



Discovering Christ!

by Mark Brunner

“Treated As Sons!” (Hebrews 12: 7-13)

We have a very old tree standing at the very crest of our property with a crown facing toward the north and west. The prevailing winds during the coldest times of the year are from that direction. They can be bitter cold and very dry; the kind of wind that simply dries things out and saps nutrients from even the hardest of woods. But, the old maple tree, standing now about 60 feet high, remains stalwart although slightly stunted compared to its nearest neighbors in the hollows. Trees in the hollow don't have to deal with anywhere near the elements of trees just a few yards away. Yet, that old tree on top of the hill has something special about it. If it could speak, it would probably relate a story of hardship, endurance and, without a doubt, promise. A tree is a product of its environment—above and below. If it's still standing after over 100 years through wind and cold, it must be a very special tree.

Here's a story: “A tourist stood on the river bank watching a lumberman hook and pull out certain logs that floated by. Noticing that he asked why he had gone to all the work of pulling just a few logs to the side, since they all looked alike. The lumberman smiled. He jammed his pike deep into the nearest log, turning it over and over. ‘They may look alike,’ he said, ‘but they aren’t. Most of the logs have grown on the mountainside protected. They’re only good for lumber.’ He jammed his pike into another log. ‘But these logs are from the top

of the mountain where the wind is fiercest, the cold hardest and frost deepest. They've been taking the brunt of the storms for years, and survived. They've grown up strong and have a finer grain. These logs will be used for special work. This here log will probably become part of a roofing truss or even a vaulted ceiling support. No sir! These logs have faced the worst so that they could become the best!"

Trees exposed to the elements survive grow at a slower, more even rate than trees in less harsher climes. The wood is denser, more even in grain. The reason is the annual growth rings are closer giving the wood a more compact structure. The weather has served to temper the tree. Similarly God chastens us to make us tougher. The winds of life blow on a Christian every day. We're battered by temptation, sorrow, hardship and despair. Yet, because God has given us the faith to withstand, we end up producing a finer, better wood with which the Creator can do even bigger and better things. To share in God's holiness, we must be willing to share in God's plan for us. And, make no mistake, that plan includes discipline, hardship, and, yes, at times chastening. Our Father knows that without his discipline, we would never make it. Could there be any better reason than this to "Endure hardship as discipline; (because) God is treating you as sons?"

"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt 6:34)

"Watch Out For The Bumps!" (Hebrews 12: 1-6)

I am not much of a biker. I own an older model bicycle which, by today's standards, is under-gear'd and outmoded. Nonetheless, I have some experience pedaling up and down hills and around a few curves at a reasonable rate of speed. Years ago my son Dan, then an avid biker, informed me "real men" ride Mountain Bikes and he referred me to an article in a *mountain biking* magazine. The article was revealing not only because of its insights into that manly sport, but it also gave me some insights into Christian living as well. Basically, this is what it Dan told me about the sport.

Mountain biking happens in some of the most challenging terrains imaginable. Trails are crude and sometimes not even visible. A typical route might take you over sharp, rock-strewn hills, down treacherous ravines filled with fallen limbs, mud holes and drop-offs. Because the trails tend to be challenging, the typical *mountain biker* seldom sits down on the small seat; legs and hips are needed to avoid shock. Additionally, it's no shame for a mountain biker to wear a crash helmet. In fact, it is a requirement. It seems that falling down is a frequent reward for participation in this manly art. The well-appointed biker will also wear special shoes that clip to the pedals, glasses or goggles, elbow and knee protection and, of course, a full uniform consisting of the appropriate lightweight, logo-emblazoned, skintight material. It's not uncommon to go airborne at times and landings are often perilous for the beginning biker. And, despite the many dangers along the trail; the obvious obstacles of rock, wood, and water, the worst thing a biker can do is focus on these things. There is some sort of unexplained biological reflex that causes even the most skilled of bikers to actually aim at these objects instead of avoiding them. Therefore, don't look at 'em. Rather, bump or fly over them. The main thing is this: you need to keep your eyes focused on the trail as a whole and focus on your ultimate goal—finishing in one piece.

The Bible tells us that a Christian can have the same problem bumping through life when his focus is on the wrong thing. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Therefore, since we are summoned by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." Hey, that makes sense. Although we can't ignore life's obstacles, sometimes we can focus on them too much. Christians need to trust that God will steer them in the right direction. We need to fly down this trail of life with zest and confidence knowing that we will fall, and will at times get hurt. As long as we stay focused on the goal, finishing the race in one piece in heaven, we'll be OK! Thanks Dan! The real manly art however isn't biking; when you think about it, it's living

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Keep Your Eye On Him! (Hebrews 11: 14-28)

What is faith? Sure, it is the “substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.” But, what does that mean? Can I touch faith? Is it “something?” In his lectures on Galatians, Martin Luther wrote, “Christian faith is not an idle quality or an empty husk in the heart . . . it takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith . . . faith is a sort of knowledge or darkness that nothing can see . . . faith is a cloud in our hearts, that is a trust we do not see, in Christ, when He cannot be seen.” Faith is, therefore, something of substance as opposed to something insubstantial. It possesses us and we cling to it. Like Moses on Mt. Sinai, we stand in the presence of this faith, feeling it and responding to it but not seeing it. Nevertheless, faith dwells in our lives and, as Christians, we respond to it, follow it, derive our comfort and security from it, as did Moses from the presence of God Himself. When we think about our faith, we need to think of presence not something lacking residence within us. We need to note to it daily and dwell in its presence, securing our direction, our vitality and strength from that union.

Here’s a story: A little boy was crossing the ocean with his father, who was captain of the ship, when they ran into a storm. The waves tossed the ship about like a cork and everyone was stricken with fear. But the boy sat still, with his eyes directed toward a certain spot. He sat there quite unperturbed as the ship was being dashed about by the waves. Someone asked him if he were not afraid, and he answered: “I have my eye on that little window, and through that window I can see the bridge, and on that bridge is my father. My father is the captain of the ship, and he has taken it through many storms.”

That little boy, although he could not see his father, knew his father was there. His knowledge was based on experience and trust. He knew that his father would always protect and provide for him. There was no need to fear; but, there was need to focus. Faith compels us to act. Without faith, life is treacherous and fear is always waiting outside our door. Leo Tolstoy called

faith “the force of life.” Many *live* outside of faith. However this is subsistence, not living. Life with promise and hope is life that “takes hold of Christ” and looks to the substance of faith within our hearts. God is preparing a home for each of us in heaven. But, you know, He has already begun that work within us. That faith which dwells within our hearts is a taste of that heavenly joy and peace. It is ours for the enjoyment and taking anytime we wish because it is the embodiment of perfect love, our Savior Jesus Christ. Dip into Christ today and experience the true meaning of joy in this life and the next. Come into His presence and receive the blessings of His righteousness! Hold on to that faith.

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Growing Pains! (Hebrews 10: 26-39)

Here’s a story; Samuel Coleridge, famed British author, poet, critic and philosopher, was once asked by a friend this question. “Why should we give our children a formal religious training and upbringing? By stepping in to interject our ideas and beliefs, aren’t we stunting a child’s ability to grow spiritually? If we just left them alone they would be free to choose their own religious faith when they reached the age of discretion.” Coleridge, known for his deep but quick philosophic responses, said not a word but continued to look out the window of his writing study. His friend, obviously annoyed at the poet’s lack of response, posed the question again. This time Coleridge pointed out his study window and stated, “Your answer, my friend, lies out there.” He continued to point out the window and then invited his guest to join him in a stroll outside in his adjacent garden.

Eager to hear the response, Coleridge’s friend joined the poet as they departed the house. Still, outside, Coleridge said nothing. He walked aimlessly through the garden which obviously had not been weeded or cared for a very long time. Shrubberies were untrimmed. Vines had taken over most of the vegetable plots. Animals had burrowed into and under everything. There were piles of leaves and fallen branches scattered everywhere. After a few moments, Coleridge turned to his friend and asked him how he liked the garden? His friend,

scanning the piles of debris and weedy landscape, replied, “Do you call this a garden? There are nothing but weeds here!” he exclaimed. “Well, you see,” exclaimed Coleridge, “I did not wish to infringe upon the liberty of the garden in any way. I was just giving the garden a chance to express itself and to choose its own production.”

Point well taken! There are just some things that can't be left alone; especially when it comes to those who need our help and love. Nothing grows unless it's planted; and nothing planted grows up unless it is tended. Sometimes that means pruning, staking and fertilizing. This applies to not only our physical lives but our spiritual lives as well. That's why God chastens us; in order to draw us closer to Him. It's important that we impress on those we love that our faith is strengthened in times of trouble because we know that God will never abandon us. In turn, we also need to impress upon those we love that WE will never abandon them even when the going gets rough. Trouble will only draw them closer to us as children, friends or spouses. As we trust God, let us hope that our friends will also trust us in that same manner. Let us all tend to our gardens today, that they may grow and be fruitful.

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The Right To Command! (Hebrews 5: 7-10)

There is an old German saying, *Zu Befehl* (*beefile*), *Herr Oberst* (At your orders, colonel) that Martin Luther had hanging on his study wall. Often a visitor would remark, “Herr Luther, why do you have such a saying on your wall?” He would reply, “Because it reminds me of the one who leads me today!” Of course, Luther was referring to his Savior, Jesus Christ. But, why was Jesus Luther's colonel? His Savior, indeed; but, his colonel?

Here's a story: At Cairo, Illinois, in 1861 Ulysses S. Grant had cause to reprimand a young recruit for deserting his post while on guard duty. Rather than punish the lad, he gave him a lesson in handling a gun and warned him, “Orders must be strictly and promptly obeyed always.” Some days later the same recruit was put on guard of a steamboat laden with ammunition. His

orders were to prevent anyone with a lighted pipe or cigar from approaching the boat. In due course General Grant appeared and made to board the vessel, one of his beloved cigars between the teeth. “Halt!” cried the recruit, and raised his gun. The general, surprised and annoyed at this apparent impertinence, demanded an explanation. “I have been taught to obey orders strictly and promptly.” Replied the soldier, “And my orders are to allow no one to approach this boat with a lighted cigar. You will please throw yours away.” Grant was forced to smile on hearing his own words quoted back at him, and obediently tossed his cigar into the river.

Zu Befehl, Herr Oberst! At your orders, colonel! That young recruit was able to put himself over the general because of his orders and the necessity to obey them. Jesus put himself over death the same way. Although he feared death, like us, he put himself under it to conquer it, once and for all. There can only be one colonel in our lives. What a comfort to know that He perfectly understands the same fears that bother us every day. Not only does He understand them; he lived them as we live them. Yet, because He was able to perfectly obey His Father’s will, he alone assumes the role of leadership in our lives. He therefore has the right to command us and his obedience is the foundation for his command.

As Christians we do not follow some counterfeit commander. Jesus Christ earned His command the hard way. He did what no other man had ever or will ever do. He perfectly obeyed. Now He is our perfect commander; worthy of our praise, our love, and, our obedience. This is a great comfort for not only do we know that we are being led by the best, but we also can be assured that by His example of faithfulness and obedience, we too are perfected in God’s eyes. *Zu Befehl (beefile), Herr Oberst*—“At your command my colonel; at your command!”

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