

The Path to Freedom

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There always seem to be some close elections each time America goes to the polls. In one of the closest presidential races ever, James Garfield was elected president in 1880 with just 2 hundredths of a percent more in the popular vote than his opponent. Garfield, who was a lay minister in his church in Ohio, used to amaze his friends by writing Hebrew with one hand and Greek with the other, all at the same time.

Whether or not Garfield would have been a good president will never be known. After just a few months in office, on July 2, 1881, Garfield was shot in the back by a man named Charles Guiteau.

Garfield never lost consciousness. The first doctor on the scene, Willard Bliss, stuck his unwashed finger into the president's side to search for the bullet. (Sterilization was suggested at that time, but not widely practiced.) When he was unsuccessful, the doctor used a probe to widen his search. Unfortunately he did not follow the actual path of the bullet and instead opened a second passage in the president's body that would mislead other physicians.

Bliss believed the bullet had entered the president's liver and that he would soon die. It didn't, and he didn't. The army surgeon general examined the president, using his unwashed finger in an unsuccessful attempt to locate the bullet. Next, the navy surgeon general made his attempt, probing so deeply with his finger that he actually did rupture the liver. Now they were sure the president would soon die. He didn't.

As the president steadily became weaker, other physicians tried unsuccessfully to find the bullet. Finally, in desperation they called upon Alexander Graham Bell who had recently invented the telephone. Bell used a primitive metal detector he had invented to search for the bullet. After several attempts he announced that he had located it and that it was much deeper than had been originally thought.

The doctors probed deeper into the president, but still no bullet. Later someone realized that the president was lying on a mattress with metal springs, which the metal detector had dutifully detected.

The three-inch penetration of the bullet had become a tunnel twenty inches long oozing with pus and infection. On September 19, 1881, Garfield passed away. An autopsy revealed that the bullet was about four inches from the spine and had been encased by a protective cyst. The conclusion was that if the doctors had just left it alone, the president would have lived.

At his trial, Guiteau argued unsuccessfully that it was really the doctors who had killed the president. Such a defense may have worked today, but it didn't then. Guiteau was hanged on June 30, 1882.

Everyone at one time or another has received a bullet. It probably wasn't a lead one fired from a gun, but perhaps some unkind words fired from someone's mouth. Or it may have been an unfair situation at work, an unjust dealing with the government, an unholy scandal at a church, or an unfriendly encounter with another driver. Perhaps it was an unloving action by one's spouse, or an unacceptable behavior by a child. It might have been an unappreciative response by a parent or an unexplainable put-down by a friend.

Whatever it was, when it happens to us it hurts. But once it happens, we have choice. We can probe and poke at it, reminding ourselves and everyone else that we are victims. We can call upon friends and family so that they can have a pity party for us and keep the pain alive. We can become bitter and poison our world so that no one will ever forget that we have a right to be angry.

We can do all those things, but if we do the final hurt will often be greater than the initial blow. The path to freedom lies in forgiving others, committing the situation to God and moving on. Jesus said, *"If the Son (of God) sets you free, you will be free indeed"* (John 8:36).