

Visit First Purchase! Passages

The following passages come from Chapter 12, and are intended to assist you with your "Visit First Purchase!" assignment, page 30 in your TKAM packet.

First Purchase African M.E. Church was in the Quarters outside the southern town limits, across the old sawmill tracks. It was an ancient paint-peeled frame building, the only church in Maycomb with a steeple and bell, called First Purchase because it was paid for from the first earnings of freed slaves. Negroes worshiped in it on Sundays and white men gambled in it on weekdays.

The churchyard was brick-hard clay, as was the cemetery beside it. If someone died during a dry spell, the body was covered with chunks of ice until rain softened the earth. A few graves in the cemetery were marked with crumbling tombstones; newer ones were outlined with brightly colored glass and broken Coca-Cola bottles. Lightning rods guarding some graves denoted dead who rested uneasily; stumps of burned-out candles stood at the heads of infant graves. It was a happy cemetery (118).

First Purchase was unceiled and unpainted within. Along its walls unlighted kerosene lamps hung on brass brackets; pine benches served as pews. Behind the rough oak pulpit a faded pink silk banner proclaimed God Is Love, the church's only decoration except a rotogravure print of Hunt's The Light of the World. There was no sign of piano, organ, hymn-books, church programs- the familiar ecclesiastical impedimenta we saw every Sunday. It was dim inside, with a damp coolness slowly dispelled by the gathering congregation. At each seat was a cheap cardboard fan bearing a garish Garden of Gethsemane, courtesy Tyndal's Hardware Co. (You-Name-It-We-Sell-It) (120).

"Will the music superintendent lead us in the first hymn," he said.

Zeebo rose from his pew and walked down the center aisle, stopping in front of us and facing the congregation. He was carrying a battered hymn-book. He opened it and said, "We'll sing number two seventy-three."

This was too much for me. "How're we gonna sing it if there ain't any hymn-books?"

Calpurnia smiled. "Hush baby," she whispered, "you'll see in a minute."

Zeebo cleared his throat and read in a voice like the rumble of distant artillery:

"There's a land beyond the river."

Miraculously on pitch, a hundred voices sang out Zeebo's words. The last syllable, held to a husky hum, was followed by Zeebo saying,

"That we call the sweet forever."

Music again swelled around us; the last note lingered and Zeebo met it with the next line: "And we only reach that shore by faith's decree."

The congregation hesitated, Zeebo repeated the line carefully, and it was sung. At the chorus Zeebo closed the book, a signal for the congregation to proceed without his help.

On the dying notes of "Jubilee," Zeebo said, "In that far-off sweet forever, just beyond the shining river."

Line for line, voices followed in simple harmony until the hymn ended in a melancholy murmur (121).

Reverend Sykes closed his sermon. He stood beside a table in front of the pulpit and requested the morning offering, a proceeding that was strange to Jem and me. One by one, the congregation came forward and dropped nickels and dimes into a black enameled coffee can. Jem and I followed suit, and received a soft, "Thank you, thank you," as our dimes clinked.

To our amazement, Reverend Sykes emptied the can onto the table and raked the coins into his hand. He straightened up and said, "This is not enough, we must have ten dollars."

The congregation stirred. "You all know what it's for—Helen can't leave those children to work while Tom's in jail. If everybody gives one more dime, we'll have it—" Reverend Sykes waved his hand and called to someone in the back of the church. "Alec, shut the doors. Nobody leaves here till we have ten dollars" (122).

"He's just like our preacher," said Jem, "but why do you all sing hymns that way?"

"Linin'?" she asked.

"Is that what it is?"

"Yeah, it's called linin'. They've done it that way as long as I can remember."

Jem said it looked like they could save the collection money for a year and get some hymn-books. Calpurnia laughed. "Wouldn't do any good," she said. "They can't read."

"Can't read?" I asked. "All those folks?" "That's right," Calpurnia nodded. "Can't but about four folks in First Purchase read... I'm one of 'em" (124).