Gilead

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARILYNNE ROBINSON

Novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson grew up in Idaho and graduated from Brown University's former women's college, Pembroke College, in 1966. She later earned her PhD in English from the University of Washington in 1977. Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*, was a Pulitzer finalist in 1982. She has also published several essay collections, including *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (2012) and *The Givenness of Things* (2015). She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Gilead* in 2005, as well as the National Humanities Medal in 2012 and the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction in 2016. Robinson taught at the Iowa Writers Workshop from 1991 until 2016. Raised Presbyterian, she later became a Congregationalist and has sometimes preached at the historic United Church of Christ congregation she attends. Religion, theology, and spirituality are recurrent themes in her fiction and essays. She married Fred Miller Robinson in 1967 and they had two sons, James and Joseph, before divorcing in 1989. As of 2021, Marilynne Robinson still lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of the Ames family legacy traces back to John's grandfather's involvement in the antislavery abolitionist movement in the years before and during the American Civil War. The eldest John Ames moved to Kansas from Maine in order to help the Free Soilers, a third party formed in 1848 with the main purpose of halting slavery's expansion into the United States's western territories. The party also worked to end discriminatory laws against free Black people. The Free Soilers' motto was "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor and Free Men." The Free Soilers were active until 1852, after which point its members were absorbed into the mainstream Republican party. The creation of the Territory of Kansas in 1854 had further inflamed tensions over slavery, and the debate over slavery's legality there exploded into a series of violent conflicts throughout the 1850s, a sort of Civil War prelude that became known as "Bleeding Kansas." The United States Senate was basically deadlocked over slavery at the time, so the question of whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free state or a slave state would tip the balance one way or the other. Though many Free Soilers opposed slavery on ethical and religious grounds (as John's grandfather did), many also argued that making Kansas a slave state would prohibit poor non-slaveholders from acquiring land there. One of the best-known antislavery activists was the controversial John Brown, who led his followers in brutally murdering five pro-slavery men in the so-called Pottawatomie Massacre in 1865. Brown is alluded to several times in *Gilead*, and John's grandfather gave him aid and support, though he doesn't appear as a character. Kansas was ultimately admitted to the Union as a free state early in 1861. *Gilead* also touches on anti-miscegenation laws (laws prohibiting interracial marriage) and the havoc they created in families' lives. In the state of Missouri, where Jack Boughton attempted to establish a life with his wife Della and their son, a law prohibiting white people from marrying Black people passed in 1835, and it wasn't repealed until 1969 (more than a decade after *Gilead* takes place). It was finally overturned because of the 1967 Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia*, which struck down an interracial couple's 1958 conviction under Virginia's anti-miscegenation law and also struck down such laws in 16 other states.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was both one of Robinson's inspirations for the novel and features as one of the protagonist's favorite books in the novel. Written and revised in both Latin and French editions between 1536 and 1560, the *Institutes* are one of the foundational works of the Reformed branch of Protestant Christianity and continue to be widely studied today. German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) is another book John Ames cites as important in the development of his faith. Feuerbach stated that his object with this book was to offer "a philosophy of positive religion," which included the idea that "God" is ultimately indistinguishable from reason, and that Christianity's essence is really the divinity of humanity. Even though Feuerbach didn't uphold traditional Christian theology, John appreciates his observations about religion's joyful aspects. At one point, John recalls being mesmerized by the popular French novel *The Diary of a Country Priest* by Georges Bernanos, which was published in English in 1937. The novel focuses on a young priest's daily interactions with his parishioners and his belief that God's grace works through his own weakness, themes that would resonate with John's experiences in *Gilead*. A favorite book of Lila's is *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, a popular 1908 Western romance by John Fox, Jr. Though John didn't like the book at first, he seems to appreciate the novel's heroine's loyalty to an older man, which he probably sees as a parallel to Lila's relationship with him. *Gilead* is followed by three sequels tracing events in the Ames and Boughton families: *Home* (2008), *Lila* (2014), and *Jack* (2020).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Gilead
- **When Published:** November 4, 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Epistolary Novel
- **Setting:** Gilead, Iowa in 1956
- **Climax:** Jack Boughton reveals to John that he has a wife and son.
- **Antagonist:** Jack Boughton
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Abolitionist Inspiration. The fictional town of Gilead is based on the southwestern Iowa town of Tabor, which was significant in the abolitionist movement. The character of John Ames's grandfather is also loosely based on a Congregationalist minister named Rev. John Todd, who was a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad and stored weapons and ammunition for John Brown. Like many abolitionists, though, he didn't condone Brown's increasingly violent radicalism.

Calvin without Caricature. Robinson admires the writings of 16th-century theologian John Calvin and notes that he has been misrepresented in American popular culture. She has said that if people read Calvin's own works instead of believing grim caricatures of him, they might be surprised by his emphases on such topics as forgiveness, God's mercy toward human frailty, and the beauty of God's creation.

PLOT SUMMARY

Gilead is made up of letters that 76-year-old Rev. John Ames writes for his young son to read after John dies. The letters are a mixture of John's memories, daily events in his life, and reflections on existence and faith in general. John begins by reflecting on the fact that he will miss this earthly life. When he was younger, widowed, and living alone, he didn't feel at home in the world. But now that he has a wife and son, he does. One of his biggest regrets is that because he remarried late in life, he hasn't done much to provide for the future, and that means he will leave his wife, Lila, and his son in a vulnerable position.

John was born in 1880 in Kansas; both his father and his grandfather were also named John Ames, and both of them were ministers, too. Seventy-four of John's seventy-six years have been spent here in Gilead, Iowa. John recalls visiting his grandfather's grave in Kansas when he was 12 years old. His grandfather had left Gilead in his old age and returned to Kansas, where he'd once fought for the abolitionist cause in the tumultuous years before the Civil War. John's father and grandfather had parted angrily, and they'd never reconciled before the elder John Ames's death. That's why John's father felt compelled to visit his father's grave. John's journey with his father was arduous, dusty, and thirsty, but they eventually found the overgrown graveyard and cleaned it up as best they could. Then John's father prayed for God's forgiveness beside his father's grave. John never forgot the beautiful, simultaneous moonrise and sunset he witnessed during the prayer.

While John was in seminary, he married a girl named Louisa with whom he'd grown up. Then they moved to Gilead, where John took over his father's position as minister. But Louisa soon died in childbirth, and their baby girl, Rebecca, lived for only a few hours. John reflects that the following decades were "like a long, bitter prayer." He wrote thousands of pages of sermons, and though he was lonely, he found purpose and solace in study. When John was 67, on a **rainy** Pentecost Sunday, his future wife Lila suddenly walked into his church and changed everything.

John reminisces about his older brother, Edward, who became an atheist while studying for his doctorate in Germany. When Edward returned home, he tried to unsettle John's beliefs with skeptical literature, but it didn't work; John enjoyed the books and kept his faith. He tells his son that writers like the atheist philosopher Feuerbach aren't harmful, and that when people's beliefs are unsettled, it's usually because they went *looking* to have their faith shaken.

Thinking about the stacks of old sermons around the house, John reflects that the sermon he's proudest of is one he never actually preached. During the deadly Spanish Flu outbreak, he wrote a sermon proclaiming that the flu was God's warning sign to people for fighting in World War I. But he ended up burning that sermon, believing it wouldn't do any good.

While thinking about the poverty his wife and son will likely face after he dies, John recalls his strange, saintly grandfather, who freely gave away the family's possessions to anyone who needed them. John remembers his grandfather telling him about a vision he experienced as a teenager, telling him to go to Kansas to join the abolitionists. John remembers his grandfather like a restless Old Testament prophet who always looked as if he'd just been struck by **lightning**. Yet John's father never put stock in visions or the miraculous.

John wants his son to know that *he* is a miracle to John—his simple existence. John thinks about the wonder of existence a lot these days, and he hopes his son will live for a long time and enjoy this world. Though heaven will be unimaginably wonderful and will last forever, somehow that makes this world's passing beauties even lovelier.

John's best friend Boughton, Gilead's retired Presbyterian minister, is mostly housebound these days with crippling arthritis. One day Boughton's daughter Glory comes by to tell John that her brother Jack (John Ames Boughton, named for John) will be visiting from St. Louis soon. Even though

Boughton intended for Jack to have a special relationship with John, who spent most of his life childless, John has always found Jack difficult. He has caused his family much grief, and John isn't sure what to tell his son about the man.

John changes the subject to his grandfather's efforts to help Free Soilers establish the right to vote in Kansas in hopes of entering the Union as a free state. He also served with the Union Army during the Civil War and lost an eye in battle. John's father never liked to talk about those days, however. He recalls that after his grandfather's death, he helped his father destroy his grandfather's old pistol; its very existence disgusted his father. He remembers the rift that opened between his father and grandfather one day when his grandfather walked out on his son's preaching. His grandfather disdained his son's pacifism, while John's father found war repugnant and felt his father had abandoned the family to serve the abolitionist cause. After the Civil War, John's father had even left his grandfather's church and attended Quaker services instead. Looking back on it all, John thinks his grandfather's single-minded devotion to his cause was both his strength and his weakness.

John tells his son about a memory from when John was a young child. His father was helping a group of people tear down a church that had been struck by lightning and burned. Everyone sang hymns as they worked in the warm rain. He remembers his father offering him a sooty biscuit to eat. The memory encapsulates both the hardship and joy of those poorer days.

John recalls his father telling him about an experience when his father was a little boy. His father (John's grandfather) had ridden off with a group of men in the middle of the night and didn't say where he was going. John's father later found a limping soldier sitting in the church and surmised that his father had shot the man. When the man never returned, John's father assumed he had died, and he felt sickened by his complicity in keeping John's grandfather's secret.

John struggles with what to tell his wife and son about Jack Boughton; he feels an obligation to warn them. The strain of worry is beginning to take a physical toll on him. One day, during a conversation on Boughton's front porch, John is especially exasperated by Jack's persistent questions about whether a person can be consigned to perdition; he feels like Jack is testing him and not taking him seriously. Lila, on the other hand, senses that Jack is unhappy and struggling.

Unable to sleep, John decides it's time to write down Jack's story. He explains that when Jack was in college, he had a relationship with a very young, destitute girl, and their relationship resulted in a child. Jack refused to do anything to support the young woman or her child, and John deems it cruel that Jack told his parents about them. The Boughtons agonized over their sickly grandchild living in squalor, and they tried to support her materially, but it didn't help—the baby died of an infection at age three. In the 20 years since, John has never been able to forgive Jack for "squandering[] his fatherhood," or to believe that he will ever make anything of himself.

Soon after, Jack asks to meet with John at the church. There, Jack admits that he's never been able to muster up any religious conviction; but it isn't clear that he wants to be persuaded of Christian beliefs, either. The conversation ends in frustration, and later John reflects that he's never found it effective to argue with skeptics, because it usually just reinforces their doubts. Besides, human categories can only stretch so far when speaking of ultimate truths.

John realizes he hasn't yet told his son how he and Lila came together. After Lila unexpectedly showed up in church one Sunday, John couldn't stop thinking about her. Over the coming weeks, he even began writing sermons with her in mind. He'd never experienced this kind of passionate desire and distraction before, and especially given their age difference (Lila was about 30 years his junior), he felt incredibly foolish. Eventually, Lila approached him about getting baptized, so John instructed her in basic doctrine and later baptized her. In time, she also came to his house occasionally to tend his gardens. One day, when he asked her how he could repay her kindness, she said, "You ought to marry me." It was the most thrilling moment of John's life, and he agreed.

One day Jack surprises John in his church study and shows him a picture: it's Jack with a Black woman and a young, light-skinned Black boy. They're Jack's wife and child. He's afraid Boughton is too fragile to receive this news, he explains, so he's telling John instead. He and Della have been together for eight years, but due to anti-miscegenation laws in Missouri and Della's father's disapproval, they've only lived together intermittently, and Jack has struggled to provide for his family. They managed to live in a racially mixed neighborhood in St. Louis for a while, but then John got in trouble with his boss, sent his wife and child back to her family in Tennessee, and came to Gilead to see if they could establish an easier life here. At this point, though, it's not even clear if Della wants to stay together. When Jack asks if he thinks a life in Gilead is possible for them, John doesn't know what to say. He embraces Jack and tells him, truthfully, that he's a good man.

Days later, after learning that Della has rejected him, Jack prepares to leave Gilead for good, even though it's clear his father is near death. John walks to the bus stop with Jack and offers him God's blessing, which Jack humbly receives. John wishes Boughton could have witnessed that moment and knows his friend would have been delighted to meet Jack's son, Robert Boughton Miles.

John reflects on God's beauty gloriously reflected in creation, even in forgotten, unassuming places like Gilead. In his final letter, he tells his son that he will pray that he will grow up to be brave and find a way to be useful—he'll pray, and then he'll sleep.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Rev. John Ames – John Ames, a 76-year-old minister in Gilead, Iowa, is the novel's protagonist. *Gilead* consists of John's letters to his nearly seven-year-old son, who will still be very young when John dies; John is already suffering from a chronic heart condition when the novel begins. John was born in 1880 in Kansas and subsequently spent most of his life in Gilead. In seminary, John married his childhood friend Louisa, who died after giving birth to their only child, Rebecca (who only lived a few hours herself). John spent the next several decades widowed and lonely, studying, writing sermons, and listening to baseball games on the radio. John has ministered to his congregation in Gilead for over 50 years now and is quietly dedicated to his congregants' well-being. John's predictable, solitary life completely changed when he married his wife, Lila, in his late sixties, then became a father unexpectedly. Lila walked into John's church one Sunday, and over the coming months as John helped Lila prepare for baptism, he fell passionately in love with her—though, in the end, Lila proposed to *him*. John struggles to accept the fact that he is rapidly declining after having found such joy, and that his son will never know what he was like in his prime. He also regrets having to leave behind the world whose beauty he cherishes, even though he expects heaven to be even better. John was shaped by his grandfather's passionate antislavery activism and his father's committed pacifism, as well as his brother Edward's intellectual integrity. Though John is fairly restrained about voicing his own convictions, he hints that he's a pacifist like his father. John struggles with his relationship with Jack Boughton, who is his best friend Boughton's son. He doesn't trust Jack due to his youthful misdeeds, seeing him as dishonorable and unable to change, and he fears that Jack might harm his family after John dies. Yet after Jack confides in John about his wife Della and their son Robert, John realizes that there *is* good in Jack and forgives him. He even offers Jack his blessing before Jack leaves Gilead. John's letters end shortly after this, implying that he dies soon after his 77th birthday. His letters close with reflections on the divine beauty in the world, even in ordinary Gilead, and a prayer that his son will have the courage to see that beauty and to live generously in response.

John's Son (The Boy) – John and Lila's son is the recipient of the letters that make up *Gilead*. He is about seven years old when the novel begins, and his name is never revealed, since John always refers to him in the second person. He looks a lot like Lila, especially with his serious, proud facial expressions. He is a loner who mostly watches other kids from a distance, although he befriends Tobias and becomes fond of Jack Boughton. Otherwise, the boy seems to be a fairly typical child; John says that although his son is handsome and polite, it's his simple existence that he cherishes most. John tells his son that he is an expression of God's grace to him and a miracle, as he'd never expected to become a father again near the end of his life.

Lila (John's Wife) – Lila is John's second wife and the mother of their son. Addressing his son, John usually refers to her as "your mother"; her name is only revealed when Jack addresses her as Lila late in the novel. Lila is more than 30 years younger than John and is 41 during the time of the novel. It's hinted that her life before meeting John was one of poverty and hardship, though she never talks about it, and John doesn't elaborate. John met Lila when she showed up in his church one **rainy** Sunday when he was 67. Lila didn't know anything about Christianity, but after attending church for a few weeks, she approached John about getting baptized. Sometime after her baptism, it was Lila's idea to marry John—she quietly suggested it one day after tending John's garden, and he agreed. Lila is a devoted wife and mother who worries constantly about their boy's upbringing. He describes her as having a "settled, habitual sadness," seriousness, and quiet dignity. She is self-conscious about her unrefined way of speaking and therefore tends to be reserved, though this leads people in the church to regard her as rather distant, and she makes an unconventional minister's wife. Perhaps because of her background, she is also quietly sympathetic to Jack Boughton's restlessness and religious doubts.

John's Father – John's father was also named the Reverend John Ames, and he, too, was a minister. He was married to Martha Turner Ames. He had a contentious relationship with his own father, John's grandfather, and their last words to each other were spoken in anger. John's father was always uncomfortable with his own father's focus on visions and the miraculous; he preferred to see such things as a reflection of his father's era and not something to worry about in the present day. After the Civil War, disgusted by his own father's preaching in support of the war, John attended a Quaker gathering for a while. Even after that, he remained a committed pacifist, and John dearly respected him and his preaching. John's father had a strained relationship with his son Edward due to the latter's atheism, but he seems to have grown more sympathetic to Edward in time. In retirement he moved to the Gulf Coast and, after John took over his position at the church, tried to persuade John to leave Gilead, too, to seek broader horizons. John implies that he and his father became estranged after he refused to leave Gilead.

John's Grandfather – John's grandfather, like John's father, was also named the Reverend John Ames, and he, too, was a minister. He was married to Margaret Todd Ames. He was borne in Maine and moved to Kansas in the 1830s, after experiencing a vision in which God told him to fight for the abolitionist cause there. Late in life, John's grandfather lived with John's family in Gilead but, restless and disillusioned, he returned to Kansas. His family was never certain what became

of him until John and his father wandered the Kansas countryside and eventually located his grave. John thinks of his grandfather as some kind of strange saint—he interpreted some biblical commands quite literally, giving away anything his family owned to anyone who asked for it. He served as a chaplain during the Civil War and lost an eye in battle. John remembers that his grandfather always looked as if he'd just been struck by **lightning**, with wild hair and a piercing, one-eyed stare. Both John and his father always felt implicated in John's grandfather's violence in Kansas in various ways—John helped his father destroy his grandfather's old pistol, for example. But they respond to their guilt in different ways; while both men become pacifists, John's father becomes resentful of his father's radicalism and subsequent neglect of his family, while John is able to see both beauty and weakness in his grandfather's convictions.

Jack (John Ames) Boughton – Jack is Boughton's most beloved child and John's namesake. Knowing John might not have children, Boughton intended that Jack and John would have a kind of father-son relationship (Jack even called John "Papa" growing up). However, through much of the novel, John hints that he and Jack have a fraught relationship, though he doesn't explain why until near the end of the novel. He describes Jack as a "prodigal son," a lifelong troublemaker, and it bothers John to see how much Boughton loves him when Jack clearly doesn't deserve it. John eventually reveals that 20 years ago, in his youth, Jack had a relationship with a young woman and fathered her child. The woman's family was extremely poor, and the baby, whom Jack never acknowledged or offered to support, was brought up in squalid circumstances and ultimately died. Yet despite his anger at Jack's transgressions, John also perceives that there's a deep loneliness and sadness in Jack. At one point Jack admits to John that he's never been able to believe in God, though he doesn't necessarily *dis*believe, either. Jack and Lila seem to understand each other instinctively. At the end of the novel, Jack reveals to John that he is married to Della, who is Black, and that they have a son together, Robert Boughton Miles. Because of anti-miscegenation laws in Missouri, their marriage isn't legal, and they are ultimately harassed out of their home in St. Louis. Though the novel doesn't reveal how, it's clear that Jack has changed for the better over the course of his life. However, he leaves Gilead in the end, after it's implied that Della breaks off their relationship; he never tells Boughton the whole truth about his life, and he doesn't know where he's headed next. Despite his ambivalence about Christianity, he willingly receives John's blessing before he goes.

Rev. Robert Boughton – Boughton is Gilead's retired Presbyterian minister, a widower, and John's lifelong best friend. John's main confidant throughout his life, Boughton came over regularly during John's solitary years so that they could work on their sermons together. Though he is younger than John, he suffers from terrible arthritis and rarely leaves home. His daughter Glory lives with him. Because Boughton has aged so much, John most often describes him in retrospect—in his younger days, he was a strong man and a gifted preacher. Nowadays he's severely stooped and sometimes cranky from the discomfort; his biggest enjoyment is his children (he has four daughters and four sons), especially his beloved son Jack. John sometimes envied Boughton's lively family life, and knowing that John might never have children, Boughton named Jack after John and intended for them to have a special relationship. However, Jack has mostly caused his father heartache and disgrace over the years. After Jack fathered a child in college, Boughton and his wife, in anguish, often visited the baby and her mother and offered support, but nothing seemed to help. Decades later, Jack returns to Gilead intending to tell his father about his marriage to Della and their son, but when he sees how frail his father has become, he changes his mind and confides in John instead.

John's Mother (Martha Turner Ames) – John's mother was a minister's wife and homemaker. Overall, John writes less about the women in his family than the men, though it's clear he loved and respected his mother, and he recognizes the hardships she endured as a minister's wife living on the prairie. She was very serious about home health remedies, which could be tedious for John. She was a hardworking homemaker who occasionally fell asleep in front of the stove after taking some whiskey for her aches and pains, burning Sunday dinner in the process. She was also strong-willed and thrifty, capable of standing her ground when John's grandfather wanted to give away what little money the family had. She could have a wry sense of humor, playfully imitating John's grandfather on occasion. She and John's father retired to the Gulf Coast, partly for her health.

John's Grandmother (Margaret Todd Ames) – John's grandmother was married to his fiery, unpredictable minister grandfather. She was very sick when her husband went off to fight in the Civil War, leaving her behind with many children. John's father always resented this. By the time the war ended, she was suffering greatly from cancer, but she still insisted on being carried to church when she learned that John's father had stopped attending.

Louisa – Louisa was John's first wife. They grew up together in Gilead and got married while John was in seminary. Louisa died soon after giving birth to her and John's only child, Rebecca. Though he loved her and looks forward to reuniting in heaven, John doesn't seem to remember her in great detail after 51 years and has stronger impressions of her as a child, when she loved jumping rope on the streets of Gilead.

Edward Ames – Edward is John's older brother, 10 years his senior. A philosophy professor trained in Germany, Edward became an atheist and introduced John to Feuerbach's writings in an attempt to jolt John out of his traditional Christian faith.

Growing up, he'd been expected to follow his father into ministry, but after renouncing Christianity, he paid the church back for supporting his education. Edward's renunciation of the faith created a rift between him and his father, but his father eventually forgave him.

Della Miles – Della is Jack Boughton's wife. A young Black woman and prominent minister's daughter, she used to be a teacher in St. Louis, where she and Jack met by chance one day and befriended each other. Della's family doesn't approve of her relationship with Jack, especially her father, who believes that most white men are atheists. Nevertheless, she and Jack try to build a life together in St. Louis, flouting Missouri's laws against interracial marriage. It's incredibly difficult, and in the end, she chooses to let Jack go and to stay in Memphis with their son Robert and her family.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rebecca (Angeline) – Rebecca was John and Louisa's only child. She died within hours of birth, and Boughton baptized her before John got home, naming her Angeline. John nearly always refers to her by the name he and Louisa had chosen for her, Rebecca.

Glory – Glory is Boughton's daughter who lives with him after the recent failure of her marriage. She has always loved, defended, and protected her brother Jack.

Tobias Schmidt – Tobias is John's son's closest friend. John describes him as a "freckly little Lutheran." Tobias's father is rather strict.

Robert Boughton Miles – Robert is Jack and Della's son.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LIFE, DEATH, AND BEAUTY

Gilead is made up of 76-year-old John Ames's letters, an attempt to leave a record for his young son. On one level, John tries to prepare his son for his death, which will inevitably happen before the boy is very old. He comforts himself and his son with the belief that life after death is a state of being "more alive than I have ever been." And yet that doesn't mean one should be in a hurry to leave earthly life behind; John tells his son that although he looks forward to reuniting in heaven someday, he wants his son to live a long time and love *this* world.

John seems to notice the world's beauty more, not less, as he prepares to die. That's partly because he has so much more to lose now, having come late to marriage and fatherhood. But all his life, he's noticed that beauty manifests unexpectedly in the most forsaken places, like when, around age 12, he notices an astonishing moonrise over the unkempt graveyard where his grandfather is buried. And shortly before he dies, John reflects that there is more beauty in the world than people typically notice—that's even true in Gilead, which looks like a worn-out, forgettably ordinary place on the surface. Yet if one has courage to see it, John believes, the whole world, including Gilead, burns with the "**fire**" of God's glory. Through John's reminiscences for his son, the novel suggests that life is about coming to terms with the world's transience. Yet it also hints that even fragile earthly beauty, because it's God's creation, transcends death in some mysterious way.

CHRISTIAN FAITH, MYSTERY, AND MINISTRY

John Ames comes from a long line of Christian ministers, including his father and grandfather, and he says that this vocation came naturally to him. Yet he doesn't take his duties for granted. He often muses on his work's "privileges"—like getting to bless other human beings, which he sees as affirming their God-given sacredness, a beautiful thing to experience. And even though John has never seriously doubted his beliefs the way other characters do (like his brother Edward and his namesake Jack Boughton, both skeptics), he also doesn't presume to fully understand faith. When his wife Lila first became a Christian, he was so awed by her faith's humble seriousness that when he **baptized** her, he felt like asking *her* to explain the sacrament's meaning. Similarly, John believes that attempts to rationally defend one's faith tend to backfire, because faith deals with realities that are beyond human categories and language. An example is the mystery of suffering, a constant undercurrent in John's life and ministry. While he acknowledges that he can't explain why people suffer and that suffering is never good in its own right, he has often witnessed how God draws near to suffering people, takes their side, and ennobles them through their sorrow. Through John's quietly faithful career, the novel suggests that the vocation of ministry—and even the Christian faith itself—is mainly about recognizing people's God-given value, accompanying them through life's struggles, and helping them ponder divine mysteries.

MEMORY, VISION, AND CONVICTION

John's letters are filled with memories he wants to pass down to his son. Often, these stories revolve around his family legacy of fervent convictions—his grandfather fought for the abolitionist cause in Kansas before the Civil War, and his father became a pacifist after the war. John's grandfather told him about literal visions he

experienced, especially a vision of the Lord holding out chained arms to him and calling him to liberate the enslaved. At the end of his life, his grandfather's convictions alienated him from his family to such an extent that he left Gilead, seeing it (and his son's preaching) as apathetic. John's father, on the other hand, resented his father's all-consuming beliefs, which left no time or sympathy for his own family. Accordingly, John's father had little tolerance for talk of the miraculous, and he rejected his father's belief that violence—even in the anti-slavery cause—could be reconciled with Christianity.

John himself often dwells on memories of his grandfather and struggles with this conflicted family legacy. Ultimately, John holds that both men held an overly narrow view of what a "vision" is. For one thing, he believes that while visions *do* exist, they can be more subtle (like **baptizing** an infant, or a childhood memory whose meaning deepens over time). For another, while he holds his own strong convictions (like opposition to war), he suggests that even the most admirable ethical commitments can blind a person to other concerns (like his grandfather's indifference to his own family's pain). John seems to want his son to value the Ames legacy, while understanding that deep convictions can be lived out in many different, equally meaningful ways.

ESTRANGEMENT AND RECONCILIATION

Gilead is a story of strife between fathers and sons: John's grandfather and father fought bitterly over war and pacifism, John's best friend Boughton is estranged from his troubled son Jack, and John himself struggles to love Jack, who's a kind of honorary son to him. To deal with his regret over the estrangement with John's grandfather, John's father goes on a long, difficult pilgrimage through the Kansas countryside in search of John's grandfather's grave. Tending the grave and praying there seem to bring John's father a measure of real peace, but the reconciliation is limited since John's grandfather is dead.

Meanwhile, Jack Boughton has caused his father, and John, much heartache over the years—especially when, 20 years ago, he had a child with a destitute young woman and abandoned both of them in squalid conditions, leading to the child's death. The whole situation colors John's perceptions of Jack's character, and he's convinced that Jack can never amount to anything good. But near the end of John's life, Jack reveals that he's married to a Black woman in St. Louis, and that they have a son together. For years, he's struggled to provide for them because of unjust anti-miscegenation laws, but he's hidden the truth for fear of hurting Boughton. Recognizing that Jack truly is a good man, John blesses him before he leaves Gilead, letting go of the resentment he's harbored for decades. John also believes that even though Boughton never learns his son's full story, he would completely forgive him regardless, because real love doesn't depend on the recipient being deserving. Through several generations of fraught father-son relationships, the novel suggests that even the closest human beings often don't fully understand one another, and yet when love is unconditional, those barriers can be overcome.

LONELINESS AND LOVE

Most of John's life has been marked by loneliness, ever since his first wife and child died 50 years ago. He regards those lonely decades as his "dark time," a "long, bitter prayer." There's an added bitterness for John in that, as a minister, he spent much of his life guiding other people through milestones like births and marriages, yet those very experiences seemed closed off to him; he was even jealous of big, seemingly happy families like his friend Boughton's. In retrospect, however, he tells his son that he can be grateful for that darkness, because in its midst "a miracle was preparing," which he couldn't have known at the time. When Lila began coming to his church, John fell immediately (and, he thinks, foolishly) in love with her—a passion unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Yet when Lila asked him to marry her and they later had a son—whom John calls his "miracle"—a lifetime's worth of unlikely prayers were answered. The novel suggests that love is fundamentally gracious—that is, its seeds are often sown in the midst of sorrow, and it appears in unexpected, extravagant ways.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WATER

Water symbolizes God's grace—God's freely-given love and redemption. In Christianity, water is strongly associated with the sacrament of baptism, by which a person (whether an infant or an adult) is initiated into the church. The baptismal water symbolizes cleansing and forgiveness of sins by God's grace. Wherever water comes up in *Gilead*, John, as a minister, is undoubtedly thinking about baptism on some level, even if he doesn't explicitly name that association. Because the Iowa prairie is subject to drought, John's delight in water also reflects his awareness that, like God's grace, it's a precious substance that appears as a surprising gift from above. So, sometimes, water appears in the novel as an example of the sudden joy to be found in nature (and, implicitly, God's generosity in freely giving it). Once, John remembers watching a young couple walking through town together and the young man jumping up to grab a tree branch, which showered raindrops onto the laughing pair. He associates the shower with God's blessing and wishes he'd paid attention to such moments more often, suggesting that the

world is filled with such blessings, if one knows where to look. In another such example, while watching his son and his son's friend Tobias hopping around in a sprinkler, he remarks that sane people *should* show such exuberance "when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water."

Rainy days also figure prominently in John's memories—times when God's grace could be seen clearly. One of John's most poignant childhood memories was watching his father and other adults cleaning out a burned-down church while singing hymns in a warm rain. He associates that memory with affliction, and with the idea that suffering can, by God's grace, purify, transform, and even sweeten people's lives by removing extraneous things—rather like the waters of baptism. Much later in John's life, there's the memorable rainy Sunday when Lila walked into John's church for the first time, and he fell in love with her. In this instance, water symbolizes the new life John is about to begin—a completely unexpected gift that transforms his years of lonely suffering.

FIRE AND LIGHT

Fire and light symbolize God's power working within and through the created world. Sometimes that power manifests in fierce and seemingly destructive ways. John associates lightning with his grandfather, an unpredictable and occasionally violent abolitionist. On one occasion, he describes lightning as though it's "Creation tipping its hat" to his grandfather, suggesting that his grandfather's fiery convictions were a force of nature, too. Similarly, he describes his grandfather's grave as looking like "a place where someone had tried to smother a fire," implying that only death could quench his grandfather's spirit—and then just barely. Above the communion table at John's grandfather's church, there hung a banner with the words, "Our God Is a Purifying Fire," summing up his grandfather's divisive view that even violence (like the Union's effort in the American Civil War) can be a manifestation of God's righteousness.

Light also manifests in clearly benevolent ways. John remarks that the sun's light has been constant—it's the Earth that moves—and that means that the light of Creation's first day continues to shine on all that God has made. This suggests that even as people's lives continuously change, God's purposes for humanity have remained steadfast, and He is faithfully bringing them about by His power. In the days before John dies, he reflects that creation is so beautiful that it's as if God breathes on the world and makes it radiant—filled with light. Anyone can see this beauty, he believes, but few people are willing to look. He tells his son that God gives people the courage to see beauty, and that this courage allows people to spend their lives generously. He implies that if his son looks for God's power at work in the world, then he, too, will be empowered by that same light.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador edition of *Gilead* published in 2004.

Pages 3-4 Quotes

❝ I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, Where, and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, Why, and I said, Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old. And you put your hand in my hand and you said, You aren't very old, as if that settled it. I told you you might have a very different life from mine, and from the life you've had with me, and that would be a wonderful thing, there are many ways to live a good life.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

These are *Gilead*'s opening sentences, and they set the tone for the novel as a whole. Rev. John Ames is writing to his young son (unnamed in the novel) because, at 76 and suffering from heart failure, John expects to die before his son is old enough to remember much about him. He begins his letter by recounting a tender conversation between himself and the boy, in which he tried to explain that he might die soon. The boy's simple, insistent questions ("Where" and "Why") convey his inquisitiveness as a six-year-old, as well as his innocence about death. Likewise, John's matter-of-factness about his age and impending death tell the truth while refraining from scaring his son. He even goes on to assure his son that his life after John's death, though probably very different from what he's known so far, can be "wonderful."

Though John doesn't say so here, it's a reasonable guess that John's conversation with his son prompted him to write this letter. The passage's last sentence could almost be read as a thesis for the novel as a whole: that while his son will grow up to have a very different kind of life than John did, that's a good thing, because a good life can be lived in any number of ways. Accordingly, John will spend the bulk of his letter discussing stories and lessons from his own life and telling his son what he needs to know in order to live a good life, since he won't be there to teach him such things in person.

Pages 5-8 Quotes

I really can't tell what's beautiful anymore. I passed two young fellows on the street the other day. I know who they are, they work at the garage. They're not churchgoing, either one of them, just decent rascally young fellows who have to be joking all the time, and there they were, propped against the garage wall in the sunshine, lighting up their cigarettes. They're always so black with grease and so strong with gasoline I don't know why they don't catch fire themselves. They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have. And it seemed beautiful to me.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Early in the novel, John muses on the nature of beauty and how it's become harder for him to understand. He writes about seeing two random young men on the street recently, smoking and joking around. He didn't know them or take part in their conversation, and chances are that if he *had*, he wouldn't have found it enlightening, given that he describes these fellows as "rascally" and their mannerisms "wicked." In short, they're not a sight that most elderly ministers would be inclined to find "beautiful."

But John seems to view their ordinary companionship and jocular behavior as a reminder of the beauty of life and the world in general. It puzzles him, suggesting that he wouldn't always have found them beautiful; yet, knowing he's likely in his last year of life, he increasingly finds that beauty can be spotted in unexpected places, if a person pays attention. The passing reference to fire, when John says he doesn't know why the gasoline-soaked men haven't burst into flame, also gestures toward the novel's use of fire as a symbol of God's active presence in the world, suggesting that God works in unexpected places, too.

Well, see and see but do not perceive, hear and hear but do not understand, as the Lord says. I can't claim to understand that saying, as many times as I've heard it, and even preached on it. It simply states a deeply mysterious fact. You can know a thing to death and be for all purposes completely ignorant of it. A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Father, John's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

John has just been talking about the hard truth that he and his father disappointed each other, even though they meant well by each other. The first sentence is an allusion to a verse in the Book of Isaiah, which Jesus also quotes in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark: "ever hearing, but never understanding [...] ever seeing, but never perceiving." In that context, the verse refers to people's spiritual blindness despite what's right in front of them. John paraphrases this verse by saying that you can know something—or, in this case, a person—very deeply and yet not truly understand them. This speaks to the fact that human beings are too complex to be neatly categorized, a truth John would have become well acquainted with over his years of ministry. His biblical allusion also establishes a pattern that persists throughout the book: he is so conversant with the Bible that he often pulls verses from memory to apply to everyday situations.

John's relationship with his father is one of the novel's storylines that's hinted at more than it's shown. John's father doesn't appear in the story as frequently as his grandfather does, and near the end of the book, it's revealed that they become estranged later in life over John's refusal to leave Gilead. John never explains the breach in detail or whether it was ever healed; his reticence on the subject suggests that it's too painful. But this doesn't mean that their relationship wasn't founded on genuine love—even a broken relationship can be marked by "loyalty and love" as well as "mutual incomprehension," a paradox that shows up in several of the book's strained father-son relationships. John suggests that such a paradox ultimately has to be accepted; it can't always be resolved or overcome in life.

Pages 8-9 Quotes

You two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors. They were very lovely. Your mother is wearing her blue dress and you are wearing your red shirt and you were kneeling on the ground together with Soapy between and that effulgence of bubbles rising, and so much laughter. Ah, this life, this world.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Lila (John's Wife)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

John is watching his wife and son out the window as they blow bubbles and laugh together. He savors the beautiful details of the scene: the bright colors of their clothes, the bright, drifting bubbles, and the sound of shared laughter. His remark that the pair is too focused "to see the celestial consequences of [their] worldly endeavors" has a gently ironic tone; after all, bubble-blowing isn't really something that has lofty consequences. Yet, in another sense, it does, as an act of shared delight in each other and in the world. Even though they don't know it, the activity brings joy to John as he watches, too.

The final words of the quote—"Ah, this life, this world"—have a prayerful sound, as if John is basking in the beauty of this world while also feeling wistful about the fact that he'll soon leave earthly life behind. Simple scenes like this, his tone suggests, are among the most beautiful moments life offers. This sight, in particular, reminds him of God's goodness not in an abstract way, but in a very specific one—God granted him happiness with a wife and child that he never expected. No matter how wonderful heaven is, he will miss such moments terribly when he dies. He also wants his son to someday understand the joy John found in him and to look for simple beauty in his own life, too.

Pages 17-21 Quotes

❝ I write in a small hand, too, as you know by now. Say three hundred pages make a volume. Then I've written two hundred twenty-five books, which puts me up there with Augustine and Calvin for quantity. That's amazing. I wrote almost all of it in the deepest hope and conviction. Sifting my thoughts and choosing my words. Trying to say what was true. And I'll tell you frankly, that was wonderful.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Lila (John's Wife)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

John is musing about the boxes of old sermons he's kept around the house (he's always written his sermons by hand before delivering them at church). One day, his wife drew his attention to the sheer number of sermons, and John's calculations suggest that if he gathered them all into book-length volumes, he'd have the equivalent of 225 books. He lightly observes that this output would place him among the theological greats, like Augustine (a major theologian of the fourth and fifth centuries) and Calvin (the famous 16th-century Protestant reformer). Both those theologians authored huge numbers of sermons and other writings which are still studied today, especially by Protestant pastors like John. John doesn't genuinely see himself as belonging on the same level as these theological forebears, but comparing his written output to theirs gives him an encouraging perspective.

Throughout the novel, John has a rather conflicted attitude about his sermon collection. He puts off reading the old sermons, not because he thinks he'll greatly disagree with them, but because he fears they won't be enough—he'll find that he doesn't have much to show for a lifetime of effort. Yet here he acknowledges that it was a privilege to speak words he believed to be true, to utter his deepest convictions. This is an example of John's awareness of the blessings of being a minister and not just the burdens.

Pages 31-37 Quotes

❝ He could make me feel as though he had poked me with a stick, just by looking at me. Not that he meant any harm to speak of. He was just afire with old certainties, and he couldn't bear all the patience that was required of him by the peace and by the aging of his body and by the forgetfulness that had settled over everything. He thought we should all be living at a dead run.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), John's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31-32

Explanation and Analysis

John is describing his grandfather, a person who's figured prominently in John's life and memories even though he died before John was a teenager. His relationship with his grandfather was complicated—his grandfather's stare felt like being "poked [...] with a stick," hardly a comforting recollection. Yet John believes his penetrating gaze came from his powerful convictions, as his grandfather worked

for the abolitionist cause in Kansas before the outbreak of the Civil War. Later in the book, it even becomes clear that he didn't shrink from violence in support of that cause.

After the war, John's grandfather could never adjust to peacetime life. "The forgetfulness that had settled over everything" suggests that his grandfather felt the country had become complacent after the war and the emancipation of formerly enslaved Americans, and that he was restless to continue striving for justice. The idea that everyone "should [...] be living at a dead run" adds to that sense of restlessness and impatience with those who didn't share his vision. John's grandfather ended up leaving Gilead and returning to Kansas, apparently in search of new opportunities to be useful. John wrestles with his grandfather's legacy all his life. He seems to have been hurt by his grandfather's departure, and yet now that he's an old man himself, he seems to sympathize with his grandfather's drive to keep working and making a difference.

The phrase "afire with old certainties" also fits with the novel's fire symbolism. Fire symbolizes God's presence at work in the world, which is certainly how John's grandfather understood his preaching and antislavery efforts, and how John seems to regard them, too.

❝ He told me once that being blessed meant being bloodied, and that is true etymologically, in English—but not in Greek or Hebrew. So whatever understanding might be based on that derivation has no scriptural authority behind it. It was unlike him to strain interpretation that way. He did it in order to make an account of himself, I suppose, as most of us do.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), John's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

John is commenting on his grandfather's tendency to look for a "blessing" in everything that happened to him, even the disastrous things, like losing an eye during the Civil War. His grandfather's wordplay—linking the words "blessing" and "blood"—requires some unpacking. As John alludes, the Middle English for "bless" (*blētsian*) comes from the Old English for blood (*blōd*), which might have something to do with the ancient use of blood sacrifices. However, that same linguistic link is *not* present in either of the biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek.

Given that his grandfather was a well-educated preacher, John is surprised that he would assert a connection between being "blessed" and "bloodied" as if that connection were found in the Bible. In reality, though the case can be made for the English etymology, there's no *biblical* justification for his grandfather's claim. And as other events have shown (like John's grandfather's strict adherence to Jesus's command to give to the needy), his grandfather was normally very careful to stick to what the Bible actually says.

John is ultimately forgiving, though, of how his grandfather stretches the biblical meaning of "blessing." He suggests that everyone, even an educated and conscientious man like his grandfather, feels the need to "make an account" of themselves, or defend their actions. Sometimes, people will even stretch the truth in order to do that. John's comments show his realism about the people he loves and his willingness to be honest about their shortcomings, even as he honors their legacy. This is especially the case with someone like his grandfather, who supported slavery abolition yet was willing to use violence to support his convictions—something John is more ambivalent about. There's also a touch of humor in the "preacherly" tone of these remarks—as a well-read minister himself, naturally John would take an interest in things like etymologies that most people would overlook.

Pages 44-46 Quotes

❝ When people come to speak to me, whatever they say, I am struck by a kind of incandescence in them, the "I" whose predicate can be "love" or "fear" or "want," and whose object can be "someone" or "nothing" and it won't really matter, because the loveliness is just in that presence, shaped around "I" like a flame on a wick, emanating itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else. But quick, and avid, and resourceful. To see this aspect of life is a privilege of the ministry which is seldom mentioned.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Here, John is reflecting generally on his experience as a

minister, especially as that experience emerged from his so-called "dark time" of loneliness as a widower. These reflections offer insight into John's perspective on what a Christian minister does. A major part of that calling, in his view, is simply listening to the problems and hopes that people bring to him in private. This openness to receiving people as they are and hearing about their challenges is a "privilege" of ministers, a joy and not just a burden. This attitude reflects John's seriousness and humility about his job.

John also suggests that no matter what people say about themselves—no matter what they "love" or "want"—the wonder of human beings consists in their simply being human. He pictures the human soul as a flickering candle-flame that "[emanates] itself in grief and guilt and joy and whatever else," a vitality that has beauty and dignity in and of itself. By contrasting "incandescence" and "a flame on a wick" with the darkness of his lonely years, John also brings in the imagery of light as a symbol of God's presence in the world—especially in contexts where one might not expect to see God at work. This further suggests that if it weren't for John's "dark" years, he wouldn't have become the sensitive minister he is.

Pages 46-50 Quotes

❝ To be useful was the best thing the old men ever hoped for themselves, and to be aimless was their worst fear. I have a lot of respect for that view. When I spoke to my father about the vision he had described to me, my father just nodded and said, "It was the times." He himself never claimed any such experience, and he seemed to want to assure me I need not fear that the Lord would come to me with His sorrows. And I took comfort in the assurance. That is a remarkable thing to consider.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), John's Father, John's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

John has just explained to his son that when John's grandfather was a teenager, he claimed to have had a vision of a pair of chained arms, which he interpreted as God's sign that he must go to Kansas to fight for the abolitionist cause. He tries to explain the mindset behind such a view.

John suggests that the men of his grandfather's generation wanted to be "useful" more than anything else, and they feared aimlessness. He implies that such men were in tune with causes much bigger than themselves, and that he sympathizes with that outlook. John's father seemed to take a different view, however. John's father regarded his own father's radicalism as an expression of his historical context, and he taught John that things like supernatural visions don't happen these days. In doing so, he seemed to want John to feel comforted—to know that God wasn't going to make any radical demands on *his* life as He did on John's grandfather's life.

Later in the book, John explains more about his father's upbringing, which helps account for his father's discomfort with miraculous callings. But John himself seems to regret accepting his father's consolation. He implies that he wishes he had been more open to the "sorrows" God might have asked John to help redress in his own day. This quote sums up the ambivalence John feels about his family legacy: he admires his grandfather's convictions, yet he's hesitant to pursue any radical vision in such a single-minded way.

Pages 50-53 Quotes

❝ While you read this, I am imperishable, somehow more alive than I have ever been, in the strength of my youth, with dear ones beside me. You read the dreams of an anxious, fuddled old man, and I live in a light better than any dream of mine—not waiting for you, though, because I want your dear perishable self to live long and to love this poor perishable world, which I somehow cannot imagine not missing bitterly, even while I do long to see what it will mean to have wife and child restored to me, I mean Louisa and Rebecca. I have wondered about that for many years. Well, this old seed is about to drop into the ground. Then I'll know.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Louisa, Rebecca (Angeline)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most tender and poignant passages in *Gilead*, as John reflects on the miraculous gift his son has been in his life and the somber fact that, by the time his son reads these words, John will be long dead. Yet sorrow isn't the main focus. John believes that after death, he will

become "imperishable," possessing eternal life and incapable of ever dying again. He will be reunited with loved ones who died (like his first wife Louisa and their daughter Rebecca), yet heaven is more than a fulfillment of earthly longings. Indeed, life there—"in a light better than any dream of mine"—will surpass anything he could have imagined on Earth. With typical curiosity, John admits he doesn't know exactly what that will be like, but because he believes that he'll be in God's presence, he's certain it will be good.

There is a tension, though, because John wants his son to understand that he won't spend his time in heaven pining for their eventual reunion. Even though imperishable life is something to look forward to, he doesn't want his son to be in a hurry to leave "this poor perishable world" behind, but to love and enjoy it as John has. Earthly life has a wonder and purpose all its own, and John supposes he will miss aspects of it, even after he's gone on to something better. He hopes his son will embrace the world in all its fragile, passing beauty while he has the chance.

Pages 86-94 Quotes

❝ I believe that the old man did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be. He may, so to speak, have been too dazzled by the great light of his experience to realize that an impressive sun shines on us all. Perhaps that is the one thing I wish to tell you. Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes to you in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time. For example, whenever I take a child into my arms to be baptized, I am, so to speak, comprehended in the experience more fully, having seen more of life, knowing better what it means to affirm the sacredness of the human creature. I believe there are visions that come to us only in memory, in retrospect. That's the pulpit speaking, but it's telling the truth.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), John's Grandfather, John's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

John has been telling his son about the pain his own father's family suffered because of John's grandfather's single-minded pursuit of his ideals. (John's grandfather saw a vision when he was a young man, which he interpreted to mean that he must go to Kansas to fight for the abolition of slavery.)

In John's opinion, his grandfather's vision could have been authentic; that isn't really the issue for John. Rather, he thinks that his grandfather responded to the vision by assuming too much self-importance. John believes that, actually, most people experience "visions," whether they use that term or not. A vision isn't always a vivid dream or something that's seen or heard in a sudden, dramatic flash. A vision could come to a person in the form of a memory, or through an unfolding understanding of something that's happened in the past. John uses baptism as an example—baptizing infants is something that becomes more and more meaningful to him as he grows older and understands more of life. For John, then, a vision is closely related to the idea of wisdom. If a person doesn't exercise wisdom, they might respond to a vision in ways that hurt themselves or others. Though he doesn't say it outright, John implies that this is what happened to his grandfather.

John concludes by acknowledging that he's sort of preaching to his son ("the pulpit speaking"), but he can't help it, because this is such an important lesson for living life well.

Pages 94-99 Quotes

❝ My point here is that you never do know the actual nature even of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed and certain nature. I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand, with that old blackened wreck of a church behind him and steam rising where the rain fell on embers, the rain falling in gusts and the women singing "The Old Rugged Cross" while they saw to things, moving so gently, as if they were dancing to the hymn, almost. [...] I mention it again because it seems to me much of my life was comprehended in that moment. Grief itself has often returned me to that morning, when I took communion from my father's hand. I remember it as communion, and I believe that's what it was.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), John's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

In the previous section, John told his son that he believes there are many different kinds of "visions." This passage offers an illustration of that assertion, as John discusses a vivid childhood memory and how his understanding of it has changed over time—something he believes can constitute a vision.

When John was a little boy, he watched a group of people cleaning up a burned-out church in the rain. At one point, his father offered him a biscuit to eat; the biscuit was sooty from his father's hand. Looking back, John believes that he wasn't just eating a biscuit, but receiving Communion from his father. Even though that wasn't his father's intention at the time, John has come to believe that's what he was truly experiencing.

John uses this story to suggest to his son that we don't always understand what we're experiencing at a given time, and that perhaps the meaning of an experience only becomes clear to us over time. John has returned to this early memory over the years, especially in grief, and somehow the memory has added depth and richness to later experiences—summing up his entire life in a way. By telling his son all this, John encourages the boy to pay attention to his own experiences, be open-minded about them, and search for meaning in them throughout his life.

Pages 110-115 Quotes

❝ And I know, too, that my own experience of the church has been, in many senses, sheltered and parochial. In every sense, unless it really is a universal and transcendent life, unless the bread is the bread and the cup is the cup everywhere, in all circumstances, [...] It all means more than I can tell you. So you must not judge what I know by what I find words for. If I could only give you what my father gave me. No, what the Lord has given me and must also give you. But I hope you will put yourself in the way of the gift.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), John's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

John has been writing to his son about his love for the congregation he's served as minister for decades. Here, he acknowledges that, having lived and worked in Gilead his entire life, he does have a somewhat narrow view of the church. But at the same time, he believes that Christians' experiences are "universal," in the sense that by participating in the same beliefs and rituals, Christians share in the same experience of Christ. That's what he means when he says "the bread is the bread and the cup is the cup"—that anywhere the Lord's Supper (or Communion) is celebrated, it's the same ritual, even if specific details are different. This shared experience extends to other parts of the Christian life, too—and John implies that that universality balances out the individual, particular aspects of the Christian life.

John avoids trying to explain these lofty ideas exhaustively; he believes that, in the end, these things are mysteries that can't be broken down in words. What's more, his son will simply have to experience them for himself, and such mysteries are gifts only God can give. All his son can do, he concludes, is "put [himself] in the way of the gift," or be receptive to God's grace.

Pages 132-139 Quotes

❝ I believe there is a dignity in sorrow simply because it is God's good pleasure that there should be. He is forever raising up those who are brought low. This does not mean that it is ever right to cause suffering or to seek it out when it can be avoided, and serves no good, practical purpose. To value suffering in itself can be dangerous and strange, so I want to be very clear about this. It means simply that God takes the side of sufferers against those who afflict them. (I hope you are familiar with the prophets, particularly Isaiah.)

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Lila (John's Wife)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

John has been telling his son about his mother, Lila, and the mysterious sense of sorrow that surrounds her. John lets this sorrow remain a mystery throughout the book, never revealing to his son (or to readers) what happened to her in her past. It's more important to him, here, to tell his son how to respond to sorrow in a general sense.

John says that there's a special dignity in sorrow, simply because that's the way God wants things to be. God seeks out vulnerable people in order to lift them out of their difficulties—even if he doesn't get rid of those difficulties, he often ennobles people in the midst of them. (John implies that this has been Lila's situation, though again, he doesn't

spell it out.) He encourages his son to study the Old Testament prophets and see for himself that this is how God treats lowly people. John also makes it clear that he isn't valorizing suffering in its own right. Nevertheless, one of the cherished mysteries of John's Christian faith is that God doesn't shun those who suffer, but that God is found right in the midst of their suffering.

Pages 173-179 Quotes

I would call that experience a vision. We had visions in those days, a number of us did. Your young men will have visions and your old men will dream dreams. And now all those young men are old men, if they're alive at all, and their visions are no more than dreams, and the old days are forgotten. [...]

The President, General Grant, once called Iowa the shining star of radicalism. But what is left here in Iowa? What is left here in Gilead? Dust. Dust and ashes. Scripture says the people perish, and they certainly do. It is remarkable. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His Hand is stretched out still.

Related Characters: John's Grandfather (speaker), Rev. John Ames, John's Son (The Boy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175-176

Explanation and Analysis

John has been telling his son about the saintly heroes who once lived in Gilead—men like his grandfather who later came to be regarded as mere eccentrics. To illustrate this, he transcribes a speech his grandfather once gave for a July Fourth celebration in Gilead.

In the speech, John's grandfather describes the vision he believes summoned him to Kansas and the abolitionist cause as a young man. Such visions, he claims, weren't uncommon in those days. He quotes a line from the prophet Joel in the Old Testament, where God says, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." The biblical passage anticipates a day when whole communities—not just select, set-apart individuals—will share in the prophet's calling. But John's grandfather interprets the passage as applying specifically to his own generation, which is now passing into obscurity. The prophetic spirit was evident in his and his friends' efforts to end slavery, he suggests, but they weren't heeded, and now they've been forgotten altogether.

Further, John's grandfather laments that Gilead, and Iowa as a whole, have lost the "radicalism" that once made them hotbeds of antislavery activism. He quotes additional Scriptures, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18) and "For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still" (Isaiah 9:17b), suggesting that because of the people's complacency about injustice, God has rejected them. John's grandfather's allusive way of quoting Scripture suggests that he isn't developing a carefully reasoned sermon, the way John himself would. Rather, he draws from various bits of Scripture (usually prophetic warnings) to support his vision. This supports John's belief that his grandfather held an overly narrow view of what constitutes a vision and how God works within people's lives. At the same time, John also feels judged by his grandfather's more radical beliefs and suspects that even if he wouldn't interpret the Bible in exactly the same way, his grandfather heeded its moral challenges better than most people do today.

So my advice is this—don't look for proofs. Don't bother with them at all. They are never sufficient to the question, and they're always a little impertinent, I think, because they claim for God a place within our conceptual grasp. And they will likely sound wrong to you even if you convince someone else with them. That is very unsettling over the long term. [...]

I'm not saying never doubt or question. The Lord gave you a mind so that you would make honest use of it. I'm saying you must be sure that the doubts and questions are your own, not, so to speak, the mustache and walking stick that happen to be the fashion of any particular moment.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Edward Ames, John's Grandfather, John's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

John has been musing about the fact that each generation struggles with Christianity's claims differently. For his grandfather, the church's response to slavery was the issue of the day, but his grandfather's radicalism proved to be alienating for John's father's generation. For John's generation, radicalism takes a more intellectual form, exemplified by John's brother, Edward, who completed doctoral work in Germany and returned home an atheist, renouncing the beliefs he was raised with.

John deeply respects his brother and even regards him as an influence on his own faith. One form this influence takes, though, is making John take a modest view of the role of rational proofs for God. It's not that John is anti-intellectual or wants to discourage his son from voicing his doubts or questions. As his own dedicated studies make clear, he enjoys cultivating his mind. However, he doesn't believe that intellectual proofs for God will ultimately satisfy someone who's seeking truth. This is because trying to fit God within the parameters of such proofs effectively tries to reduce God to a level that humans can grasp, which isn't possible. In fact, it's arrogant. And John thinks that approaching faith this way can actually *undermine* a person's beliefs in the long run.

Furthermore, while intellectual skepticism often *sounds* novel and exciting, John suggests that it usually isn't—instead, it typically recycles old, stale questions in a fashionable guise. By referring to "the mustache and walking stick [...] of any particular moment," John humorously alludes to the fashionable intellectual of his youth, implying that Edward went along with the doubts such people were voicing. He tells his son that he's not obligated to go along with the mustached doubters of his own day; if and when he asks questions about his faith, he's free to ask his own.

Pages 185-191 Quotes

❝ Having looked over these thoughts I set down last night, I realize I have evaded what is for me the central question. That is: How should I deal with these fears I have, that Jack Boughton will do you and your mother harm, just because he can, just for the sly, unanswerable meanness of it? You have already asked after him twice this morning.

Harm to you is not harm to me in the strict sense, and that is a great part of the problem. He could knock me down the stairs and I would have worked out the theology for forgiving him before I reached the bottom. But if he harmed you in the slightest way, I'm afraid theology would fail me. That may be one great part of what I fear, now that I think of it.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Lila (John's Wife), Jack (John Ames) Boughton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

John has been reflecting on the importance of forgiveness in light of human beings' sacred, irreplaceable existence. But while he believes what he's been saying, he recognizes that he's been using those reflections to distance himself from his most painful fear—namely, that Jack Boughton will somehow hurt the people John loves most in the world. After all, Jack has gravely hurt others, both directly (by neglecting and abandoning his lover and child) and indirectly (by bringing grief and shame on his whole family). John has no evidence that Jack intends anything like this toward Lila or John's son, but given Jack's past, it's an understandable fear.

John pinpoints his problem—that, in the end, John doesn't care how much Jack hurts *him*. Though he's being humorous, he's also sincere when he says that even if Jack knocked him down the stairs, he would be able to act according to his Christian faith and forgive Jack. But if Jack hurt John's family, John fears his theology won't be sufficient to help him face it. In other words, he's afraid that if his faith were put to the harshest test he can imagine—someone causing his loved ones to suffer—he'd discover that his cherished beliefs rang hollow in that moment. This would throw his beliefs, his work, and even his identity into question.

Pages 191-200 Quotes

❝ I have wandered to the limits of my understanding any number of times, out into that desolation, that Horeb, that Kansas, and I've scared myself, too, a good many times, leaving all landmarks behind me, or so it seemed. And it has been among the true pleasures of my life. Night and light, silence and difficulty, it seemed to me always rigorous and good. I believe it was recommended to me by Edward, and also by my reverend grandfather when he made his last flight into the wilderness. I may once have fancied myself such another tough old man, ready to dive into the ground and smolder away the time till Judgment. Well, I am distracted from that project now. My present bewilderments are a new territory that make me doubt I have ever really been lost before.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Edward Ames, John's Grandfather, Jack (John Ames) Boughton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

John has been telling his son about his angst over Jack and his fear about Jack's intentions toward John's family,

especially after John dies. Here, he explains that these fears have taken John into unexplored territory. And that's really saying something—John has never feared taking on difficult questions before. He compares intellectual exploration to "Horeb," the mountain in the desert wilderness where God met with Moses and the Israelites. He also compares it to Kansas, the site of his own wilderness wanderings with his father as a child.

With these comparisons, John means to say that he's never been afraid of venturing to a place where all "landmarks," familiar ideas and beliefs, are left behind. He even finds such exercises invigorating and joyous, even when they're a bit scary. This appetite for exploration makes John feel a kinship with his fearless grandfather. However, John's current challenge—figuring out how to deal with Jack's reappearance and Jack's possible influence on John's family—is different from anything John has considered before. That's because this challenge isn't just intellectual. It deals with the happiness of the people John loves most, and through most of his life, he hasn't been responsible for anyone's well-being but his own. Now he is, and a possible threat to his loved ones is a whole new "territory" that makes him feel he's lost all his bearings.

Pages 200-209 Quotes

❝ I mention this because it seems to me transformations just that abrupt do occur in this life, and they occur unsought and unawaited, and they beggar your hopes and your deserving. This came to my mind as I was reflecting on the day I first saw your mother, that blessed, rainy Pentecost.

That morning something began that felt to me as if my soul were being teased out of my body, and that's a fact. I have never told you how all that came about, how we came to be married. And I learned a great deal from the experience, believe me. It enlarged my understanding of hope, just to know that such a transformation can occur. And it has greatly sweetened my imagination of death, odd as that may sound.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Lila (John's Wife), John's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this, John told his son about a dream he had, in which his grandfather threw water over him as if baptizing him. Now he tells his son that he thinks the most life-changing moments are like this dream: sudden, unexpected, and beyond a person's wildest hopes. The water in the dream, a symbol of grace throughout the novel, also fits with the rainy day John met Lila—suggesting that, like in the dream, Lila came into John's life as an overwhelming expression of God's grace.

Surprisingly, John looks back on the morning he met Lila as the day he began to die. He even identifies the experience of falling in love with her as something that "sweetened [his] imagination of death." By this, John suggests that love swallows up a person's whole existence in a way that's similar to death. Experiencing such a transformation helped John feel less afraid of dying someday. Falling in love with Lila did begin the last phase of John's life, but in a more profound way he can't quite express, it also sharpened his appetite for heaven. This fits with how earthly beauty makes John long for heaven, and vice versa, throughout the novel.

Pages 209-215 Quotes

❝ Why do I love the thought of you old? That first twinge of arthritis in your knee is a thing I imagine with all the tenderness I felt when you showed me your loose tooth. Be diligent in your prayers, old man. I hope you will have seen more of the world than I ever got around to seeing—only myself to blame. And I hope you will have read some of my books. And God bless your eyes, and your hearing also, and of course your heart. I wish I could help you carry the weight of many years. But the Lord will have that fatherly satisfaction.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), Jack (John Ames) Boughton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs just before a pivotal moment in the novel, when John finds out about Jack's wife and child. Notably, even before learning the truth about Jack, John already seems to have arrived at greater peace about his son's future. He'd feared that Jack would end up having a malignant influence in his son's life after Jack's death. Even though that fear hasn't completely disappeared, he commits his son to God here, trusting that although there's much he can't control, his son is in God's safekeeping.

This is a very tender passage, as John wishes he could be

around to enjoy watching his son mature into a man, even an old man—he even likens an arthritic knee to a loose tooth, suggesting that no matter how old his son might be, he'll always seem like John's little boy. He also offers his son advice: to pray, to try to see the world, to read. But most of all, he entrusts his boy to God's blessing and fatherly care, since John won't be there in the years to come. Though the entire novel contains thoughts John wants to share with his son, this passage sums up the most important fatherly sentiments John can offer.

Pages 217-232 Quotes

"We are married in the eyes of God, as they say. Who does not provide a certificate, but who also does not enforce anti-miscegenation laws. The Deus Absconditus at His most benign. Sorry." He smiled. "In the eyes of God we have been man and wife for about eight years. We have lived as man and wife a total of seventeen months, two weeks, and a day."

Related Characters: Jack (John Ames) Boughton (speaker), Rev. John Ames, Della Miles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219-220

Explanation and Analysis

Jack Boughton is finally telling John the story of his past, namely his marriage to Della and the fact that he's had a son with her. Since Jack is white and Della is Black, anti-miscegenation laws—laws prohibiting interracial marriage—are a big part of their story. In Missouri, where Jack and Della have tried to establish a life together, such laws were on the books decades before the Civil War, and they weren't struck down until 1969, *after* the 1967 Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* ruled such laws unconstitutional. So, Jack and Della aren't legally married—they can't be.

Deus Absconditus is simply a Latin term for the "hidden God," a favored concept of Martin Luther and hence influential in Protestant theology more broadly. By using this term, Jack just means that though God doesn't always directly intervene in earthly happenings, he does sometimes intervene in "hidden" ways—in this case, by recognizing Jack's and Della's marriage as valid when governments won't. Jack is basically agnostic, but he uses this term somewhat lightly to suggest that even if he isn't sure God exists, he assumes that if God *is* there, he looks on Jack's situation benignly. Jack's and Della's situation—and the cruelty they've experienced from others because of it—helps shed light on why Jack might struggle to believe in God.

Pages 232-237 Quotes

A stranger might ask why there is a town here at all. Our own children might ask. And who could answer them? It was just a dogged little outpost in the sand hills, within striking distance of Kansas. That's really all it was meant to be. It was a place John Brown and Jim Lane could fall back on when they needed to heal and rest. There must have been a hundred little towns like it, set up in the heat of an old urgency that is all forgotten now, and their littleness and their shabbiness, which was the measure of the courage and passion that went into the making of them, now just look awkward and provincial and ridiculous, even to the people who have lived here long enough to know better. It looks ridiculous to me. I truly suspect I never left because I was afraid I would not come back.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), John's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes just after Jack has told John about his marriage to Della and his struggle to maintain a life for her and their son. Because of the racism he's experienced, Jack doubts he will find a welcome in Gilead, either, and John finds he's unable to reassure Jack on that point. In the aftermath of that conversation, John feels disillusioned with Gilead. Once upon a time, Gilead was a place that sheltered abolitionists and seemed to promise a future of greater freedom and justice for everyone. But John thinks that's "all forgotten now," and all that remains simply looks "awkward and provincial and ridiculous," as though the place never aspired to anything greater than it does now. Even though John knows the town's history better than anyone, he struggles to see past its shabby, unambitious surface now.

This passage echoes John's grandfather's Fourth of July speech earlier in the novel, when he expressed his weariness about a town that seemed to have forgotten its more glorious past. With unusual cynicism, John seems ready to give up on Gilead, too, and to think that his refusal to leave was actually a failure of courage.

Pages 237-244 Quotes

And old Boughton, if he could stand up out of his chair, out of his decrepitude and crankiness and sorrow and limitation, would abandon all those handsome children of his, mild and confident as they are, and follow after that one son whom he has never known, whom he has favored as one does a wound, and he would protect him as a father cannot, defend him with a strength he does not have, sustain him with a bounty beyond any resource he could ever dream of having. If Boughton could be himself, he would utterly pardon every transgression, past, present, and to come, whether or not it was a transgression in fact or his to pardon. He would be that extravagant. That is a thing I would love to see.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), Rev. Robert Boughton, Jack (John Ames) Boughton, John's Son (The Boy)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

Jack has left Gilead, unable to tell his father about his marriage because he fears it would crush the fragile old man. This means that Jack's and Boughton's reconciliation is never complete. Indeed, John implies that Boughton is *not* himself anymore, having passed the point of being strong enough to bear Jack's news, so a full reconciliation isn't possible. Yet John also suggests that if Boughton were his old self, he doesn't doubt the two would have reconciled.

John alludes to the story of the prodigal son here, where the father—who has a perfectly obedient son at home—runs to embrace his wayward other son and lavish him with forgiveness and rich gifts. Knowing his friend as he does, John is certain that if Boughton were in his right mind and former strength, he would act this way. He would forget all past offenses and griefs to wholeheartedly embrace the son who's hurt him the most. John also hints that this is a true picture of what God's love for sinful people is like.

As I have told you, I myself was the good son, so to speak, the one who never left his father's house—even when his father did, a fact which surely puts my credentials beyond all challenge. I am one of those righteous for whom the rejoicing in heaven will be comparatively restrained. And that's all right. There is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality.

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy), John's Father, Rev. Robert Boughton, Jack (John Ames) Boughton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

John has been thinking about how freely Boughton would forgive his son Jack if he could. He follows this up by discussing the other son in the prodigal son story—the son who never left home or did anything to incur his father's displeasure. The Bible story suggests that heaven's rejoicing is greater for the sinner who repents than for the person who has always behaved himself. John admits that he is like that "good son." He even ruefully remarks that since his father left Gilead and he didn't, his good son "credentials" are unchallengeable. But John isn't self-righteous about his good behavior, and he's okay with the fact that he warrants a more restrained heavenly party. After all, he believes that God's love is beyond any deserving or understanding, and human beings can only taste the merest glimpse of it in this life. He also suggests that any forgiveness and reconciliation seen in this world offers a "parable" of what heaven will someday reveal about God's love for humanity.

Pages 245-247 Quotes

It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance—for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light. That is what I said in the Pentecost sermon. I have reflected on that sermon, and there is some truth in it. But the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?

Related Characters: Rev. John Ames (speaker), John's Son (The Boy)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

In one of the final passages in *Gilead*, John reflects on the beauty of this world. Earthly beauty has meant a great deal to him in contemplating death, as it makes him ponder the joys of heaven to come and also makes him appreciate Earth's fleeting joys of that much more. Here, he delves into that idea a bit more deeply, noting that most of the time, God's light within creation isn't obviously visible. But that doesn't mean it isn't there. In fact, John suggests that such beauty is present all the time; the question is whether a person has the ability to see it or not—that Earth "shines like transfiguration." (This is a reference to the biblical account when Jesus took his disciples Peter, James, and John up a mountain to pray, and Jesus was "transfigured" with an astonishing light.) John hints that witnessing such "transfiguration" takes courage, because it requires a person to be truly open to the world's pain as well as its joy—otherwise, there would be nothing to divinely transform.

The motif of divine light is present throughout the novel and seems to grow stronger the closer John gets to his own death, suggesting that as the boundary between this world and the next gets thinner, the more heavenly light spills over in unlikely places (like unassuming Gilead). John prays that his son will have the courage to see this light, too.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PAGES 3-4

John Ames recalls last night, when he said that someday he might be gone. He was talking to an unnamed "you," who seems to be his child. In response to the child's questions ("where" and "why"), John explains that he will go to be with the Good Lord, because he is old. He adds that his child might have a very different life at that point, and that "there are many ways to live a good life." He admires his little son's look of "furious pride," so like his wife's, and thinks that he'll miss those looks.

Right away, the novel establishes that the protagonist, John Ames, doesn't expect to live long. Moreover, though John is "old," he has a son who's young enough to struggle with the concept of his father's impending death. This detail prompts the reader's curiosity, since it suggests that John had a child at an unusually late stage in life, and that he hasn't gotten to enjoy very many years with his son. It also establishes tension, as the father clearly wants to use what little time he has to prepare his son for life—a life he probably won't be there to see or guide for himself.

John reflects that it's silly to think that the dead miss anything. If his son reads this letter after he's grown up, as John intends, then John will already have been dead a long time. By that time, he'll know most of what there is to know about being dead.

Throughout the novel, John reflects frankly about death. Though he doesn't seem to fear death, he's also honest that he doesn't entirely know what to expect from the experience. He even has a curious and gently whimsical tone when he reflects on death, like when he muses that by the time his son reads this, John will have lots of firsthand experience with being dead. At this point, it also becomes clear that Gilead *is written in epistolary form—that is, in a series of letters (or one very long letter) from John to his future adult son.*

Over the years, so many people have asked John what death is like, sometimes when they're on the cusp of death themselves. When he was a young man, even elderly people would ask him this question, seeming sure that he knew. Back then, he'd tell them that death was like going home, that we don't have a home in this world. But then he'd walk home to his old house and make himself coffee and a sandwich while listening to the radio.

Evidently, John's line of work involves being with people when they're near death. Because of his role, people assume that he has clear and certain answers about death. This also suggests that most people seek answers about death and that those questions feel more pressing as people age. When John was younger, he would give people a rather unsatisfying, stock answer to their questions about death. He recognizes a tension here: that even though he told people that the world isn't *a true home, he finds comfort in his own home and familiar routine.*

John asks his son if he remembers this house—he must, at least a little bit. John has lived in this house, a parsonage, for most of his life. Most family friends and relatives also lived in parsonages. He used to think this parsonage was the worst of them all—so drafty and dreary—but that was because he lived alone and *didn't* feel at home in the world. Now he does.

Throughout John's letter, he moves from one subject to another in a stream-of-consciousness way. Talking about home in general leads him to reflect on this house in particular. It's a parsonage, or a house that a church provides for its minister and, usually, the minister's family. This confirms what John's earlier talk about caring for people on their deathbed implied: that he's a Christian minister. John, however, seems to have spent many years in this parsonage living alone. Since then, something has changed—and his view of the world has changed with it.

John knows his heart is failing. He figures this is to be expected at his age, and he's grateful for his life. He only regrets that he has so little to leave behind for his wife and son—just some old books, and no money to speak of. If he'd known he would become a father, he would have set aside more. That's the main thing John wants to tell his son—that he regrets the hard times he and his mother will surely go through.

John shifts the subject back to the present. His heart condition means that he can't expect to live very long. He wouldn't mind so much, it seems, if it weren't for the fact that he'll leave behind his wife and son. Again, John implies that his wife and son came into his life unexpectedly, making his final years much different than he'd planned.

PAGES 5-8

John hears his wife coaxing his son to sleep in the next room. He can't make out the words but thinks his wife's singing voice is beautiful. She just laughs when he tells her that. He reflects that it's hard to tell what's beautiful anymore. He remembers seeing two "decent rascally young fellows" smoking and laughing in the sunshine the other day, and thinking the sight was beautiful. It made him wonder where laughter comes from, and what it gets out of a person's system—like crying, you have to laugh until you're done.

Thinking about his unexpected marriage and fatherhood draws John's attention to his wife's voice in the next room, and from thinking about her beautiful voice, he begins to reflect on beauty in general—something he does a lot throughout the novel. By saying that it's hard to tell what's beautiful anymore, John implies that in his old age, he sees beauty in places where he might not have recognized it before. He even sees it in young men joking around and enjoying life. John muses that laughter is cathartic in some way, like crying. Though he doesn't completely understand the nature of laughter, John finds it beautiful. It seems that the more mystery John sees in life, the more beauty he finds, too.

John reflects that the young men quieted down when they saw him walking by, and that he wished, as on other occasions, that he could tell them he enjoys a good joke. But he knows from experience that people prefer that ministers stay "a little bit apart." It's the strangest thing about his life as a minister—the way people change the subject when you're around. And yet, in private, people reveal incredible things. It goes to show that there's a lot beneath life's surface—"malice and dread and […] so much loneliness."

John observes that he enjoys a good laugh as much as anyone, but that people generally put ministers on a pedestal, as if they're untouched by everyday pleasures like humor. Though John doesn't agree with that view, he also implies that this sense of separation allows people to unburden themselves to ministers about their struggles and pain. This glimpse beneath the surface of life—and of other people—becomes a key theme in John's ministry.

John's grandfather on his mother's side was a preacher, and his father's father and grandfather, too. Such a life came naturally to them, and they were good people. But John regrets that he's failed to learn from them to control his temper. He warns his son to watch for the same tendency in himself, because anger is terribly destructive.

John's consideration of ministry in general leads him to think about his family's legacy in that profession. But even though he's respectful of his forebears, John doesn't shrink from naming their faults, either—like anger. This balanced tone establishes how John will talk about his family throughout the novel. Notably, he also seems more concerned about his son's moral character than whether his son follows his ancestors' footsteps to become a minister, too.

John says he's going to be candid now. He doesn't mean his father any disrespect, and he knows his father always acted according to his principles. But somehow his way of acting on his principles could be disappointing to people. And John knows for a fact that he disappointed his father, too. Yet they both meant well by each other. He observes that "you can know a thing to death and be […] completely ignorant of it."

When talking about loved ones, John often alludes to events he explains only gradually in the course of writing to his son, so readers don't necessarily have all the information they would need to follow his train of thought. Here, for instance, John indicates that his father was a man of principle whom he admired. But at the same time, he implies that for all their good intentions, the two had a strained relationship. This tension between personal conviction and family will be explored throughout the book. With his remark about ignorance, John further suggests that just knowing something or someone well—even a close family member—doesn't mean you truly understand them.

John's point in saying this is that a regretful person will assume you're angry at them, even if you're just quietly going about your life. They can make you doubt yourself, which is a waste of time. John regrets not figuring this out earlier in life. Just thinking about it now makes him feel irritated, which he realizes is a form of anger.

Again, John alludes to people and situations without yet explaining them. Essentially, though, he says that people often project their own regrets onto others, which can damage relationships. He also implies that such relational tension is at the root of the angry tendency he mentioned earlier.

John observes that a benefit of a religious vocation is that it helps one concentrate, to understand one's obligations and what one can ignore. This is a big part of whatever wisdom he has to offer. He notes that his son has blessed their home for almost seven years, late in John's life. It happened too late for John to do anything to provide for his son and his wife. He thinks and prays about this a lot.

John shifts back to more general observations about his work as a minister. Basically, he says that a perk of the role is that it helps a person differentiate between what's truly important and what isn't. He also suggests that his wife and son are among the most important obligations in his life—but that because they entered his life so unexpectedly late, he didn't prepare for them. Often, it seems, the biggest blessings in life appear in this surprising way.

PAGES 8-9

It's a beautiful spring day. John notes that his son was almost late for school today because he'd procrastinated on his math homework. He observes that his son is so serious about everything he does, like the "half sadness and half fury" he saw for the first time when he met the boy's mother (Lila). He first noticed it in his son when the boy was three, trying to fix a broken crayon, looking much older than his age.

John's letter to his son often describes everyday events and observations because, by the time his son is grown up, he might not remember much about the life he shared with John before John's death. Here, John also alludes to sadness and pain in his wife's background. He doesn't explain their source here, but he suggests that sorrow and anger are so much a part of Lila that the same things appear in their son, too.

John notes that his father left him a trade, which is also his vocation. It was second nature to him because he grew up with it; but he knows that for his son, that probably won't be the case.

John doesn't distinguish between the ideas of "trade" and "vocation." Usually, "trade" is associated with hands-on skills requiring special training, whereas "vocation"—especially in a religious context—often refers to a calling, more than just a job, to which a person is especially suited. John seems to regard his ministerial work as a matter of both *technical skill and spiritual calling. Both aspects of the job came to him easily because he grew up in a pastor's family. But John seems accepting of the fact that his son's life will probably be different, and that for the first time in several generations, his son probably won't carry on the family "trade."*

John notices a fat blue bubble drifting past his window and looks down to see the boy and Lila in the yard, blowing bubbles at the cat, Soapy, who leaps in the air. They are having too much fun to notice the "celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors." John admires his wife's blue dress and his son's red shirt and their shared laughter, thinking, "Ah, this life, this world."

John's reflections are rarely detached from the delight he finds in everyday events, like his wife and son blowing bubbles at the cat. Simple details like his loved ones' clothes and laughter remind John of the beauty present in this world—even though he believes he'll soon be with God in heaven, that doesn't mean he doesn't find earthly life incredibly precious. His remark about "celestial consequences" is playful but genuine—the bubbles literally float skyward, and at the same time, John implies that simple actions on Earth—even games with loved ones—somehow impact eternity as well, even if we're unaware of it.

PAGES 9-17

Lila has told their son that John is writing his "begats," which pleased the boy, so John thinks about where to begin. He, John Ames, was born in 1880 in Kansas; his father and mother were John and Martha Turner Ames, and his grandfather and grandmother were John and Margaret Todd Ames. As he writes, he is 76 years old, 74 of which he has spent here in Gilead, Iowa.

"Begats" is a colloquial way of referring to the Old Testament's lengthy genealogies (in archaic English translations, the formula is usually "X begat *Y"). John's wife humorously applies the same word to John's family history. John uses this as an opportunity to begin writing in a more formal, structured way than he's done to this point, introducing his parents and grandparents and explaining that he's lived most of his life in the small Midwestern town of Gilead.*

When John was 12, his father took him to his grandfather's grave. At this point, the family had been living in Gilead for about 10 years. John's grandfather had been born in Maine and moved to Kansas in the 1830s. As an old man, his grandfather had gone off and become some kind of traveling preacher, they thought. Then he died and was buried in Kansas, near a town that had been almost abandoned due to drought. The town had been settled by Free Soilers.

John begins his family history in an unusual way: instead of beginning with his birth, he starts with a visit to his grandfather's grave, suggesting that this was a pivotal event in John's coming of age. It also gives John's writing a more conversational feel—after all, people don't often tell a story in strictly chronological order. John's grandfather seems to have been drawn to Kansas, where John was born and lived before the family moved to Iowa. The Free Soilers were a political party that sought to stop slavery's expansion into western territories like Kansas.

It took months for John's father to figure out where his father was buried. After many letters of inquiry, somebody sent John's father a package containing the grandfather's watch and old Bible. John's father grieved that his last words to his father had been angry ones and that they'd never reconciled. John and his father traveled to his grandfather's grave by train and wagon, and eventually on foot over dusty, rutted roads. Because of the drought, it was a laborious, thirsty journey, and at times, John believed they would die.

John doesn't explain what happened, but his father and grandfather apparently had a serious falling-out, after which they were estranged until his grandfather's death. John's father seems to have taken this rupture to heart, since he went to great lengths to locate his father's grave, undertook a difficult search to find the spot, and took his young son along on the risky journey. These actions suggest that reconciliation between estranged loved ones—especially fathers and sons—is extremely important, even if that reconciliation can only be partial.

With directions from a lady on a farmstead, they eventually found the remote, overgrown graveyard. Finally they found a grave with "REV AMES" marked on it in bent nails. As evening fell, they walked back to the lady's farm to sleep and got up early to do chores to thank her for feeding them. Then they walked back to the graveyard and repaired its falling-down fence and graves as best they could. When they said goodbye to the farm lady for the last time, she cried, but when they offered further help, she insisted that she'd be fine once the rain came.

John's memory of the neglected graveyard, the lonely homesteader, and the drought-stricken landscape captures the desperation of life on the Kansas plains in the late 19th century. His grandfather's grave, with its stark lettering, fits into that environment, deepening the sense that John's grandfather died alone and estranged from the rest of his family.

John couldn't imagine a lonelier place than the drought-blighted graveyard. He still dreams about the childish guilt he felt when he accidentally stepped on small graves obscured by weeds. When they finished cleaning up, they scattered wildflower seeds they'd saved from their own garden. Then his father sat silently by John's grandfather's grave for a long time.

John vividly remembers his visit to the graveyard; the memory has clearly made a deep impression on him, especially giving him a sense of respect for the dead. Scattering wildflower seeds seems to have been a way of honoring his grandfather and the rest of the dead by adding some beauty to this forsaken place.

Finally, John's father stood up and prayed a long prayer, remembering his own father before God and asking God's pardon. The prayer was so long that John eventually opened his eyes and looked around, noting the full moon rising in the east as the **sun** set in the west. Not wanting to startle his praying father, John kissed his hand and told him to look at the moon. They admired the sight for a long time, and at last his father said he was glad to know that such a place could be beautiful.

Even though John's grandfather is dead, and face-to-face reconciliation isn't possible, John's father seems to find a measure of peace through praying at his father's graveside. He can't ask his father's forgiveness for their argument, but he can ask for God's, and he believes his father is with God. The beautiful moonrise and sunset symbolizes God's grace transforming even the most desolate places, similar to how the wildflower seeds that John and his father scattered might one day bloom and transform the graveyard.

When they got home less than a month later, they were so much thinner and their clothes so tattered that John's mother wept at the sight of them. John and his father, though, looked back on it as a great adventure—even the time an old farmer shot at them for stealing some carrots so they wouldn't starve (though his father left a dime on the front stoop of the farmer's house). Once they'd escaped and began to say grace over the tough, tasteless carrots, they both started laughing until they cried. It was only later that John thought about how disastrous it would've been if his dad had been shot and killed, leaving him stranded.

The journey through Kansas is memorable for John not just because of their experience in the graveyard, but because of the time he spent with his father. Through their perilous misadventures, the two bonded in a way that has stuck with John. In a way, their journey was John's initiation into the family legacy that John will discuss throughout the novel.

After that incident, John's father stopped gleaning from people's farms and started knocking on doors instead. He didn't like doing this because when people found out he was a preacher—which they invariably did, because he somehow looked like one—they'd sometimes offer more food than they could spare. When his father would offer chores in exchange for food, they'd often ask for prayer instead. Later on, John and his father would always laugh about the worst parts of their wanderings, and his mother, annoyed by this, just told them never to tell her the details of what they went through.

John's father's role as a minister gave him a special status, even among strangers. John implies that his father didn't like being recognized in this way, because people tried to give him food they couldn't spare. This shows that John's father was humble and didn't see his vocation as an excuse to take advantage of people. At the same time, other people—especially isolated families on the prairie who might not have access to a church—apparently jumped at the chance to have a minister pray for them personally. To them, prayer and spiritual companionship were worth the price of precious food.

John recalls that in some ways he was his mother's only child. Before he was born, she'd bought a home health care book, "a good deal more particular than Leviticus," and she took it very seriously. When John returned home, his mother put him straight to bed and fed him six or seven meals a day, which was tedious. But John looks back on the journey with his father as a great blessing. He remembers his father being vigorous into old age; every day they played catch after supper until dark. Of course, John remembers being a vigorous old man, too, until recently.

Because John focuses on father-son relationships when writing to his son, most of the women in his life, especially his mother, appear more in the background. But even though his father's company is a sweeter memory for him, John remembers that his mother doted on him, taking pains to preserve his health. The health care book being "more particular than Leviticus" is a humorous allusion to the Old Testament book, which contains detailed laws that the ancient Israelite priests, or Levites, must follow.

PAGES 17-21

When John was a young man, he married a girl, Louisa, during his last year of seminary. They'd grown up together. They moved back to Gilead so that John could take over his father's pulpit while his parents took a sabbatical. But his wife soon died in childbirth, as did their baby, Angeline. He recalls the blessing of getting to hold Angeline for a few minutes before she died. Boughton had named and **baptized** her before John got home. Otherwise, they would have named her Rebecca.

John jumps from describing his childhood to his early marriage, which he hasn't mentioned before. It turns out that John experienced family life before he had Lila and their son, but his first marriage took place many decades ago and only lasted for a short time. Death and grief have impacted John personally, not just as a minister. This is also the first the fellow minister Boughton enters the story; he and John have obviously been close, if Boughton named John's dying baby daughter.

Last Sunday during supper at Boughton's, John noticed his son studying Boughton's arthritic hands. While he looks older, Boughton is actually younger than John. His daughter Glory lives with him now, her marriage having failed. John says it would be a pity if Boughton's occasional crankiness is mainly what his son remembers. In his prime, Boughton was a gifted preacher.

Age changes people, and John wants his son to know that his childhood impressions—like Boughton's frailty and crankiness—don't capture the man accurately. Perhaps John is also thinking that his son might remember him *as a cranky, frail old man, too.*

John always wrote his sermons out word for word; there are boxes of them stored around the house, but he's never gone back to look at them. He's a little afraid to—maybe he'd discover that he worked so hard on them just to keep other people from bothering him. Somehow, solitude was a balm for his loneliness in those days. Writing also felt a lot like praying—it felt like being with someone, much as writing these letters feels like being with his son.

Thinking about Boughton's preaching makes John think about his own. From the perspective of old age, John wonders about his motives when writing all those sermons. Especially during the long years of living alone, he recognizes, it's possible that sermon-writing helped him cope with his deep loneliness.

John's wife is proud of his hours spent writing and of his books. She was the one who pointed out the sheer number of sermons and prayers John has written—probably coming out to around 67,500 pages, if you add up 50 sermons a year for 45 years. And if 300 pages make a volume, then that would add up to 225 books, which "puts [him] up there with Augustine and Calvin." John notes that he did almost all his writing "in the deepest hope and conviction," seeking to be truthful, and that was wonderful. He's even grateful for the lonely years, even though looking back, they seem "like a long, bitter prayer." His wife walked into church in the middle of that prayer.

As a Protestant minister, John would have been responsible for preaching a sermon to his congregation weekly; the sermon would often be the high point of the worship service, as John explained the week's designated Bible readings and applied them to congregants' lives. By likening himself to Augustine and Calvin (revered theologians of the fifth and sixteenth centuries, respectively), John is being a bit tongue-in-cheek. He doesn't mean that he's on the same intellectual level as these great figures but makes the wry observation that his volume of written output might rival their published writings. He also acknowledges that even if his motivations were mixed during his lonely years, he also believed what he preached, and he regards the ability to preach truthfully as a privilege.

John reflects on the peace of an ordinary Sunday, "like standing in a newly planted garden after a warm rain," full of quiet life. You just need to avoid trampling on it. That particular day was especially quiet, with much-needed **rain** falling on the roof and windows of the church. Though when his future wife walked in, he worried that the very ordinariness might seem dull to her.

Traditionally, Protestants like John would regard Sunday, or the Sabbath, as a day set aside for worship and quiet, restful activities instead of work. This is reflected in John's language about a watered garden filled with the promise of life. Throughout the novel, he associates water with God's love, which is given freely. Thus it's especially appropriate that it rained on the day he met Lila, whom he sees as an expression of God's love.

If Rebecca had lived, she would be 51 now, 10 years older than his wife is now. John used to think about what it would be like if Rebecca suddenly walked into the church. He imagined her coming back from a place where "everything is known," and how paltry his hopes and mere speculations might sound to her by comparison. He believes that mindset prepared him for what it was like when his future wife walked in. It seemed like she didn't really belong there, and yet she belonged there more than any of the rest of them did.

This passage makes it clear just how much younger Lila is than John. Though readers could guess that Lila was significantly younger because she has a young son, it's now clear that at 41, Lila is about 35 years younger than John. But in this passage, John's focus is on the wonder of preaching to Lila for the first time. If his daughter Rebecca could come to church from heaven, she'd presumably know everything he was preaching about already. Lila, too, seemed like an outsider: even though she wasn't a churchgoer, she seemed to have wisdom that John didn't, and it made him self-conscious.

John's future wife's seriousness seemed almost like anger. He remembers how closely she watched as he **baptized** two babies that day. He noted her expression of "stern amazement" afterward. Six months later, he baptized *her*, and she cried. He felt like asking her what it all meant. He never doubted that baptisms were meaningful, but he always felt "outside the mystery of it" somehow.

When Lila first came to church and later got baptized herself, she seemed to take everything with life-or-death seriousness. Unlike the rest of the congregation, everything she saw and experienced was new, not a familiar ritual she could take somewhat for granted. John shows his characteristic humility in that he doesn't presume to understand everything about his faith or ministry, even after decades of baptizing people. Even a brand-new Christian like Lila, he suggests, might grasp spiritual truths that are beyond his reach.

PAGES 21-28

This might seem trivial, but John doesn't believe it is. He and his childhood friends were very religious children from religious families in a religious town, which shaped their behavior quite a bit. One day, they **baptized** a litter of skinny barn cats. One of the girls dressed the cats in a doll's dress, and John applied the water to the cats' heads and pronounced the baptismal formula. Eventually, the mother cat found them all by the creek and carried the kittens off one by one. The children lost track of which cats were still unbaptized and fretted about this.

John's thoughts continue to follow a stream-of-consciousness path, as reflecting on Lila's baptism leads him to a formative childhood experience. He suggests that he and his friends grew up in a more religious context than is common in his son's day, which helps explain their imaginative play. The scenario—baptizing kittens—is obviously a funny one. But the fact that the children took it seriously suggests that they believed practices like baptism conveyed something real, even on cats.

Later, John casually asked his father what would happen if you **baptized** a cat. His father replied that the Sacraments must always be treated with the greatest respect, which didn't really answer John's question, but he got the message. He stopped baptizing until he got ordained.

John's Protestant beliefs include two sacraments: baptism (initiation into the church) and the Lord's Supper, which will come up later. John's father (also a minister) warns John that these are sacred practices, not something to play with.

Louisa took one of those cats home, and she still had it when she and John got married. It eventually disappeared, probably caught stealing rabbits, even though it was a Christian cat. A Baptist friend quipped that it should've been named Sprinkle. (He believed in **baptism** by full immersion, and the cats should have been grateful that John didn't.) John still remembers what it felt like to place his hands on those cats' heads. Blessing a creature is different from simply petting it, and it stays in one's mind. To this day, John wonders what blessing those "baptisms" really conferred on the cats—there's a power in acknowledging the sacredness of something. He doesn't expect that his son will go into the ministry someday, but he's simply pointing out that the vocation has some distinctive advantages.

Even though baptizing the cats was an irreverent thing to do, John looks back on the memory with humor, joking that a baptized cat should have been too holy to kill rabbits, and counting the cats lucky that he didn't baptize them with a full Baptist dunking. But, more seriously, the pretend baptisms taught John something that has stayed with him since he became a minister: that there's a unique power in blessing any creature, whether it's a human being or a cat. He implies that all creatures, because they're made by God, are inherently sacred, and that the act of baptism simply affirms that sacredness.


Ludwig Feuerbach had some wonderful remarks about **baptism**, particularly the fittingness of water—a naturally pure and spotless substance—as a vehicle of the Holy Spirit. Even though Feuerbach was an atheist, he has some of the best things to say about religion's joyful aspects, and he loves the world, too. Of course, he makes the significant error of thinking that it's possible to have pure joy without any religion at all.

John names Feuerbach, a 19th-century German philosopher, as an important influence on his faith. Interestingly, Feuerbach wasn't even a Christian, but John thinks Feuerbach still had valuable insights into Christian theology, and he identifies with the philosopher's love of this world. At the same time, John departs from Feuerbach in that he believes religion is essential to real joy—presumably because John believes that God is the source of joy.



Boughton doesn't care for Feuerbach because he shook many people's faith, but John figures the fault lies as much with those people as with Feuerbach—"some people just go around looking to get their faith unsettled." That's been especially fashionable over the past century or so. Once, John's brother Edward gave him a book called *The Essence of Christianity* in an attempt to shock him out of his naïve faith; he believed he was doing John a favor. John always looked up to Edward. Still, he ended up living out the very sort of life Edward had warned him against, and he's pretty happy with it overall.

John thinks that if someone is grounded in their beliefs, reading dissenting viewpoints shouldn't pose a threat. In other words, if someone is shaken by reading Feuerbach, it probably means they already had doubts about what they believe. John sees this as the real problem with fashionable skeptics: they were insecure to begin with. At one point, John's brother Edward gave him one of Feuerbach's most famous books to try to undermine his faith. It didn't work, John implies, because John was secure in what he believed.


Edward, 10 years John's senior, studied at Göttingen. John didn't really know him as a child. There had also been two sisters and a brother who died of diphtheria within two months, and Edward had known them while John didn't. John was always aware that he had missed out on the life his other siblings shared. After Edward returned from Europe with a mustache and a doctorate, having published a monograph on Feuerbach, everyone was in awe of him. But he also came back as an atheist, so he didn't become a preacher as everyone had expected. Instead he became a professor of German literature and philosophy and raised a big family. Though John rarely saw him, Edward sent a check to the church each year to repay the congregation for their support for his education. John knew he was a good man.

Earlier, John referred to the fact that he was like his mother's only child. It turns out that he came from a much larger family, but most of the siblings died, and there was a big gap between John and Edward. In fact, Edward was the Ames brother who everyone thought was destined to follow in their father's footsteps as a minister. Even though Edward defied these expectations by rejecting Christianity, he showed integrity by paying back those who invested in his education. John admires his brother for this and doesn't seem to hold a grudge against him for his departure from the Ames legacy.

One day, Edward and their father had a confrontation at the dinner table. Their father asked Edward to say grace, but Edward explained that he couldn't do this in good conscience. Turning pale, their father said that Edward could show some respect for their family traditions. Edward replied that he has now "put away childish things," prompting his father to leave the table and his mother to weep silently. Later, John walked Edward to the hotel. At the time, his parents must have thought that John would end up following in Edward's footsteps and becoming another grief to them.

Between Edward and his father, things were different. Their father took Edward's refusal to say grace as a personal insult instead of an act of conscience. Granted, Edward's response does *seem pointedly offensive: he quotes a Bible verse that says, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child [...] but when I became a man, I put away childish things." In other words, Edward calls his parents' faith childish, something he's outgrown.*

John will be sure to set aside the Feuerbach among the books he's keeping for his son. When he was young, he read it in secret because it was associated with Edward's atheism; but he doesn't believe there is anything harmful in it. He has made some marginal notes which his son might find useful.

John concludes this memory by making it clear that he hopes his son will read Feuerbach someday, too. This suggests that he's not worried that exploring other points of view will hurt his son, and that in fact it will be a way for his son to feel closer to John after he's gone.

Thinking of Feuerbach and joy reminds John of something else. He remembers walking to the church a few years ago, seeing a young couple strolling ahead of him. He remembers the young man jumping up and grabbing a branch, sending glistening raindrops showering onto him and the woman, and they laughed and ran. John found the scene beautiful. In a moment like that, it was easy to believe that **water**'s main purpose is for blessing. Nowadays he wishes he'd paid more attention to such things.

John's memory of the young couple getting sprinkled with raindrops is associated with baptism in his mind. The memory—a spontaneous expression of delight in human relationship and in nature—is also an illustration of the kind of joy that John finds in his Christian faith. He implies that if one pays attention, such examples of joy can be seen almost anywhere.

PAGES 29-31

John paid Boughton a visit and found him distraught, as tomorrow would've been his 54th anniversary. Boughton told John he's tired of being alone, and that when they were young, marriage and family really *meant* something. Glory rolled her eyes at this and explained that they haven't heard from Jack for a while. But when Glory and Boughton started quarreling, John walked back home. He reflects that though Boughton is good-hearted, he says things he shouldn't when he's uncomfortable.

An irony in John's close friendship with Boughton is that Boughton was married for decades and now finds himself a lonely widower, while John spent decades alone and now enjoys a happy family life for the first time. In his loneliness, Boughton waxes nostalgic about the past. Glory suggests that her father's nostalgia has to do with his estranged son, Jack, whose story will unfold later in the novel.

John is sorry that his son is alone. He's serious and shy and mostly watches other children from a distance. He's like his mother that way. John knows that Lila makes an unlikely minister's wife and that it's hard for her. Yet he thinks she is the kind of person whom Jesus would have spent time with during His earthly life. She has "an earned innocence [...] stripped of all the accretions of smugness and pretense[.]" Maybe he should preach on that in Advent.

John's visit with Boughton prompts thoughts about his own family situation. Neither his wife nor his son fit into their social environment easily, and given John's own lonely past, he worries about what this will mean for his loved ones' future. Yet he finds comfort in the fact that, in the Bible, Jesus was often drawn to misfits and outcasts. Lila, in particular, has an "innocence" that comes from her hard experience in life; anything inauthentic has been stripped away from her. John implies that this kind of personality is especially receptive to God.

John thinks that his wife knows the world more intimately than he does. He wishes he could spare her and his son from poverty, but when he said this out loud, his wife pointed out that she's been poor all her life and knows how. Yet he can't help praying that they'll be spared the kind of life that Jesus Himself blessed by example.

Despite the fact that he's much older than Lila, John feels that in some ways, his wife has a more realistic, less sheltered understanding of the world. Again, Lila's background isn't revealed, but it's clear that she has experienced poverty. Even though John believes there's no dishonor in this—Jesus was poor, after all—he grieves that Lila and their son might face poverty again after he dies.

PAGES 31-37

John has been acquainted with "holy poverty." His father's father never kept anything that he could give away. He thinks his grandfather was some kind of a saint. He lost an eye while fighting in the Civil War, but he preferred to say that he had kept one. He had a certain kind of innocence that could make life hard for his family, interpreting biblical commandments so plainly—like "To him who asks, give."

Thinking about poverty reminds John of his grandfather, his son's great-grandfather. In his grandfather's case, however, poverty was a form of eccentricity, as he interpreted the Bible in a literal way. The quoted command comes from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. In the context where it appears, the verse is likely not intended to be an absolute statement, but John's grandfather applied it that way, giving away anything to anyone.

John wishes that his son could have known his grandfather. His single eye used to stare straight through John. He was "afire with old certainties" and struggled to adapt to peace and aging. In John's parents' day, times were hard, and his grandfather would give away everything, even the blankets off his bed. For a while, John's mother even made him wear his church clothes all the time so his grandfather couldn't give them away.

John's description of his grandfather conveys the weight of the family legacy. Though John might not agree with all of the "old certainties" that motivated his grandfather, those convictions made him a force to be reckoned with. In the absence of a war to fight, John's grandfather looked for other ways to live out his convictions. Though comical, his radical measures could make life difficult for those closest to him.

John recalls a time when some folks approached his grandfather for help, so his grandfather asked John's mother for money. She fished 45 cents out of a can of baking powder—a generous sum—but he wasn't fooled. He knew she had money hidden away in the bodice of her dress, and she stared him down until he finally walked away. But she respected him, and they all missed him when he was gone.

As the novel is more focused on father-son relationships, this is one of the rare moments where John offers a more vivid glimpse of his mother. Times were obviously very difficult, and his mother was both resourceful and firm in defense of her family's needs, though she was also able to be generous.

Looking back, John believes that his grandfather's eccentricities were "thwarted passion" and "pent grief." He knew his father felt judged by his restlessness and "pillaging," and when the bitterness flared up, they would call each other "Reverend" with perfect politeness.

A Civil War veteran and slavery abolition activist, John's grandfather struggled to find an outlet for his passionate convictions in old age. John hints at the tension between the two men, in that John's father felt as though his father's relentless generosity was an implied judgment of his own choices—as if his son's way of life was too settled and compromised.

John remembers a time when a storm blew the roof off their henhouse, the chickens scattered, dogs chased them, and the rain soaked the wash hanging in the yard. John remembers being surprised when his mother jokingly imitated his grandfather, closing one eye and saying, "I know there is a blessing in this somewhere." His grandfather had said this about everything, even when he lost his eye in the war.

John offers another glimpse of his mother's personality, namely her sense of humor. His grandfather, meanwhile, looked for "blessings" even in devastating events. On a particularly hard day, his mother jokingly recalls that tendency, which shows that she respected the old man's deep convictions, even though they could make life more difficult.

After most of his grandfather's friends began to die off, his grandfather grew lonely, and that's when he ran off to Kansas. The other factor was a fire at a Black church. The Black church was a small congregation that eventually sold its building, and the few remaining families moved to Chicago. At the time, the church's pastor brought John some lilies he'd dug up from the church property, and John replanted them around the front of his church. He should tell the deacons about the flowers' significance. He hadn't known that pastor well, but he'd said that Gilead once meant a great deal to his church.

Though elderly people don't often go out seeking a fresh start, John's grandfather was different. John implies that as his grandfather grew lonelier, there was nothing to keep him in Gilead, even his family. Notably, the same seems to have been true for the town's few Black families; it's suggested that although they loved Gilead, they didn't feel welcome or wanted here. The church fire was apparently part of that, and it seemed to prompt John's grandfather to give up on the town, too. John himself is unfamiliar with the Black church's full story or doesn't share it, suggesting that he's not as conversant with matters of racial justice as his grandfather was.

PAGES 37-39

John notes that his son has started spending a lot of time with a "freckly little Lutheran" named Tobias. This is a great thing for him, but his parents miss him terribly when he spends the night with his new friend. The boy and Tobias had a backyard sleepover last night but came home at dawn the next morning and slept until lunchtime; Tobias's brothers had growled at them from the bushes. John made the boys grilled cheese sandwiches with cupcakes for dessert. His wife hadn't slept at all last night, though John slept surprisingly soundly.

John feels encouraged by the fact that his son, a shy loner, has finally made a friend and is starting to enjoy more typical boyhood activities like campouts. John evidently cherishes small fatherly duties like making lunch for the boys, though his wife tends to express her love for their son through worry. This makes sense: John knows his time with his son is limited and takes comfort in everyday moments; Lila is aware that she'll be a single mother before long, solely responsible for protecting their boy. Also, as a small-town minister, it's not surprising that John is aware of Tobias's church affiliation.

John remembers when he and Boughton were boys (Boughton was called Bobby then), and they'd sit on the warm roof of his mother's henhouse eating sandwiches. They both had pairs of stilts and would wander around town on them all summer, enjoying themselves. John remembers Boughton worrying about his vocation even back then—if he couldn't be a minister, he wasn't sure what else to be. Neither of them could think of many options.

Thinking about his son reminds John of childhood memories, especially his friendship with young Boughton. They played differently than young boys do in the book's present, but the companionship was much the same. Another difference is that John and Boughton seem to have wondered about their future careers at a very young age. In small-town Iowa, there weren't many choices—indeed, there seems to have been a certain pressure to think of one's "vocation," or calling, rather than a mere job. Boughton was more serious about this than most.

Boughton was taller than John for 40 years, but nowadays he's completely stooped from arthritis, and looking at him, you'd never know what he used to be like. The other day John reminded Boughton of a conversation on the henhouse roof, when Boughton said that if he saw an angel, he'd be so scared that he'd take off running. Boughton laughed at the memory and added that pretty soon he'll know what an angel looks like.

Having known Boughton his whole life, John can see how drastically he's changed over the years. (The unspoken implication is that John, too, must be very different from what he once was.) Both men know they probably won't be around in the world for much longer, and both seem to accept this fact. Like John, Boughton looks forward to heaven as a realm where many lifelong mysteries will be resolved.

PAGES 39-43

John has always been tall; it runs in his family. Because of this, people always assumed he was older than his age, and he became adept at pretending he understood more than he did. This became a useful skill throughout life. He's telling his son this so that his son will know he isn't a saint and that he's gotten more respect than he deserves, even gained a reputation for wisdom because of his huge library of books—many of them unread. But for much of his life, he read out of loneliness, even finding human company in bad books.

John wants his son to understand that things aren't always what they appear. For example, looking older than his age allowed John to claim a sense of authority he hadn't earned. Likewise, his massive book collection gained him a reputation for greater wisdom than he deserves. Though there's no indication that John used these advantages unfairly, he still might have. In reality, John is simply an ordinary man who's often been lonely.

Often when people saw light in John's study late at night, it just meant that he'd fallen asleep in his chair. He chose not to disillusion his flock in their kind assumptions about their pastor, mainly because he never wanted their sympathy—something he'd much rather give than receive. Boughton was the only person whose comfort he never minded. He wishes his son knew what Boughton was like in his prime.

John doesn't enjoy other people's pity or being vulnerable with most people, Boughton being one notable exception. This suggests that John often holds back his emotions, perhaps even while writing to his son—something the reader should be aware of when John talks about his life.

Thinking about Boughton's fine preaching reminds John of his stacks of old sermons. He supposes it'd be best to burn them, but he knows that would upset his wife. It's embarrassing to have written so much and now have to find a way to dispose of it all. Of course, he meant every word he wrote at the time. But now it's awful to think of reading 50 years' worth of his own deepest thoughts.

John doesn't believe that his preaching over the years has been worthless, but now that he's approaching death, he seems to believe that the sermons' time is past, and that they're not worth keeping around. In a sense, he poured himself *into the sermons, and the prospect of spending his last months or years revisiting his younger self—as opposed to enjoying his present life—doesn't seem worth it.*

Of course it's natural to wonder about those sermons, since John pastored hundreds of souls over the years. To this day, he sometimes still wakes up at night thinking of something he should have said, or suddenly understanding what someone meant, when it's much too late to put anything right.

John's humility comes through here. John genuinely cares about all the people he's ministered to over the decades, and he knows his care for them wasn't perfect. While he's done the best he could, he understands that a single mistake could have long-lasting consequences.

There's one sermon John burned the night before he was supposed to have preached it. It was during the Spanish Flu outbreak, and right at the outset of America's involvement in World War I. The flu killed off so many that it really was like a war. Even here in Iowa, many young people died—and the community still got off relatively lightly. If people came to church at all, they wore masks and sat far apart.

The United States entered World War I (1914–1918) relatively late, in 1917, after several years of strong antiwar and isolationist sentiments nationwide. Around the same time, the Spanish Flu spread around the world. Unusually, the flu proved most deadly for adults between the ages of 20 and 40, and it ultimately killed more people than the war did. Fear of the flu touched all aspects of life, as the image of the masked churchgoers suggests.

Parents of young soldiers who died of the flu approached John to ask how God could allow something like this pandemic, and often John would reply that they didn't know what their sons had been spared. They took it to mean that their sons had been spared trench warfare, but John meant that they were spared from having to kill.

The double impact of the war and the pandemic would have hit John early in his work as a minister, requiring him to answer impossible questions from grieving parents. Though John's reply sounds somewhat pat, it's actually the novel's first hint that John is a convinced pacifist—in his opinion, dying of the flu was a better fate than going to Europe and ending up having to kill someone else on the battlefield.

The sickness was like a biblical plague. Seeing the stacks of bodies and the local college turned into a hospital ward, John thought that it all looked like a sign. He wrote a sermon about how God was rescuing these young men from their foolish courage before they went and committed murder. He also wrote that these flu deaths were a warning about the consequences that war would bring, since people were determined to go to war against God's will.

The flu was unlike anything most people would have seen before, and it reminded John of the terrible plagues God inflicted on the Egyptians in the Old Testament Book of Exodus, to persuade Pharaoh to stop oppressing the Hebrew people. He decided that the flu must be a warning against modern-day oppressors—namely, anyone willing to fight and kill in war. Since John believes war is objectively wrong, he asserted in his sermon that choosing to go to war must be wrong from God's perspective, too.

John was pleased with the sermon. But he didn't preach it, because he knew the only people at church would be a few elderly women who didn't approve of the war anyway, and who came to church even at risk of catching the flu. It was perhaps the only sermon that he wouldn't have minded answering to God for in heaven, but he burned it.

John destroyed the sermon because he realized there would be no point in preaching it. While it might have been cathartic for him, it wouldn't have served his congregation well. His choice shows that even as a younger minister, John had a mature sense of perspective, willing to put his parishioners' needs ahead of his own ego.

John says it's hard to understand another time. His son couldn't imagine the nearly empty church, with the women wearing veils to conceal their masks, and John preaching with a scarf around his mouth, and everyone smelling like onions. Meanwhile, magazines were filled with pictures of soldiers wearing gas masks. To this day John believes that the plague was God's sign, and that we didn't heed the sign, because there's been war ever since.

During the pandemic, drawing on emerging science surrounding contagion and germs, wearing gauze masks became common among healthcare workers and segments of the general population, though the masks' effectiveness at preventing spread was mixed. The reference to onions alludes to a folk belief that keeping sliced onions around the house helped repel the flu virus. The virus and the frightening images of war contributed to an overall sense of dread and of God's displeasure at humanity.

PAGES 44-46

John says that he can't give an account of his life without speaking of his "dark time," the long period of his loneliness. He remembers listening to countless baseball games, envisioning the plays in his mind while listening to the staticky radio. He often thinks of pastoral conversations in a similarly analytical way—studying the people who came to speak to him, their grief and guilt and joy. This is another privilege of ministry that few ever talk about.

John moves from discussing a particularly noteworthy sermon to considering his approach to ministry more generally. His attitude toward his ministry seems to be closely tied to his years of loneliness. Since he didn't have much else in his life, he applied his mind to analyzing his parishioners' problems, much as he would the plays in a baseball game.

John says that a good sermon must be heard as "one side of a passionate conversation," though there are actually three sides to it. This is even true, remarkably enough, of private thought, John says—there is the "self that yields the thought, the self that acknowledges and in some way responds," and the Lord. He's never tried putting any of this into words before, and it's tiring.

In preaching, John doesn't believe he's simply giving a lecture—he is addressing his congregation, but he is also conversing with God through engagement with the Bible. He sees the same three-way dynamic present even in individual thought, as though God is mysteriously present everywhere, even in human consciousness.

John is reminded of a poem he wrote once that mentions the image of a seashell and the sound of "the priestly susurrus," a word he's loved for a long time. But back in those days he didn't know much besides "texts and priestliness and static." At that time the book *The Diary of a Country Priest*, by Bernanos, was very popular. John remembers sitting up all night with the book, still reading the next morning. He felt sympathetic to the protagonist, though Boughton just said the character drank too much and was unsuited to his position.

Though his meaning is a bit obscure, John suggests that in his younger days as a minister, he was mostly wrapped up in books and ideas—more interested in the idea *of being a pastor than the gritty reality of it. This would fit with his absorption in Bernanos's novel about a young priest, which was translated into English in the late 1930s. Though the novel clearly resonated with John, Boughton responded to it more crankily, showing a humorous contrast between the friends' personalities even when they were younger.*

PAGES 46-50

John remembers traveling to Des Moines with his grandfather to watch Bud Fowler play for Keokuk, when he was about 10. The game was uneventful until it got rained out in the fifth inning. John was rather relieved, but for his grandfather, it was yet one more frustration. He remembers thinking that the storm's thunder and **lightning** were like "Creation tipping its hat" to his grandfather—as his mother always said, he did attract "terrible" friends, like John Brown and Jim Lane. It was a few weeks after this event that John's grandfather went off to Kansas. John realizes that this memory consists of very little. But in retrospect he wonders if Kansas "transformed[] itself from memory to intention" as his grandfather sat there beside him.

John offers another piece of his grandfather's story here. John Brown was a radical antislavery activist who was executed for treason in 1859, and James Henry Lane was a controversial Kansas politician who died by suicide in 1866. It's easy to see why John's mother felt uneasy about her father-in-law's friends, and why John associated his grandfather with lightning, which is throughout the book symbolizes divine power bursting into the world. John regarded his grandfather as a force of nature who couldn't be content to watch baseball games and needed to be active in the world instead.

John remembers walking with his father away from the graveyard in the moonlight, and his father remarked that everybody in Kansas saw the same thing they had just seen—the alignment of sunset and moonrise. John knows his father meant that they hadn't experienced anything special; his father never talked about visions or the miraculous. Nevertheless John sensed a "sweet strength" in them both and watched his father wipe his eyes.

John flashes forward to visiting his grandfather's grave; since only about two years would have passed since the baseball game, John's grandfather didn't live a terribly long time after he made the decision to return to Kansas. After witnessing the stunning sunset in the graveyard, John's father pointed out that the experience wasn't unique to them. This seems to have been part of his father's general reticence about the miraculous, yet that doesn't mean he was unmoved by the sight.

Once, John's grandfather told him about a vision he had when he was 16, after falling asleep by the **fire**. He saw the Lord extending chained arms to him. He woke knowing he had to go to Kansas to join the abolitionist cause. In those days, men wanted to be useful, and their worst fear was aimlessness. John respects that. When he spoke to his father about the vision, his father said, "it was the times," as if to reassure John that nothing like that would happen to *him*. And he *did* take comfort in it, which he now thinks remarkable.

John's grandfather had a very different attitude about the miraculous, since he had a life-changing vision at a young age. John suggests that the men of his grandfather's generation felt called to make a difference in the world. But perhaps because of his own father's radicalism, John's father was more skeptical of visions and the drastic actions they led to. John hints that he's more sympathetic to his grandfather's desires, though he also refrained from such radicalism himself.

John remarks that his grandfather always seemed as if he'd just been struck by **lightning** and was "the most unreposeful human being" he ever knew. He and his friends seemed like Old Testament prophets forced into retirement. They'd studied at Lane and Oberlin and knew biblical languages and classic literature; they set up a college in Iowa that produced many foreign missionaries. But it makes sense to John that his grandfather's grave "look[ed] like a place where someone had tried to smother a fire."

John reprises the fire imagery to describe his grandfather as somehow struck by divine power, giving him a restlessness that even death could scarcely "smother." He suggests that even though his grandfather and friends did more conventional things like getting a seminary education and training missionaries, their desires to change the world burned through those conventional boundaries. Lane Theological Seminary was a Presbyterian seminary near Cincinnati that had close ties with radically abolitionist Oberlin College, southwest of Cleveland.

PAGES 50-53

John was just listening to a song on the radio when his wife came in, embraced him, and gently danced with him to the music. She asked him, "Why'd you have to be so damn old?" John wonders the same thing.

John's memories and family stories are often interspersed with everyday moments, suggesting that past and present can't be perfectly separated from each other—something John's mature mind instinctively grasps. John's age haunts his loving relationship with Lila, because no matter what, their years together will be limited.

A few days ago, John saw his wife and son come in with flowers, and he knew at once where they'd been. She takes their son there "to get [him] a little used to the place." His son showed John some honeysuckle he'd picked and taught John how to suck the nectar from the blossoms, and they laughed together.

Obviously, John's wife has been taking their son to the cemetery, so that after John dies and is buried, their little boy won't be quite so shocked when the time comes to visit John's grave. Life and death feel close to each other as John and his son laugh over the wildflowers the boy picked at the graveyard.

That afternoon John was struck by the way the **light** felt, like a weight resting familiarly on everything. His wife brought the camera out and took pictures of the father and son sipping honeysuckle nectar. But, as usual, the film ran out before John could get a picture of her. She always hides from the camera, not believing she's pretty. John doesn't understand why. He would never have dared ask her to marry him; it was all her idea.

Throughout the novel, light symbolizes God's blessing, which seems to fall on the peaceful family afternoon in a special way. Lila is elusive in this passage—John's inability to get a picture of her points to how her personality is difficult to capture, and how her full story remains a mystery to the reader.

John would never have believed he'd get to see his wife doting on his child. If his son ever wonders what he's done with his life, he should know that he's been "God's grace to me, a miracle." He wishes he had the words to tell him that.

John wants his son to know that his mere existence in the world is an expression of God's grace to him. After many lonely decades, Lila and the boy came into John's life as an extravagant, unexpected gift.

John reflects that his son is nice-looking and polite, but it's his *existence* he loves him for—existence seems to him the most remarkable thing imaginable. By the time his son reads this, John will have become "imperishable, somehow more alive than I have ever been." He doesn't want his son to think he's waiting for him in heaven, though, because he wants his son to live a long time and love *this* world. He can't imagine not missing this world, even as he longs to be reunited with Louisa and Rebecca and has long wondered what that will be like.

John's son isn't a particularly unusual child, but the simple fact that he exists in the world is wonderful to John. Getting to live in this world and experience its beauties, John suggests, is a marvelous thing. He believes that life after death will surpass earthly life in every way—yet that doesn't mean he is in a hurry to leave behind the world's wonders.

PAGES 53-57

John has a few pictures of Louisa, but they don't seem to be a good likeness. Then again, he hasn't seen Louisa in 51 years. He remembers how young Louisa used to jump rope without skipping a beat, her braids bouncing and her sunbonnet askew.

In a way, Louisa is just a dim memory to John at this point, and he didn't have the chance to get to know her very well. His memories of her as a child are more vivid than memories of their brief marriage.

John has always envied men who could watch their wives grow old. He'll never see that, and he'll never watch his child grow up. He's guided hundreds of people through life's milestones, yet so much of life seemed closed off to him. His wife says he was like Abraham, but unlike Abraham, John didn't have an elderly wife or any promise of a child—he "was just getting by on books and baseball and fried-egg sandwiches."

Though John's late marriage and fatherhood are a great joy, the sorrow of his impending death is built into that joy. His career as a minister is largely focused on shepherding people through things like births, marriages, and relationships—things that seemed beyond John's reach. Though Lila compares his former life to that of the biblical patriarch Abraham, John's was lonelier in a way—he lived a solitary bachelor life with no expectation that it would ever change.

John says that his son and the cat, Soapy, have joined him in his study. His son is drawing airplanes while lying on the floor in a patch of sunlight. He knows the names of different airplane models—names like Messerschmitt and Fokker and Zero—because of a book Leon Fitch gave him behind John's back, surely knowing John wouldn't approve. John knows he should make his son return the book, but he'll probably end up just hiding it in the pantry. He wonders when his son will figure out that's where they hide things they don't want him getting into.

John's pacifism is again hinted at here, even though he doesn't directly say why he objects to his son's book of fighter planes. He'd prefer that his son not take delight in weapons of war. Recall that John fervently opposed American involvement in World War I, and presumably he felt the same way about World War II, which wouldn't be a very distant memory at this point (the mid-1950s).

John could have gotten married again while he was still a young man; people in his congregation certainly tried to marry him off. Looking back, though, he's grateful he chose not to remarry. It seems as though "in all that deep darkness a miracle was preparing," even though John didn't know what he was waiting for.

John reflects that his life could easily have taken a different path; it seems he had the option of remarrying if he had truly wanted to. He suggests that the "deep darkness" of his lonely years was necessary for a "miracle" to emerge in his life.

Then, when his wife did arrive, when they still didn't know each other well, she gave John a serious look and quietly said, "You ought to marry me." This was the first time John ever realized what it really *meant* to love another person. John was stunned into silence for a while, but he followed her down the street and finally said, "You're right, I will." She replied that she'd see him tomorrow and kept walking. It was the most thrilling moment of John's life.

John reveals more bits and pieces of his relationship with Lila. It's still largely a mystery how they came together, except that Lila initiated their engagement—a rather unconventional step, especially in a rural Midwestern community in the 1950s.

John is trying to be wise, but he doesn't know what to say. He has loved this life—the feeling of laying his hand against a baby's brow in **baptism**—and yet, every time he does it, he thinks of laying his hand on his dying daughter Rebecca to bless her. Boughton named her Angeline because of the verse, "Their angels in Heaven always see the face of my Father in Heaven."

Much of John's understanding of life has come through the mysteries of his faith, which in turn has meant that his view of life has been built on close encounters with death—including his own daughter's. The Bible verse she was named after is Matthew 18:10, in which Jesus urges his disciples not to disdain his "little ones"—even a child like Rebecca, who lives for only a few hours, is precious to God.

John has been thinking about existence a lot lately. It all feels new and astonishing still. He knows that what awaits him is far better, but that makes this world even lovelier, with its "human beauty." He believes that in eternity, this life will be an "epic" sung in the streets.

John's closeness to death makes human life seem even more remarkable to him; he's never grown used to it, and he believes that heaven's beauty doesn't make earthly beauty any less worthwhile. He even speculates that earthly life will be celebrated in heaven, like an epic poem that people might recite, marveling at the deeds it depicts.

Lacey Thrush, an unmarried elderly lady, died last night, "promptly and decorously." They said the Lord's Prayer and Twenty-third Psalm, and John sang a hymn before she nodded off. He admires her and was comforted by her peace, noting what a blessing these elderly saints are.

As he considers his own death, John draws strength and comfort from visiting elderly parishioners' death beds. Used to the set-apart role of minister, he doesn't seem to reflect on the fact that he, too, is now among those old, faithful church members whose lives bless others.

PAGES 58-63

John remembers a story, likely embellished, that his grandfather and friends used to tell. Once, in an abolitionist settlement near Gilead, the people established a dry-goods store on one side of the road and a livery stable on the other. Then they built a tunnel between the two buildings. The people were so serious about this tunnel that they made it much too large, and it wasn't stable.

John records this story just to pass it down to his son, because it's humorous and also because it gives a glimpse of life during his grandfather's generation in Iowa. Implicitly, the tunnel is part of the Underground Railroad, a secret network of tunnels and passageways that gave enslaved people a pathway of escape to free Northern states or Canada.

One day, a stranger rode into town on a big horse, paused at just the wrong spot, and suddenly sank into the tunnel up to the horse's shoulder. When the townspeople came out and saw the man walking around in bewilderment, they decided to act bewildered, too. They soaked some oats in whiskey and fed them to the horse until it fell asleep. The man (a teetotaler himself) became even more upset.

People living in an abolitionist settlement like this would have had a lot of practice in keeping secrets, though this scenario is more comical than most. In this case, pretending they didn't know what was going on (and getting the horse drunk) was the townspeople's best hope of hiding the truth about the secret tunnel.

Knowing any Bushwhacker or slave-hunter would quickly figure out the situation, one of the townspeople finally offered the stranger his own smaller horse, which he finally accepted. After he left, they tried to figure out what to do about the stuck horse, which was beginning to sober up. Trying to dig around the horse would be a big effort. In the meantime, since by this time "only foolish choices [were] possible," they placed a shed over the horse.

Even though the situation was funny, there wasn't time to lose, since in the years leading up to the Civil War, pro-Confederate guerilla forces called Bushwhackers could pass through town at any time. So, the townspeople got rid of the stranger as best they could, leaving them to contend with the horse. The "foolish" nature of the situation also highlights its desperation.

Eventually they dug a trench to free the horse, but ultimately the only way to deal with the collapsing tunnel was to fill it in by leveling a nearby hill. But for all their hard work, the section where the tunnel had been invariably sagged whenever there was rain. At last, the people ended up having to move the whole town half a mile down the road. Nowadays the former tunnel has become a creek bed, and people often picnic beside it. Without knowing it, they sit above the town's few, forgotten graves, but John says this is "on balance, a pleasant thing."

The abolitionists ended up undermining their own town with the massive tunnel. There's almost no memory of it today, as in fact most people probably don't remember the hardships of those days. But John regards it as fitting that people would picnic over the town's remains—another example of how he sees life, death, and beauty existing side by side.


PAGES 63-66

John watches his son and Tobias jumping around in the sprinkler. It makes him think of how he loves to **baptize** people, though he sometimes wishes his way of doing it involved a little more "shimmer and splash." The boys whoop joyfully in the iridescent drops, "as sane people ought to do when they encounter a thing so miraculous as water."

As a minister, John regards baptism as a symbol of God's grace, and he has come to associate water in general with God's freely bestowed love, too. And water, in and of itself, is a beautiful aspect of the natural world he loves so much. All this being the case, it's only "sane" for people to whoop like children when they touch water.


John recalls a time after Edward returned from Germany, when the two of them started playing catch on a side street. At first Edward was rusty, but soon he got his throwing arm back and stopped worrying about messing up his nice clothes. People stopped to watch. John thought that after this, they'd be able to have a real talk. That didn't happen, but John felt more at peace regarding his brother's soul when, after pouring a glass of **water** over his head, Edward recited Psalm 133 from memory ("Behold, how good and pleasant it is, / For brethren to dwell together in unity!"). John isn't sure exactly what Edward intended by these words, but he finds the memory "splendid."

John's brother Edward became an atheist while studying in Germany, and this passage describes a moment of reconnection between the brothers despite their different beliefs. Because they were so in-sync physically, John thought it meant they'd be able to connect again more personally. Even though that didn't happen, John regards Edward's Psalm recitation as reassurance that they'll never lose the deep connection between them. Psalm 133 likens brotherhood to "precious oil [poured] upon the head," which is probably why Edward thought to recite it while his head dripped with water.


Though John believes his pious reputation is somewhat exaggerated, he doesn't want his son to think that he doesn't take his vocation very seriously. He and Boughton used to work on their sermons together at John's house. Boughton came there since he knew that coming to Boughton's house full of children made John's home feel very empty. Boughton had four girls and four boys. Though that family has since gone through some terrible suffering, Boughton's family life seemed "blindingly beautiful" to John at that time.

John wants his son to have a realistic view of him—to know that he wasn't some spiritual superhero, but that he also believed what he preached and tried his best to be an effective minister. Boughton, his fellow pastor in Gilead, was a big part of that. Though they were close, their family situations couldn't have been more different, and John envied Boughton's full house, not realizing how much the Boughtons struggle at times (something that will be explained later).

John remembers that Rebecca looked into his eyes before she died. Now, in his old age, he realizes there's nothing more amazing than a human face, that it has something to do with incarnation. Any human face makes a claim on a person, but this is most true in an infant's face. John thinks an infant's face is a kind of vision.

Before Lila and his son, John's only experience of fatherhood was the fleeting memory of Rebecca. Their brief moments together made a deep impression on John, which he categorizes as a vision akin to his grandfather's vision of God. By "incarnation," John refers to the Christian belief that God became fully human in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, looking into any human face can reveal something of God.

When John's son was very little, John was frightened of him. When his wife would place the baby in his arms, he would rock and pray and sing: "Go to Dark Gethsemane." It wasn't until his wife asked him if he knew a happier song that he even realized he'd been singing.

"Go to Dark Gethsemane" is a somber-sounding 19th-century hymn about the final hours, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That John started unconsciously singing it while holding his infant son suggests his deep awareness that life and death are intertwined, as he learned when he held his dying first child, Rebecca.

PAGES 66-69

John is trying to think of heaven this morning, but it's difficult. After all, he couldn't have even imagined this world if he hadn't spent so many years in it, and it still astonishes him each day, "like Adam waking up in Eden."

The world still feels miraculous to John—almost like discovering paradise anew each day. He seems to become more sensitive to these beauties as he gets closer to his own death, suggesting that death can make someone love the world even more, rather than simply making them want to escape it.

John's mind may have had its deficiencies, but it's served him well over the years—containing lots of poetry and Scripture. When he was small, his father would give him pennies for memorizing Bible verses. Sometimes they'd play games, where his father would say a verse and John would have to say the next, and they'd go on and on that way. His son knows some Psalms and the Lord's Prayer.

John recalls that his father found fun ways to instill Scripture in him as he grew up. Though his son knows some of the basics, John knows his son won't get the chance to learn from him the way he learned from his own father.

His wife seems to want John to know that she's going to raise their boy as a Christian. John says this is wonderful because, when he first met her, he'd never met anyone who knew so little about religion. When she first started coming to church, sitting in a back corner, he felt she was the only real listener. Even before he knew her name, his sermon felt like ashes in his mouth each week, and he was sure she'd never come back. But she did.

Raising their son as a Christian will be challenging for Lila, since she apparently wasn't raised that way herself—yet John suggests that her lack of religious training gives her a special openness to religious ideas, hence her receptivity to his preaching.

John had a chat this morning with Tobias's father, Mr. Schmidt, who was concerned about the kids using inappropriate language while joking around. John had a hard time keeping a straight face during the conversation, and he said he thinks it's better not to be overly strict with children, as it won't be effective in the long run. Mr. Schmidt finally deferred to him, though he did ask if John was Unitarian.

John's conversation with Tobias's father shows that in some ways, he's a relatively lenient father. This might be partly because, after decades as a pastor, he's gained a lot of perspective on what works and what doesn't among the families he's known. Amusingly, the stricter Mr. Schmidt implies that John's easygoing attitude must mean he's a liberal Christian. (Unitarians began as an offshoot of Christianity but reject many central doctrines such as the Trinity and have a progressive reputation.)

Boughton laughs, too, when he hears the story. He's in a good mood because he's heard from Jack. John decides not to tell his wife about the talk with Mr. Schmidt because she worries so much about their boy and always assumes things are her fault. She also said the other day that she wants to read John's old sermons. He figures he might as well sort through some of them for his own peace of mind. He wonders how he's lived with the knowledge that the sermons are his life's major work.

John refers to Boughton's son Jack again, though he doesn't yet comment on the nature of their estrangement; he seems to be putting off that story, implying it's a difficult one. Thinking about his old sermons is also tough for John. While he might not disavow the sermons, he seems to feel that they weren't enough—that his work as a minister is somehow unfinished.

PAGES 69-71

Today John celebrated the Lord's Supper and preached on the Words of Institution in the Gospel of Mark. He's been thinking about embodiment, physicality, and his love of life a lot lately. When most people had left, his wife brought the boy to the front and said he ought to have some of the leftover elements. Even though the boy is too young, John gives him bread and wine.

The Lord's Supper is a Christian sacrament—a simple meal celebrated in remembrance of Christ's death. The "Words of Institution" describe Jesus's last supper with his disciples before his death and are often recited during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Because the Supper emphasizes God's presence in simple, tangible objects, it makes sense that it would tie into John's thoughts about physicality and life. Though many churches only admit children to the Lord's Supper once they've reached a certain age, as John's does, he offers his son some of the remaining bread and wine after the service is concluded. The implication is that by the time his son is old enough to formally participate, John won't be there to serve him the bread and wine.

The **light** in the church was beautiful that morning. In the old days, John would sometimes wake up before dawn and sit in the sanctuary to watch the changing light of the sunrise. He loves the settled, welcoming sounds the old church building makes when he's there alone, and he encourages his son to experience this for himself. Of course, he knows they're planning to pull the building down after his death.

Throughout the novel, John is sensitive to the beauty of light, especially as a symbol of God at work in the physical world. He also loves the church where he's spent most of his life and feels at home there even when it isn't filled with congregants. He accepts the fact that the church won't last forever, though, as no earthly thing does. The aging church is closely associated with John's waning lifespan.

When John walked through town at night, he'd sometimes see people's lights on and wonder if there were a problem he could help with, though he usually kept going, not wanting to intrude—sometimes past the Boughtons', since he didn't know what was troubling them in those days. He could walk through the whole town in an hour in those days, trying to remember what he knew about the people in each house—the ones that didn't go to his church usually went to Boughton's. He'd pray for them all.

This is another example of how John's lonely life as a widower actually complemented his role as a minister. Presumably unable to sleep, he used the nighttime hours to pray for Gilead's people. The fact that he didn't presume to know or be able to fix everyone's problems shows his humility as a minister. His obliviousness to the Boughton family's struggles (which will be explained later) also shows that even people who know one another well aren't always acquainted with one another's deepest struggles.

John hopes that if his son remembers him, this might explain him a little bit—his "crepuscular quality." He hopes it will help his son understand that when he speaks of those lonely days, he usually remembers peace and comfort more than he remembers grief.

"Crepuscular" means "active at dawn or dusk," like John walking the streets of Gilead just before sunrise. John also seems to associate this quality with the way his life has often stood on the cusp between loneliness and joy.

PAGES 72-83

Jack, or John Ames Boughton (John's namesake), has called from St. Louis and is coming home soon. Glory came to tell John about it; her father is excited. John doesn't know how one man could cause so much disappointment and so little hope. He is the most beloved Boughton child, but John hasn't decided yet what to write about him. He is a prodigal son. And even though John knows that nobody deserves their Heavenly Father's love, he always feels a little bothered when he sees a parent loving a child who clearly doesn't deserve it.

Jack Boughton has come up a few times before, but almost nothing has been explained, and this is the first time it's revealed that he's named after John. John implies here that Jack's history is troubled. "Prodigal son" refers to the biblical story of a son who squandered everything but, when he changed course in his life, was accepted by his father with open arms. As a preacher, John knows that story as well as anybody, but just because he affirms its meaning doesn't mean he's comfortable with it in practice.

This morning John did something foolish. He woke up before dawn and decided to walk to the church the way he used to do. He did leave a note for his wife. At first, she thought he'd wandered off to die alone. Sometimes he worries about his final hours and how his son will remember them. He sometimes forgets that he can't depend on his body the way he used to. He reflects on how different the world seems at night, something he's never gotten used to. This night, he was so fixed on the idea of sitting in the church that he didn't think about how worried his wife would be to discover him missing.

John spent most of his life living alone, so it makes sense that in old age, he's never fully gotten used to the fact that his actions—like taking a walk before dawn—affect other people and cause them worry. It's also possible that at his age, he simply forgets about his limitations because he's more focused on reliving memories, like enjoying the nighttime solitude and sitting in the quiet church.

But John says he has strayed from his subject—his son's "begats"—and there's so much left to say. His grandfather was in the Union Army. He was considered too old for the regular army, so he talked his way into a chaplaincy position. John's father was born in Kansas because his own father had come from Maine to help Free Soilers establish the right to vote. The constitution they were going to vote on would decide whether Kansas joined the Union as a slave state or a free state. At the same time, people from Missouri came to Kansas hoping it would become a slave state. John's father didn't like to talk about those days, and after studying those times, John feels he was right. So much trouble has happened in the world since then, after all.

Notably, John doesn't dwell on the scare he gave Lila—he seems eager to move on from the subject of his limitations, suggesting that although he accepts the reality of death, that doesn't mean aging isn't difficult. Instead, he quickly picks up his grandfather's story again. He explains his grandfather's motives for moving to Kansas: to help the territory enter the United States without allowing slavery within its borders. Though John's grandfather uprooted his life to follow his convictions, John's father is much more reticent about the troubles surrounding the Civil War. John understands this attitude, yet he apparently feels compelled to talk to his son about them, at least.

John's family moved into this house when he was a little boy. Back then it had no electricity. His mother used to love her kitchen, especially the warmth of the stove. She drank a little whiskey for her aches and pains, and after a hard day, she sometimes fell asleep in front of the stove, sometimes letting an entire Sunday dinner burn.

John grew up in Gilead—in this very house, in fact, since his father was minister here before him. Again, John talks less about the women in his family, but his brief anecdotes are often pretty telling—like the fact that his mother's labors as a prairie housewife and minister's wife were apparently quite demanding and exhausting.

John's wife was startled when he suggested that she skip the ironing on a Sunday night, but she wanted to learn the Sabbath customs. Nowadays she reads and studies on Sunday night, copying out facts and poems for her son's sake. She is trying to like John Donne in particular. One day she went to the public library and brought home a copy of *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, which she devoured. John read the book back when it was popular, but he didn't care for it.

Thinking of his mother's tendency to burn the Sunday dinner reminds John of his wife's very different background. Usually, a devout Christian family of John's day would avoid heavy chores on Sunday, or the Sabbath, but Lila wasn't raised this way. It's clear, though, that carrying on these customs is important to her for their son's sake. She's even trying to pick up some of John's literary, tastes such as Donne, but she prefers popular Westerns like John Fox, Jr.'s 1908 romance.

When John was a young boy, he heard of a murder out in the country, when a farmer was attacked with a knife. The knife got thrown into the river. But no suspect was ever charged, though rumors swirled now and then. John always worried about this because once he helped his father throw a pistol into the river. His grandfather had gotten the gun in Kansas, and they found it among his possessions after he died. John was fascinated, but his father was disgusted.

The transition to this boyhood memory is rather abrupt, but it might be prompted by the plot of The Trail of the Lonesome Pine, *which involves feuding Appalachian families. John grew up knowing that brutal murders sometimes happened and that their perpetrators were never found. So, his grandfather's mysterious gun tapped into this awareness of the frontier history of violence and vigilantism.*

John's father buried the gun, some old shirts, and some sermons in a deep hole, but weeks later, he dug everything up again. He tried to smash the pistol with a maul, then put the pieces into a sack and flung it all into the river. Then John's mother washed the shirts by hand and ironed them until they looked almost as good as new. Then she buried them. John wonders if anything is left of the shirts and thinks it would have been more respectful to burn them.

John's father seemed much more troubled by his father's past than John himself did—tormented, in fact, as shown by the fact that he couldn't let his father's things rest in the ground and then tried to destroy what remained. Recall that John has always associated his grandfather with fire; he seems to think it would've been more suited to his grandfather's personality to set his effects on fire than to piously bury them.

Once John asked his father if his grandfather had done something wrong, and his father said that God would be the judge of that. John believed there must have been a crime involved. He has an old photograph of his grandfather looking wild-haired and angry at the camera. But John notes that even the best life contains enough guilt to account for such a look. And John figures that by helping hide the evidence, he's always been implicated in whatever his grandfather did.

The Ames family legacy was filled with secrecy, which owes much to the fact that John's father was uncomfortable with how his father chose to practice his convictions. His father's silence left John with questions, but he chooses not to speculate, suggesting that even good people are guilty of something, or are at least implicated in others' guilt.

After the murder took place in John's neighborhood, children were scared to do the milking in the dark. Rumors flew for many years about where the killer might be hiding, and the story kept changing. For all John knows, kids are still telling that story. But he assures his son that if he or Tobias hears the story, the villain must be past 100 by this time.

John shifts back to the mysterious murder that kids have told stories about for generations. Even though that particular murderer no longer poses a threat to anyone, John implies that his story expresses universal human fears. Its haunting vagueness is associated in his mind with his grandfather's unnamed actions.

PAGES 83-86

John remembers an argument that his father and grandfather had once. His grandfather walked out during his father's sermon and returned to the house later that day. His father and grandfather sat in hostile silence for a long time until his grandfather admitted that he "wanted to hear some *preaching*," so he went to the Black church instead. He said that the sermon there was on the text "Love your enemies" (this was after the small fire at that church), and that the sermon was "very Christian." He finally lamented that there's no end to his bitterness and disappointment. John's father replied that his father had put his hope in war, while *he* had put his hope in peace, which is its own reward.

So far John has mostly alluded to the estrangement between his father and grandfather; now he begins to fill in details. The tension seems to have originated over his grandfather's distaste for John's father's preaching—a conflict that would've been incredibly personal for a pair of father-son preachers. John's grandfather implies that his son's preaching wasn't real *preaching—preaching with conviction—like what he hoped to find in the Black church. It seems, though, that even the Black church's sermon let him down by being too forgiving in the face of injustice. His disappointment, and John's father's comment about war and peace, suggest that John's grandfather couldn't accept attitudes of peace and forgiveness after what he experienced in his efforts against slavery; he believed the injustices ran too deep and remained unresolved.*

John's grandfather said that this is exactly what kills him—that the Lord never came to his son. John's father stood up and said that he remembered his father walking to the pulpit in a bloody shirt with a pistol in his belt and realizing that "this has *nothing* to do with Jesus." He was certain of that as of a so-called vision. His grandfather retorted that his vision was more real to him than his son standing in front of him now. His son replied that nobody would doubt it. John says that's when a chasm really opened between the two men.

John's father's objections offend John's grandfather because they strike at the heart of the difference in their convictions. John's grandfather thinks that his son's preference for peace means that he's never truly encountered God. But John's father's visceral memories of his father's preaching—complete with hints of violence like a gun in his belt and blood on his shirt—make him doubt that his father was truly following God rather than simply justifying his own convictions. The two men find their stances irreconcilable.

John has kept a note his grandfather left behind, saying that "No good has come, no evil is ended." But John remembers his father preaching with conviction about Abel's blood crying out from the ground. He respected and loved his father dearly.

John's grandfather's note is obscure, but it suggests that in his view, the war—and his own son's preaching—have failed both to forestall evil and to accomplish good. The reference to Abel's blood is an allusion to the first murder in the Bible, when God told Cain (the murderer) what he'd done to his brother Abel. The implication here is that John's father preached against brother killing brother in the Civil War—a pacifist view John himself came to share.

Over time, John learned about his grandfather's involvement in the violence that took place in Kansas before the Civil War. His grandfather and John's father disagreed about it and finally agreed never to talk about it. He knows his father regretted his anger, but he also hated war. The patriotic celebrations at the start of World War I almost killed his father. He knows his father remembers his own father going off to war while he was young and had a sick mother and many younger siblings at home. One of his brothers, Edwards (named for the theologian Jonathan Edwards), ran off and was never found.

Because John's grandfather's convictions were so central to his identity, his disagreement with his son on this matter would have been intensely personal. But it becomes clearer that his son's opposition had much to do with being abandoned during the Civil War. The strain of trying to hold things together at home, with a sick mother and a runaway brother, would have inevitably shaped John's father's feelings about the demands that war makes on families. He probably also felt that his father chose to put his ethical commitments ahead of his wife's and children's needs.

PAGES 86-94

Glory comes by to warn John that Jack Boughton is home and will stop by in the next day or two. John feels he needs the time to prepare. It was kind of Boughton to name Jack after him, having figured John might never have a son. Whenever Jack's name appeared in the newspaper, it always got printed as John Ames Boughton.

There's an ominous feeling about Jack's impending visit, especially since John hasn't revealed yet why there is tension between himself and Jack. Boughton intended that Jack would be a sort of surrogate son to the childless John. But this was an ambiguous blessing—it's not clear, for example, that having his name appear in the paper (as part of Jack's name) was a good thing.

John's father told him stories while they wandered around Kansas, searching for his grandfather's grave. He told John that after the war, he used to spend Sabbaths with the Quakers. Their own church was half empty, filled with widows and orphans who wept when his father preached about God's righteousness manifested in the war. But John isn't sure what else his grandfather could have said. He also thinks it's honorable that his grandfather came back to his congregation after the war, though many people started going to the Methodist open-air meetings instead.

It's interesting that John's father told him stories much like John is writing down stories for his son now. Recall that it was a harrowing journey, and John's father probably figured he should pass down the family stories in case he didn't survive the trip—maybe even giving John the idea to do the same someday. He admitted to John that he couldn't bear to stay in his father's church after the war, so he worshipped with Quakers (notable pacifists) instead. But John sympathizes with his grandfather and admires his struggle to maintain integrity between fighting in the war and practicing his faith as before.

John's grandfather knew his church was dying. He did odd jobs for the needy and tried to get pensions for veterans and widows. At the time, his wife was dying, possibly of cancer, and no one could do much for her, and John's grandfather did not seem to have much time for her suffering. John thinks his grandfather's "strenuousness in ethical matters" was both admirable and also the source of his errors. He suffered greatly, but he also sought out trouble.

John's grandfather seemed to be more attentive to his dying congregation than to his dying wife. John suggests that his grandfather's inflexible views motivated him to activism, but they also blinded him to needs closer to home.

John thinks that in the end, his grandfather's idea of visions was probably too narrow. He thinks sometimes the "visionary" comes to a person in a memory or over time. For example, each time he **baptizes** a child, he understands the mystery of the act a little bit better. He also thinks that visions come through memory sometimes.

Although John is more sympathetic to his grandfather than his father was, he thinks his grandfather's passionate convictions caused harm as well as good. He believes in visions, but his idea of them is much broader. In fact, it could be that writing down these memories is a way of sharing "visions" with his son someday, after he's gone.

John Ames Boughton came to visit today. He greeted John as "Papa," a name he's called John since childhood, though John doesn't think Jack really likes him. When Jack introduced himself to John's wife with his full name, she looked startled, and Jack laughed, remarking that bygones clearly aren't bygones. John realizes he probably should have told his wife about his namesake. John's son is fascinated by Jack. John feels embarrassed when Jack helps him out of the porch swing and John sees how much taller Jack is than him.

The tension between John and Jack is immediately evident, and it's telling that Jack's visit follows John's recollection of the estrangement between his father and grandfather—he doesn't get along with his surrogate son, either. Even though Jack has an affectionate childhood name for John, John doesn't believe there's any real fondness in it, It's also obvious that John never told Lila or their son that Jack is named after him, suggesting that he holds a grudge.

John remarks that it had been just about a perfect morning until Jack appeared. He notices looks on both his wife's and son's faces as they recognize John's age. The visit with Jack goes fine and doesn't last very long. John wishes his son could have known him "in [his] strength."

John's focus clearly isn't on the visit—he barely gives any details about it—but on his family's perception of his age. Something about Jack's presence prompts this—perhaps John imagining what life with Lila and the boy could have been like when he was still young and strong, like Jack is now.

PAGES 94-99

Speaking of visions, John remembers that when he was a young child, his father helped tear down a Baptist church building that had been struck by **lightning** and burned. He remembers playing with other small boys while watching the men search through the rubble, and everyone singing while they worked in the warm **rain**. He remembers eating a biscuit that had soot on it and thinking of "the bread of affliction," a phrase that's not used too often these days.

Earlier, John remarked that memories can be a kind of "vision," and this childhood memory seems to be one such vision for him. It includes two kinds of imagery that are important for John—fire and water—symbolic of God's power and grace. The presence of soot on the biscuit evokes God's fiery power, too, and the biscuit's association with "affliction" suggests that even through destructive things like fire, God can kindle new life.

Sometimes, late at night, John loses track of his surroundings and thinks he's back in those harder times, and "there's a sweetness in the experience which I don't understand." He says that his point is that we never understand "the actual nature even of your own experience." This memory seems to sum up John's life somehow, when he "took communion" from his father's soot-stained hand. That memorable day put "many things [...] altogether beyond question" for John.

This memory is foundational for John's life and beliefs in ways he can't articulate. He suggests that people don't always understand things while they're happening, but that their meaning becomes clearer over time. The sooty bread, for instance, wasn't actually part of a communion ritual, but looking back, its solemn significance, what it taught him about affliction, make it seem *as if it was.*

The family was always careful about approaching his grandfather from his right side—the side with the missing eye—since that seemed to be where his visions came from. Sometimes John would come home from school and his mother would warn him, "The Lord is in the parlor," and he'd peek into the other room to see his grandfather looking "sociable and gravely pleased," while making occasional remarks to his unseen guest. One day he said the Lord had suggested that he "just go home and be old." Later, John's father said he didn't think there was anything they could have done to dissuade his father from going to Kansas, but John doubts that he really believed that.

Even though John has made peace with his grandfather's legacy and with his own ideas about visions, his grandfather's visions really were *quite strange. Here, his grandfather believed that he received literal visits from the Lord. Such visions are out of place in a parsonage parlor, to say the least, so perhaps it isn't surprising that John's grandfather ultimately decided to retire to Kansas, the place where he felt at home. But that doesn't change the fact that father-son tensions contributed to his father's departure.*

One day while walking to school, John saw some kids teasing his grandfather while he was picking blackberries, tugging on his coat and running away. While John stood there trying to decide what to do, his grandfather suddenly whirled around and stared at him, and John felt like a betrayer. John admits that he did feel some embarrassment about his grandfather, and his grandfather knew it but didn't give him any credit for trying to be better. He adds that they were all hurt by his grandfather's departure; they knew it was a judgment.

The other kids saw John's grandfather as a pitiful old eccentric, and to some extent, John felt the same way. But he did love and respect his grandfather, and his grandfather's decision to leave Gilead felt like a message that in his grandfather's eyes, the rest of the family wasn't any better than the mocking, clueless locals.

PAGES 99-104

John's father said that upon their return from the army, he walked into John's grandfather's church and saw a needlework tapestry hanging above the communion table. The words on it read, "The Lord Our God Is a Purifying **Fire**." His father left for the Quaker meeting after seeing this banner. The use of the word "purifying" in reference to war appalled him. Over the years, the congregation dwindled, and the Methodists bought the land and burned down the decrepit building.

John flashes back to his father's life in Kansas after the war and before John was born. The words on the tapestry sum up his father's objections to his own father's convictions. From his perspective, war doesn't "purify" anything, but rather contaminates whatever it touches. The eventual burning of the church is ambiguous, too—it could be viewed as God "purifying" the church by destroying it, and John's grandfather's views with it.

John remembers his father saying in a sermon that he regretted going off to the Quakers while his father struggled to comfort his congregation after the war. Sometimes his grandfather's congregation would start singing along with the Methodist camp meeting in the middle of the sermon. The smell of earth was in the air because of all the newly-dug graves. Yet people remembered those days with "tenderness." But his father stayed away out of principle. His own father had preached war to his people because, he said, as long as there was slavery, there could be no peace.

John's father had regrets about how he expressed his convictions to his father, even though his principles didn't change over the years. Much as his father had abandoned the family in a time of suffering, John's father abandoned his father's congregation in its waning years.

John came home for lunch today to find his son playing catch with Jack Boughton. He notes that he's failed to get his son his own baseball glove and that he'll see to it. John finds them beautiful to watch. He remembers Louisa jumping rope in that same street and himself playing catch with Boughton under those same trees.

John seems to regard Jack playing with his son as a bit of an intrusion on their relationship—playing catch is a quintessential father-son activity, and it reminds him of what he and the boy will never get to enjoy together. Still, though, he's touched by the memories the game of catch evokes, and by his son becoming part of Gilead's history in this way.

John is trying to "make the best of our situation" by telling his son things he might not have told him if his upbringing had been more typical. He says it's hard to remember what really matters "when things are taking their ordinary course," and that these are the very things that mean the most to people. He reminisces further about the **rainy** day at the burned-out church with the singing women and the ashy biscuit his father gave him.

If John's relationship with his son had proceeded more normally—if they'd had many years together—then it's possible they never would have talked about the most meaningful things. John tries to record some of those things in his letter.

When John broke some communion bread and fed it to his son that recent morning, he knows he was trying to give his son something of his own memory of his father feeding him a morsel of biscuit. He often wonders about the relationship between this reality and eternity. Even though grief won't persist there, he can't believe that earthly sorrows will become meaningless—they are such a big part of being human. Even now, he feels sorrow for his future son, who will grow up fatherless.

In John's mind, giving his son communion was a way of sharing an old memory with the boy, even though his son couldn't understand at the time. When he reads this letter, then, he may be able to look back on his own childhood memory in a different way. John believes that sorrow and suffering are some of the most human things—even though the pain isn't good in itself, it etches meaning into people's lives.

PAGES 104-110

John tells his son more old stories. Most of these he learned from his father during their wanderings in Kansas, and he supposes he wouldn't have heard most of these if they hadn't been in such dire straits, often thirsty and hungry. Once, when owls woke them up, his father told him the story of waking up and seeing John Brown's mule being led down the front steps of the church, followed by several horses, a wounded man being led on one of them, and John's grandfather following. Not yet 10 years old, he went up and sat in the dark church. As **light** rose in the church, he noticed blood on one of the benches. He dragged the bench outside and tried to scrub the bloodstains, but he stopped, figuring that someone might come looking for evidence of the men.

John has just talked about the fact that meaningful stories don't often get shared in the course of ordinary life, and here he relates stories that his own father shared during their difficult travels. When John's father was a boy, he witnessed the radical abolitionist John Brown apparently receiving shelter in their church. Even as a young boy, John's father apparently felt a sense of responsibility to grapple with his father's bloody activities and try to protect him—a heavy weight that shaped their relationship later on.

That morning, it occurred to John's father that it was strange that his father had left in the middle of the night without leaving any instructions. A little later, he noticed a soldier sitting on a bench in the church. The stranger asked if he could borrow a horse, but he noted that John's grandfather had probably ridden off on the horse he hoped to borrow. He asked if John's father has heard of Osawatomie John Brown. The man mused that he couldn't understand why a minister would let Brown into his church. He told John's father that hid platoon has ridden in the general direction that Brown's men are thought to have gone. John's father noticed the man was limping and believed his father had shot him.

John continues relating the childhood memory that his own father shared with him. The unfamiliar soldier seems to have had a violent encounter with John's grandfather before coming into the church. John's grandfather's association with John Brown—called "Osawatomie" after the Kansas town where he lived—would make him complicit in Brown's brutal tactics against pro-slavery forces, at least in many people's eyes. John's father would have realized that his father could get into serious trouble not just for aiding Brown, but for shooting a soldier—a terrifying memory for a young boy.

After they'd left the church last night, Brown's men had headed for the hills, knowing they were being followed. Later, John's grandfather was heading back home carrying his gun and foolishly carrying two bloody shirts, too. This soldier came upon him and questioned him, and John's grandfather shot him. He'd promised to try to cover Brown's retreat, and he did. What else should he have done—brought him back to the church, which was filled with secret hiding places and tunnels for freed slaves? His grandfather's association with Brown would have been given away at once. Later, his grandfather warned his father never to tell the truth about having seen the injured soldier.

After John's grandfather returned home, John's father learned what had happened the night before. It's now clear to readers that John's grandfather did shoot at least one person—the soldier who questioned him about Brown— with questionable justification. But John's grandfather was so committed to his antislavery efforts that he believed he couldn't risk exposing his church's activities for the cause. It becomes easier to understand why John's father always struggled with his own father's legacy, as he was entrusted with such heavy information and carried such fears at a young age.

When nobody came to question them about the injured soldier, they figured he must have died on the plains, and John's father was sickened by the relief he felt. He said he never forgave himself for not going and looking for the man. The next Sunday, his grandfather had preached in a bloody shirt while clutching his gun. From then on, he often disappeared for days at a time, and John's father couldn't bear to know where he went.

Even though he was just a young boy at the time and knew the soldier's survival could have led to his father's arrest or worse, John's father felt responsible for not trying to help the injured man. Though he doesn't say so directly, this seems to have been the point in John's father's life when his deep ambivalence about his father took root.

PAGES 110-115

This morning, John met with the church trustees. He knows they're planning to tear down the old church after he dies. He's glad he won't be around when that happens—he figures the grief would kill him. Of course, there'd be poetry in that.

John is deeply attached to the church where he's spent his entire life and career, so it makes sense that even if the congregation survived, the destruction of the building itself would be devastating. Still, John manages to keep a sense of humor about the possibility.

John ponders whether he might be impatient to die. He quotes George Herbert on God's preservation being like a new creation every moment; he hopes that his son has read Herbert. He watches his son playing on a swing beneath his window and experiencing the childhood pleasure of discovering things like gravity and light for the first time.

John seems to feel ambivalent about life at this moment. He's lived a long and full life and, in some ways, he's apprehensive about what might come next, if he lives much longer. And yet, dying will mean missing so many milestones and opportunities to teach his son things, like George Herbert's poetry.

John didn't mean to criticize the church trustees; it makes sense not to invest in the church building at this point. He did tell them that the church's weathervane was brought from Maine by his grandfather. The vane has a rooster on it, and there's a bullet hole at the base of the rooster's tail. There are various stories about how it got there. He suspects the true story is that his grandfather fired a rifle to call a meeting to order.

John shows his humility in his attitude toward the church trustees; he understands that the congregation's future is bigger than himself and might not include the church building that means so much to him. The building's importance makes sense: it isn't just a structure, but something that contains memories and even bits of people's personalities, like the weathervane that his grandfather likely shot.

John points out that these churches weren't meant to be "venerable"; settlers built them as an adequate shelter for the time being, and they grow shabby over time. He used to think that all churches had steeples in order to draw lightning away from other buildings, but eventually he realized that not every church had his father in its pulpit. He wants his son to know that he understands the church's complex history. These days, many people think that loyalty to the church is "benighted." He knows his own experience has been sheltered in many ways. But the church is also universal, and it means more than John can find words for. He hopes his son will "put [himself] in the way of the gift."

John's comment about the church's steeple is a little hard to understand. He implies that, like steeples draw lightning, his father's ministry—perhaps especially his preaching—tended to draw fire. This might be a way of suggesting that his father's preaching was controversial. In any case, John also tells his son that he knows that the church, as a human institution, has its flaws. But in spite of this, he also wants his son to be open to the beauty and blessings to be found in its midst.

John did something strange this morning—he danced to a waltz tune on the radio, even though he didn't really know how. Thinking of his youth reminds him that he didn't really have much of one, and that he will miss the beauties of this world. He figures he'll do all his waltzing in the privacy of his study, and if he starts to feel pain, he'll clutch a special book. He changes his mind since a book might gain unhappy associations if it's found in his dead hands. But he considered Donne, Herbert, Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, and the second volume of Calvin's *Institutes*.

As he nears death, John seems to grow more whimsical and more appreciative of life's everyday joys. This attitude even extends to his anticipation of dying. He thinks it would be appropriate to die with a favorite book in his hands, like poetry or a theological work of special significance, but he decides that might be too traumatizing for those who find his body. But his musings suggest that he's able to think about death in a fairly matter-of-fact and even humorous way.

PAGES 116-122

John visited Boughton this morning. He's in a good mood because Glory and Jack are clearing out his overgrown gardens. John chats with Boughton a little about baseball, politics, and happy memories of youth, but he can tell that what Boughton really wants is to just listen to his children's voices, so John goes back home. His wife was worried that he'd gone out without telling her. He figures it wouldn't be the worst thing to drop dead while he's out enjoying himself, and that he might as well enjoy life while he's feeling well.

It's plain that Boughton finds joy in simply being around his children, especially Jack, with whom he's had an unexplained estrangement. Boughton's contentment suggests that even if there isn't perfect understanding between people, they can still cherish one another. Meanwhile, John continues to enjoy life as much as he can with the time he has left, though it's difficult to balance this with his wife's worries.

John thinks of Boughton's dour old parents and what they must be like in heaven now. He likes to think of "divine mercy giving us back to ourselves," letting us laugh at our foolishness. He still thinks of Boughton as a vigorous young man. Boughton hasn't preached in a decade, and John feels that, unlike his friend, he still has an errand to complete.

John regards heaven as a place where, somehow, people become what they're meant to be, even if they didn't live life in the most fulfilling way. As John watches Boughton decline, he feels that his friend has achieved what he's meant to do on Earth and, for that reason, almost seems to hope that Boughton will get to experience heaven soon. On the other hand, John feels like there's still something left for him to do.

This week John plans to preach on the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis. He finds comfort in this story because it suggests that even when a child's father or mother can't provide, someone will. Every child is sent "into the wilderness" in some sense, and even the wilderness belongs to God. Jack Boughton came to play catch with the boy today, and both the boy and his mother seemed disappointed when Jack couldn't stay for supper.

In this biblical story, Abraham sends Hagar and the son she's borne him, Ishmael, into the desert on the orders of his wife Sarah. There, God looks after the cast-out woman and child. It's pretty obvious why John would find this story comforting. It's not a perfect parallel to his life, but he does know that after he dies, he won't be able to provide for his son, and he has to trust God to provide for the boy and Lila instead.

Last night Jack Boughton came by and chatted with John on the porch, until John invited him to stay for supper. John has always found Jack's "preacherly" manner disturbing—he's had it since childhood. It almost has a touch of parody, John thinks. Over the macaroni and cheese, Jack notes that John hasn't visited his father in a few days. John thought Jack would have been gone by this time—it's one of his life's greatest irritations to see Jack and Boughton together.

It becomes clear that even when he's outwardly kind and inviting, John struggles with various grudges against Jack Boughton. These range from the trivial (he finds Jack's resemblance to a preacher insulting) to the weighty—he seems to feel that Jack doesn't deserve a father like Boughton. Though it's not clear why, Jack is a big obstacle for John.

When John was a bachelor, church ladies used to just come and go, leaving meals for him. When he got married, it was hard for people to learn that they couldn't do that anymore. He started discouraging people once he realized that their well-meant gestures hurt his wife's feelings.

John reflects on how his life has drastically changed. Through most of his ministry, he more or less belonged to the congregation as a whole, and there weren't firm boundaries between his life and his congregants'. Now that he has Lila, it's been hard to maintain boundaries around his home life.

John mentions it because it's just so strange to find himself sitting there with Jack Boughton and his family, when not many years ago he used to sit there eating cold leftovers and talking and praying with Boughton *about* Jack. But what is the point in telling his son about all that? There's nothing very unusual about Jack's story. In fact, John sometimes wishes people understood how "worn and stale" the commonplace sins really are. Maybe then they'd lose some of their appeal.

Jack Boughton's presence at his family dinner table is a good example of how dramatically John's life has changed. Still, John seems hesitant to tell his son what he means by all this. He implies that Jack is guilty of unnamed sins, but that's not unusual—as a minister, John has seen everything, and he knows that the same old stories play out over and over again. Yet, clearly, there's some reason that Jack really bothers John.

John needs to figure out what to tell his wife about Jack. His son keeps looking at Jack like he's Charles Lindbergh. John wonders if God is somehow specially at work in Jack returning home. He hopes there's a point, since he would especially appreciate peace right now. But he shouldn't complain.

There's a humorous hint of John's age here, as aviator Charles Lindbergh's peak of popularity would have been in the 1920s and 1930s, not the 1950s (although his son does love airplanes and might indeed idolize Lindbergh). The bigger point, though, is that Jack is somehow disrupting the peace John had hoped for in his last days. The novel subtly hints that Jack's presence has something to do with John's sense of an unfinished mission in life.

PAGES 123-127

The next time Jack comes over, John makes a point of behaving more cordially toward him. Jack seems amused by John's effort, so John gives up and heads off to the church. He spends hours thinking and praying about Jack. Afterward, he knows he must try not only to act but to *think* graciously toward Jack, no matter how Jack sees through him. He has a lot more praying to do.

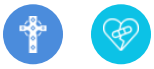
Despite the fact that relating to people is basically his job—one he seems to be reasonably good at under normal circumstances—John has a special struggle with Jack, as his outward behavior apparently gives away his inner ambivalence. The fact that Jack sees through him suggests that the two know each other well.

John has heard from both his father and his grandfather that when you encounter another person, it's as if the Lord is asking you a question in that moment. That being the case, if you encounter antagonism, you're free to *not* respond in kind; you have an opportunity to act according to grace instead.

John shares advice that's been passed down to him, that each personal encounter is a fresh opportunity to treat another person well. No matter what one's history with another person, then, there's always a chance to try again.

John's own recent failures have reminded him of this. He likes Calvin's image of the individual as an actor on a stage with God as the audience. He thinks that in general, people think too little about God's enjoyment of us, the enjoyment of a beloved child's existence. Thinking about sons turns his thoughts back to Jack Boughton, who "is a piece of work."

John likens God's enjoyment of his human creatures to his own delight in his son's existence. He thinks this is a helpful way for people to think about living their lives before God—wanting to please their heavenly Father, rather than shrinking in fear from a distant deity. Humorously, though, John can't keep his thoughts elevated this way for long before he starts fretting about Jack again; he's only human.



John's instinct is to warn his son and his wife against Jack Boughton. Though by now, his son must understand that John can't trust his own feelings on the subject of Jack. But it's a grave matter for John. Maybe he simply needs to say that Jack's character isn't to be trusted, and nothing more than that.

Obviously, John's worries about Jack are of a serious nature. He feels that Jack poses some sort of danger to his wife and son, made more urgent by the fact that John won't be around much longer.

John hasn't written for a day or two. At night, he's been having some discomfort and difficulty breathing. But there is no point in dwelling on problems that don't have an earthly solution. His wife has sent the boy off to the neighbors, and he notices that she looks pale. She's brought his writing and reading materials downstairs. Someone else has brought a tray for his glasses and pills and water. John doesn't believe this is as serious as everyone else seems to think, but he could be wrong.

John doesn't say whether his symptoms are a result of anxiety or his heart condition, but there doesn't seem to be a heavy distinction between the two in his mind—he's preoccupied with the Jack problem, and Lila and others seem to believe he's taken a turn for the worse physically.

John feels much better after a nap. The family eats a casserole supper, and John gathers that the congregation was alerted; you'd have thought he died, he notes wryly. His son samples the different casseroles from John's tray, joking that he can't make up his mind until the food is nearly gone. John thinks of the time he gave the boy communion and wonders if his son does, too.

The congregation has rallied around with meals for John and his family, and he finds humor in the situation—after all, pretty soon he will die, and the church will respond in the same way. John delights in mundane moments with his son and wonders if he will cherish the same memories John does.

PAGES 127-131

John spends a few hours at the church this morning, and when he comes home, he finds that his books and desk have been moved into the downstairs parlor. He knows it's Jack Boughton's doing, and he's okay with this. He's still bothered by the thought of Jack Boughton in his study. He even has trouble finding his journal at first and feels Jack taunted him by placing it in his bottom desk drawer, though he knows that's not reasonable.

John is clearly struggling to accept Jack's sudden—and very personal—reappearance in his life. He tells himself he's okay with Jack taking the initiative to help, but he also feels Jack's presence as an unwelcome intrusion and isn't able to be completely rational about it.

Today, John gave his Hagar and Ishmael sermon, departing from the text more than he usually does. It may have been unwise, since he lay last night in a kind of paralysis of anxiety and woke exhausted. And then Jack Boughton showed up at church, and John's son went to sit with him. But John notes that his wife didn't give Jack a second look.

John continues to struggle with his sleep, implicitly concerned about Jack. Jack's appearance at church seems to be uncharacteristic of him, but, tellingly, John is more focused on his son's interest in Jack—and relieved by his wife's apparent lack of interest. John hints that he's concerned about Jack's intentions toward John's family, though it's unclear what, exactly, he's worried about and whether he's justified in his suspicions.

John's point in his sermon was that Abraham was called on to sacrifice both his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, and that in both cases, God sent an angel to intervene. He also sees Abraham's old age as an important element, since any father, especially an elderly one, has to entrust his child to God's providence. This takes great faith. He also notes that an old pastor's anxiety for his church shows he forgets the fact that Christ is his people's pastor. He changes the subject when he notices some of the women crying.

Though John doesn't make the point explicit, there could be a parallel in his mind between Abraham's sons Isaac (the long-awaited, favored son) and Ishmael (the cast-off son) and John's sons (his biological son and his surrogate son, Jack). His explicit point is that an old man has to entrust his children—or his congregants, as the case may be—to the heavenly Father who loves them most.

John notes that when Abraham takes Isaac into the wilderness and when he sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, these are the only times in Scripture when a father appears to act unkindly to his children. In practice, John notes, everyone knows fathers who mistreat their children. At this moment, he notes that Jack is pale and grinning. He regrets choosing this text to preach on and wandering from his written notes.

When John muses that neglectful fathers don't measure up to the model fathers of the Bible, he seems to trigger an emotional response in Jack. The fact that this is a digression suggests that John had something in mind about Jack that he didn't intend to say out loud.

John goes on to note that the Bible does acknowledge that children offer suffer from others' cruelty, that it doesn't countenance this, and that even in such circumstances, the child is always within God's care. He doesn't know if it's a sufficient answer to the question; he's never been satisfied with his attempts. He always worries that when he speaks of God's providence, he will unintentionally downplay the evil of oppression. But the Bible doesn't do this, as the Gospel text shows when it speaks of a millstone around the neck of anyone who offends God's "little ones."

John wants to make it abundantly clear to his congregation, and to his son reading this, that God never approves of those who inflict suffering, especially on children. In fact, the Bible is emphatic that anyone who hurts children deserves a horrible fate. At the same time, he tries to show that even though we can't understand the reason behind suffering or its meaning, people should trust that God cares for vulnerable sufferers.

John notices that Jack just keeps grinning. He's always found this strange about Jack. Instead of regarding their meaning, Jack decides that words are hostile or not hostile and reacts accordingly. Even though John admits that Jack's look might have influenced his extemporaneous comments, he still thinks it's very presumptuous of Jack to assume that he was directing his words at him. He also notices that his wife looks anxious, and he wonders what Jack might have told her.

Jack's strange smile suggests that he's trying to mask his reaction to what John is saying in the sermon; John thinks he takes words themselves as an attack, regardless of what the speaker intends. It sounds as though John wants things both ways here—he thinks Jack is making assumptions, but at the same time, he basically admits that he was thinking specifically about Jack as he preached. He's obviously conflicted.

PAGES 132-139

John woke up this morning feeling refreshed. He visits a widow who's just moved to town; she is upset because the hot and cold water are coming from the wrong faucets, and she wants things to work the way they're supposed to. So, John gets his tools and switches the handles for her until she can get a real plumber. He thinks ruefully about the duties of the clerical life. His wife gets a good laugh out of the story, though, so he figures it's worth it.

The visit with the widow shows that small-town ministers often find themselves carrying out duties that they didn't train for in their seminary classes. John takes all of this with good humor and doesn't regard such things as a waste of his time, showing he really cares about the people in his church above all.

John reads *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* for himself, and it "gave [him] a sort of turn" when the old man character fears that his young beloved will choose a man her own age instead. She eventually chooses the older man. He reflects that his wife couldn't have encouraged him in any better way than by loving this book so that John read it, too.

Recall that The Trail of the Lonesome Pine *is one of Lila's favorite books. John previously said that he didn't care for the book, but it seems that precent events prompt him to read it again—hinting that, whether he admits it to himself or not, he's afraid that Lila might choose a younger man (perhaps Jack Boughton) over him. That Lila loves the book's plot encourages John that she won't leave him after all.*

Sometimes John forgets why he is writing this—to teach his son the things he believes a father should. In writing of the Ten Commandments, he comments that the Tenth is "violated constantly." He mentions his own longing for a family and a house full of children, a pang felt in one's bones. He has always been better at "weeping with those who weep" than "[rejoicing] with those who rejoice."

John drags himself away from thinking about Jack and focuses on addressing his son. The Tenth Commandment is "You shall not covet," which John thinks is an especially difficult one to obey—including for him, during his lonely years. The Bible exhorts Christians to sympathize with one another (he cites Romans 12:15 here), but John admits it's difficult for him to share in others' joys when he's aware of his own lack.

John also draws special attention to the Fifth Commandment, to honor one's father and mother. He believes this commandment belongs to the "first tablet," or those Commandments pertaining to proper worship. This is because worshiping rightly has to do with perceiving things—including people—the right way. John says that you can only fulfill an obligation to honor people in cases where there is mutual intimacy and understanding.

Traditionally, many interpreters distinguish between the "first tablet" of the Ten Commandments, which focus on one's duties toward God, and the "second tablet," which focuses on people's duties toward one another. John is making a case that the commandment to honor one's parents actually be grouped among the duties directed toward God. This is a subtle point, but basically, he means that in order to honor someone properly (whether one's parents or even God), one must have genuine knowledge of them. As the book goes on, it's worth asking whether this holds up in practice (like in John's relationships with his father and grandfather).

John's overall point here is that most of us have someone in our lives to honor, whether a parent or a child. It is "godlike," he says, to delight in someone else's being, the way he and his wife delight in their son. In a way, the Fifth Commandment is necessary because parents are more of a mystery to their children than vice versa.

John draws parallels between his delight in his son's existence and how he believes God delights in his children. His view of God as a loving heavenly Father is foundational for his view of human relationships, too.

John thinks of his wife's "settled, habitual sadness" and the "sacred mystery" of sorrow that has struck him ever since he first saw her. There is dignity in sorrow, simply because that's what God wants: he is always raising up the lowly. That doesn't mean it's right to inflict or to seek out suffering; he thinks it's important to be clear about that. But he wants his son to remember that God is on the side of sufferers.

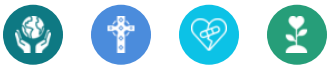
John finds that his wife, too, is mysterious because of what she'd been through (which is never revealed to the reader). John returns to the subject of suffering here, noting that God seeks out those who are suffering, even though that doesn't mean suffering is inherently a good thing. But God's care for the vulnerable is a key part of John's outlook.

John admits that his wife never talks about herself or admits to having suffered. He tells his son to be respectful of that pride, and also to be very gentle; if someone shows that kind of courage, it means they've needed it. He has seen enough of human life to understand her, but he worries that others in the church don't, and that they think she is a hard person.

It becomes a bit clearer why John has been talking about honoring parents and respecting the dignity of suffering. Right now, his son is much too young to understand any of this, but someday, John hopes he will be able to understand and respect where his mother is coming from. This is a lesson that many people don't understand, and that John won't be there to teach him.

John adds that among the instructions he is leaving behind for his wife, he wants her to know that over the years, he's donated a substantial portion of his salary to other people, making up stories about anonymous donors. Assuming that he would never have a wife or child, he never gave it much thought. He's also paid for upkeep at the church. He's only telling his son this so that if and when his son receives help, he can think of it not as charity but as repayment—by the grace of God, receiving something back as if from John's own hand.

John has been very generous to people over the years, in a characteristically low-key, unassuming way. Now that he's unexpectedly had a family, his lack of savings will put them in a difficult position after he dies. Telling his son about this isn't being boastful or apologetic—rather, John is suggesting that years from now, his son can feel connected to him through church members' generosity.



But back to the Fifth Commandment—John says that the right worship of God is essential because it forms a person's mind to a right understanding of God. That is, God is not to be understood as just "a thing among things"; God is set apart. Much as the Sabbath day is set apart, so mothers and fathers are set apart. And then the remaining commandments prohibit crimes against the sacred, set-apart things.

John returns to his theological discussion. In his view, it's important to have a basic understanding of the God one worships (even though that understanding obviously can't be exhaustive, since God is infinite and people are finite). Key to this is understanding that God is above everything else and must be honored accordingly. John suggests that the Commandments (like those regarding the Sabbath and parents) train people in the practice of setting certain things apart for special honor, and ultimately in setting God apart above all.

Father and Mother can be understood, then, in a universal sense. And the discipline of honoring other human beings is learned by honoring one's mother and father, even when they're difficult to honor, by keeping in mind their sacredness. In the case of John's wife, he tells his son that if he keeps this in mind, he will see his mother as God sees her, which will teach him, in turn, about the nature of God and of Being itself.

John suggests that the practice of honoring one's father and mother is a kind of fundamental lesson in honoring all *people as having been made in God's image. Learning to honor people as God made them also results in people honoring God as they should, in his view, and he commends this view to his son.*

PAGES 140-149

John has had a more leisurely morning today, and in the course of reshelving his books, it occurred to him to wonder what he'd say to himself if he came to himself for counsel. He decides to put his conundrum down in a Question and Answer format, calling himself "Moriturus." He asks "Moriturus" what he fears most, and he replies that he fears leaving his wife and child "in the sway of a man of extremely questionable character."

John has spent years counseling people, so imagining a counseling session with himself seems a reasonable way of helping him work through his own problems. This also gives a glimpse into John's approach as a minister, which involves getting to the heart of people's fears rather than giving heavy-handed advice. "Moriturus" means a person who's about to die, and it appears that John's biggest fear is Jack Boughton's future influence on his family.

Continuing to question himself, John asks himself what makes him believe that Jack will have a damaging influence upon his family. This strikes him as a good question—after all, Jack has come to the house a handful of times and to the church only once. The truth is that when John looked down and saw Jack sitting with his family, covetousness rose up within him—the way he once felt "when the beauty of other lives was a misery and an offense to me." He's glad he thought this through.

John recognizes that there isn't really a rational basis for his fear. That is, Jack hasn't even been around John's family that much, and John's fear seems to be based on his own insecurities more than anything else. When he saw Jack with his family during church, it brought up memories of his old envy of big, happy families. While there's no reason to believe that Jack would marry Lila after John dies, it's a lurking fear nonetheless.

The truth is that John doesn't want to be old—"the tremulous coot you barely remember." He wishes his son could have seen him when he was trim and fit, even into his sixties. He reminds himself that Jesus wept in the face of His impending death, and the Bible's promise that "we shall all be changed [...] in the twinkling of an eye." He's saying all this because he's aware that he's failing, "as though I'm some straggler" that people keep leaving behind. This morning, when his son came up to show him a picture, he was finishing a magazine article and didn't look up immediately. He was struck that his wife said to his son, "He doesn't hear you"—not "he *didn't* hear you."

By all appearances, John isn't afraid to die, but he does *hate being old. He regrets that his son will never know him as he used to be—the version of himself John seems to regard as his truest self. He tries to reassure himself with the Bible's promises regarding death, such as the transformed, resurrected bodies mentioned in 1 Corinthians. He does this because he can't deny that he's slipping ever closer to death, the rest of the world moving on without him. Even Lila seems to believe that John isn't fully present with the family anymore. John isn't a fully reliable narrator in this regard, so it's hard to know if Lila is right, but John acknowledges that there's at least a little truth to it.*

The article was in a 1948 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*; Boughton had marked an article to show John a long time ago. The article is called "God and the American People," and it claims that 95 percent of Americans say they believe in God. But the writer thinks all those churchgoers are "the scribes and the Pharisees." The writer clearly thinks of himself as a prophet, but to John's mind, the scornful tone marks him as a "scribe" himself.

"The scribes and the Pharisees" refers to the religious authorities who criticized and eventually condemned Jesus to death in the Gospels. So, when the magazine writer calls religious Americans "scribes and Pharisees," it's a scathing remark—he thinks they're all hypocrites. However, John thinks the writer's self-righteous denunciation of others reflects badly on himself, too.

"Believe in God" is an odd phrase, and it makes John think of Feuerbach, who doesn't imagine any existence beyond this one. John observes that humans' notion of reality is very limited. He tried giving a sermon on this last year, and he was very pleased with it, but people seemed puzzled, and he realized that he lives in his thoughts too much. It occurs to him that nowadays people might chalk up his abstract preoccupations not to eccentricity but to senility, "by far the worst form of forgiveness." In any case, in his waning years, he has felt it important to tell people that many of the attacks on religion that have been so popular in recent centuries are actually meaningless. He wants his son to understand this, too.

John muses on the nature of belief in God—a topic that's hard to put into words, since God is beyond human understanding. His experience preaching on the subject suggests that John's theological musings are often too abstract for his congregants. It's embarrassing to think that people might cut him a break not because of his scholarly bent (as in his younger days), but because of his age. But he sincerely thinks that faddish criticisms of religion often proceed on an intellectually faulty basis.

This afternoon John and his son walk to Boughton's to return the magazine. Every once in a while, his son runs off to chase drifting milkweed seeds, but he always comes back to take John's hand again. John knows it's hard to be patient with his shuffling gait. He drinks lemonade with Boughton on the porch. As soon as John brings up the magazine article, Boughton starts laughing—he knew it would exasperate John. They figure that lots of people in both their congregations must have read it, because it appeared in the same issue as a recipe for a horrible gelatin salad that has haunted both of their lives in recent years.

John's walk with his son is touching, as the boy tries to balance his desire to run and play with his desire to be close to his dad. John's discussion with Boughton shows how well they know each other's minds, and it's also funny—congregations often bombard their ministers with food, but it's unusual to hear the ministers complain about it openly.

John says there are two "insidious notions" about Christianity in the modern world. The first is the view of Feuerbach and Freud, that religion and religious experience are basically illusions. The second is that religion is real, but that the individual's belief that they participate in it is an illusion. John points out that people are always vulnerable to this second accusation, because no one's understanding meets the highest standards of faith. But if religion's failures mean that there's no truth to religion (a view that the Bible itself rejects), then people cannot believe in the dignity of their own or their neighbors' inevitably flawed expressions of belief. It seems to John that this article is written in exactly that self-righteous spirit that the writer criticizes.

Speaking to his son, John explains what he sees as the pitfalls of modern atheism. Basically, his point is that people either discount religion altogether or attack religious people as inauthentic. It's true that nobody can perfectly live up to their faith, John says, but this modern objection isn't a new observation (it's everywhere in the Bible, after all). And what's more, religious people's failures are not sufficient grounds for claiming that there's no truth to religion whatsoever.

John points out an especially "fraudulent" point in the article, which claims that the majority of respondents expressed confident views about heaven, even though the Bible doesn't say much about it that's clear. John argues that just because a subject is ambiguous doesn't mean that someone can't or shouldn't form ideas about it; indeed, it may not be possible to *avoid* doing so. He'd love to talk to the 29 percent of people who claim they have no ideas about heaven to see how they manage it. Boughton says he has more ideas about heaven every day—he just multiplies the world's glories by two (and would multiply them more if he had the energy).

John continues critiquing the article with Boughton. The magazine writer seems to scoff at people's certainty about heaven, but John contends that it's difficult to avoid forming views about this subject, even if those views are just conjectures. He implies that it's only human to wonder and form ideas about big, ultimate things like life and death and what comes after death. Indeed, like Boughton, many people probably imagine heaven more as they draw closer to death.

Jack comes outside to sit with his father and John. He mentions a point in the article that Americans' treatment of Black citizens seems to indicate "a lack of religious seriousness." Boughton says it is easy to judge. This is the first John has seen of Jack since he came to church, and he feels a little embarrassed. He realizes he mainly came to visit Boughton to see if he and Glory were mad at him, if he'd driven off Jack by bringing up "the old catastrophe" in church. But he hesitates to bring up the issue because he doesn't want to stir up needless offense. Thankfully, everyone seems to be in fine spirits.

John was having a good time discussing the article with Boughton, but Jack becomes an unwelcome interruption. Jack wants to discuss a specific matter of injustice, but Boughton brushes it off rather easily. And John is distracted by the fear that his sermon about neglectful fathers alienated Jack, though it's still not clear why this would be the case.

John's wife comes up to Boughton's to tell them supper is ready. John coaxes her to stay for a moment, which she is always reluctant to do, and she says little. He loves the way she talks, though he knows she is self-conscious about it—like the "prodigal" way she says "It don't matter" when she forgives someone.

John uses "prodigal" to mean something like "generous"—when his wife expresses forgiveness, you can tell she means it with all her heart. From her style of speaking, it's also hinted that Lila comes from a lower social class than John does.

PAGES 149-154

As they're sitting there, Jack suddenly cuts in to ask John his views about predestination. John hates discussing this topic—no matter how heatedly people discuss it, their opinions never budge an inch—so of *course* Jack would bring it up. When John hedges, Jack simplifies the matter by asking John if he thinks some people are simply "consigned to perdition." John replies that this doesn't really simplify anything, and that human beings lack the capacity to truly penetrate the mystery of God. When Jack continues to press him, John isn't sure if he's serious.

Predestination (the teaching that God appoints some people to receive salvation while passing over others) has often been a contentious topic in Christian history. Presumably Jack knows that, so it annoys John that he'd bring it up now, *and he struggles to believe that Jack is really asking these questions in earnest. He keeps putting Jack off by observing that God is beyond human understanding.*

Jack says that this isn't an abstract matter. He says that it seems that, in John's view, predestination doesn't mean that a good person will go to hell simply because that's his fate. Glory excuses herself from the conversation at this point, and Boughton agrees that it probably won't go anywhere useful, but John's wife listens quietly. Jack is insistent, so John says he doesn't believe that a person who's good in any meaningful sense, or for that matter a person who's sinful, is necessarily "consigned to perdition," according to the Bible. John adds that he has seen people's behavior change, but he's not sure if that means their nature changes. Jack says he is being "cagey."

Jack keeps pressing the matter of predestination. He tries to pin down John's specific views on this matter, but everyone else tries to steer away from the controversial topic—except for Lila, who seems to take a personal interest in this subject, too. John eventually concedes that he doesn't think the Bible teaches that anyone is automatically consigned to hell. He also doesn't think a person who changes their behavior has necessarily changed deep down. But Jack doesn't accept John's distinctions, accusing him of avoiding a straight answer.

John insists that he is just saying there are things he doesn't understand, and he doesn't want to impose a theory on something that's ultimately a mystery. His wife looks at him, and he knows he must sound upset—and he is. Most of the time when a "smart aleck" starts questioning him about theology, they're just trying to make him look silly, and he doesn't find that funny these days. But then his wife surprises everyone by speaking up and asking what's the point of a person being saved if there's no hope of them changing. She blushes, but Boughton tells her it's a good question, one that he's never found a good answer to.

John takes Jack's questions personally. He doesn't believe Jack is being serious and is trying to make him look foolish somehow. Lila, though, seems to sense a deeper seriousness behind Jack's questions, and she's invested in the subject, too—especially the hope of a person changing their life. Her remarks hint at her own experience of becoming a Christian later in life, but her story remains a mystery for now.

Jack tries to dismiss himself from the conversation since no one seems interested in pursuing it, but John's wife speaks up again and urges him to stay. After an awkward silence, John suggests reading Karl Barth, just for something to say, but Jack scorns this. John's wife, without looking up, says that a person can change—that *everything* can change. Jack says that's all he wanted to know, and the conversation ends.

Karl Barth was a Swiss Protestant theologian whose life would have been roughly contemporary with John's, and in fact Barth was at the peak of his public influence as a theologian around this time (the 1950s). It's clear, though, that by making this suggestion, John is just trying to put an end to the conversation. Again, Lila sees a deeper significance in the conversation and hints that she's experienced radical change herself. This suggests that although she's not educated like John, her perceptiveness is much greater in some ways.

John is left wondering about the conversation. He doesn't enjoy discussing theology with people who are not sympathetic to it. As a small-town pastor, it's not a situation that comes up very often. And when it comes to Jack Boughton, John has trouble believing he's sincere. But as they're walking home, his wife says that Jack was just asking a question, and that "some people aren't so comfortable with themselves." John feels rebuked by this.

John isn't used to being aggressively challenged on his beliefs this way, and it seems to unsettle him—especially given John's fraught history with Jack. But, lacking such a history, Lila seems to understand Jack much better than John does and even to sense pain underneath his sharp words.

John has always tried to avoid saying anything that his brother Edward would find naïve. This practice as served him well. After all, some religious people speak in such a way that they invite contempt. But John advises his son to avoid defensiveness. It suggests a lack of faith. And sometimes in the act of trying to protect oneself, "we are struggling against our rescuer," though John admits that he has seldom managed to live by this.

Intellectual integrity is very important to John, thanks to his atheist brother's challenging influence. However, he appears to sense that he bungled the conversation with Jack by being too defensive. A secure faith isn't threatened by hard questions. Moreover, he thinks that sometimes a challenging questioner can actually provide a vital turning point in someone else's faith.

PAGES 155-160

John is having trouble sleeping and praying, so he believes it's time to tell his son what the issue is. If he later decides he's said something untrue, then he can just destroy the pages. He begins by saying that God's grace is sufficient for any transgression, and that it's wrong to judge.

John gets ready to tell his son what's been tormenting him regarding Jack. His preface suggests that it involves some sort of wrongdoing on Jack's part.

John adds that he has certain bonds with John Ames Boughton, his dearest friend's beloved child, whom Boughton essentially gave to John as a consolation for his own childlessness. John even baptized Jack himself. Because of all this, it pains him to speak against Jack. And yet there's a sense in which it's only right to speak truthfully about people.

Boughton intended for John and Jack to share a special bond ever since Jack's birth, hence naming Jack after John and honoring John by letting him baptize Jack (something Boughton would normally do for his child himself). But John holds that honesty is more important than bare loyalty.

The basics are easily summed up: when Jack was in college, he had a relationship with a young girl, and they had a child together. Every clergyman has had to deal with situations like this, and it always works out in one way or another. However, in this case, there were "aggravating circumstances." For one thing, the young girl was quite young, and her family was extremely poor. John doesn't even know how Jack became involved with her. John says it's something that "no honorable man would have done." From his years as a pastor, John believes that dishonorable people never really change their ways, and he cannot help such people. But he acknowledges that he might be wrong about this.

All along, the novel has hinted that Jack has a troubled past, and the extent of that trouble is finally revealed here. John explains that all ministers have to deal with situations where children are born out of wedlock, but this one presented some special challenges. He doesn't say how *young Jack's lover was, but it's implied that there was a disturbingly big gap between their ages—she was probably underage. John's disgust with Jack's actions is evident, and this gives more context to their recent discussion about whether people can truly change. John seems to believe that Jack is one of those people who are basically so corrupt that they* can't *change.*

Jack didn't acknowledge the child as his or do anything to provide for the child. He told his father about it, and to John this always seemed cruel—Jack would have known that this grandchild would weigh on Boughton's mind. One day, Glory even drove Boughton to the child's home, but the family were hostile toward him. Mrs. Boughton went to hold the baby, too, which John thinks was unwise. They brought money and supplies for their granddaughter for years, but nothing really seemed to help—the little girl didn't thrive.

Jack was inexplicably callous toward the child he fathered; meanwhile, the rest of the Boughton family fretted over her, constrained in what they could do to make her situation better.

Once Glory took John to see the little girl, too, and John found the situation horrifying—there was trash strewn everywhere, and the baby was dirty. He couldn't understand how Jack could have taken advantage of the young girl and then abandoned her and the baby. Jack made it clear that he had no intention of marrying her, and the family had no interest in placing the baby in a healthier environment. Glory sent Jack pictures of his child, but he never mentioned her or acknowledged the pain he'd caused his family.

Jack's daughter was stuck in a fairly hopeless situation, her family unwilling to change her impoverished environment and the Boughtons unable to alleviate it in any significant way. Given Jack's apparent indifference to his daughter, it becomes clearer why John harbors such a grudge against his namesake.

The little girl lived about three years until she cut her foot and died of the infection. Her family allowed the Boughtons to bury the little girl in their family plot; the grave is simply marked Baby, since her mother hadn't settled on a name. The grave also has a Bible verse on it: "Their angels in Heaven always see the face of My Father in Heaven."

Recall that this is the same Bible verse that appears on John's infant daughter Rebecca's grave, speaking of God's love for the most vulnerable and helpless. It's easy to see how the nameless little girl's tragic death would remind John of his own child.

Everyone, including John, was filled with regret afterward. John supposes maybe it would have been right, as Glory once suggested, to kidnap the baby, even if it meant some of them wound up in jail. Glory sometimes lamented that they didn't manage to keep the baby for just one week. John understands how she feels, but he wonders what difference that would have made ultimately. He wonders the same thing about "that other child of mine."

The rest of the Boughton family is left in anguish, wondering what they might have done differently that could have potentially spared the little girl's life. For his part, John knows that even the kindest intentions don't always work out, and that senseless tragedies still happen—like the loss of his own child.

John says this is all he needs to tell his son about Jack Boughton. Jack's family loved the baby because they loved Jack so much; she looked just like her father. And now Jack is mysteriously back home, and his family is acting like everything is fine. John knows that 20 years is a long time, but he thinks that Jack "doesn't have the look of a man who has made good use of himself."

Jack's family seems to have put the whole tragedy, and Jack's culpable behavior, behind them. But John hasn't let go, and that's apparent in his current perception of Jack—that, given his past, he's basically good for nothing.

PAGES 160-166

John found a couple of his sermons sitting on the night table and knows his wife put them there. One, dated June 1947, is about forgiveness. It refers to the story of the prodigal son and suggests that *being* forgiven is just half the gift—the other half is that we can forgive, too, by God's grace. He still thinks this was a good sermon. He preached it when he was approaching 70, and his future wife was there.

Lila seems to be very perceptive about everything that's on John's mind lately, which is presumably why she's leaving sermons on forgiveness sitting around where he can find them. If she remembers this sermon from several years ago, it obviously made an impression on her, and she hopes that John might take his own words to heart if he revisits it.

John's future wife first attended church on Pentecost of that year, which was in May. There were festive candles burning, and John preached on the subject of **light**. He was 67 at the time. He wishes he could convey to his son how beautiful his mother was that day, hating to think that the memories will die with him; but "this life has its own mortal loveliness."

Since light symbolizes God's presence in the world, it's fitting that light is a prominent memory from the day that Lila—whom John sees as God's gift to himself—first visited John's church. Lila is also an example of the kind of fleeting, fragile beauty that John loves about the world.

John remembers Glory taking him to visit Jack's baby one day. The family lived on the other side of the West Nishnabotna River. When they arrived, they saw the baby and her mother playing in the river. After they dropped off some canned goods, the young girl ignored them, as usual. John understands—the family assumed that they were going to all this trouble to try to keep Jack out of trouble. John supposes there might have been an element of truth to that. He and Glory stood on the bridge and watched the mother and baby playing in the shallow, muddy river. John remembers the cicadas singing and the hush of the wind through the trees. Then he and Glory drove home. Glory said to John that she didn't understand a single thing in the world.

Abruptly, thoughts of beauty put John's thoughts on a different track: visiting Jack's neglected little daughter. Despite poverty and neglect, the sight of the little girl playing with her young mother in a peaceful setting is strikingly beautiful. Both Glory and John seem to think that there's something incongruous about the loveliness of the scene against such a tragic backstory—it doesn't make sense, as Glory observes. Yet, as John notes throughout the novel, that's true of so much of this world's beauty—it's all mixed up with sorrow.

John recalled this scene because "remembering and forgiving can be contrary things." Jack Boughton didn't hurt him directly, so it's not his place to forgive him, anyway. Just because one man loses his child, and the next "[squanders] his fatherhood," that doesn't mean the second man has sinned against the first. John says he doesn't forgive Jack—he wouldn't even know where to start.

Given all that he knows and remembers, John struggles to let go of his anger about Jack's youthful misdeeds. He understands that Jack didn't actually do anything to him. But he also implies that he can't help viewing Jack's failed fatherhood in light of losing his own child in infancy. The fact that Jack had the chance to be a father and wasted it, while John barely got that chance at all, grieves him terribly.

John is watching his son and Tobias playing in the yard. Eventually Jack Boughton appears with his baseball bat and glove. He watches the three of them playing in the yard for a while and eventually steps outside, knowing something must be on Jack's mind. Jack asks John if he'll be in his church study tomorrow and says he will stop by in the morning.

John isn't the only one who's been preoccupied about his relationship with Jack; it seems Jack has been thinking about it, too. At this point, it seems possible that Jack might be seeking some sort of reconciliation with John.

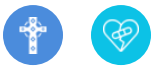
After this, John reflects that when he and his son are reunited in heaven someday, neither of them will be old; they'll look like brothers. At least, he believes it will be something like that—he thinks Calvin is right to discourage speculation on this subject. John supposes that souls in heaven probably enjoy something similar to "perpetual vigorous adulthood." He wouldn't mind his wife being reunited with him as a young man, either. He knows the Bible says there won't be marriage in heaven, it would certainly be nice if there were.

Whenever Jack plays with John's son, it seems to remind John that he didn't get to experience life as a young father himself. This thought leads him to ponder what life will be like in heaven. He can't help wishing that in heaven, he might get another opportunity to enjoy marriage and fatherhood as they would have been if he were young and strong.

PAGES 166-173

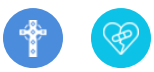
John slept poorly last night. When he got up, he made an effort to shave carefully and dress neatly, wanting to look more like a "gentleman" than a "codger." Then he walked to church to wait for Jack Boughton and fell asleep in a pew. Before he fell asleep, he'd been praying for wisdom in dealing with Jack, and he figures he must have reached a sense of resolution on the matter, or he wouldn't have fallen asleep. Jack, who's also nicely dressed, apologizes and sits down to give John time to pull himself together. They chat about the congregation's history, and Jack remarks that it's "an enviable thing" to inherit an identity from one's father.

Despite John's efforts to look like a respectable, put-together minister, he immediately does something that makes him look like a "codger" (an elderly, old-fashioned man) after all by falling asleep. Given that John's age is a sensitive matter for him, especially when Jack is around, being discovered asleep in a pew doesn't get their conversation off to a promising start.



John has a bad habit: he forms an opinion of a conversation early, and at this point, his hopes aren't very high. He's always been a little touchy about this, and he tells Jack that regardless of who his father had been, he assumes that God still would have called him to his vocation. Jack says that he always seems to cause offense without meaning to, and that he wishes he could have been like his own father. When John says that Boughton has been an example to all of them, Jack looks grieved and frustrated. He says he'd hoped to speak more directly and starts to go, but John encourages him to sit down; they'll try again.

John has always given an impression of being a sensitive listener, but where Jack is concerned, listening is much more of a struggle. Though carrying on his family's legacy is important to John, he also feels strongly about having been called to his vocation as an individual. But it seems his sensitivity about this keeps him from understanding that Jack was really talking about his relationship with his own father, Boughton. John's prejudice about Jack—and his assumption that Jack intended offense—get the conversation off on a shaky footing.



They sit quietly together for a while until Jack says that when he was a little boy, he thought God lived in the attic and paid for their groceries. That was the last time he was capable of religious conviction. He couldn't believe anything his father preached, and he still doesn't. And there's another thing—he lies a lot, because people believe him, and telling the truth tends to go badly for him. By telling the truth now, he implies, he's taking a big risk.

Jack admits that he's never truly believed in God and doesn't feel capable of doing so—a big confession for a minister's son, although it doesn't seem he's hostile to his father's faith the way other skeptics, like John's brother Edward, have been.

John asks Jack what he wants to tell him. Jack says that earlier, he'd asked John a question. John admits that's true. He just doesn't know how to answer it. Jack says it does not make sense to him that there is "a great gulf fixed" between him and John, across which they can't communicate. John isn't sure what Jack is asking—does he want to be persuaded that Christianity is true? Jack isn't sure.

Jack is referring to the conversation on Boughton's porch when he asked John if he believes a person can change. The phrase "a great gulf fixed" is a reference to a story Jesus tells in Luke 16 which teaches that there's an impassable boundary between heaven and hell. Jack just means that he doesn't think it should be so impossible for the two of them to have a straightforward conversation, even though their beliefs are different.

Jack remarks that a man he met in Tennessee had heard of Gilead and of John's grandfather. He'd also heard that in the Civil War, there was a regiment of Black soldiers. He hadn't realized that so many Black people ever lived in Iowa. John says it's true—many of them came from Missouri before the war began. Jack recalls that there used to be more Black families in Gilead, but that they've all moved away.

It's not really clear what Jack is getting at with these seemingly out-of-the-blue remarks about Iowa's Black history, but they're worth keeping in mind as Jack's story continues to unfold.

Shifting to the sly, angry tone that John has never been able to stand, Jack brings up Karl Barth, whom he knows John admires. He points out that Barth doesn't respect American religion very much. He asks John why American Christianity "seems to wait for the real thinking to be done elsewhere." John starts to feel as if he is losing this conversation. He said that it's presumptuous for anyone to judge the authenticity of anyone else's religion. Suddenly he realizes he is crying, and Jack apologizes, contrite. After he leaves, John knows he has to write Jack a letter, but he has no idea what to say.

Jack abruptly changes the subject and tone, becoming more critical of John's faith and, implicitly, of John himself. This seems to wound John deeply, although it isn't clear exactly what's triggered his tears. At the very least, he's grieving the fact that he and Jack, his namesake, can't seem to communicate with each other, especially about the subjects that mean the most to John.

PAGES 173-179

Gilead doesn't look like much, but John wants his son to know that heroes and saints have lived here. Over time, those saints came to seem like mere eccentrics. John even felt this way about his grandfather, dreading his disappointment. The older generation judged people with great harshness for failing to embrace the "great cause," and John believes they were justified.

John seems to take up this subject in the aftermath of Jack's critical comments about his faith, as though to assure his son that although it isn't a perfect place, Gilead has been home to exemplary Christians. It also seems that Jack's criticisms have hit a nerve. That's why he brings up his grandfather, implying that by not taking up his grandfather's convictions so passionately, he's let him down.

John remembers a certain Fourth of July when his grandfather was asked to speak. (The mayor who invited him doesn't seem to have known just how eccentric the old man was.) John has a copy of the sermon his grandfather preached that day, and he copies it out here for his son. His grandfather wrote that the Lord came to him when he was a young man and spoke to him. He told him to free the captives. He categorizes this as a vision. Such things aren't common anymore. In his day, General Grant called Iowa "the shining star of radicalism." But now, only dust and ashes remain in Gilead. Most people weren't listening very carefully, but those who did mostly just laughed at the strangeness of the speech. His grandfather knew it hadn't done much good.

Even though he doesn't agree with everything his grandfather said and did, John regards him as exemplary in many ways and wants his son to learn from that example. His grandfather's eccentric Fourth of July speech can be seen as a parallel to John's unpreached sermon about World War I and the Spanish Flu pandemic. Both men held strong convictions, but the difference between the two of them is that his grandfather gave his speech knowing he'd be misunderstood and even derided, while John destroyed his sermon on the grounds that it wouldn't do any good.

John thinks about that a lot. It seems to him that the same words that radicalize one generation often alienate the next. So while it might seem that he would feel obligated to rescue Jack from his skepticism, he feels the conversation is pretty futile. In any case, he has always declined to get involved in conversations with skeptics, because he doesn't believe that one can speak truthfully of God from a defensive posture. It just reinforces people's skepticism.

The alienation between John's father and grandfather is a good example of the dynamic John discusses here. He figures that any arguments he might offer Jack might alienate him, much as his grandfather's audience rejected his views. And in general, he doesn't think a person can be argued into faith in God.

When John was young and Edward was studying in Germany, his father watched him like a hawk and lectured him about the faintest whiff of heterodoxy in John's thinking. It caused tension in their relationship, but John knew that his father was really trying to find a way through to Edward.

The same dynamic that occurred between John's father and grandfather repeated itself between John's father and brother Edward: his father's faith wasn't intelligible to Edward. "Losing" Edward this way made John's father fear the same would happen with John.

John actually thinks that attempts to defend faith can backfire, "because there is always an inadequacy in argument about ultimate things." And it's possible to assert something's existence (like "Being") without understanding what it means. And God is yet further beyond *that*, as the "Author of Existence." Human understanding is too poor to grasp how a being could exist *before* existence. These ideas force us to speak of things of which we have no experience, like "building a ladder to the moon." So, John advises his son not to look for proofs of God. They'll never be enough, and over time, they can be very unsettling.

Here, John means that arguing about God ultimately can't work—God is above human categories, so human reason can't apply to God successfully. He also rejects the idea that it's necessary to understand something in order to believe in it. John isn't being anti-intellectual; he values searching, studying, and asking questions about one's beliefs. But he's essentially discouraging his son from mixing up reason and faith—these categories might complement each other, but they can't take each other's place.

PAGES 179-185

John doesn't sleep tonight; his heart is unsettled. He remarks that he can't distinguish between illness and grief. Throughout his life, a weight in his chest has signaled that there's something he needs to work through; but nowadays, the weight worries him. Tonight he keeps thinking about Jack. This morning Jack sent a note apologizing for offending John and promising not to trouble him again. His wife looks worried when she brings the note in. John sends back a note saying they should try to talk again soon.

It's not clear whether John is experiencing illness, heartache, or possibly both. In any case, he's still troubled about the failed conversation with Jack and senses that there's unfinished business between the two of them.

John remembers when Jack was 10 or 12 and he set John's mailbox on fire. In those days, Jack was always up to some prank or another. He even stole a Model T car when he was just 10. He confessed it to John, and John couldn't bring himself to tell Jack's parents because he was so impressed with the child's ability to keep the secret.

Even though Jack's affair with the young woman was his most notorious offense, it clearly wasn't the first one. He had a rather precocious ability to pull off pranks, and John couldn't help admiring it. It's not clear what motivated Jack's behavior, though.

And yet he saw a sadness in Jack, too, and in his many "sly and lonely" transgressions. Jack sometimes stole from John, too—even a little photograph of Louisa. John was furious, yet he didn't know how to tell Boughton. Eventually, the picture was quietly returned to him. As Jack grew older and got in trouble for bigger messes, he got away with it because people respected the Boughtons so much.

John sympathized with young Jack on some level, seeing—and perhaps identifying with—a loneliness in him, even though some of Jack's behavior was deeply destructive and hurtful. Ironically, Jack's status as a minister's son exempted him from consequences for many of his actions.

John thinks it was strange that Jack was lonely, because he was so beloved by his family. His siblings always fretted over him and tried to protect him from getting into trouble. John found it provoking to be around Jack, especially when he would smile at John as if they were in on a joke together. His point in recounting all this is that Jack is mysterious, and John has never known how to make sense of his behavior morally. Yet he knows how much harm Jack could do. He thinks again of Jack sitting beside his family in church and grinning up at him. It's not doing his heart any good, so he goes to pray.

Jack was clearly loved as a child, yet that didn't seem to be enough for him—he was still unhappy and acted out. He's an example of John's belief that people are fundamentally mysterious, even if one think one knows a person well. Given their unique connection, John doesn't want to reject Jack, but he also feels genuinely threatened by him.

PAGES 185-191

Today is John's birthday. There's a stack of pancakes waiting for him at breakfast, and his son recites the Beatitudes perfectly, beaming at the accomplishment. His son wears his red shirt, and his wife wears her blue dress. John would give a great deal for a thousand mornings just like it. His wife also found the sermon he gave the first time he saw her, the Pentecost sermon. She kisses him and tells him not to go revising it. He is now 77.

John has an idyllic morning with his family—a picture of the kind of home he longed for during his lonely years but never dreamed he'd actually get to experience. His attention to detail suggests that he's savoring it, knowing he might not reach his 78th birthday.


John is discouraged to think that he might end up being "bothered to death" because of Jack Boughton. He feels it's "disgraceful" that he's unable to speak to Jack as a pastor should. The best people, he feels, love the people they pity. In general, women are better at this than men, but it also means that they get drawn into harmful situations. John always struggles to counsel people away from such situations—since that loving attitude is basically Christlike.

John's struggles with Jack make him feel like he's failing as a minister. He seems to think he should be able to distance himself from Jack emotionally, but given the past, that's probably not realistic. John suggests that loving struggling people makes one vulnerable, and it's not always healthy for people to do that. Yet doing so, he suggests, is also following Jesus's example.

Jack hasn't replied to John's note. So, he writes another. When he's dropping it off in Boughton's mailbox, Jack is outside. He reads the note and thanks John for it, and they agree to talk again soon. John feels relieved. Admittedly, part of the relief is the hope that his wife will no longer have reason to pity Jack so much.

John seems to fear that if Lila feels sorry for Jack, she'll end up falling in love with him, and Jack will then take advantage of her. This fear is a big part of John's motivation to try to help Jack with whatever is burdening him.

John doesn't sleep this night; he's thinking about **baptizing** Jack. The plan had been to name Jack Theodore Dwight Weld. John liked that name, especially since his grandfather had loved Weld's preaching. But during the baptism, when John asked Boughton what the child's name was to be, Boughton wept and instead said, "John Ames." Jack felt the situation was unlike Boughton, and "un-Presbyterian," at that. People wept in the pews.

Theodore Dwight Weld was a famous 19th-century abolitionist. During the baptism ceremony, Boughton caught John totally off guard by declaring instead that the baby was to be named after him. John found this "un-Presbyterian" spontaneity and sentimentality off-putting.

To be honest, John says, it took him a long time to forgive Boughton for this. If he'd had any time to reflect, he probably would have felt differently. But in the moment, his heart froze, and he thought, "This is not my child." It's foolish, but John admits that he has occasionally thought that the infant Jack felt how coldly John baptized him. He's always felt guilty about it, and he's never warmed up to Jack.

Boughton's surprise set an uncertain tone for John and Jack's relationship. It makes sense—after all, unexpectedly having a child named after you (and not your child, at that) is likely to bring up complex emotions. Even though it isn't rational, John feels like this tainted Jack's baptism somehow.

After writing this, John realizes it isn't actually true, and he's relieved. But he does wish he could **baptize** Jack again, to really feel the sacredness of it. And John Ames Boughton really *is* his son in a sense. He recalls the passage in Calvin's *Institutes* that says that God's image in another person is reason enough to love them, even if they're an enemy. He's not saying that Jack is his enemy, but even if he isn't, shouldn't he be all the more ready to forgive whatever petty offenses Jack has committed against him?

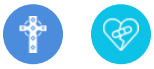
Sorting through his feelings in writing helps John realize that they don't necessarily reflect reality. But since baptizing people has always made John feel connected to the sacredness of human beings created by God, he wishes he could have another shot in this case. He wrestles with his feelings toward Jack, sincerely wanting to love him and not begrudge him.

While John was praying about all this, he reflected that existence is the most essential and holiest thing. So, if God chooses to make nothing of human sin, then our transgressions truly *are* nothing—or at least, they are trivial compared to "the exquisite primary fact of existence." At the same time, human beings can do great harm. John has always struggled to reconcile the gravity of sin with the grace of forgiveness. If Jack is truly his son, then that little girl who died was John's child, too.

Essentially, John means that the mere existence of a human being is incredibly sacred, and that nothing can compare to that fact. No matter what a person has done, it can't obscure the miracle of their existence. But he worries that this emphasis risks downplaying the horrible things people do, such as Jack's neglect of his child.

After reviewing these thoughts the next morning, John has realized that he's avoiding the key question—how should he deal with his fear that Jack will somehow hurt his wife and son out of sheer meanness? Perhaps a big part of his fear is that if Jack *did* hurt them, his theology would fail him. Then John hears them all laughing on the porch below. It's a relief. He thinks that he is an old and limited man, and even once he's dead, Jack will remain "his inexplicable mortal self."

It's fine to theorize about existence and sin, but John is still faced with a pressing matter—after he dies, his wife and son could be at Jack's mercy. The thought that Jack could harm his family threatens to override all of John's forgiving intentions. At the same time, he recognizes that he doesn't really understand Jack and is jumping to drastic conclusions based on his worst fears.



PAGES 191-200

Pressing the limits of his understanding has been one of the greatest pleasures of John's life. He believes that both Edward and his grandfather inspired him to do this. However, his "present bewilderments" make him feel more lost than ever before. It has all made him think about the way the world goes on—how those who come after trample on what we cared about.

John loves to explore problems intellectually. The challenge of his present problems, however, is that they're not theoretical—they concern the people he loves most in the world. And looming over it all is the fact that pretty soon, John will no longer be here to protect his loved ones.

John remembers his father and grandfather shelling walnuts on the porch one day, as they did every autumn. When they weren't arguing, they enjoyed each other's company, and that usually meant sitting silently together. A terrible drought had started, and his grandfather said, "The summer is ended and still we are not saved." His father agreed.

John's grandfather's quote is from the prophet Jeremiah, lamenting the people's suffering under God's wrath. So, his grandfather was saying here that the drought was God's judgment on humanity's sin. Notably, the two men manage to agree sometimes about God's work in the world, though at other times they're bitterly divided over it.

Right now, John's son and Tobias are sitting on the porch, sorting through a colorful pile of gourds and pretending that various ones are submarines, tanks, and bombs. John remarks that all children seem to play at war nowadays, though he notes that in his day, they did the same thing—only they played at cannon fire and bayonet charges. This fact doesn't reassure him.

The memory of the past makes John reflect on different generations, as his son and Tobias play on the same porch where his grandfather and father once sat. He acknowledges that even if the details change, there seems to be a warlike impulse in humanity—and a tendency to make light of war, at that.

John reflects on a sermon his father gave after everyone knew there'd been a breach between him and Edward. It wasn't like John's father to bring up personal things in the pulpit. But that day he thanked God for helping him understand what "defection" is and what he'd done to his own father when he left him to worship with the Quakers instead.

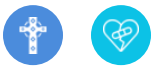
Unlike his own father, John's father was reserved in his preaching. But that didn't mean he was unreflective. When grieving Edward's "defection" from Christianity, he was able to see that he, too, once abandoned his father's view of the world.

John's father revealed that even though his mother (John's grandmother) was very sick and in great pain at that time, she began coming to church again when she heard that her son wasn't there. His sisters had to take turns carrying her. When the three of them entered the church, his father paused in his preaching, then preached for a few more minutes on the mystery of suffering for others. Then he finished the sermon, picked up his wife, and carried her home. When John's father heard about it, he was ashamed, and he came back to church.

John brings up a rare story of his grandmother, who's mainly known in the book as someone who suffered terribly because of his grandfather's convictions. Despite arguably being neglected by her husband, John's grandmother couldn't bear the fact that her son (John's father) stopped coming to her husband's church, and she shamed him into coming back. Her actions suggested that, at least for her, family loyalty was the most important conviction.

John understood his father's message—he was saying that whatever Edward's transgressions might have been, his own were worse. He was also saying that no matter how embarrassing and disappointing these circumstances were, they still had something to teach him. John has often tried to look at his own life this way. He has found that the wrongs a person suffers are usually foreshadowed by the wrongs a person has committed themselves. However, he's unsure how this realization applies to his present circumstances.

John's father was open to the lessons God might be teaching him through painful circumstances in his life, and John tries to be similarly open in his life. After all, everyone is guilty of hurting others, and this is important to keep in mind when one is hurt oneself. But this insight doesn't help John understand what's happening with Jack.



This afternoon John had a discouraging meeting at church where very little was accomplished. When he got home, he took a nap and ended up sleeping through supper. He came outside in the evening and found his wife and son wrapped in a quilt on the porch swing. He sat down with them in the dark, watching his son doze. Then Jack Boughton walked down the road, and John's wife invited him to visit, so he sat on the porch steps. John has noticed that Jack is always obliging toward her. Jack remarked that it's good to be back in this town, and it's wonderful that some of the people who live here now "don't know [him] from Adam." He made a weary gesture John had seen before.

John records an encounter with Jack. It's a good example of the way John feels that Jack is intruding on precious time with his family. He seems particularly concerned about the fact that Jack clearly likes and respects Lila—something that apparently makes John feel somewhat threatened. Jack's comments reference the fact that his reputation in Gilead hasn't been great and hint that this has been a burden to him.

They chatted a bit, and John said sincerely that it has been good to see Jack during his time in Gilead. He also said he admires Jack's familiarity with Karl Barth. Jack said he still tries to "crack the code" sometimes, and that John might not admire this if he understood Jack's motives. John couldn't help thinking that Jack is the hardest person in the world to have a conversation with, but he let the matter drop. He even imagined that Jack is really his son, sitting peacefully on the porch with them that night. He's been thinking about grace lately, as if it's a **fire** that burns things down to essentials, and he could feel something of that in the darkness and quiet tonight.

Jack's reference to "crack[ing] the code" means that he still tries to understand Christianity sometimes, presumably with the hope that he might be able to believe it someday. John finds Jack's personality very provoking, but he makes an effort not to let that disturb him and to focus on the simple goodness and beauty of life instead.

Even though John was drowsy at this point, he had a thought that stayed with him. He wished he could sit at the feet of Jack's eternal soul and learn from him. It occurred to him that people are secrets from one another and even have their own distinct languages in a way—each a "little civilization" to themselves. Customs and common notions really just let us "coexist with the inviolable, untraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us."

Even though John is distressed and confused by Jack, he still has an underlying respect and love for his basic humanity, as his drowsy thoughts show. After all, no human being can fully understand another, he thinks. As each person is made in the image of God, he suggests, only God can really understand the interior of any person. People just have to do the best they can to communicate and live together in this world.

John thought back to the terrible hunger during the Depression. It was simply how life was, and people got used to it: it was their civilization. But nowadays it might as well be "Ur of the Chaldees," for all people know about it. And that's a good thing. It's also a good thing to know what it's like to be poor, and better if you can experience that in the company of others.

John's drowsy thoughts on the porch drift to life during the Depression, which is totally foreign to people today—as foreign as if it happened in long-ago Ur, the Middle Eastern land from which the biblical Abraham originated. He reflects that as terrible as that time was, it taught his generation something precious and irreplaceable about suffering together.

John nodded off, as he often does nowadays, and at some point he heard Jack and his wife talking. His wife asked Jack how long he'll be staying in Gilead. He said his stay has already begun to seem long, and he might be heading back to St. Louis soon. His wife admitted that it took her a while to get used to this town. She also remarked that everyone speaks kindly of Jack. In reply, Jack asked if Reverend Ames has warned her about him yet.

This conversation, which happened while Jack and Lila thought John was asleep, is revealing to John. Jack and Lila know each other a little better than John guessed. At least, Lila seems to feel comfortable being honest with Jack, suggesting that they share a feeling of being outsiders in Gilead. But it's also clear that Jack hasn't told Lila everything about himself, assuming that John will do that.

John felt her taking one of his hands as she said that John never speaks unkindly about anyone. They laughed a little about what it's like to be poor and how she always longed for a settled life; Jack remarked that he's still searching for one. Very gently she replied, "Well, Jack, bless your heart." He said, "Why, I thank you for that, Lila," and left.

In their shared status as outsiders, Jack and Lila speak more forthrightly together than Jack does with anyone else. Lila also has a genuine sympathy for Jack which he isn't affronted by, seeming to know it's sincere. Highlighting the honesty of the exchange, this is the first time Lila is actually named in the novel—writing to his son, John has always referred to her as "your mother."

PAGES 200-209

John lies awake all night, except for the time he spends writing all this out. He's touched by his wife's kind words about him. He's also struck by Jack's tone of amazement when he learned that John hadn't yet warned Lila about him. He wonders how much of Jack's apparent misery comes from the fact that he's here in Gilead, and whether Jack feels shame. He wishes he could soothe any guilt and regret Jack is feeling. Then John could see what he's dealing with. But he apologizes—that's not a "theologically [acceptable] notion."

The conversation John overheard between Lila and Jack is very striking to him. He still can't figure Jack out, but he seems to draw reassurance from the fact that Jack apparently feels some degree of remorse. As a pastor, John instinctively wants to comfort Jack, but he's also aware of the less admirable motivation that he just wants to get to the bottom of Jack's intentions. John is a good pastor, but he also has endearingly honest, human moments.

John also admits that he heard the edge disappear from Jack's voice while he spoke with Lila. The two sounded like friends.

Jack and Lila can relate to each other in a way that neither of them can relate to others in Gilead. John recognizes this and seems, for the moment at least, to accept this uncomfortable truth.

After prayer and sleep, John thinks he's starting to see where the grace is in all of this. He regrets that he's never been to St. Louis.

John is slowly coming to terms with the painful situation surrounding Jack, though he doesn't yet explain where he's seeing "grace" in it all. His regret about St. Louis shows that he's still reaching for ways to relate to Jack, despite the tension between them.

After looking through the letter, John realizes he's mostly been worrying to himself, while his intention had been to address his son. He fears that when his son reads this, he will just see an old man's struggle. But he thinks he's finding his way out of it. He remembers the kindness in his wife's voice while she held his hand last night. She sounded as if she thought she'd never lose the settled life she enjoys with him, even though she knows she will. It gives him peace to know that her years of longing and wandering have been answered for her.

John realizes that the situation with Jack has dominated his letter to his son, which he'd intended to focus much more on family stories and life lessons. At the same time, the love and joy between him and Lila comes through even at incidental moments, and perhaps that's the most important legacy for John to convey to his son.

Once John dreamed that he and Boughton were looking for something in the shallows of the river, when suddenly his grandfather appeared and threw a hatful of **water** over them; they stood there "shining like the apostles." John thinks most of life's transformations are just this sudden and unexpected. It makes him think of meeting Lila on that rainy Pentecost. He's never told his son how their marriage came about. It sounds strange, but the event "sweetened [his] imagination of death."

John's dream has baptismal imagery, as though John's grandfather had given him and Boughton some sort of transformative blessing. This prompts him to write about the most sudden, unexpected change in his life: the way he met Lila.

After Lila visited his church for the first time, he spent the next week hoping she'd come back; he'd neglected to ask her name. He felt like a fool for wanting to see her and hear her voice again. He remarks that if his grandfather did "throw his mantle" over John, the holiness of his life gave the same holiness to John's, which he has tried not to sully. He had always tried to match his life to his preaching. Yet all of a sudden, he found himself distracted by the memory of a young woman's face.

John felt attracted to Lila from the first time he saw her in church. At the same time, he felt very conscious of the fact that she was much younger than him, and that it was his responsibility to uphold the dignity and sacredness of his profession by treating her appropriately.

If John had been younger, he might have been wiser. But now he understands more about passion. He no longer sees earthly love as separate from the kind of passion that moved saints and martyrs. Even in his misery, those days made him grateful to his core for the existence of love.

John had never experienced anything like this attraction before. The overpowering feeling couldn't be entirely separated from what moved people to willingly suffer and die for their beliefs. Even though these are very different kinds of suffering, the all-consuming devotion struck John as the same.

John and Louisa were expected to marry from their childhood. He'd never experienced this constant preoccupation with a stranger before. It was the first time he felt at risk of damaging his character and reputation. In that way, it was a kind of foretaste of death. And it got worse: as Lila continued attending church, John found himself writing his sermons in the hope of pleasing her. He felt ridiculous even as he prayed about it—and yet God answered his prayers beyond his wildest hopes.

John loved his first wife, but their marriage was different. It was simply taken for granted that they'd get married, and it seems John had never really fallen in love before. John's unprecedented, headlong rush of feelings for Lila felt like losing control, at risk of everything that he thought was important.

One awful Sunday, Lila didn't appear in church. John spent the next week feeling foolish and resigned. But she was back the following week, and John tried not to let his joy show. (He'd also gotten a haircut and a new shirt and experimented with hair tonic.) Finally, after the service, he shook hands with her and said they'd missed her last week. She blushed with surprise and looked away.

John is honest that on some level, his feelings for Lila were foolishly unrealistic. He even has a sense of humor about his preoccupation with her. It's also evident that, despite the strength of his feelings, John gave Lila space and didn't pursue her in an obvious or aggressive way.

The following week John invited Lila to an evening Bible study. To his delight, she showed up on the church steps that night and asked to speak with him. She informed him, "an unworthy old swain with perfume in his hair," that she wanted to be **baptized**—no one had made sure she was baptized as a child, and she'd been feeling the lack. He promised that she would be taken care of. When she admitted that she had no family at all, he felt sad for her, and wretchedly glad, too.

John continues to be ruefully self-deprecating about his lovesickness. At a time when American culture was a bit more uniformly Christian, it would have been more unusual for someone to remain unbaptized than it might be today. In any case, this seems to be a genuine spiritual concern for Lila, not just a formality. Despite his pastoral concern for Lila, John also can't help feeling grateful that Lila's loneliness could give him an opening to draw closer to her.

So, John taught Lila the basic doctrines of the Christian faith and soon **baptized** her. He felt thankful that he hadn't yet disgraced himself—he was 67, and yet he almost chased her down the street when he saw her coming out of the grocery store. He took care to treat her with the greatest respect. He even made sure that some of the church's kindly older ladies sat through her baptismal instruction with her, though he regretted that this seemed to make her feel shy.

John recognizes that love is making him feel and potentially act ridiculous, so he goes to considerable lengths to make sure that he doesn't cross any lines with Lila, even making sure their instructional sessions are chaperoned by church ladies.

John remembers one evening of the baptismal class. The group was sitting there pondering a passage John had just read from Calvin's *Institutes*, but he was really thinking about the loneliness stretching ahead of him. When he looked up, Lila smiled at him, touched his hand, and softly said, "You'll be just fine." He found it "unfathomable grace" to get to hear such a voice. Soon, Lila began to visit from time to time to tend his gardens. One day by the roses, he asked how he could repay her for it all. She replied, "You ought to marry me." So he did.

It's clear that at this point, John has no expectation that his lonely life will ever change. Lonely herself, Lila seems to intuit this about him. Their relationship quietly blossoms from there. It doesn't seem that Lila necessarily even told John much about her past; they just grew in trust by spending time together. Eventually, Lila was the one to ask him to marry her, which would have been quite an unconventional move for a young woman in the 1950s Midwest. But John clearly didn't mind.

Even now, John can't believe that Lila's feelings could have been as passionate as his own. He even hopes that someday, the words of the Song of Songs might startle her the way they startled him when he first fell in love with her. He wonders why he worries so much about Jack. After all, love is like grace: "the worthiness of its object is never really what matters." Perhaps he will leave her to an even greater happiness; he even supposes he might be witnessing its beginnings in her. If that's true, then it's a kindness from God.

John continues to have a certain realism about his relationship with Lila; he doesn't mistake it for a grand, youthful passion. The Bible's Song of Songs is known for its romantic, even sexual overtones, and these took on a fresh meaning for John after he met Lila. He doesn't assume she feels the same passion and is okay with that. Remarkably, he implies here that if Lila were to fall in love with Jack after John dies, he could accept even that.

PAGES 209-215

This morning there was a glorious dawn. John thinks about how **light** is constant; Earth just turns over in it. But it's all one day, "that first day." He thinks about his son getting old someday and finds the thought precious. He advises his son to be diligent in his prayers. He won't be around to help his son carry the weight of his years, but the Lord will.

With "that first day," John refers to Earth's creation in the Book of Genesis and suggests that the same light God made at the world's beginning continues to shine on the world. This seems to help him feel connected to his son's future aging, too, even though he won't be there to witness it.

This day has been strange. Glory invited Lila to the movies, and when she arrived, she dropped off Boughton. Boughton rarely leaves his house nowadays, and he seemed exhausted by the effort of coming over to John's house. While there, he finally spoke up and said that Jack isn't "right with himself." He said that Jack has never told him why he's back, or what he'd been doing in St. Louis. He's also noticed that Jack comes to visit John and Lila. John didn't know how to take this, but it seemed like Boughton was warning him about something. He felt confirmed in the belief that he must talk to his wife about Jack.

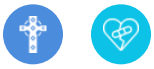
If Boughton went to the effort of coming over to John's house, there's clearly something on his mind. Jack apparently hasn't opened up to his father, and Boughton seems to be suggesting that John should be cautious about Jack's unexplained presence in their lives.

While John and Boughton were still sitting there, Jack arrived, and John invited him in. He looked as if he knew just what the men had been discussing, and he looked embarrassed and a little angry, as he often does. Boughton soon nodded off, leaving John, as always, wondering what to say to Jack. The conversation limped along pitifully for a while. John didn't know what else he could have said—after all, Boughton didn't tell him much. But Jack knew John wasn't being honest with him, and the whole situation was humiliating. It troubles John's heart even as he writes this.

Jack has a knack for showing up at awkward moments and making things even more uncomfortable. This time, Jack perceived that his dad and John had been talking about him, but there was really nothing John could say about the inconclusive conversation, especially with Boughton dozing there. It's an absurd moment that sums up John's unease about the whole complicated mess.

When John prays about Jack, it's Jack's sadness that strikes him the most. He feels Jack must be forgiven a great deal on account of his sadness. And by the time the women and John's son come back, the mood in the house is a little lighter. It's a relief to no longer be alone with Jack. Jack wanders off soon after. After supper, Lila and Glory take a walk to look for Jack, and though they don't say so, John surmises that they found him at the local bar.

In spite of all his complicated feelings about Jack, in prayer John feels drawn to the unexplained pain in Jack's past. Prayer seems to help John view Jack more honestly and be sensitive to his needs instead of just John's own reservations about Jack.



PAGES 217-232

Jack Boughton has a wife and child. He showed John their picture for a moment. John wasn't sure how to respond, and he could tell Jack was struggling not to be offended by this. The wife was a Black woman, and that did surprise John.

This reservation comes abruptly, as John writes the news straight off instead of first giving the whole narrative of how it came about. Readers share in John's sudden bafflement.

John had been sorting through papers in the church office when Jack suddenly came in wearing a suit and tie. After sitting there quietly for a moment, Jack said that he might have never returned to Gilead. He came back for a few reasons, chiefly to speak to his father. But he was shocked to find Boughton so aged and fragile. Instead of talking to Boughton, he said, he's going to make a last attempt to talk to John. That's when he took the picture out of his pocket and showed it to John. It was a portrait of himself, a Black woman, and a light-skinned Black boy of about five or six. In an almost bitter tone, he said, "You see, I also have a wife and child."

Jack's reasons for returning to his hometown become clearer. It seems he'd intended to come clean to his father about what's been happening in his life, but Boughton's failing condition made him doubt that Boughton could handle what he had to say. So, Jack turned to John, his surrogate father, instead. Suddenly, John discovers that he and Jack have marriage and fatherhood in common.

John says they are a fine-looking family. He asks if Jack is afraid this revelation would kill Boughton. Jack says it nearly killed his *wife's* parents. Jack says they've been "married in the eyes of God" for about eight years and have lived as such for 17 months, two weeks, and a day. John comments that they don't have anti-miscegenation laws in Iowa and wonders if Jack came to Gilead to be married. Jack explains that his wife's father, himself a minister, doesn't want them to marry.

John implies that if Boughton found out that his son was in an interracial marriage, the shock could actually kill him. The novel has given no indication that Boughton has hateful attitudes toward Black people, yet that doesn't mean Boughton would necessarily respond with acceptance to news like this, at a time when interracial marriage was much rarer than it is today.

Jack goes on to explain that there's a good Christian man in Tennessee who is willing to marry his wife and adopt their son. Her family all think this is a good idea, and he admits that he has had trouble looking after his family under the circumstances and doesn't want to ask his wife to break from her parents. And the main thing Della's father has against Jack is that he's an atheist. (Her father believes that all white men are atheists and that only some are aware of it.)

Because of laws against interracial marriage, Jack and Della aren't legally married. This creates all sorts of stress and obstacles in their life together, and even Della's parents don't approve of their being together. Presumably judging from the way many white men treat Black people, Della's father assumes that most of them can't be genuine Christians.

John says he thought that Jack *was* an atheist. Jack says it's more accurate to say that he's "in a state of categorical unbelief"—that is, he doesn't necessarily believe that God *doesn't* exist. His wife worries about his lack of faith, too. At first, she'd mistaken him for a minister himself, as many do.

Jack is basically an agnostic, meaning that he doesn't have a strong conviction about God's existence either way.

John is surprised to realize that he isn't sure how Boughton would take this news. He and Boughton never talked about this—in all their discussion over the years, it never came up. Jack hasn't even spoken to Glory about it, because he knows she'd be heartbroken over the situation. But he knows his father is worried. And during his time in Gilead, he's written to his wife several times and gotten no reply.

When the topic of race came up in the book previously (initiated by Jack, on Boughton's porch), Boughton was fairly dismissive. Again, while he isn't necessarily hostile, Boughton—and John, for that matter—doesn't seem to have found it necessary to wrestle with this topic. Racial discrimination and tension in the rest of the country doesn't touch their lives, so they can comfortably ignore it.

Della was a teacher. One day Jack saw her walking home from school in a **rainstorm** with an armload of books and papers, and he picked up some papers for her that had gotten scattered by the wind. Her first words to him were, "Thank you, Reverend." Without really thinking about it, he walked her to her door with his umbrella. Later, Della's father said that if Jack were really a gentleman, he would have left her alone. He understands—Della had a good life, and he *isn't* a gentleman. He won't let John object to that.

Compare this passage to John's first meeting with Lila—it was also a rainy day, the rain a symbol of unexpected divine grace. Also, Lila's first words to John on that occasion were, "Good morning, Reverend," suggesting a parallel between the two couples.

Jack says that if they could find some way to live as a family, answering her parents' biggest objections to him, then he believes Della *would* marry him. He explains that he met Della at a low point in his life. He had no intentions toward Della one way or another; they just greeted each other on the street sometimes. One day, Della invited him in for tea, and Jack revealed that he wasn't actually a minister. At the time, it didn't seem to matter much.

Jack's relationship with Della began unobtrusively. It's somewhat like John and Lila's relationship, in that they got to know each other from a distance at first and then began quietly spending more time together, without obvious romantic intentions.

Later—Jack isn't sure how it happened—Della invited him to Thanksgiving dinner. Jack was nervous about it and had a few drinks beforehand. When he finally showed up late, Della was sitting there alone and unhappy. She scolded him for showing up drunk, and he knew she was right not to respect him. He left, then realized she was following him. She told him not to feel so bad, and he ended up walking her home and having pumpkin pie with her and her roommate. Somehow her family in Tennessee found out about them, though, and her brothers took her back home with them after the school year ended.

By the time of the Thanksgiving dinner, Jack seems to be developing some real feelings for Della. However, it seems obvious at this point that there's no potential for their relationship to go anywhere—and that her family doesn't approve.

Jack tracked down Della's family; they were easy to find, since her father was the minister of a well-known African Methodist Episcopal church. When he showed up at the church, he was the only white man in attendance; everybody noticed. Her father certainly did: he preached about wolves in sheep's clothing and whitewashed tombs.

Jack cares enough about Della that he's willing to put himself in a risky and conspicuous position by tracking down her family. This stands in sharp contrast to his callous, selfish behavior as a young man. Della's father very obviously identifies Jack as a hypocrite through the biblical images he uses in his sermon.

But Jack still greeted him at the door afterwards. That's when her father told him that if his intentions were truly honorable, he wouldn't have befriended Della. Seeing that Della had a good life with her family, Jack immediately returned to St. Louis. Then, in the fall, he ran into Della again on the same street. When he tipped his hat to her, she began to cry. From that moment on, they considered themselves to be husband and wife.

Jack's father thinks that Jack's kindness to Della isn't real kindness, because Jack should have known it would only cause Della pain and sorrow in the long run. Trying to be honorable, Jack heeded Della's father's warning, but the couple's love for each other ended up winning out—at least for now.

Della's family disowned her at this point, and when she got pregnant, her school fired her. Jack worked as a shoe salesman, and they lived in a hotel in a bad part of town. They were technically breaking cohabitation laws, and the hotel clerk charged Jack exorbitantly to turn a blind eye to them.

Because Black and white people couldn't legally marry under Missouri law at this time, Missouri (and other states that enforced anti-miscegenation laws) sometimes prosecuted couples for living together illegally.

Eventually, Della's father and brothers came to see Jack. Her father said Jack should be thankful that he was a Christian man. He persuaded Jack to send Della home with them to have her baby, so he did, both relieved and miserable. He promised to come to Memphis when he had enough money. Weeks later, after writing to Boughton for help, he had enough money. While he waited, he often wandered to a tent revival that took place by the river each night. One evening he watched a man undergo a dramatic conversion, and he knew that if *he* could experience that, his whole standing with Della's family would change.

Della's father implies that Jack should be grateful because if he weren't *a Christian, he'd presumably do Jack harm. Jack was stuck in an awful bind—he loved her, but he also knew Della, and their soon-to-be-born child, really would be better off with her family in many ways. He also knew that if he could genuinely become a Christian, Della's father would be more open to their relationship. The fact that he refuses to fake a conversion shows that Jack really does have integrity.*

When Jack finally got to Memphis, the baby was a few days old. When Della's father got home, he said that he understood that Jack was a descendant of John Ames of Kansas. It was clear this changed his perception of Jack, so he didn't deny it. Della's father explained that he'd heard some amazing stories from people whose families had been helped by Ames and the abolitionists. Treading carefully, Jack said that his family had become pacifists after the Civil War and didn't discuss those days anymore—which of course was true.

Assuming Jack is named "John Ames" because he's descended from the old abolitionist, Della's father thinks a bit better of Jack. For his part, Jack doesn't hesitate to use John's name to try to gain a better standing with Della's father.

Della's father knew his name because it turned out that Della wanted to name the baby after Jack. Jack was happy to learn this. He sat with Della and the baby all day. Everyone was kind to them, but eventually, Jack figured out that they were "just being Christian." Then Della's father told him it would be best if Jack left. He left Della some money and went back to St. Louis to search for work. When Della came to St. Louis a few months later with the baby, she found him living in a nice, respectable room.

At first, the future looks a bit more hopeful for Jack and Della. But the fact that even Della's family's kindness is mostly superficial suggests that it's not going to be easy for them to find acceptance anywhere.

Ever since then, they have gone back and forth. Whenever things become too difficult in St. Louis, Della and their little boy go back to Memphis for a while. The little boy, Robert Boughton Miles, is a wonderful child, Jack says. He has a large, doting extended family and hasn't lacked for anything. A couple years ago, Jack saved up enough to buy a house in a racially mixed neighborhood.

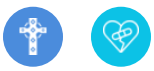
Life has been very hard for the Boughtons; they've had to fight constantly to maintain stability in their lives. Jack doesn't go into detail, but he implies that the family faces frequent harassment. In contrast to the situation with the impoverished young girl and baby 20 years ago, Jack works hard to protect and provide for his new family, and his child has everything he needs.

But after about eight months, the family went to a park together, and Jack's boss saw them there. The next day he spoke to Jack and warned him that he had his good name to consider. In response, Jack hit him. That night, the police came by and warned them about the cohabiting law. Jack put Della and their son on a bus to Memphis, rented out the house, and came back to Gilead.

The family's happiness has never been able to last for very long. When Jack's livelihood is threatened because of racism, he lashes out in his family's defense, finally realizing that their life together isn't sustainable—the world won't just let them live in peace.

Jack had thought that maybe he could find a way to move his family to Gilead. He would have liked for Boughton to know that Jack finally had something to be proud of. Little Robert Boughton Miles is being raised in the church and even wants to be a preacher someday. But seeing how weak his father is, Jack is afraid to tell the truth. He tells John not to tell him that this is "divine retribution." John assures him he wouldn't. But he needs to reflect on this before he advises Jack in any way.

Jack hasn't felt able to confide this story in his father at any point, and now it's seemingly too late. Ironically, Boughton might have a child follow in his footsteps as a minister after all (as he'd hoped Jack would do), yet he'll never know it. Jack fears that John will think this whole situation is God's revenge for Jack's misdeeds as a young man.



Jack remarks that John knows a little bit about being "the object of scandal," having made an "unconventional marriage" himself. Then again, Della is an educated woman. Immediately, John is struck by Jack's characteristic meanness. There was no need for Jack to put it that way. He's never regarded his marriage as scandalous, and he sees Lila as a refined woman in her own way. If anybody ever made remarks about their marriage, John forgave them. And seeing Jack's weariness, John forgives him, too.

There is a parallel between the Boughton and Ames marriages, in that people probably did judge John for marrying a much younger woman. And it seems John is sensitive about this point. Though Jack might have just been seeking common ground between them, John mainly hears the insult in Jack's words—that Lila isn't educated.

John tells Jack that if he were Boughton, he would love to meet his child. He adds that Boughton certainly was fond of Jack's other child. Jack turns very pale. John apologizes for saying such a foolish thing; he is tired and old.

Jack isn't the only one who can make cutting remarks—John's reference to Jack's first child is a bit of a low blow. But John's emotions are running high, and it's possible he really didn't mean any offense here.

When Jack gets up to leave, John embraces him. Jack even rests his head on John's shoulder for a moment. He says he is tired, and John can feel his loneliness. He wants to say something to Jack about being a second father to him, but he's too tired to think it through. Instead he tells Jack that he's a good man, and he means it.

Even if John and Jack aren't fully reconciled, they are now much closer to that point. Even though they haven't talked about Jack's youthful failings, John seems assured that Jack has truly changed over the years—a point he doubted before today.

Jack asks John what he thinks about moving his family to Gilead. John doesn't know what to say. There hasn't even been a Black church in town for many years now. And while Jack is right that John has influence here, he's not going to be around for much longer. They agree that it's been a good conversation, but as Jack leaves, he says, "No matter, Papa. I believe I've lost them anyway."

John can't give Jack an easy answer to how his family would be received here in Gilead. It's a scenario he hasn't had to consider before, and that along suggests it wouldn't be an easy road for Jack and his family.

Afterward, John prays for a long time. When Lila comes looking for him, she seems to think he's had another heart episode, and he lets her think it. He tells his son that it might seem indiscreet for him to have written down this whole conversation. But his son might never hear another good word about Jack Boughton, and he doesn't know how else to let his son see the beauty in Jack.

The conversation has transformed John's view of Jack. It goes to illustrate John's point that it's difficult to fully know a person, even if you think you know their story. John wants to make sure his son understands Jack's goodness, too.

PAGES 232-237

All this happened two days ago; now it is Sunday. In a minister's life, it always seems to be Sunday, or Saturday night. No sooner do you prepare for one week than the next week begins. This morning for his sermon, John read one of his old sermons. Some of it seemed right and some of it embarrassingly wrong.

Life goes on for John as it always does: a continual cycle of Sundays and the duties of preparing for the next Sunday. But John has changed over the years, as shown by the fact that he's ambivalent about some of his old sermons.

Jack Boughton was in church, and it particularly embarrassed John to stand there reading an old sermon while Jack smiled at him. Yet afterward, he wonders if Jack might have been comforted by the sermon's very irrelevance. He no longer feels his old dread around Jack. In fact, he almost wishes he could bequeath Jack a wife and child to make up for the ones he's lost.

Before, John felt threatened by Jack's smiling expression in church; it felt like a knowing insult. But now he feels like the two of them stand on more even ground, having arrived at a better understanding. Neither one of them has life figured out, and they both know it.

This morning, John woke up thinking that Gilead might as well be "standing on the absolute floor of hell," and it's his fault as much as anyone's. He thinks about everything that's happened there over his lifetime—droughts, the Spanish Flu, the Depression, and three wars—and wonders why they never considered what God might be trying to teach them through it all. Since they didn't, the question was taken away from them. One might ask why there's a town left here at all. He wonders if he never left Gilead because he was afraid he wouldn't come back.

The conversation with Jack rattles John and his view of the town he loves so much. He doesn't say so explicitly, but he implies that God has sent various disasters to urge the people to repent of their sin, or at least to teach them something important. But because the town never heeded those warnings, God has abandoned them. John struggles with the idea that Gilead, once an abolitionist haven, might not welcome a family like Jack's.

John's parents did leave Gilead. Edward built a cottage on the Gulf Coast, and their parents moved in partly to get away from the climate. At one point John's father came back after Louisa died to try to persuade John to leave, too. John asked his father to preach at the church, but he said he just couldn't do it anymore. He told John that he and Edward had always hoped John might seek a "broader experience" elsewhere and reminded him that he doesn't have to remain loyal to this place and its old ways. John was upset by this. He'd always understood that his loyalty to God transcended his loyalties to things like local customs and memories. Did his father think he was ignorant of that?

Earlier, it was implied that John and his father disappointed each other, but only now do the details come out—that even if John's father didn't lose his faith outright, he seems to have become disillusioned with the ministry and with Gilead. In his disillusionment, he didn't respect John's choice to remain here. John was offended that his father implied he was small-minded, or at least falsely loyal, by choosing to stay here.

John doesn't recall what he actually said at the time, but all his father accomplished was to deepen John's loyalty to Gilead. He hadn't realized how low his father's estimation of him was. It was a dark time. A week later he got a letter from his father that felt like a "cold wind" sweeping over his life. It caused him much sorrow, but it also forced him to throw himself on the Lord, so he can't ultimately regret that time.

Part of John's deep attachment to Gilead comes from his father's rejection of the town. He doesn't say what was in his father's letter, but he hints that it was the final breaking-point in their relationship and that they were estranged after that point. If they ever reconciled, John doesn't say so. This adds another dimension to John's long years of loneliness.

John isn't sure why he was thinking about this to begin with. He supposes he was thinking about life's many frustrations and disappointments. He hasn't been totally honest with his son about how many there are.

Even though John has learned to seek God's grace in all kinds of circumstances, that doesn't mean he has a falsely hopeful view of life. Things remain unresolved in his life, and he wants his son to understand how heartbreaking life can be.

This morning he went to the bank and cashed a check, in hopes of helping Jack out a little. But when he offered it to Jack, Jack put the money back in John's pocket and pointed out that John doesn't have money to spare. John tried to give away what very little he has—his wife's and son's money, at that—and this is how it was received.

John feels hurt and rejected by Jack's response to his generosity. He's trying to treat Jack as a son, in a way, and it feels as though Jack is throwing that back in his face. Really, Jack is probably just aware of how little John has and doesn't want to take from him and his family—but it's hard to tell.

John asked Jack if he was heading back to Memphis, but Jack said he was going "anywhere else." He's received the long-awaited letter from Della. John's heart felt heavy. He tried to make small talk with the family, but Jack and Glory were clearly upset, and Boughton was just staring into space. Then John tried to do Jack a kindness and only managed to offend him. When he got home, Lila made him lie down. She lowered the shades and stroked John's hair for a while.

Jack implies that Della has rejected Jack, or at the very least set him free from their relationship, given the incredible strain they've been living under. Jack can't tell his family why he intends to leave Gilead, so they're baffled and hurt. The news seems to take a physical toll on John, too.

PAGES 237-244

Jack is leaving. Glory, upset, comes to speak to John about it. She doesn't understand how Jack could leave when Boughton clearly doesn't have much time left. John understands, though—the Boughton house will soon be filled with grieving family, while Jack will have to keep his "sad and splendid treasure" a secret. John also has a wife and child, so he understands.

John understands that Jack can't confide who he really is to his family, and that will become all the more painful in the aftermath of Boughton's looming death. The fact that he identifies with Jack's pain shows how much his view of Jack has shifted in a short time.

If John had married some "rosy dame" who gave him 10 children, he would have left them all on the coldest night of the world and walked a thousand miles just for a sight of Lila's face and his son's face. And even if he didn't find them, he would find comfort in the mere hope. He's trying to say that he could never thank God enough for the "splendor He has hidden from the world […] and revealed to me in your sweetly ordinary face."

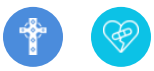
Jack's situation prompts John to reflect with uncharacteristic passion on his own life with Lila and his son. He reflects on the fact that the most beautiful things in the world are beauties that aren't obvious to other people, and that these are worth fighting for. He seems to be thinking of Jack's wife and child, too, in saying this.

Similarly, John knows that if Boughton could, he would walk away from his crowd of handsome, happy children to chase after the son he doesn't truly know, just in the hope of protecting and defending him. He would forgive Jack everything, extravagantly. John wishes he could live to see that.

John alludes broadly to the Bible's prodigal son story here. John knows Boughton better than just about anyone, and he believes that deep down, Boughton loves his most troubled son—the one who's caused him the most grief—more than his many "good" children and would do anything to reconcile with him, just as the father in the Bible story ran to meet the son who'd wronged him.

John himself was "the good son" who never left his father's house—one of the "righteous" ones for whom heaven's rejoicing isn't so boisterous. And that's okay with him. After all, there's no justice or sense of proportion in love.

This is another prodigal son reference. In the story, there's a second "righteous" son who does everything right and never leaves his father, so he never gets a party thrown for him.



John decides it's time to bring his writing to an end. This morning he saw Jack Boughton walking toward the bus stop with a suitcase. John walked along with him and offered him his old, dog-eared copy of *The Essence of Christianity*. Jack seemed pleased with the gift. John made a few final comments about faith, namely that God's grace can present itself in many different ways. He knew Jack must have heard all this from his father before, but he looked so lonely that John couldn't help but make conversation.

John offers Jack the Feuerbach volume Edward once gave him. The gesture suggests that even though John doesn't expect to convince Jack about God, he trusts that Jack, with God's grace, will find his way one day—even if his path doesn't look anything like John's or Boughton's.

At one point, Jack paused and said that by leaving, he was once again doing the worst possible thing. He smiled, but John saw fear in his eyes. And it really is "dreadful" that he left his father to die without him. Yet it's the kind of thing only Boughton would forgive him for. John assured Jack that he spoke to Glory about it, hinting that there's more to the situation than she knows. He also told Jack, truthfully, that he understood why he has to leave.

Jack's leaving will cause his family great pain yet again. Jack understands it's cruel, but there doesn't seem to be a better way forward, since he believes it's too late to tell his family his whole story. The whole situation shows how racism causes widespread destruction in families and communities.

As they sat at the bus stop, John persuaded Jack to accept a little money. Then John asked if it was okay if he blessed Jack. Jack conceded, taking off his hat, so John rested his hand on Jack's head and recited the traditional blessing from the Book of Numbers. He also asked God to bless "this beloved son and brother and husband and father." John feels he would have gone through all his years of training and ministry just for that instant. As Jack boarded the bus, John told him that they all love him.

Recall that John has wished he could baptize Jack over again and do it better. In effect, that's what happens here as he offers Jack a farewell blessing, committing him to God's care. This might well be the unfinished errand John has been waiting to do before he feels his ministry is complete. Even though Jack's story doesn't resolve happily, that doesn't mean God's blessing isn't present in his life.

On the way home, John had to stop at the church to rest. He thought about his walk through town with Jack. He reflects that Gilead used to be the kind of place where "a harmless life could be lived [...] unmolested." There's irony in that now.

John used to idealize Gilead, but he now realizes its imperfection more than ever. Instead of being a haven for someone like Jack and his family, the town effectively rejects them.

Every night, Lila makes John one of his favorite meals. His son's face always looks too beautiful for John's eyes. He wishes Boughton could have seen the way Jack received John's blessing at the bus stop. He figures Boughton will know about it in heaven, and he can imagine Boughton looking back at him from there, thinking with amazement, "This is why we have lived this life!" John reflects that there are innumerable reasons to live this life, and each of them is sufficient.

Lila seems to be prepared for the possibility that John could die any day. He feels that, too, as the world's beauty—such as the sight of his son—almost becomes a source of grief. He reflects again that we don't fully understand life while we're living it, but that it's precious, nonetheless.

John had promised Jack he would say goodbye to Boughton for him. So this evening, he visited his friend, who has almost moved on from the world. His understanding is cloudy, his hearing is poor, and he's often asleep. He knows if he spoke Jack's name while Boughton was alert, Boughton would have more questions than John could answer, and he couldn't bear the confusion it would cause his friend. So instead, he whispered a few words while his friend slept.

John knows it would cause his friend too great a shock to know the truth now. Even though this means Boughton will die with unresolved grief, John implies that there can still be reconciliation in heaven one day, even if they don't know what it will look like.

He sat beside Boughton's bed for a long time and imagined how wonderful it would have been if Boughton could have met and blessed his grandson, Robert Boughton Miles. It seemed to him that even though this never happened, the thought contains such a powerful truth that it might as well have. Before he left Boughton, he whispered that he loved Jack as much as Boughton always meant him to.

Though he doesn't say so, John suggests that he has a kind of vision of Boughton meeting his grandson—his imagining such a meeting feels so truthful. Though John's relationship with Jack has always been fraught, they end up reconciling as a surrogate father and son, and John knows that this outcome would have brought Boughton comfort.

PAGES 245-247

Sometimes it seems to John as if God breathes on creation and it becomes briefly radiant. He said that in the Pentecost sermon. And yet the Lord is more extravagant than those words suggest. No matter where you look, the world "can **shine** like transfiguration." You just have to be willing to see it—but who has that kind of courage?

John sees the light of God's beauty shining everywhere in the world. It's always possible to see this beauty, he suggests, but not everyone has the ability or willingness to look. He implies that it takes courage, because seeing beauty requires facing pain and grief honestly, too.

John is going to ask Lila to have the church deacons burn his old sermons. There are enough to make a good **fire**. She can keep some of them if she likes, but he doesn't want her to worry about them too much. He figures that "they mattered or they didn't."

John never did get around to dealing with the stacks of old sermons, and now it doesn't really seem to matter. They were important when he wrote them, as truthful words always are, but their day is past.

There are two occasions when Creation's beauty is especially apparent. One is when we feel our insufficiency to the world, and the other is when we feel the world's insufficiency to us. John thinks God must give people a special courage to "acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear." Such courage allows people to make themselves useful—that is, to be generous. John has nothing to leave his son but "the ruins of old courage." He trusts that someday God will fan it into **flame** again.

Here, John suggests that people see the world's beauty especially when the world feels like more than they can bear. It's not totally clear what John means by this, but he implies that it has to do with being given a vocation—a calling—to serve the world's needs. This takes courage, and the courage John has received—especially his grandfather's and father's—he now passes down to his son.

John reflects that he loves the prairie. Many times he has watched dawn break, flooding the land with **light**, and nothing on the horizon to interrupt the view.

John rejoices once more in the beauty he sees in the world. The imagery of unimpeded light suggests a glimpse—maybe a vision of sorts—of heaven.

John thinks that Gilead is "Christlike" in the way it's so unadorned and unregarded. He thinks it's fine if his son leaves someday. After all, Gilead does look like "whatever hope becomes after it begins to weary a little." But that is still hope. He loves this town, and sometimes he thinks that being buried here will be his final gesture of love for it. Here he will "smolder away the time until the great and general **incandescence**."

Though he has felt disillusioned with Gilead, John now seems able to regard it with affection again, and realism. Even if the town isn't what it once was, that doesn't mean it doesn't still contain something that's beautiful or even divine. He uses fire imagery to suggest that (like his grandfather) he will "smolder" until God's light sets the world totally aflame.

John will pray that his son will grow up a brave man in a brave country, and that he will find a way to be useful. He'll pray, and then he will sleep.

John's final prayer for his son is that he will be given the courage to be "useful"—to see the world's pain and beauty and do his best to serve it. Though John intends to close the letter here, his final words about prayer and sleep also suggest that, in fact, he is about to die in peace.

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