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*The Great Reward  
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Guest Commentator*

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Once upon a time, there lived a mighty slave master on the mightiest plantation in the world. When asked the secret of his might, he responded with one word: God. The slave master was a religious man, a pious one in fact. Every morning he rode his horse out to the fields and had his slaves gather around him as he read from the good book and preached a word. The master was quite fond of the good book, at least certain parts. He especially liked the verse that tells slaves to be obedient to their masters.

About this passage, the slave master preached many a sermon. Although he had difficulty stringing words together to make a complete sentence, he preached with great conviction. "Obedience," he proclaimed, "is the true mark of a noble slave and...umm...an obedient slave. The noble slave bears his burden with pride, loyalty, and...er...happy thoughts. The noble slave is even willing to sacrifice his own life for the greater good of the plantation and plantations everywhere. Without plantations, there would be great...uh...evil, but with plantations there is great nobility and great reward...er...in heaven, that is."

Listening closely to this sermon was a wise, old slave named John. Ole John was the master of tricks and thereby the master of masters. After the sermon, he approached his master and said, "Gee, massa, what do I need to do to earn my great reward?"

"Pick more cotton," said the master.

That night Ole John stayed in the field picking after quitting time. Later, when the slave master went to bed, the other slaves came out and said, "We want our great reward too. We'll help you pick." In an hour, all the slaves worked together to complete a task that would have ordinarily taken Ole John all night.

The next morning the master rode out to the field and began praising the Lord when he saw how much cotton was picked. "Glory to God, John! Did you pick all that cotton?"

"I sure did," said Ole John.

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The master then preached a whole sermon on how slaves like Ole John would surely get their great reward, in heaven, that is. When he finished preaching, the master approached Ole John and asked him how he did it. "I prayed," said Ole John.

"Well, John, how about you paint my house white tonight?" said the master.

"Will do," said Ole John, and that night after the master fell asleep, he painted the house white with all of the other slaves.

The next day the master saw his great big white house freshly painted and began praising the Lord. "Glory to God! One day, John, you'll get your great reward, in heaven, that is." Then, he asked John, "What does God do when you pray?"

Ole John replied, "God gives me the strength of a hundred slaves."

"My Lord," said the master, "I wish I had the might of a hundred slave masters."

For that night, the master asked John to build a house for his wife and kids that would be so nice none of them would ever want to leave it. The next day the master saw the new house and began praising the Lord, "Glory to God! One day, John, you'll get your great reward, in heaven, that is." Then the master said to John, "Tell me how you pray so I can get the might of a hundred masters."

Ole John answered, "I go to the great tree in the middle of the woods, and there God tells me what I need to do in order to increase my strength a hundred fold."

That night the slave master went to the big tree in the middle of the woods, got down on his knees, and prayed, "O Lord, give me my great reward here on earth. Give me the might of a hundred masters."

"Noble slave," said a voice from above, "This is your master speaking. Obey me, and I will give you the might of a hundred masters."

"O yes Lord, tell me what to do, and I'll do it," prayed the master.

"Noble slave, say the Lord's Prayer ten times in a row without a mistake. Then I will grant you your wish," said the voice from above.

Immediately, the master began to pray, "Our father who art heaven, oh darn it...Our father..."

The next day the master was still praying, "...they kingdom be done, oh damn that kingdom..."

And again the next day, he was praying, "...thy will be done, oh damn your will..."

Finally, on day three he prayed, "...for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever." The master began jumping for joy and praising the Lord, "Glory to God! Only nine more to go!"

Some days later the master was jumping for joy again and praising the Lord, "Glory to God! Now I'll have the might of a hundred masters. O Lord, you've given me my great reward!"

In that same moment, Ole John and the rest of the slaves were also jumping for joy and praising the Lord. They too had just received their great reward...in the North, that is.

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*This story was inspired by the African American folktales collected by Zora Neale Hurston in "Mules and Men." Brooks Berndt is a student at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and can be reached at [justicia\\_ahora@hotmail.com](mailto:justicia_ahora@hotmail.com).*