

“MEMORIAL DAY” 2017

Tomorrow is Memorial Day - and many Americans will “celebrate” the holiday with pool parties and picnics, parades and shopping sprees. Lord willing, we’ll be visiting in Ohio as we’ve chosen to seize the opportunity to honor Nina’s parents’ 60th wedding anniversary. Though it’s not the official date for that, the holiday offers some time when the family can get together for that purpose. As I thought about this however, I felt a caution in my spirit. I do want to “celebrate” the marriage commitment that my in-laws have demonstrated, but I do not want to forget to “solemnly remember” those who sacrificed their lives to provide me the freedom that I have to do so. You see...

Right after the Civil War, in the spring of 1866, Mrs. Mary Ann Williams of Columbus, Georgia wrote an open letter suggesting a day be set apart each year to decorate the graves of fallen soldiers with flowers. She chose the anniversary of Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston’s surrender to Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman of the Union Army to be the official “Decoration Day.” Parts of her letter ran in newspapers all over the South, leading to widespread ceremonies on that day.

Williams originally envisioned a day to honor only the Confederate dead – but ironically, as a hospital town, Columbus, Mississippi was also a burial site for both Union and Confederate casualties of Shiloh. And it was there that four women walked in solemn procession to Friendship Cemetery on April 25, 1866. As the story goes, one of the ladies was moved to suggest that they also decorate the graves of the Union dead, as each grave contained a father, husband, brother, or son.

It’s remarkable that people united in the aftermath of the country’s most savage years at the initiation of war widows, former slaves, and grateful citizens of vastly divergent political views and even conceptions of what was being commemorated. Memorial Day soon became part of our American culture.

Yet, from its conception, this Day was not about a celebration – but about remembering and paying homage to those who gave the last full measure of their devotion. The Day is therefore meant to give us a chance to reflect on the mortar that holds the bonds of freedom in place: the blood of patriots. At its core, their sacrifice is the embodiment of what America is and should be, as well as a reminder of the cost of her freedom.

Though many will urge us to “have a happy Memorial Day” tomorrow, that seems to me to be a bit inappropriate. This got me thinking how Christ followers can so easily fall into a trap when it comes to honoring Jesus. We can be so busy “celebrating” our freedom in Christ, that we fail to “solemnly remember” His sacrifice. **We won’t ever forget--will we?** It can be a challenge to clear our hearts and minds of distractions, so we can completely and honestly recall “the blood that was shed” that now binds us together eternally. So, today I offer just a few reminders of what the blood of Jesus has accomplished.

By the blood of Jesus, **WE HAVE BEEN REDEEMED**. In Ephesians 1:7-8 Paul writes: **“In (Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.”** The concept of redemption may not be clear to many of us. Redemption has to do with purchasing back something that was lost or stolen. Some from my generation might also recall collecting green stamps which could be *“redeemed”* for prizes or the idea of returning pop bottles to the store in exchange for money. Because of our sins, we were rendered unfit for the life God intended for us. But by the blood of Jesus, we have been washed and made clean – forgiven of all the sins of the past and made ready for usefulness with God. Peter says this about that in 1st Peter 1:18-19: **“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”** Redeemed, renewed, by the blood of Jesus.

By Jesus' blood, **WE HAVE BEEN RESTORED** in fellowship with God. In Ephesians 2:12-13 Paul also says: **“Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.”** I recently saw a trailer for a film called *“Everything”* about a young girl who's quarantined because of a rare disease attacking her auto-immune system. (*Severe Combined Immunodeficiency or SCID*) Her isolation causes unbearable loneliness and heartache. She's willing to risk everything to experience life as it was intended. It's just a movie – but there are 100's of people for whom her situation is reality. Of course, there've also been those sentenced to a life imprisoned in high security facilities – completely cut off from loved ones.

Because of our sin, we were destined to that kind of existence for all of eternity. Isolated and alone. Separated from God and the life He had in mind for us. But, by Jesus' blood we have the chains are broken and the barriers removed. We can come close to God, restored in fellowship with Him.

By the blood of Jesus, **WE HAVE REASON FOR CONFIDENCE**. In Hebrews 10:19-25 the Holy Spirit tells us: **“Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let's consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.**

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

It's one thing to be freed from prison, but **quite another to be accepted back** into the family. I know of a man who committed such vile offenses against members of his family, that some have refused to have anything to do with him since his release. To be honest, if I was in their shoes, I would wrestle with that issue myself.

But the things that I have done are just as vile in the eyes of God. I hurt Him and His children. I am guilty of cruel and horrible offenses. Yet, by the blood of Jesus, I can approach the Father knowing that He does not hold any of it against me. And though I am sorry for my sin, my conscience is clear. I am not overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and condemnation. I am accepted and I am loved and I am welcomed into the presence of God. Not because of any sacrifices I have made – but because of the single sacrifice Jesus made on my behalf.

And though all these things are "*cause for celebration*" – I am not "*happy*" that Jesus suffered so much for me. I do not "*like*" the fact that His blood had to be shed for my sin. When I remember what He endured for me, I am humbled and moved at times to tears. His blood poured out for the likes of me – and for you? So, ***we won't forget - will we?***

Over the past few months I've had several blood tests. Normally, I'm not bothered by the "*little poke*" of the needle - and though I've been a little anemic, it's not like they drained me dry. I've also had a couple procedures lately that necessitated IV's. My veins weren't always cooperative so a couple times the nurses had trouble getting them inserted. I'm a wimp and I admit it hurt. But, after a brutal beating which would've left the flesh on His back torn and bleeding profusely, it wasn't little needles that were poked into Jesus' veins. It was nails the size of railroad spikes. And it wasn't just a vial or two of blood they drew from His veins. The blood of my savior not only trickled from the wounds caused by the thorns pressed into His brow, it also flowed freely from His hands and feet. When a soldier drove a spear into His side, both blood and water poured from that gaping wound.

Jesus did not do this because He "*liked*" me. He did it because He "*loved*" me. I do not serve Him now because I "*like*" what He did for me. It's because I "*love*" Him for being willing to do it. And I honor Him today and every day, not with a moment of silence or watching a parade or enjoying a day off work with family or friends, but by pouring out my life for Him. It's the only reasonable thing to do. (Romans 12:1)