

A REPORT FROM LEE AND MARCIE TOSTI
GREATER PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND
DECEMBER 15, 2021

“It’s more important for me to understand what the message here is than to fight against it” — Joe H., speaking of setting aside a lifetime of rebellion and criticizing the Bible.

“I cannot wait for something to change me. A lot of people who are in their graves are still waiting for something to change them” — Joe H., speaking of improving our character and overcoming.

“I’ll be honest: I don’t believe every word in here” — Joe H., speaking of the Bible, and he says this to me at least once per visit.

“If I believed everything in here.... Believing everything in here has led to white men enslaving blacks the world over for a long time” — Joe H. He’s said this at least twice.

“The reason I first began looking into this book is because I wanted to know what was in it that changed my dad” — Joe H.

“I used to hate the word ‘sin.’ But I’ve come to understand that I am a sinner” — Joe H.

I wrote about Joe in my last report. Mr. Joe’s grandmother was a sharecropper in Alabama. He never knew his mother. His father raised him “sternly” in Buffalo, NY. Joe left home when he was fifteen and has been back only four times: “I saw my first murder when I was fifteen on the street over from ours. I knew that I could either try to stay on that environment and fight against it — a fight which no one ever wins, or I could leave....” He is now sixty three. He’s been homeless several times. He now owns a good home. I continue meet with him every Friday at 10am. Each time he opens the door, he never greets me but instead launches right into discussing whatever spiritual topic is on his mind. And it continues at this pace until I leave, which is usually an hour and a half later. I learn a lot about life in those hours. And, as I did while doing the Work in Ithaca, usually I find that he has learned, the hard way, a life principle...and my role is simply turning to an inspired text that discusses it.

So far our studies have been more conversations flowing here and there, anchored to passages variously and now and again, moved by one very related point from sub-point to sub-sub-point, and ending up some six or ten or twenty-ten (that’s how I feel these conversations sometimes go!) degrees of separation from where we began in just that sentence. In order to make overall progress, we must soon bring our conversations under control and truly focus on single points at a time. For now, they are healthy as far as they go. And actually, in the chaos I am trying to lay some important groundwork: “No one I know knows the Bible like you do,” Joe tells me, and “I’ve been to a lot of ‘Bible studies’: They don’t study the Bible — they just read a passage and talk about how they feel about it. With you, we study the Bible.” The point is not to pat myself on the back — all glory goes to God, and all of you know the Bible better than I do; rather, the point is to point out: First, Joe knows the difference; second, he’s looking for the real; and third, so far, as opportunity permits, I am simply trying to lay the simple groundwork that I’m not a quack!

And I continually remind Joe that if his heart is the Lord’s then God will work with the amount of faith he does have to grow it into what it should be, and this through the Word (2 Chronicles 16:9; Romans 10:17; etc.). And I remind him that my role is simply to point to the Word and that it’s up to Joe to choose to believe it. And I do a little nudging too. :-)

I have not been able to do any street work. Instead, we all had COVID. Yay. Then, we bought a house and moved into it. Yay! Now, our parents are in their bi-annual visit from Belize and they too got COVID. Yay. Oh, and it's winter....

But we are doing Meetup. It's been a bumpy beginning — sort of sputtering, like an old airplane engine on start up. But it's getting going! And we had one visitor, Barbara. That by itself is great! And I always find that the best thing about Meetup is meeting up with the saints from the congregation. So far, Lauren, (and Anthony from out-of-town), Sandie, Hannah, Danielle, Keyne, Jerry and Haven have attended, which is more greatness! And, when Barbara came, at one point Keyne so very gently came to the forefront center to make a perfect point and then gently receded back. Fantastic. And then, after everyone else had left, Danielle and Hannah stayed and chit-chatted with and encouraged Barbara. What a great group effort! And again, even when no visitors come, it's just a great blessing to be with other saints who are willing (and able) to spend an evening together.

And here's an interesting one: Every year a bunch of Northeasterners, saints, spend a week "camping" together. This year, one day, George and Susil, two strangers, used our group's pavilion to work remotely all day. Susil became interested in the Pig's Foot Stew (YUM!!!) I was cooking over the campfire. We invited them to join the group for supper. They stayed for the group Bible study after supper, and even participated in it. We've since kept in touch, and lately Susil wrote (to me and to Laura Reeves, who was not at camp but became involved — long story) asking for help in their marriage. Since then we've been helping (via text). The moral of the story: Cook more Pig's Foot Stew! Actually: Make the most of the opportunity! God is good.

We're settling in working with the church. Good people! The church is undertaking studying the Bible in five years, beginning in January; so we're all gearing up for that. Exciting times! In the mean time, we've used our class periods to study some requested topics — some of which are very foundational and important for working together as a group, including membership and how a congregation without elders makes decisions, etc. Again, good reminders, good stuff and exciting times! At least Marcie and I think so.

We're also settling in to Rhode Island. We have property. (What a blessing.) We have health insurance. On Friday we'll transfer driving licenses and vehicle registrations, etc. It's like we're real people. And Marcie and I keep remarking on how Rhode Islanders in general are very nice.

Thank you for your ongoing interest and prayers and communications and support! Glory to His Kingdom. (Speaking of support: Some of you, having supported us for years, sent us your last check this month. Marcie and I thank you! You have been a blessing to us! We will miss you! God be with you!)

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