

Where the Tree Falleth, There It Shall Be

"If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be" (Ecclesiastes 11:3).

As most of you know, we have two of our married kids, their spouses, one grandkid, and one on the way living in Pensacola, Florida. We were happy that Juliana and her little boy, Aidan came to Houston soon after knowing that "Ivan the Terrible" was coming for a visit. I just received a phone call from my son, Jonathan and he, his wife, Lauren (who is carrying their son), and my son-in-law, Joshua are coming to Houston. Their jobs, their schooling, electricity, and running water are all on hold indefinitely. So, Barbara and I have mixed emotions, we are sorry they are inconvenienced, but happy they are coming home. Our youngest son, Sean is coming home this week-end for a visit from Baylor, and if Hurricane Jeanne comes to South Carolina, maybe Heather (our oldest daughter), her husband, Jared and our oldest grandchild, Caleb will come and we'll have a full-blown family reunion!

I am amazed at the goodness of God in the midst of storms and other circumstances beyond our control. I was informed by Josh and Jonathan of the harrowing night they spent with winds sustaining over 100 miles per hour and gusting even higher through the night. I was told they could feel the house shaking and the trees breaking all night. The most outstanding event of the storm (for them) came at approximately three in the morning. They heard an incredibly loud crack, then an earthquake-like tremble as the largest tree in the forest across from their house fell to the earth. The kids told us it shook the whole house with electrifying force. When they checked it out in the early light they discovered that this massive and strangely beautiful oak had fallen between their house and one next to them with huge limbs lying between their houses. Earlier as the wind was whipping the trees, they decided to move their cars. Had they not done this, their cars would have been demolished. And they would not be en route to us as I write these words. "and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be" (Ecclesiastes 11:3).

In 1856, the famous Methodist Preacher, Peter Cartwright published his autobiography. This old circuit-riding preacher had some stories of his adventures in the ministry that are nothing less than phenomenal. He had encounters with many people who helped shape America in the early and mid 1800's such as Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln. As you read the story of some of the great revivals he was involved in, you cannot help but give God praise that preachers like him were there influencing the leaders and laymen that influenced our country. This was a man of destiny. Sometimes however, destiny is interwoven in tragedy. As Peter Cartwright was moving from the Kentucky to Illinois he, his wife, two sons, and four daughters were camping in the woods, just before they entered the open prairie. Listen to his own words, "Just as day was appearing in the east, the tree at the root of which we had kindled a small fire fell, and it fell on our third daughter, as direct on her, from her feet to her head, as it could fall; and I suppose she never breathed after. I heard the tree crack when it started to fall, and sprang, alarmed very much, and seized it before it struck the child; but it availed nothing". One hundred and fifty years later, these words still "pull at our hearts", don't they?

Even as I am thanking God for the protection of my family, I am aware, so very aware that sometimes, the tree falls and with the outcome considerably different. I am reminded of a teen-age girl in our church in Indiana who miraculously survived a life-threatening disease, only to die in a freakish house-fire three months later. I was riding next to a Continental pilot last week and he, another gentleman, and I were talking about airplane crashes (a most delightful conversation at 30,000 feet in the midst of turbulence). The pilot then proceeded to explain the most horrendous plane crash he knew of, which happened in Chicago twenty-eight years ago. I interrupted with these words, "I know the crash which you are talking about. I was booked on that flight, and in order to be at our college graduation where I was teaching, I re-booked it and flew it a week earlier". The conversation went quiet as they

looked at me in stunned disbelief. The pilot was a believer, so he was probably thinking something similar to me, i.e., "It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lamentations 2:22, 23). This happened one year before our first child was born; how different our personal history would have been! There are three principles that Solomon laid down in the context of the Scripture of our text. First all he teaches us to:

I. Go On With Life

Look at these two verses, "If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap" (Ecclesiastes 11:3-4). So, in other words, God was saying, "If you see rain clouds coming and you decide it is too dangerous to continue any activity, such as planting and working the soil, you will never reap a harvest".

Life has risks. We cannot live with paranoia, because nothing will be accomplished if we live in fear of circumstances. We are comforted by verses such as these: "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand" (Psalm 37:23, 24). Peter Cartwright buried his precious daughter twenty miles up the road, and went on to serve God. When crisis comes, that is not the time to quit, but go on. Secondly, Solomon teaches us to:

II. Rejoice Through The Unknowns of Life

The teacher said, "As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all" (Ecclesiastes 11:5). God is explaining that we no more know how to explain His ways, than we can explain the marvelous wonder of how a little baby grows to term before it is born. The underlying message I receive from this text is, we don't have to understand everything in order to rejoice in everything. "In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (I Thessalonians 5:18). At times it may be difficult, but the command is there. In sweet acceptance of the inexplicable, Peter Cartwright wrote years later of the event of the tree falling that took the life of his next to the youngest daughter, "Although this was an awful calamity, yet God was kind to us; for if we had stretched our tent that night, we should have been obliged to lie down in another position, and in that event the tree would have fallen directly upon us, and we should have all been killed instead of one." Cartwright could have lived in regret thinking, if I could have been quicker, if I could have been stronger, I could have kept the tree from killing my daughter. Instead the preacher focused in on the goodness of God despite the heart-break. Thirdly, Solomon teaches us to:

III. Live All Your Life

The Word of God went on to say, "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good" (Ecclesiastes 11:6). In the morning of our life God wants us to be surrendered to Him and in the evening of our life, He says, "...withhold not thine hand...." another way of saying, "keep up the good work until I bring you home to heaven".

Don't die before your time! Don't give up on life, because if God has kept you here, it is because He is not giving up on you. Therefore, live until you die. You may think you are finished, you may think you have only a little strength left, but be encouraged God can take what little strength He has provided for you and work a miracle! "I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name" (Revelation 3:8). Let us keep on keeping on!

- Pastor Pope -

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