

The Battlefield

This morning, I walked through a battlefield!

It wasn't a real battlefield, of course. It was a forest. Let me explain...

Usually, on my days off work I take a walk around Eagle Lake and the forest that surrounds it. Eagle Lake is a small but pretty lake near our home in the Highlands of southern Vancouver Island. The trails that I usually take are quiet and peaceful and give me the opportunity to walk and talk with God without interruption. These walks and talks brought me through the storm of '95.

The storm of '95 was a spiritual storm. The recent storm of '96 here on the west coast of Canada and the United States was a physical one, and actually consisted of two storms: a relatively small blizzard followed by a huge one. Together, they made a real mess of my lovely paths around Eagle Lake, hence my allusion to a battlefield. Until just a fortnight ago, deep snow rendered the trails impassable. Now, as I walk that route again, these thoughts occur to me:

Many trees came down in the storm. Some of them snapped off somewhere along the length of their trunks. The weight of the snow totally uprooted some of them. The only use for these trees now is as homes for insects and as fertilizer for future generations of their brothers and sisters and for other forms of forest vegetation.

Many trees survived, however. Some lost branches, large and small. Some were bowed over until their tops now touch the forest floor. The storm of '96 has changed their appearance, in most cases, for the remainder of their lives. Nevertheless, throughout the blizzard, many trees, and not just the biggest ones, continued to stand straight and tall. It was not just the biggest trees that survived. Neither was it all of the smaller trees that were destroyed or damaged.

There are similarities between the trees of my Eagle Lake trail after the physical storm of '96 and the members of God's church following the spiritual storm of '95. That storm spiritually destroyed some of our former brethren. The experience so deeply shattered their faith and confidence in "organized religion" that they returned to the world and may never come back. Only God knows.

Some members stood straight and tall throughout that storm and never wavered at all. Many, and I am not ashamed to be counted as one of this group, were bowed over by the spiritual storm that was unleashed against us. I expect that, like my other brothers and sisters in this category, I will be forever changed by the experience.

We should remember that God, for His own great purpose and for our ultimate good, allowed the storm of '95 to come upon us. It was not the first storm that He had allowed His church to suffer. Nor did He promise that it would be the last. It appears that, despite our ideas that we had found a totally safe haven from adverse spiritual "weather," some of our congregations throughout the world are now going through yet another spiritual storm... the storm of '97.

It is not the purpose of this article to go into the details of this present tempest. My purpose today is to remind you that God is in charge! He brought us through the last spiritual storm and, if we will have faith in Him and if we will do our part, He promises to bring us through this one:

Do not be afraid of sudden panic, or of the storm that strikes the wicked; for the LORD will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being caught. (Proverbs 3:25-26 NRSV throughout)

I quote this verse to encourage you to have confidence in God, not to suggest that we are all totally wicked because trials have come upon us. God's people are not to be counted among the wicked just because we have been exposed to "bad weather." Many scriptures throughout the Bible clearly show that God allows His beloved children to experience stormy trials for our own eventual benefit. We must not be tempted to try to get through them on our own. Our Saviour wants us to depend upon Him:

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?" (Matthew 8:23-27)

Like Jesus' first disciples, we too must have faith. We understand that true faith cannot be "worked up" by ourselves; God must give it to us. Let's ask Him for it! We must rely on God to bring us through these present trials. He promises a wonderful reward to those who have faith and who are willing to weather the storms that He allows to come upon us:

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, I am about to set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of jewels, and all your wall of precious stones... *[doesn't this sound a lot like a description of the New Jerusalem?]*... All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the prosperity of your children. In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you. If anyone stirs up strife, it is not from me; whoever stirs up strife with you shall fall because of you. (Isaiah 54:11-15)

As God tells us at the end of verse 15, we should make sure that we are not the ones who are stirring up strife. This is not to say that we should ever "roll over and play dead" if we suspect that our brethren are being mistreated in any way or that something wrong is being done within God's church. If these things happen, we should not be afraid to initiate orderly, polite and respectful action. Such action is not strife. Remember that God, through Paul, chastised the Corinth congregation of His church for failing to act when sin crept into that group.

If someone else initiates real strife, however, God promises to finish it. Again, we should have faith in Him and let Him do any "fighting" that may be necessary.

Let us not leave God out of the picture. If it were not for Him we would not be where we are now. If it were not for Him we would never have been called to His truth in the first place. Let us humble ourselves and draw closer to God. Let us rely less upon our own limited human knowledge and abilities. Let us rely more totally upon Him.

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