We live in beautiful Arizona, and have built a delightful terraced garden. It is my joy and pleasure to go out nearly every morning with a bucket in one hand, pruning shears in the other hand, and a large brim hat on my head. The garden patrol is on, snipping and trimming as I sing to the flowers, shrubs, and trees.

Every now and then I call out, “Cardie,” and out of nowhere flies this magnificent bright red male Cardinal. He follows at a distance whilst I trip around and we seem to keep an eye on the other. This in itself is a real treat as Cardinals are known to be shy birds and as a rule they avoid people. I believe this particular Cardinal was born on our property as Cardinals lived here long before we bought the property.

Clearly Cardie had his own plan for his life, but the day came when young Cardie broke the rules and started walking on our deck rails, all of them. We have a lot of glass and it often looks more like a mirror in certain light. Cardie really likes himself and clearly admires his reflection in the glass. So before long Cardie started a campaign of pecking the glass, we could almost hear him thinking, ‘there is another Cardinal in the house, and he looks just like me. By golly I am going to get that Cardie.’

The noisy pecking became a lifestyle, and I was sure Cardie would seriously hurt himself as he flung himself at the glass and did gyrations that were amazing to watch.

No tea breaks, no lunch breaks, just pecking the glass, throwing himself at the glass, and then buzzing the house, only to start the routine all over again.

Surely Cardie must be drugged, no bird can keep up this pace, I marveled.

It’s a fact that some birds love eating Juniper berries for the seeds inside, and we have lots of Juniper trees. Birds can get intoxicated from eating them. I wondered if Cardie may be high. But I checked and the Juniper berries were green and not edible at this season. And any fermented berries from last season were mostly dried up.

On one occasion I saw what looked like blood on the glass slider and quickly investigated only to find that it was not blood at all, but berries from the native Skunkbush Sumac in our garden. Cardie seems to favor them highly. He opens them and removes the seeds from within, sometimes leaving the bright red berry parts scattered on our deck.

All that head hitting would surely kill the beautiful, about nine inches long, bird, and yet there was no let up. Cardie was our wild bird friend, and he was now reporting for work at 4:45 A.M.
with a series of clear, sharp, songs that inform potential intruders about his territory, followed by intense attacks on our windows. He keeps this up until dusk begins turning into darkness, about 8 P.M.

This is day eight and Cardie is now like a rebellious child to us. He hops along our deck rails on his skinny legs, watching himself in the reflective window. He then lunges downward off the rail, and of course, his reflection does the same. Both collide somewhere near the deck floor. Sometimes Cardie jumps up off the deck rail, only to find his adversary again does the same and they collide high on the window glass. This routine continues throughout the long hot days.

I began thinking about the creation of such an exquisite bird. It was evident to me that God blessed the Cardinal with a striking appearance; it’s not possible to look at him and not admire him. Gracefully glorious the cardinal is, outstanding with his face edged in black and his eyes as intense as magnets, and his topnotch smartly displayed for all to see.

Why is it that this Cardinal does not just do what birds have to do to exist and recognize that God has given them extraordinary looks? They should use their looks to glorify God, set apart they are, so why not be set apart. Why get so frantic to the point of hurting themselves? Why does this Cardie of ours behave in this manner?

It’s all about his reflection in the glass. I guess Cardie does not know that the definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. The pecking, and throwing of himself at the glass, with intermittent buzzing of the house continues.

My thoughts went to Paul on the road to Damascus, (don’t ask me why!), and how our Lord Jesus knocked him off his horse to get his attention, and then whilst Paul lay in the dust Jesus asked him, ‘Why do you kick against the goads?’ (In other words, ‘don’t you see what you are doing, Paul? You’re fighting against me, and I’m not the enemy!’)

Once Paul realized it was Jesus talking to him, suddenly right thinking came into play. At that point everything changed.

OK, let’s get back to Cardie.

So, to the computer I went, time to do some research on the glorious Cardinal . . .

Here are some of my findings about Cardie:

Some birds have a strong sense of territory, especially during the breeding season, and this beautiful Cardinal is one of them. It is nature’s way of minimizing competition for food and nest sites. The singing of the male Cardinal is a familiar manifestation of nesting territoriality. A male’s characteristic song, usually given from several preferred perches in its territory, says in effect, ‘This is where my mate and I plan to nest, others of my species please respect my boundaries and stay out.’

When a territorial bird accidentally sees its image in a reflective surface, such as a window, it perceives its own reflection is a rival in its territory and does everything in his power to drive the other bird away.

So there we have it that is exactly what our Cardie is doing, being territorial, even to the point of ridiculous. He is fighting against himself, ‘kicking against the goads,’ like paddling up stream getting nowhere.

How many of us have seen behavior like that of this Cardinal in our human friends?
I have found that most Christians are too busy, and border on being frantic. If you ask a friend, ‘How are you?’ The answer is often, ‘busy man, really busy.’ I wonder if they think this is a good thing. By running around frantically, you really get nothing worthwhile accomplished, never understanding the beauty of being still, and trusting God. Being ‘busy’ is not an advantage, but being still and thinking on things that are good, and pure, and holy, is advantageous, and great benefit can come out of it.

Then there are others who see something as worthy of their time, but it is not what it appears to be, so running after it is futile. No thought is given to the value of chasing after it, not even a prayer to God about it.

Others think that they are warriors giving everything for the sake of the gospel, but they may only be at war with something that lies deep within them. They are often oblivious to their own need of freedom.

Many are distracted from the very thing they should be focused on, thinking they are protecting their territory, but sadly what they really should be protecting, they are not. The one thing in a life needing protected, may be vulnerable to victimization due to their neglect. Like this Cardinal, while he is attacking the glass, who is watching after its mate, the nest, and the babies?

Some are plainly jeopardizing their own health and risking serious injury with their antics. They take unnecessary risks unwarranted by their life situations, putting the care of their loved ones on the line.

Most of these people have great intentions, but are wearing themselves out with results that meet no really meaningful kingdom objective, and accomplishing little. Literally running around like a chicken with its head cut off, and nothing more.

I can often fit into this category as well, and of course these things are not true of all Christians. Godly characteristics are found in every Christian. I see many Godly characteristics displayed in our Cardie’s behavior.

Here are some Godly attributes I see in Cardie:

Cardinals mate for life, roosting together at night, and even traveling together. They have a particular call that is used to locate each other at dusk if they happen to be apart.

The male Cardinal does most of the gathering of nest building materials, delivering them to the female who does the actual nest building. A joint effort.

While the female does nearly all the sitting on the eggs for the two-week incubation period, the male takes over the care and feeding after birth while the female is busy sitting on a second brood for another two weeks. This can go on for several broods, as is necessary due to the high mortality rate of Cardinal young. Again, it is a joint effort to produce and raise their young.

The truth is we can learn great lessons from everything we encounter in this life on planet earth, even from Cardie. But remember, Cardie is a beautiful bird and that is all. Cardie cannot reason. Men and women can reason, although many fail to demonstrate this trait. God’s word says that man is without excuse in some areas concerning knowledge of him. God’s word does not hold Cardie, nor any other animal, responsible without excuse. Cardie does only what his instincts show him to do, even batting his head against a window glass that holds an image of himself.

Amazingly, Cardie’s instincts told him to end the battle today, day nine. Around midday he stopped fighting his image in the glass and flew away. And then at 2:30 in the afternoon Cardie
landed on the ledge of our upper living room window, peered across the living room toward us, cocked his head, all as if to say goodbye, and with a strong thrust of his wings soared off the ledge and slipped through the desert air. He has not returned.

I ask myself, will Cardie even remember this epic battle when the next mating season rolls around? Will he once again engage his formidable foe for those long hot days? Could he get caught up in this ritual warrior-like behavior throughout his life that can extend to fifteen years? And, if so, will Cardie honor us again by choosing our home for any subsequent territorial rematches?