculty Club, Tuesday, 12:30, as my guest."

Greg replaced the receiver and stared at the portrait of Erasmus on the opposite wall until his secretary stepped into his office. "Your class is waiting, Dr. Thompson," she said.

BOOK ONE

Job's Hedge

Then Satan answered the LORD, 'Does Job fear God for naught? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side?... But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face.'

Job 1:9-11

Chapter 1

1952

"Greg! For heaven's sake!"

Gregory Thompson opened one eye with effort and stared blearily into his mother's face, level with his as he lay on his side on the upper bunk in his bedroom. "Mmph," he said, and rolled to his other side, away from the snapping brown eyes of his parent.

"Greg, do you want me to get Dad? It's seven-thirty!"

This threat of massive intervention penetrated his consciousness. He opened both eyes, and spoke with effort. "Okay, okay. I'm coming."

"Right now."

He didn't speak but sat up slowly, rubbing his fists into his eyes.

"Now are you awake?" his mother prodded.

"Yes," he said. He swung his feet over the edge of the bunk and dropped to the floor. His eyes were level with hers, tall as she was.

Now that he was on his feet her irritation faded and she said, "You don't have time to shower. Wash and dress and come down for breakfast." With that she was in the hall and down the steps.

He padded to the bathroom and stripped out of his pajamas. Now that he was upright, energy was beginning to seep into his arms and legs and he became aware of the shortness of time. But he washed carefully. His best friend had broken out with acne. He believed his mother when she said that washing helped. At any rate, he had never seen Eddie wash his face. He was the only guy in gym class who could shower without getting wet above the shoulders.

After drying his face he paused a moment to look at himself in the mirror. He had become conscious of the fact that maybe he was good-looking. This opinion of himself he wouldn't admit to anyone.

His skin was fair, his hair and eyes dark. He had the shape of head that made his flat-top haircut, then in style, look perfect; his hair as even on the top of his head as the bristles of a scrub brush. His brown

eyes made him look serious and gentle, which didn't fool anyone after the first week of knowing him. In his attitudes and interests he was one of the guys, though smarter than all of them and tougher than most.

His parents were still at the table, but finished with breakfast. His mother was pouring his father another cup of coffee. Lloyd Thompson operated an automotive body repair shop, and after two decades of ten hours a day had decided that one of his employees could open the place in the morning just as easily as he. There was no reason why he could not begin work at eight-thirty instead of seven-thirty. This decision had pleased his wife and lost him no money.

Lloyd and Margaret Thompson were the same age, forty-seven, and parents of four sons and a daughter. The youngest of the first four, the only girl, had been six when Greg was born, so by the time he had reached junior high Lloyd and Margaret were experienced parents who were nearly, though not entirely, unshockable. By his ninth-grade year—this year—the second-oldest brother Paul was in his second year of teaching English in the school where Greg was a student; the oldest, Mark, was in theological seminary preparing to be a minister; Dan was working for his father in the body shop, and his sister Sue was married to one of her father's employees, who was also Dan's closest buddy from early childhood on. Of the first four only the oldest was still single.

Greg was their current worry, as they had worried about each of the others in turn when they reached their teens. The worst time had been when his sister's wedding had to be moved up to a much earlier date than planned. They had weathered the scandal, however, and the young couple was happy together with their little daughter—as good an outcome as could be hoped for—and Sue's husband continued to work for Lloyd.

The Thompsons were a happy family: the parents strong, hard-working, healthy, Christian, willing to be sacrificial without being sentimental or foolish. They were the sort of parents that children take happily for granted, as Greg did when he came to the breakfast table. At the age of ten he had gained some insight into the wall of secure love built around him; but now the self-centeredness of adolescence preoccupied him and he didn't think about it. He accepted the situation as normal.

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"You're going to have to do better, Greg," his father said. "We're not going to put up with this last-minute dash. I'll come up tomorrow and straighten you out if you aren't down here on time."

"Yes sir," Greg said, his eyes widening slightly in surprise as he uttered the ritual response to the warning. If you said, "Yes sir," you couldn't pretend later that you hadn't heard it. He slid into his place, reaching for the corn flakes as he did so.

"Greg," his father said.

Greg's hand froze on the cereal box. Then he withdrew it, folded both hands and ducked his head for a silent prayer. He was not sure if the other members of the family really prayed when they missed the group prayer – sometimes he did and sometimes he didn't. This morning he didn't. His father's threat had blasted genuine piety from his mind, which was full of football anyway.

"May I buy my lunch today?" he asked halfway through his meal. Hot lunch at the junior high was optional.

"Any special reason?" Mrs. Thompson asked.

"Nothing special," Greg said casually.

Whether there was a special reason or not, Lloyd and Margaret didn't have a need to know so they didn't press it. "I can get my purse," Margaret said.

"I've got it," Lloyd plunked a half-dollar on the table alongside Greg's cereal bowl and bent over his wife. He kissed her briefly and was gone.

Greg finished his cereal and stood up, the silver coin vanishing in a quicker-than-the-eye motion into the pocket of his denim jeans.

Greg had a measure of privacy and money to spend, privileges which hadn't been available to his older siblings. They had been born in a five-year period, at the time Lloyd Thompson was getting started in his own business. Then in the four years between Greg's eighth and twelfth birthdays Lloyd had borne the expense of two sons in college and a daughter's marriage. Dan had not cost him anything. As an expert body man, Dan was a business asset who was paid well and earned it.

The expenses had leveled off at about the time Greg entered his teen years and developed an excessive appetite for cash. Or so it seemed to his older brothers and sister, who'd had to squeeze every nickel at that point in their lives.

They understood how Greg could have more than they'd had. They were irritated because he never seemed to notice.

Indeed, Greg forgot utterly about the fifty cents once he had it. He said, "Goodbye, Mom," grabbed his books from the dining room table, and set out for school. His mother noted that, once again, after not seeming to care at all, he had plenty of time. Once he began to act, it was with an economy of movement and deliberate speed. The whole family was like that, but it was more noticeable with Greg because he had gotten into the habit of late starts.

It was a nine-block walk under the elms to Brighton East Junior High School. In those days before the desolation wrought by Dutch elm disease, the trees of Brighton were glorious, forming arches as they did over nearly every residential street in the city. Greg had walked under them nearly every school day for nine years: first east to elementary school; then north to Junior High. Since he had lived all his life in the same house he was unaware of the beauty of his neighborhood, with its spacious houses, immaculate lawns, and big trees. Though he consciously knew better, unconsciously he believed that the world outside was largely a copy of the east end of the city of Brighton.

The September wind rapped coolly against his chest, and a few early leaves scattered the sidewalk. For a moment he felt sad for the summer that was past; it had been a great season at the pool, on the ball field, and at church camp. Now, in the first full week of school, his catcher's equipment was already packed away. His focus was entirely on football: he never had to pay much attention to his homework. He did more than okay on that, and always had.

His specific focus was the near certainty of becoming the first-string quarterback on the Brighton East team. He had not told his parents about his chances; if he told them and then failed to get it they would be disappointed for him. They knew he was out for football, and that was all. Since the Junior High with its limited budget didn't get to play many games with other schools, the first game was still ten days away and the Coach was having a hard time deciding between him and an eight-grader, Howie Underhill, who was very good. Not as good as he was, though.

Football was the reason for Greg's request to stay at school for lunch. There would be opportunity after eating to go out with a couple

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of other guys and practice passing. His own football lay in his locker at school, waiting for the opportunity.

Paul Thompson sat at the desk in his classroom on the second floor of Brighton East. It was twenty minutes before his homeroom class of eighth-grade English, and the students were beginning to trickle in. Some acknowledged his presence politely, even pleasantly, while others ignored him and would continue to do so until he commanded their attention.

Paul was twenty-three, married, and in his second year of teaching junior high. He was a pleasant looking man, taller than most, with a family resemblance to his younger brother, except that his black hair was longer and conventionally parted. A slight pompadour glistened above his forehead. His eyes were green instead of brown, and distorted slightly by the strong prescription of his glasses.

Except for his youngest brother, whom he loved but didn't often approve of, he had great patience with young adolescents who were trying to learn. He didn't have much patience with goof-offs and troublemakers. He students regarded him with respect and a reasonable degree of admiration.

He sat marking the first writing assignment of the year, the standard "best thing that happened to me this summer" essay. They were all very short indeed, so he would be done marking them before the first period began. On the basis of the little evidence he had so far, the first period students were better than average. He enjoyed starting the day with them.

Then he came across the sort of paper that always discouraged him. This kid either hadn't tried at all, or he hadn't learned a thing about spelling, grammar, or punctuation in his first eight years of school. In an unmanageable scrawl across the top was written the name: Howard Underhill.

Howard was the tallest boy in the class, well muscled, very quiet, who never volunteered in class; yet Paul didn't perceive him as unintelligent. Instead he seemed intensely preoccupied, but not with English.

So far, and this was part of his success, he had not badgered any student in class, as some of his own teachers had done. He had been convinced even in elementary school that such teachers were unhappy

people who took their unhappiness out on their students. He would quit teaching if he saw himself developing that habit.

Even his words of rebuke were rare, and public only if a kid challenged him in public. It would not have occurred to him to scold Howard in this first week for his inattention, but the paper in front of him was so substandard that he had to talk to him in private. He put no grade on it but simply wrote in red pencil, "See me after class."

The tardy bell clanged, and the twenty-seven boys and girls before him stopped talking and looked at him expectantly. He checked the attendance against the seating chart on his desk, and then announced the flag salute. They all stood and recited the pledge, hands on hearts, and the sound of their not-quite-changed voices speaking in unison the solemn words of loyalty tugged at his heart. The significance of the act was passing most of them by, but not him; two of his high-school class had already been killed in Korea. Though he was as strong as a young horse, his eye condition had disqualified him for service.

When they were seated again he read the announcements swiftly and recorded the lunch list. That disposed of, he could turn to teaching. "I have your reports graded," he said. The kids thought it easier to write a "report," which they were used to, than an "essay," which they would perceive as very difficult indeed. He picked up the neat pile from the top of his desk and distributed them quickly. There were flushes of pleasure on some faces, grimaces of disappointment on others, and determined faces on others. Whispers of "What'd you get?" passed around the room.

Howard Underhill glanced at the note on top of his paper and frowned.

When the class was over Howard appeared at the desk as the other students moved swiftly on. "Did you want to see me?"

"Yes, but we don't have time to talk now. Can you come in after school?"

"I have football practice."

"I can get you excused."

Howard looked troubled. "Can I come in at noon instead?"

Paul wondered whether he should press for an after school meeting for disciplinary reasons, then decided against it. "All right. Come in before you eat."

Howard nodded and disappeared into the hall.

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Brighton East was a medium-sized school. Over twelve hundred students swirled through the halls between classes, creating a din of frantic dimensions as sound bounced back and forth between the marble tile on the floor and the unyielding plaster ceiling. Howie entered the confusion and moved on to his math class, oblivious both to the noise and the people around him. He was terribly worried about the upcoming conference with Mr. Thompson, although in his reticence he hadn't revealed it. In fact, Mr. Thompson could get him kicked out of football. Any teacher could. Brighton East was fierce about its grade requirements for team sports, and would allow no "down" student in uniform or on a practice field.

He wondered whether Mr. Thompson knew about his competition with Greg and was out to give his brother the edge. As soon as he thought it, he knew it was unfair. He had done a stinky job on that report. He had put it off too long, and didn't even have time to copy it over. It still wouldn't have been any good, but it wouldn't have been such a mess.

While Howard worried, Greg sat in his third period algebra class, reciting easily when called on and working his assignment carefully and quickly. He rarely took books home; the study time allowed in school was enough for him to get by comfortably. His parents didn't realize how smart he was, nor did he; his limits had never been tested. But his algebra teacher, Miss Evans, suspected he was a genius. So did Paul.

Paul himself had been a very good student and still was, and loved it. He was also an observer of his young brother – how easily Greg understood ideas and concepts, how quickly he assimilated them, how permanently he retained them. In Paul's mind there was no excuse for Greg's high B average; he could get straight A's with just a little effort, if he cared.

The irony of it angered Paul. Mark was sweating it out in theological seminary with a C+ average, the only thing keeping him there a passionate commitment to his sense of divine call. If Mark had had his own preference, he would be in a classroom like this one, teaching math, or with his classmates in Korea.

The bell rang, signaling the morning's end and the beginning of the long noon hour.

Not many students ate in the cafeteria at the lunch hour in September. Most lived in walking distance, or brought their lunches in paper bags and ate at the far end of the dining hall. So the waiting line was short. Later in the season when the weather turned bitter more students would stay at school.

Greg was one of the first in the cafeteria line. In those days, at school prices, fifty cents could buy a lot of food. He filled his tray with every option available and still had enough money left to buy two cartons of milk instead of one.

He sat at an empty table while he waited for his friends. One by one they came—first Eddie, the boy with blackheads and pimples contending for territory on his pinched, worried face; then Myron, blond, red-faced, with a powerful body and a tender heart. He cried easily, but it was a trait his friends put up with because he was good at most sports and they liked to have him on their team

The three of them ate quickly, saying little because of their eagerness to get outdoors to the playing field. About halfway through the meal Greg asked, "Where's Howie?"

Eddie squinted. "He told me in the hall that he had to see your brother before he came to lunch."

"What about?"

"I guess he flunked a test or something."

Greg did not comment, but continued eating methodically. Paul could be rough, even though the other kids didn't seem to realize it. Maybe Paul just picked on him because he was a little brother; but if Paul was mad at Howie, Greg was sorry for him. But, Greg thought, I can't do anything. Here Paul is Mr. Thompson. I almost have to call him that at home.

Howie did not show up for lunch at all, and the three boys went out to the playing field. There wasn't too much they could do; Eddie, who was not out for football, took the job of shifting the ball to Greg, who would then fire the ball to Myron, who was going to be the starting left halfback on the first team. They went for long passes, bullet passes, always passes; Greg was accurate and Myron was fast. Of course it wasn't the same as a game at all. There was no pressure on either the passer or receiver, and they weren't in uniform. But they were having fun.

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Howie wasn't. When the noon bell rang he made his way to Paul Thompson's classroom. His heart was thumping, and he had butterflies in his stomach. He had never been in this sort of trouble before, ever; but he had never before had the chance at being good at something, as he had this year on the football team. He had never been really smart, but he had gotten his C's right along and had behaved himself and the teachers never noticed him. But the football bug had bitten him hard, and he couldn't think of much else.

Ironically, it had been Greg Thompson who introduced him to football. Last fall, when he was beginning the seventh grade, the Underhills had moved to Brighton, a block down from the Thompsons. Greg, in the eighth grade then, had discovered Howie on a Saturday morning, doing nothing, sitting on the front steps of his house with his dog. Since Eddie and Myron lived several blocks away, Howie became Greg's partner in passing practice. The idea was that Greg was the passer and Howie the receiver; but of course to get the ball back to Greg, Howie had to pass it back; and he began to pass it very well indeed.

Howie did not go out for football in the seventh grade, since he didn't know anything about it until the season was well started; but he became deeply interested. Greg was interested in whatever sport was in season, and did reasonably well at all of them; but Howie's consuming passion was football, and now that the season was in session, he was a happy person for the first time in his life.

Paul Thompson was sitting at his desk when Howie appeared at the door. "Come on in, Howard. Sit down."

Howie did as he was told. His nerves had taken hold of him, and he literally could not speak.

"I just went down to the office and looked up your record, Howard. You've always done all right before. What's going on now?"

If Howie could have explained, he would have. As it was, he just shrugged.

"Come on," Paul persisted. "You'll have to talk to me if I'm going to help you."

Paul's kindness, on top of the tension his fear had instilled in him, was too much for Howie. His face crumpled, and tears came.

Paul was still a relatively inexperienced teacher, but in this case his youth was a help and not a hindrance. He remembered clearly what it was like to be thirteen years old, anxious, and under the judgment of

an adult authority. If you didn't take refuge in anger, you would sometimes feel like crying even when you didn't.

He handed Howie a tissue from a box on his desk, and sat waiting. In the silence the tears stopped quickly and Howie looked furtively past the tissue on which he was blowing his nose at the interested, kind, and serious face of the teacher. He wanted to talk, but words were still hard to come by.

"Are you going to send in a down slip?" he finally blurted. A down slip meant suspension from football.

"I don't know yet. I won't know until you tell me more."

How to begin? "I gotta chance at being the starting quarterback. It's between Greg and me."

The story was going to come in pieces, Paul realized. He wished now he had paid more attention to his adolescent psychology professor.

"Do you mean that football is keeping you from doing your studies? You don't have enough time?"

Howie shook his head vigorously. "I got enough time. But I can't think of anything but football."

So there it was, complicated by Greg's involvement in it. The easy solution would be to suspend Howard from the team until he got his grades up; after all, the English language was more important to a boy's education than football. But that might discourage him rather than motivate him, and a suspension would hand the quarterback's job to Greg, who probably didn't deserve it any more than Howard did. Usually, Greg had privileges handed to him on a silver platter anyway, and had come to expect them. Besides, how did he, Paul Thompson, know that English was more important to Howard Underhill's education than football? What of the nonverbal communication of team loyalty and cooperation, of sacrifice and suffering for a common goal?

Paul thought these things, but Howard could not tell what he was thinking; and a lump the size of a baseball rose in his throat when Paul said, "I can't let this go, Howard. I can't give you a passing grade for failing work."

The teacher looked out the window and said, "Tell you what. You stay here and rewrite this report and I'll review it with you. We'll see if your grammar and spelling were just carelessness or you need some

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extra help. Then you go home and write it again after we've reviewed it. Were you supposed to go home for lunch today?"

Howie shook his head.

"I'll let you go in time to grab a quick bite at the cafeteria. Now let's get to work."

As short as the report was, the exercise took most of the lunch hour. Howie never worked so hard in his life. "You had better go to the cafeteria now," Paul said. There was a bare fifteen minutes until the first afternoon bell, and Paul remained in his place. Howie realized guiltily that the teacher had missed his lunch because of him, and as he hurried to the cafeteria he resolved not to mess up an English assignment again.

About the Author

Everett Wilson has been a minister of the Evangelical Covenant Church since graduation from North Park Theological Seminary in 1962. He is now in his forty-sixth year of continuous pastoral ministry. His conservative estimate is that he has written and delivered about 1800 sermons.

During his first decade of ministry he also wrote short stories for Sunday School papers of seven different denominations. His first book, *The Touch of God*, was published by Covenant Press in 1975. *Real Things* is his fourth book and first novel. Of the book he says, "I have written the kind of novel I like to read."

His articles have also appeared in *The Covenant Companion*, *Christianity Today*, *Leadership*, and *The Church Musician*, among other magazines. In 1985 he had the privilege of serving as moderator of the centennial annual meeting of his denomination, and from 1991 to 1993 served as president of the Covenant Ministerium, the organization to which all ordained and licensed ministers of the Evangelical Covenant Church belong.

He and his wife Donna are the parents of seven adults, and the grandparents of nine children between the ages of five and eighteen.



Everett Wilson sold his first short story in 1962, the same year he began pastoral ministry in The Evangelical Covenant Church. *Real Things* is his fourth book and first novel.

When they were teenagers, the four sons and a daughter of Lloyd and Margaret Thompson presented their father with an illuminated manuscript listing "Lloyd's Commandments" as they remembered them from constant repetition—sometimes with special emphasis, as one of the sons says at the presentation.

The commandments symbolize the hedge of protection that Lloyd and Margaret had grown around these bright, tough kids with the "lick-the-world expression they couldn't seem to help having."

Then the youngest brother, the smartest and toughest of them, is coming home late for dinner when he accepts a ride from one of his father's employees, that ends in a fiery crash and the driver's death. The disaster and its consequences are not fully played out until Lloyd's funeral more than thirty years later.

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