

GENTLE SHEPHERD MINISTRIES

CONTENDING FOR THE FAITH ~ MAKING DISCIPLES ~ EQUIPPING THE SAINTS FOR MINISTRY

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SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL Part 5 LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS By Rayola Kelley

The past four articles have been about the times in which we live. No thinking person would disagree that these times can prove



to be quite depressing. It can appear as if all is hopeless. After all, who can save us from such despairing darkness? No mere man can save us from the encroaching evil. No one group has the means to change the course of the tide no matter how good their intentions are. No government can save us from the wicked designs of those in power. In fact, the government often becomes the main enemy, and an advocate of evil.

In such hopelessness, it is hard to see that there is hope in spite of the darkness. In fact, when we study other dark times in history, we realize that there is a ray of hope. Grave darkness actually sets the stage for heaven to part this foreboding curtain with a great light.

For example, one of the most recent incidents where the light parted a great darkness was back in the early 1990's. It was right after the iron curtain came down. After 50 to 70 years of grave spiritual darkness in Communist third-world countries, the light of the Gospel broke through with vibrant rays of hope.

I had the privilege of witnessing the impact of the light on these poor people. Jeannette and I were attending a missionary school with the hope of going to Russia on a short-term missionary trip. I remember seeing the first pictures and video of the first evangelistic meeting held in

Romania, 70 years after God was kicked out of the country. This evangelistic meeting was held outdoors in the dead of winter. How many people do you think would venture out in the cold after being thoroughly indoctrinated in the religion of humanism, pumped full of atheistic philosophy, and inundated with the propaganda of the wicked gospel of Socialism and Communism for a whole generation? But, praise the Lord! There were 60,000 people who came to the meeting. When I looked into the eyes of those standing close to the camera, I saw fear, hopelessness, torment, and utter despair. They knew something that would behoove the unbelieving, lawless, godless, and immoral Americans to take note of, and that is, a country without God has no hope.

I also witnessed one of the first evangelistic meetings held in a Russian community. It was held in a stadium. Once again, the stadium was full of people. When the invitation was given to receive Jesus, the response was incredible. The aisles immediately filled with people, some even jumped about eight feet from the stands to the ground. The scene was the same no matter where you looked. People were not walking to the podium, they were running to it to receive the gift of precious life from above.

A video was also shown to us of a young man from Albania. Albania had been in complete darkness, under the tyranny of Communism for 70 years. To the dismay of the missionaries, they discovered that even the language of the people had no word for "God." However, the light broke through the grave darkness that enfolded the country, and on the video a young man around 20, related in broken English the joy he had in receiving Jesus. He thanked America for sending missionaries and requested that more would come to teach him and his people about the ways and wonderment of God.

In another story, an evangelist was sharing how he went into one of Russia's prisons. There were around 2500 prisoners along with six guards. He shared the simple but powerful message of the Gospel. When he sent forth the invitation for men to raise their hands to receive the Living Water from heaven, almost all the men responded. He could not believe the number of hands. He told them to put their hands down. Even though salvation is free, the life that is given must be worked into our very being. Christianity is not a matter of wishful thinking or a religious exercise. It is the life of Christ coming forth in power and glory.

The evangelist began to stress the cost that comes with this incredible life from heaven. He wanted these prisoners to know that it was not only a lifetime commitment and walk, but that the way was hard and straight. He once again gave the invitation. To his surprise every prisoner, including the guards, raised their hands to receive Christ. He admitted to us that he should not have been surprised at the response for the Spirit of God was moving upon their empty souls and hungry hearts with genuine hope and heavenly expectation.

Needless to say, these stories stirred up great passion in both Jeannette and me. We not only wanted to be part of the move of God in such darkness, but I was also reminded of another period of darkness. It was the darkness that had once weighed heavily upon my own soul. Sin's tentacles were choking every semblance of anticipation from my being. Despair was mocking me, hopelessness encased me, and depression enslaved me. I not only was aware that I was walking in darkness, but that darkness was my reality, my endless pit, my barren, silent tomb, and if something did not change, it would also be my lot in life. I would never know where I was going or what I was looking for. I would be a wanderer, uncertain, lost, and always seeking for that which turned out to be illusive.

Most of you who know me, know the rest of the story. A light of hope did penetrate the darkness of my soul. It was the life of Jesus, and the light His life created within my soul graduated from the intense penetration of a beam of light of hope and promise to an all encompassing light that warmed my very soul with God's love, mercy, and grace. The light penetrated every dark area of separation and loneliness, it pushed aside the musty smell of despair, filled the dark corners of hopelessness, and created an environment of liberty to see, explore, and discover the life that had been given to me.

It is important to remember that the darkness cannot extinguish this light. This light may at times be hidden behind the dark veil of unbelief, obscured by the brick walls of rebellion, and defused by compromise, but it is still present, ready to shine through darkness to reach receptive souls and tender hearts.

The ability of the light of heaven to shine through the darkness of the present world was demonstrated during another dark time in history. *Matthew 4:16* describes this event, "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up." The light referred to in *Matthew 4:16* came in the form of a person. This person came by way of a manger, born to a virgin among that which was considered base and insignificant.

This person came when spiritual darkness had entangled many, political darkness was oppressive, and the personal darkness that enshrouded souls was relentless. He came when darkness was indeed great upon all the land. His coming was foretold, ordained, and desired. He came when the gloomy desperation of man was hitting the pinnacle of despair and the religious traditions of man proved bitter, useless, and lifeless to the souls of men.

We know that this man came at an appointed time. We must wonder if the darkness of His time made it ripe for the light of His life to bring contrast to those who were lost and bound by the darkness. If He came when the twilight of self-sufficiency

was at its height for His people, would His light bring the necessary contrast? If He came at the dawning of abundance, would the people recognize how poor they were in relationship to spiritual matters? If He came during the daylight of prosperity, would man recognize his need to be saved?

I am sure you recognize this person to be the Lord Jesus Christ. We will be celebrating His first advent this month. The idea that the light of Jesus began in the life of a baby in a manger, reveals how all light that is about to break through the darkness begins. It begins in a small insignificant way. At first, daylight begins as a mere speck of light on the horizon. Clearly, it must begin to dawn upon the landscape before its rays can break through the darkness. The shadows of darkness initially keep it obscure, but as the light parts the curtain of darkness, darkness must flee to give way to its glorious rays.

The truth is, the light puts forth the greatest impact when it is the darkest. Jesus came in the darkest moment of that age so people could see His light. He came when the best attempts of man had utterly failed to bring satisfaction to the longing heart. He came when the only real hope for man was to look heavenward. Granted, He was established in the shadows of obscurity, but when He burst forth on the scene, His light began to dawn upon the hopeless souls of men. It reached through despair, torment, ignorance, sorrow, and a spiritually barren wasteland. The light had indeed come to not only penetrate the hopelessness of men, but to offer a solution.

There is no doubt that grave darkness is enfolding not only our country, but the whole world. For America, many of her gods of self-sufficiency to wealth have been brought down. It is becoming obvious to many Americans that they cannot control the tides that are sweeping ashore. They have found themselves in a frightening wilderness that offers no real hope. Not only is this wilderness barren, it is being consumed by the darkness of night.

As believers, we cling to the blessed hope. The blessed hope points to Jesus coming back. Jesus is first returning for His bride, then He will come as the great Judge. The Bible is clear that when He returns, the world

will be enshrouded in the greatest struggle it has ever known. If He does not come back, there will not be any flesh that will be saved alive (*Matthew 24:22*). It is obvious that in such darkness man is on the foolish course of self-destruction. For this reason, the night will also be as great upon the souls of men. Clearly, the only light that will penetrate the great darkness at the end of this age is Jesus. When Jesus comes as the righteous Judge, His light will bring such a contrast that even the wicked will cry out for the rocks to fall on them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb (*Revelation 6:14-17*).

The key to spiritual survival is to believe, trust, and know that the light will eventually penetrate the darkness. It is true that the darkness will become great before parted by the light, but it points to the fruition of our blessed hope. Fear will be rampant, but as believers hope is our legacy. Hatred will be the norm in the world, but love will keep our focus heavenward. Despair will be prevalent, but we are able to walk in light of a heavenly expectation. However, to be ready for the light to penetrate the darkness around us, we must first make sure that it is present in our own souls.

Jesus came from outside of this world. He appeared in the midst of the humble and insignificant. He did not remain separate from



the darkness; rather, He penetrated it with love, truth, and grace. He did not succumb to the darkness; instead, He brought the contrast of righteousness in order to stir up the hope of man. He did not flee the darkness; rather, He walked through it. And, when the great darkness of the cross was ready to consume His soul, He committed all to the Father in order to defeat it.

Our Lord left us an incredible example of how to survive the darkness. We must become humble vessels in which His light can penetrate. We must be born again with His life from above. We must then by faith walk in the light that has been provided by heaven by living according to the life of the Son of

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MAGNIFY THE LORD

By Jeannette Haley

Beautiful, powerful, anointed, and true are the inspired words from the lips of a woman, chosen of God, by the name of Mary. These wonderful words, as recorded in *Luke 1:46-55*, reveal an incredible inner knowledge of God and His attributes. Therefore, as we turn our thoughts and hearts this time of the year towards the advent of our Lord and Savior, may the words of Mary lift up our souls in adoration and praise to the only One who is worthy to receive all glory, honor and praise.

Mary's response to Elizabeth's proclamation and prophecy began with, "My soul doth magnify the Lord." The word "magnify" means to declare great, and it comes from the Greek word "megas" which implies exceedingly great, greatest, high, and mighty. This word also intimates response such as sorely afraid, and fear. The only other time this word is used in the New Testament is in *Acts 10:46a*, which reads, "For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God." We can be assured that such magnification of God was pure worship, involving the entire soul. This means complete surrender of one's mind, will, and emotions in such a way that everything within him or her is totally, without hesitation, reservation, self-consciousness, shame, or duplicity focused on God and His greatness. After all, He created all things, both visible and invisible. He upholds and sustains all that He has created, a truth that our finite minds cannot begin to comprehend. Is there anything or anyone greater than the Lord God Almighty? Can any human explain and fully understand the mystery of how Jesus could leave the glories of heaven, and "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" *Philippians 2:6-8*?

Mary continued in verse 47, "And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." It has been my experience that

in those times when I have truly moved into magnifying the Lord in worship, my being has been filled to such an overflowing sense of God's presence that all self-awareness is diminished to a point of pure joy and ecstasy. If He is to "increase" in our hearts and lives, then we must, as John the Baptist said, "decrease." Decreasing is the opposite of the world's ways, and opposite of the flesh and the devil, all of which strive, through vanity and pride to exalt self, to become important in the scheme of things, and receive honor, glory, and worship.

As Mary magnified the Lord, her spirit rejoiced in Him as her Saviour. When we truly magnify God, we will find ourselves in a place where the Holy Spirit is able to reveal to our spirit the glorious Saviour, and our need for Him. Mary was just as human as you and I, and she knew that "both Jews and Gentiles...are all under sin" and that "There is none righteous, no, not one" *Romans 3:b; 10:b*. Her joy was the purest of all joys, as she rejoiced in her own salvation. How can there be any greater joy under heaven than knowing that you have been redeemed by the blood of Christ? The second greatest joy that I have ever experienced is whenever a soul is led to salvation in Christ. All other earthly joys are fleeting and temporary, and will eventually fade; but, the joy that we have in Jesus is eternal. It can never be lost, ruined, stolen, diminished, tarnished, or altered because this joy is our life in Christ. He never changes, He is eternal, He is almighty, He never fails, He is mighty to save, His kingdom will come, and He will reign forever and ever.

Does this joy mean that we will always be happy and on top of it in this life? Not hardly. The joy of God abides in the eternal recesses of our being. An illustration of this can be the ocean. In the great depths, unlike the rolling and tossing waves near the surface, there is a calm that is hidden from view. So is the life hidden with Christ in God. Within the innermost part of man the joy of the Lord can reside in spite of the storms of life that assail. We may not feel it, or be able to find it in our worst hour, but God knows how to keep that flame of joy reserved for us in Heaven. We know that the greatest of sorrows pierced Mary's heart as she

watched her son die in agony on the cross. In the dark night of her soul when all joy turned to sorrow, the eternal flame still burned within her spirit, and in due time she, and Jesus' brethren, were among those who received power to be witnesses at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the upper room on the day of Pentecost (*Acts 1:14*).

Luke 1:48, "For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed," reveals the humble attitude of Mary—an attitude that every believer should possess. Mary recognized her own "low estate" as well as the knowledge that she was God's handmaiden, or servant. God resists the proud, but chooses instead to show Himself mighty through humble clay vessels. Unlike people, God is no respecter of persons, college degrees, titles, religious affiliations, worldly successes, gender or a person's popularity. Instead, the Lord uses willing and yielded vessels who are generally disregarded by both the world and the church. "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence" *1 Corinthians 1:27-29*. We have had to tell people on more than one occasion that if God can use a jackass to speak to a man, then He can use a woman as well. God is not limited in the type of vessel that He chooses to use for His glory. The test remains the same for each of us as believers—we must receive a matter based on whether it is truth from the throne room of God, and not according to the vessel the Lord chooses to expound or exhort it.

Mary eloquently expressed her reason for magnifying the Lord and rejoicing in God her Saviour, "For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name." It is humbling to consider that God, although almighty, knows each of us in an individual and personal way. For this we should give Him all the glory, as did Mary. No other human being

has ever had, or ever will have, the unique honor that God bestowed upon Mary to be the vessel through which the sinless Saviour of the world would be born. While sin entered into the world through one man (Adam), through one woman God sent His Son, the resurrection and the life.

In all reverence and adoration Mary declared, *“holy is his name.”* God never steps outside of who He is. Individuals and governments may scoff at God’s holiness, yet the truth remains—God is holy, He always has been holy, and always will be holy. He calls us to holiness according to His Word and ways, not to happiness according to our own perverted perceptions and fleshly desires. In our day and age we are living in the times foretold by Jesus in *Matthew 24:12*, *“And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.”* The sin of iniquity is immorality. It is no secret that immorality abounds in our world in these end times, but what is even more alarming is the abundance of immorality that can be found within the ranks of professing Christians.

As many of you know, the Lord called Rayola and me to minister to the churches in America. After over two decades in this difficult harvest field, we are witnessing such a decrease in holiness (or any real desire to be holy) and such an increase in blatant immorality that it boggles our minds and breaks our hearts. Countless “churched” people, from the leadership on down, are increasingly becoming callous to such heinous sins as fornication, abortion, pornography, child molestation, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, and perversion on a scale that would make Sodom and Gomorrah blush. Woe to the shepherds who are soft on sin, preaching that God is “comfortable” with our sin, claiming that such ungodly wickedness as pornography is a “habit” when it is an abomination to God! Woe to the shepherds who ignore God’s holiness and His command to be holy as He is holy! Woe to those who humanize God while deifying man, preaching socialism, which is another gospel and exalting another Jesus, while adhering to another spirit. (See *2 Corinthians 11:4*.) Woe to the people who love to have it so! Yet, in the midst of it all, God still has His remnant, Jesus

is still building His Church (the true Body of Christ). He knows those who are His, and while we look back with joy and wonder at His first Advent, we can look forward in faith and hope to His second coming which is very nigh, “even at the door.”

Mary prophetically declared, *“And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation” Luke 1:50*. If only this could be declared from every pulpit in America instead of the feel-good slop that spews forth from so many profane lips! God is merciful indeed, but on whom? On those who fear Him! *“Oh how great is thy goodness, that thou hast laid up for them that fear thee; which thou has wrought for them that trust in thee before the sons of men” Psalm 31:19! “But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” Acts 10:35*. Note that these promises are not exclusive to the male gender only, nor to certain religious affiliations, nor to certain races or nationalities, nor to any particular age bracket, but to all who fear God, and who live (or work) righteousness, which is faith in action; that is, in deeds and good works. *“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” James 1:22. “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” James 2:26*. Therefore, one must ask, *“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation” Hebrews 2:3a?*

The truth that most ears will never hear in our dulled down, politically correct churches is this: *“He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him” John 3:36; “God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day” *Psalm 7:11; “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness” Romans 1:18; “Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them” Ephesians 5:6, 7. (Emphasis added.)**

In *Luke 1:51* Mary continued to magnify the Lord, declaring, *“He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath*

scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.” How great and mighty is our God! *Psalm 89:13, 14* says, *“Thou hast a mighty arm: strong is thy hand, and high is thy right hand. Justice and judgment are the habitation of thy throne: mercy and truth shall go before thy face.”* Mary saw with spiritual eyes that God’s mighty arm had scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. What a powerful revelation of God’s majesty, power, might, and holiness. How exhilarating to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God knows the imaginations of the proud in heart, and that in His righteous judgments He shall scatter them, thus weakening their alliances to storm the gates of the righteous to bring them to ruin. We are given such precious promises, that Mary knew full well. *“The righteous shall never be removed; but the wicked shall not inhabit the earth” Proverbs 10:30. “But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.”*

Those of us who mourn over the state of the world, and the fall of America, can take heart in Mary’s inspired proclamation, *“He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree” Luke 1:52*. It is no secret that the wicked and proud “mighty” are seated in high places plotting the destruction of at least 80% of humanity, plotting to starve the remnant into submission and servitude, and plotting to destroy the earth. As in the days of Noah, so are the days in which we live, just as Jesus foretold. Yet, as God’s children, we know that we shall be saved if we *“endure to the end.”* In that glorious day, when all the world lies in darkness, He shall suddenly come accompanied by ten thousands of his saints, and the holy angels, in power and great glory. Then shall that which was told and foretold by Mary be fulfilled, for He shall indeed put down the mighty from their exalted seats, and exalt them of low degree. As she declared so long ago, *“He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever” Luke 1:53-55.*

God in us. We must not try to hide the light; instead, we must reflect it to the world. As children of the light, we must reprove all works of darkness in meekness (*Matthew 5:14-16; John 3:5; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:1-13*). We must never be comfortable in darkness, nor use its influence as an excuse to live in it. We must become separate from all darkness, flee all youthful lusts, and bring all works to the light to ensure their integrity (*2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 2 Timothy 2:19-22*).

For many who are struggling financially, this Christmas will prove to be bitter. The light of Christmas will appear to become very dim or cease to shine for these downtrodden souls. However, as believers, we must remember that the hope, light, and real message of Christmas is not determined by presents under the Christmas tree. Rather, the real message of Christmas is that light came into the world, penetrated its darkness with love, overcame it with truth, and defeated it with redemption.

As believers, we possess the real light and gift of Christmas. And, regardless of the great darkness, the light will lead us through it. It will sustain us when it is the darkest, comfort us when it becomes heavy upon the soul, and give us hope when it appears that it is ready to consume us. In fact, we will be able to rejoice and look up for the great darkness will indeed signal that the real light of the world will soon part its curtain with the power and glory of heaven.

We at Gentle Shepherd Ministries want to wish all of you a very Merry Christmas and blessed New Year. †

ARE YOU PREPARED?

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Matt. 24:29, 30 (Emphasis added.)

Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness He shall fill with the good things of His eternal Word, and those who are “rich” in their own conceits and self-importance He shall send away empty. All of His promises to Israel He shall fulfill in His mercy, as He promised to Abraham, and his descendants forever. This shall He do, for faithful is He who promised.

As we celebrate the fulfillment of God’s promises of He who came into this world two-thousand years ago through His humble handmaiden, may we also look up in faith and hope knowing that His promises are still being fulfilled, and will be fulfilled in the sudden return of the King of kings and Lord of lords with whom we will reign and rule for a thousand years. Rejoice that all evil will be banished. Rejoice that the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. If you are truly born again, rejoice that your name is written in the Book of Life!

Praise be to God forever! †

RAYOLA’S Q & A CORNER

WHY DID HE HAVE TO DIE?

Q: *I know that Jesus died for me, but my question is why did He have to die to deal with my spiritual plight?*

A: The answer comes down to the Law. God’s Law reveals three realities: that God is just and holy, man is found in transgression to it, and there must be some type of retribution made to satisfy it. Sin clearly offends God. His holiness will not tolerate it, His justice will not let it go unpunished, and His righteous ways demand retribution for such offenses. *Romans 6:23* summarizes this very point when it declares that the wages of sin is death.

This brings us to the wages of sin. Death implies that the exchange of life will be required to pay the wages for sin. Since life is in the blood, it is the only way to make atonement for the soul. It is also the only means of cleaning and purging something; therefore, blood must actually be shed in order to remit sin (*Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22; 1 John 1:7*).

“Remission” means to pardon. It is obvious to maintain the integrity of justice the great Judge of the Universe had to have the means to pardon us.

However, to secure such a pardon, blood must first be shed to satisfy the demands of the holy, righteous Law.

In the Old Testament, the blood of unblemished animals was spilled on the Altar of Burnt Offering. These sacrifices simply covered sin or made atonement for it, but they could not take it away (*Hebrews 9:12-13*). The result is that many innocent animals were offered up to cover the sins of men. The altar was in continual use, the priest forever standing in intercession, and man forever paying in some way to make atonement for his unacceptable ways.

The Old Testament sacrifices pointed to the ultimate sacrifice: God’s sacrifice of His Son on the altar of the cross. Jesus would become the propitiation, substitute, or payment for our sin. He would redeem us back from the tyranny of sin with the payment of His blood. His blood would not only fulfill and satisfy the Law’s requirement and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, but His sacrifice would take away sin once and for all. He would satisfy the Old Covenant of the Law, and usher in a better or more excellent covenant. After all, the Law could only condemn, while in Christ we can be forgiven and stand justified before God (*Matthew 5:17-18; Romans 10:4; Hebrews 9:11-28; 1 John 1:7*).

The Apostle Paul tells us that the Law was simply a schoolmaster that pointed us to the Person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ as a solution to our sin problem (*Galatians 3:24*). We are also told that the priest continually offered gifts and sacrifices on behalf of others and themselves. It was clear that their work was never done. It was a temporary fix until the next gift or sacrifice had to be offered up to make atonement. However, after Jesus offered His sacrifice, He was able to declare, “It is finished,” and was able to cease from such work and sit down on the right hand of the majesty on high (*John 19:30; Hebrews 8*). †

“O PRAISE the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people. For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the LORD endureth for ever. Praise ye the LORD.” “Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD.” Ps. 117; 150:6



THE THREE TREES

Once upon a mountain top, three little trees stood and dreamed of what they wanted to become when they grew up. The first little tree looked up at the stars and said: "I want to hold treasure. I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I'll be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!" The second little tree looked out at the small stream trickling by on its way to the ocean. "I want to be traveling mighty waters and carrying powerful kings. I'll be the strongest ship in the world! The third little tree looked down into the valley below where busy men and women worked in a busy town. I don't want to leave the mountain top at all. I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me they'll raise their eyes to heaven and think of God. I will be the tallest tree in the world.

Years, passed. The rain came, the sun shone and the little trees grew tall. One day three wood cutters climbed the mountain. The first wood cutter looked at the first tree and said, "This tree is beautiful. It is perfect for me." With a swoop of his shining ax, the first tree fell. "Now I shall become a beautiful chest, I shall hold wonderful treasure!" the first tree said.

The second wood cutter looked at the second tree and said, "This tree is strong. It's perfect for me." With a swoop of his shining ax, the second tree fell. "Now I shall sail mighty waters!" thought the second tree. "I shall be a strong ship for mighty kings!"

The third tree felt his heart sink when the last wood cutter looked his way. He stood straight and tall and pointed bravely to heaven. But the wood cutter never even looked up. "Any kind of tree will do for me." He muttered. With a swoop of his shining ax, the third tree fell.

The first tree rejoiced when the wood cutter brought him to a carpenter's shop. But the carpenter fashioned the tree into a feed box for animals. The once beautiful tree was not covered with gold, or treasure. He was coated with sawdust and filled with hay for hungry farm animals. The second tree smiled when the wood cutter took him to a shipyard, but no mighty sailing ship was made that day. Instead the once strong tree was

hammered and sawed into a simple fishing boat. He was too small and too weak to sail to an ocean, or even a river, instead he was taken to a lake. The third tree was confused when the wood cutter cut him into strong beams and left him in a lumberyard. "What happened?" The once tall tree wondered. "All I ever wanted was to stay on the mountain top and point men to God."

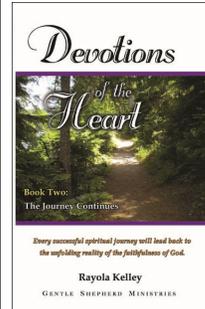
Many days and nights passed. The three trees nearly forgot their dreams. But one night, golden starlight poured over the first tree as a young woman placed her newborn baby in the feed box. "I wish I could make a cradle for him." Her husband whispered. The mother squeezed his hand and smiled as the light from the star shone on the smooth and sturdy wood. "This manger is beautiful." She said. And suddenly the first tree knew he was holding the greatest treasure in the world.

One evening a tired traveler and his friends crowded into the old fishing boat. The traveler fell asleep as the second tree quietly sailed out into the lake. Soon a thundering and a thrashing storm arose. The little tree shuddered. He new he did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely through the wind and the rain. The tired man awoke. He stood up, stretched out his hand, and said, "Peace." The storm stopped as quickly as it had begun. And suddenly the second tree knew he was carrying the king of heaven and earth.

One Friday morning, the third tree was startled when his beams were shaped into a crude cross. He flinched as he was carried through an angry jeering crowd. He shuddered when soldiers nailed a man's hands and feet to him. He felt ugly and harsh and cruel. But on Sunday morning, when sorrow turned to joy, suddenly the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything. It had made the third tree strong. And every time people thought of the third tree, they would think of God. Pointing man to God was better than being the tallest tree in the world!



GOOD NEWS!



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QUOTABLE

"The real focus and meaning of Christianity is that all believers should be involved in evangelism in some way. We are to be witnesses of the faith to a needy world around us. Jesus placed a high priority on witnessing, for it was the last subject He talked about before He ascended into Heaven. He stated: *'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.'*

"The power of the Holy Spirit has been given to man for the purpose of enhancing our witnessing abilities which in every case should bring glory and honor to Jesus Christ. Let us distance ourselves from the kind of self-serving 'what's in it for me' kind of Christianity and forget about ourselves and serve others. Let us do all that we can to put our focus back on Jesus Christ and His Word. Then and only then will we have accomplished the perfect will of the Father."

— Roger Oakland, *NEW WINE*, pg.119