

# The Salvation of Billy Baxter

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I'M FLYING DOWN THE HIGHWAY, pumping my fist in the air. "Second Timothy four: seven and eight!" I belt out into the sunshine. "I have *fought* the good fight, I have *finished* the race, I have *kept the faith*!" I'm aware that I look more than a little bit ridiculous. No matter. This is my victory song! My backup singers: the Halo Express, a band of angels from a thirty-year-old kids' series of Bible verses put to music.

The songs are strung together into stories by the adventures of brother and sister Michael and Christy, visited by their guardian angels G.T. (Good Tidings) and Guardian to share the good news and impart life lessons. II Timothy 4:7-8 is the climax to an episode about a bike race, whose other songs about perseverance – Hebrews 12:1, Hebrews 10:35-36 – I have been clinging to for dear life through a grueling personal ordeal. Having finally seen the other side, I find these are the only songs to meet the occasion – and apparently, their singers are my guardian angels too.

I listened to *G.T. and the Halo Express* thousands of times growing up, and signed myself up for thousands more when I introduced it to my kids, who are usually my excuse to put it on. "I'm hiding God's word way down in my heart; I'm making it mine right from the start," chirps the theme song. The series begins when the kids are attempting to do just that for a competitive event with their youth group. Christy, the Type-A older sister, is on Michael's case for his failure to learn a single verse. As they fight, an entire band of angels comes crashing down into the closet. "Yow, it's an angel attack! They've got weapons!" yelps Michael. "Those are *instruments*, Michael," Christy sneers. With the help of the attacking angels, they learn their verses and more, like why they should stop bickering.

The catchy songs draw on a wide range of musical styles, from country to gospel to jazz. My husband, baffled by the amount that I make everybody listen to them, and without the filter of nostalgia, has been known to say they sound like cereal commercials (where can I buy this angel cereal?). My son, tapping into his distant Jewish heritage, loves the Semitic songs from the Old Testament the best. There are saxophone solos everywhere you turn, so much saxophone, a sonic wormhole to the late eighties and early nineties.

Since the lyrics are actual Bible verses (NIV translation), they avoid any tendency to inanity. The productions are ideal for children in that they bear endless repetition. The fact that they still have a hold on me a generation later, the verses hidden in my heart just like it says, means that they worked exactly as intended. But from this vantage, there are things I hear differently.

THE FIRST EPISODE, "[God's Love](#)," is more or less a proof of concept, without a whole lot of plot. As the series continues, it starts to stretch its wings in terms of storytelling: a thunderstorm where the kids face their fears and learn to trust in God, the bikeathon to practice faith and perseverance, a service project to learn about inclusion and equality.

The second episode, "[God's Plan of Salvation](#)," is premised on Michael's obligation to share the good news with Eddie, the most popular kid in school. In this choice of subject for the first real story, I recognize the evangelical imperative to get this message up top. Michael drags his feet over the awkwardness of the Great Commission.

I once had a pastor who was fond of telling about his first attempt to witness to a couple of unbelievers early in his ministry. He was so nervous that he passed out in their living room. On coming to, he found that they were eager to hear what he could possibly have to say that was *that* important to him. They were "born again" that night. The awkwardness of the encounter was not a bug, it turned out, but a feature. "God's Plan of Salvation" is animated by this same idea, and indeed, Eddie accepts Jesus into his heart at the end.

I'm not completely sure how all this is coming across to my preschooler. I remember pressure when I was very young to pray the once-and-for-all Sinner's Prayer at any number of church functions. The greatest, darkest sin I could imagine at the time was drawing on the wall, and I had never been so bold as to draw on the wall, but surely there were other sins to be repented of.

Listening now, I wonder about Eddie, whom we never hear of before this story nor ever again; he just shows up the one time to be saved. I think about the awkwardness, and how the main problem with running up to

someone and spitting out the Gospel is not that it makes the messenger uncool, but that (my pastor's converts notwithstanding) people are unlikely to receive God this way – that it does not express the love that it intends.

But the answer to this critique is also in *G.T.*, in an arc that extends over the whole series. Call it the long con of conversion.

"I bet I know someone that even God doesn't love," says Michael in "God's Love." "Big, bad Billy Baxter!" Christy chimes in. "He swears all the time, and he's mean, and beats up on kids," Michael explains.

"God still loves him," counters G.T. The kids fill out his rap sheet, but God "still loves him, still loves him, still loves him," G.T. insists.

"How could God love anyone like *Billy Baxter*?" Michael wonders.

"Romans 5:8: For God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us," sings the Halo Express.

After this introduction by notoriety alone, Billy emerges more over the next few episodes. While the kids cower in the thunderstorm, talking about what frightens them, G.T. sets up a holographic demo where they can confront their bullies via role play. Michael's first impulse is to send in "the toughest motorcycle gang ever" to teach Billy "a lesson he'll *never* forget," and has to be coached to "hit him with kindness instead." Michael makes nice and gets the Billy holograph to back down, but is still unsure how this approach would play out in real life.

We know Billy's reputation, we've heard his voice – and then in the bikeathon, we meet him as a living character: the villain of the story. Billy sabotages Michael and Christy's team at every turn – slitting tires, triggering a rock slide, bullying an ill teammate, guffawing as he leaves them in the dust. He is *the worst*. This is the key set-up for what is to come.

STARTING IN JULY, everywhere we went in the car, I put on *G.T.* My project of total saturation featured all the episodes in rotation but one. Then on November 1, I cleared the decks and finally pulled out the episode all of this was building up to: "[Ticket to Christmas](#)."

Michael and Christy are staging a living nativity scene at the mall when Billy stops by to make fun of them. He's on his way to a raffle for a shopping spree at Terrific Toys. "That's what Christmas is all about: toys!" he explains. No one in his life is in a position to give him anything this year, and all his hopes are pinned on winning.

As he joshes around with Michael's shepherd stick, the three of them are suddenly transported into an unfamiliar crowd, with sand and sun and braying donkeys and a woman greeting them, "Shalom." Before they can get their bearings, a prophet at the head of the crowd delivers an exciting message: "Isaiah 9:6: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!"

At first impressed by the time travel, Billy is soon dismayed to find that his lucky raffle ticket has disappeared. "That was my last dollar! That was my *ticket to Christmas*!" he wails. Lunging at Michael, he sends them spinning to another time and place, a field of trembling shepherds as the sky fills with angels, and then another, with a caravan of tetchy nobles following a star. Everyone seems to be looking for the same promised baby, but "I don't need to find a baby. I need to find my ticket," Billy insists.

Transported yet again, they do not find either, only an old man, who tries to comfort the crestfallen Billy. A hush descends, everyone goes still, as this man tells of his own lifetime of searching for

something, often without much hope. One day in the temple, as he scoured the scriptures yet again for some clue to the advent of the Messiah, God's presence rushed in and overcame him. He cried out. "And then, in the quiet of my heart, God said to me, 'Simeon, you will not die before you see the Christ, the Holy One of God.'"

Ever since that day, he kept watch at the temple. At each new baby dedication, he wondered, could this be the one? "So many years . . . so many babies . . ." he sighs.

But, one day, as I was in the marketplace, that presence surrounded me again, just as it had that day in the temple. My heart began to leap in my chest! Could this be the day, I thought? After all these years, could this be the day I would see God's promised one?

I hurried to the temple, and there I saw Joseph and Mary standing in line to present their baby to the Lord. It was like all of heaven was watching. My hands trembled as I took the baby in my arms.

A *viola crescendos* to the song: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel. Luke 2:29-32." (It is this, the sixty-seventh song in the series, that finally gets to my husband, who becomes a little misty and admits to being moved.)

After this, the trio are sent back into the present, where Billy finds his ticket in his hand. "Maybe it was there the whole time and you just couldn't see it," G.T. suggests. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

Perplexed, Billy slinks off in the direction of the raffle, but soon turns up again, revealing that after everything he went through to get there, he didn't even go. "When I looked at my ticket, all I could think about was wise men and shepherds and Mr. Simeon, all looking for the baby Jesus. If he's that important, maybe I need to find him, too."

In all the wandering through ancient Judea, Jesus, the figure around whom this whole story revolves, does not appear directly. "Ticket to Christmas" does not attempt to simulate an encounter with him, for Billy or for us, but instead points in his direction via relationships. These characters are onto something – what is it? Go find out for yourself. It is thanks to Michael's long and charitable relationship with Billy, fraught as it is, that Billy becomes open to this. And of course, it is God's desire for relationship with us that sends him to be born and die a human. As Christy puts it, "It was God's way of telling the world, 'Hey everybody, in case you're wondering, I love you!'"

Billy haltingly recalls a song from deep in his own childhood: "Away in a Manger." Gently set against this carol in a duet, the Halo Express sings: "Jeremiah 29:13: You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart."

ONE DAY I PICK UP THE CD JACKET to see if I can figure out who the creators are and what else they might have done since the series ended in 1995. The credits say Doug and Debbie Kingsriter of King Communications. I assume this is a sweetly on-the-nose pen name. When I search online for Doug Kingsriter, I find a football star, which makes it hard to dig down to the other Doug Kingsriter I'm looking for. At last I realize they are the same person, and that is his real name. Evidently, writing for the King was a simple matter of destiny. I give him a call.

Doug Kingsriter was a preacher's kid who got into football to pay his way to college, and wound up a tight end for the Minnesota Vikings. His short NFL career included two shots at the Super Bowl in 1974 and 1975 (sad to say, the Vikings lost both times) before retiring with an injured knee and moving on to real estate. Along the way he married Debbie Patton, a former Miss Teenage America,

whom he met at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes event. They had a little girl, another baby on the way, a picture-perfect life.

Nothing really bad had ever happened to them until 1980, when their newborn son Barrett turned blue in the delivery room. He had the first of several heart surgeries at fourteen days old, and was touch-and-go for a long time. A friend who had been through a similar experience pointed Doug and Debbie to Psalm 56:3: "When I am afraid, I will trust in you." The Kingsriters weren't big into memorizing scripture, but this verse became a point of reference during their years in the valley of the shadow of death.

When Barrett was four and a half, he went in for his final surgery. Then for two days afterward, he was immobilized by a powerful muscle relaxant (the same paralyzing agent, Doug notes, that is used in lethal injection) while his squirmy little body healed. He was fully conscious but unable to open his eyes or make a sound. His parents, plastered to his bedside, could tell when he was awake because his face would mottle up and tears would dribble from the corners of his eyes.

No one had prepared for this. Barrett had had many tours of the hospital, done many practice surgeries on his teddy bears and his daddy, had many conversations about what to expect, but Doug and Debbie hadn't known to warn him that he wouldn't be able to move. Too little too late, the doctors let them know that most kids in this circumstance feel betrayed.

When he finally came off the drug and could speak, they expected anger and incomprehension to pour out. Instead he whispered, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you." With nothing else to do, he had been repeating it to himself the whole time.

"The scriptures could go where we couldn't go as parents," Doug says through tears.

THE FOLLOWING YEAR, Doug was driving down the Minnesota road at night when he felt a message come in from God. "Do a musical scripture memory series for children," it said. "Okay . . ." Doug thought. The message continued: "And I'd like you to get Mr. Graham's endorsement." Doug had been involved with a couple of Billy Graham Crusades with one of his associates, John Wesley White. Doug called him up right away and sketched out his preliminary vision. Sight unseen, White wrote down an endorsement and later got Graham's office to send it over on official letterhead – an endorsement of a product that did not exist. That was the beginning and the end of the Graham organization's involvement in *G.T.*, but Doug carried the letter with him everywhere and brandished it when necessary.

Doug and Debbie started workshopping some episodes and took a second mortgage on their house to fund production. They felt like any fundraising they might do would be better directed to charities that needed it more, and this was something they were being called to sacrificially. They threw heart, soul, and wallet into making it reality.

Doug wrote the scripts, and hired a composer and musicians to turn the verses he selected into songs. Kids from local churches formed the choir. He recruited Richard Allison, an old friend from high school who had always been into drama, to play G.T. (and, by extension, the roles within the role – emcees, announcers, wise men, Simeon, and so on). Another friend with a drama background gave him notes on each script to adapt them to the stage for church productions. (My theatrical debut at age six was in one of these.)

The Kingsriters based the personalities of Michael and Christy on their own kids. The talented young actor hired to play Michael happened to have a weird obnoxious laugh that used to drive Doug bonkers in rehearsals, until it occurred to him to build a character around this laugh: Billy. I had never

realized this before, but *Michael also does the voice of Billy*. (A casting choice with fascinating subtextual implications!)

Focus on the Family's James Dobson plugged the series on his radio show when it launched in 1987, and that signal boost helped keep it going for a few years. With increasingly ambitious episodes, the Kingsriters hired a new composer to take it to the next level – Michael Pearce Donley, a fantastically gifted twenty-four-year-old with a short résumé and a long list of ideas.

No sooner did he get to work than he learned he had cancer. Even as he wrote my fight songs about perseverance, he was in the hospital. The stealth hero of "[Winning the Great Race of Faith](#)" is a teammate named Warren, who's been sick his whole life but wants to do the bikeathon to raise money for his fellow patients. Inspired by Barrett with his years of surgeries, Warren resonated with Donley's experience as well. At several key moments, Warren calls on inner strength to solve a problem – "way better than muscle power," as Michael, who was reluctant to include him on the team, comes to realize. "Philippians 4:13: I can do anything through him who gives me strength," they sing. Donley pulled through, and the kids pull out a victory.

But there were problems in the *G.T.* enterprise that no amount of inner strength could solve. Doug never kept track of the money that was coming in and going out, and various other organizational problems made it unsustainable. By the mid-1990s, the Kingsriters were broke, and Doug had to take a consulting job down in Florida to make ends meet. Meanwhile, Debbie's parents' health was failing, and she went to Texas to be with them.

Under these pressures, things fell apart on all fronts. Doug had in mind to make more episodes long-distance, but felt like he was losing control of the creative process, so he quit. A few months after that, Richard Allison – the voice of *G.T.*, who had been fighting his own cancer battle – passed away. "I still ask God to send him back to me sometimes," Doug says.

MEANWHILE, IN THE STRESS AND CHAOS, the Kingsriters' marriage dissolved. It was a dreadfully painful time for everyone. In despair, Doug washed up one evening at the Potter's House, a megachurch in Dallas that a friend had recommended. As he huddled in the back, Bishop T. D. Jakes picked him out of the crowd, summoned him up for a prayer, and "slew him in the Spirit." After that, although nothing in his situation changed, the pain was gone. In the divorce, he signed the rights to *G.T.* over to Debbie, who now maintains the website (with [song samples](#)). It never achieved the cultural penetration of, say, *Adventures in Odyssey* or *Veggie Tales*, but fans of those franchises would be well-advised to check it out.

If the series had continued, Doug would have wanted it to evolve to speak to older kids with more complex problems. He mentions "[Made to Be a V.I.P.](#)," a later episode that focuses on Christy stepping into a leadership role at school against popular opposition. Doug wrote it after he read a study saying that by fifth grade, girls' confidence flatlines and does not recover. He wanted to encourage young women to be strong and know their worth.

Now he's working on another creative project in this vein, something with more sophisticated storytelling. It's a major challenge. Looking around at the issues and anxieties that teens face, the treacherous online landscape, the increasingly dystopian conditions and indicators of alarm, it'll take the touch of an angel to make something that can reach them where they are.

I think about the kinds of bullies online and at large now, and wonder, like Michael with his Billy holograph, if engaging them in fiction honestly has any bearing on their actions in real life. Out here, it seems like "killing them with kindness" just makes you a chump. Do people, *can* people really change?

It is the impossible promise of the Gospel that they can, that no one is beyond hope. And more than that, that God loves them – loves us – no matter what.

Michael Donley learned the limits, or the limitlessness, of this notion when he lost his own son Lewis, a kind and funny sixteen-year-old who died by suicide in 2016. In this time, one of Donley's own songs that he composed came bubbling up to meet him in his grief: "Jeremiah 29:11: 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" In "Made to Be a V.I.P.," this comes at an optimistic moment, with no tragic undertones at all. It's the sort of ballad that is sung at graduation ceremonies. The talk of hope and a future might seem a bitter irony. But what Donley heard in it was another promise: even in this, even now, he and Lewis are still in God's care.

In truth, the themes approached in *G.T.* aren't any smaller or less difficult for being geared to a young age. The series was born from one of a parent's darkest nightmares, and came to an end among all-too-adult circumstances. Along the way, it took on questions that only grow more aching with time. Am I valued as a person? Is there any end to this hard slog – a finish line, a savior? Will my restless heart ever find what it's looking for? Is there purpose within suffering? Is someone watching over us, or are we on our own?

The answers are all there in the songs. But it takes faith like a child's to accept them.