

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Nothing deafens more than silence. For months after we lost our family and brethren, we found the silence in Misty Valley almost unbearable. Death brings no peace to the living, only memories and pain. At every turn, in every room of every building, along every path in the valley, we saw reminders of people we had known and loved for much of our lives.

We drove back to the crash site the day following Carmen's death, but we came too late to recover any of the bodies or personal effects. Someone had brought in heavy equipment, and shoved cars, bodies, and all over the bank and into the ravine. After all, can't have a major north-south artery blocked to traffic. We returned home more depressed and helpless than ever. We gathered up personal items left behind in the valley, and buried them in a common grave on a nearby hill. I performed an emotional, if unimaginative, funeral service, and we filled the hole in with dirt. Our inability to give our loved ones a proper burial bothered me for years afterward.

I also had to cope with a personal load of guilt over what had happened. After all, the Lord had made me the anointed prophet of our little group, and I should have seen disaster coming. Had I sought the Lord's guidance as I should have, the tragedy never would have happened. In a recurring nightmare, I saw myself standing over the burned bodies of my brethren, only to have them all stand up and surround me, pointing accusing fingers while saying, over and over, "*You killed us! You killed us!*" I would wake up screaming, and bathed in sweat. Emily very patiently kept telling me that it *wasn't* my fault, that the Enemy had destroyed them. God forgave my guilt in what happened, the first time I asked Him, she said. \No matter how much I tried, though, I couldn't forgive myself.

Our remaining brethren did what they could to comfort us, as shocked and hurt as they themselves felt. Marvin and Martha came over from Pikeville within days of the massacre, and stayed several days with us. Marvin ministered to me repeatedly about turning loose of my guilt. I agreed with every word he said, but nothing changed inside me. Max and Louise came before Marvin and Martha left, and stayed after they had gone. The presence of these dear brethren in Christ certainly comforted us in our grief, but the gloom I felt would just not lift.

I started questioning God's mercy and grace. How could a good God, after all, allow such monstrous things to happen in the world He created with His own hands? Did He see, or even care about, what happened? My mind told me these questions were foolish, even blasphemous, but my heart didn't care. The words the angel had spoken to me about being a caretaker struck me as bitter mockery; caretaker of what? A morgue? Less than a morgue; a museum. We lacked the comfort of even visiting the graves of our dead.

Liz came later than the others, but she came. She drove a borrowed car, and brought her grand daughter, Julie, along. We found the child's sheer joy of living a delight, a refreshing change from the gloom and depression that so pervaded the valley. Liz's own situation grew worse with every passing year; all of the rest of the church in Bentown had either been killed or had deserted her. She stood alone, in the Lord, against the Satanic forces that controlled the place. Brett Halcomb ruled supreme; nothing happened in or around the place without his agreement; even the police came into town only at his invitation. His giant son, Green, spent most of his time roaming the hills. Some people whispered that he indulged in cannibalism; Brett encouraged the rumors, as another means of instilling fear, but he drove the boy out of town.

"If the Lord permits me to be killed one day, probably Green will do the killing."

"Liz, don't talk like that!" Emily protested. Liz said no more, but I could tell she believed what she said. Julie came back in the room just then, and talk turned to happier things.

After spending a week with us, longer than she really planned, Liz returned to West Virginia. We didn't see her again for years afterward.

Emily's brother Drew heard about the "victory" over the "Christian bandits." He had great difficulty arranging transportation, since his car had been confiscated and the police watched his every step. He finally called in some old favors, and managed to slip out of town in a borrowed car late one night. I always thought of him with great fondness and respect, because he had risked himself over and over to rescue Christians, including me, from demonic bondage. He lost his job, his home, and all prospects for ever having a family and a home, but he never gave up his faith or his determination to serve his Lord. When he entered a room, light came with him. Fire burned in his eyes, but his voice came as a cooling breeze. I never met any man with a greater sense of the Lord's power and presence than Drew Bloomington. After he returned to Cleveland, the authorities arrested him, and someone murdered him in his cell. We didn't find out until months later, and the news just convinced me all the more that God was a vengeful God who punished those who loved Him most.

Things settled into a sort of dreary routine in the valley. Emily worked together with me to keep the buildings clean and in as good repair as possible. I had only limited skills as a carpenter, but I found myself fixing leaky roofs and repairing wind damage to doors and windows. I also made the rounds along the outskirts of the valley, mostly just to see that no one came in that shouldn't be there. Keeping the huge fields clean was beyond my strength and ability, but the Lord miraculously sent a herd of goats our way. For years, they roamed freely over the valley, keeping the grass closely trimmed, and never once straying beyond the rim of the hills that surrounded us. I don't know how they survived the winters, but every spring they would be right back in the meadows, placidly munching grass, weeds, young trees, Emily's laundry, and anything else they came across. They were a minor nuisance, but a major blessing.

Even as I did the work from day to day, I repeatedly asked myself, "Why?" Mostly I worked so I wouldn't have to think, to avoid the pain of solitude. Even with the constant presence of my Emily, the love of my life, I felt all alone and deserted. I know my attitude hurt my mate deeply, and that she had her own private Hell to contend with. I knew that then, and ceased caring about anyone else's hurt, including hers.

Over six months after the tragedy, I walked one day on the west slope of the valley, nearing the road that lead to the outside world. I kept hearing a low rumble, like that of a car. Gradually, the noise grew louder, and I no longer had doubt what I heard. What came my way – a very noisy vehicle missing a muffler – I knew, but I had no idea who would visit us. We had just recently learned of Drew's death, so I suspected that someone might be coming for us as well; memories of my arrest by Max flashed into my mind.

Determined not to run away, no matter who appeared, I stepped into the road, and waited on the shoulder. The car labored with difficulty up the other side of the hill, and finally came over the top. It rumbled down toward me, brakes squealing in protest as the driver tried to keep it from picking up speed. About a hundred feet away, it started slowing to a stop. The passenger side window rolled down, and a still-familiar voice said, "Hey, buddy, is this how we get to Pike-ville?"

My mouth dropped open in astonishment. Walter Camp laughed and said, "Better close that thing, Hank, or it'll attract flocs."

From the driver's side, Miriam greeted me. "Is you is, or is you ain't, my baby?"

I couldn't wait for them to reach the house. I pulled open the car door and dragged out the laughing Walter, throwing both arms around him. From inside, Miriam said, "I'd like to join in, but if I let my foot off the brake, this thing will go rolling away by itself. Let go of Daddy, and climb in. Let's go see Emily, and I'll greet you proper."

"Right, Babe!" I said, more genuinely happy and delighted than I had felt in months. I clambered in the back

seat while Walter resumed his place in the front, and we continued down the hill.

We found Emily shooing the goats away from yet another tattered shirt they had munched. She heard the car coming long before we reached the house, but continued working until Miriam pulled the old jalopy to a shuddering halt. When she saw who got out of the car, my wife squealed with delight, and came running. She smothered the two Camp's with hugs and kisses, moving back and forth from one to the other.

A while later, over tall glasses of apple cider (made from our own apples, of course), we pressed the Camp's for details of why they came to us all the way from Camp Town, but, first of all, we had to know how everyone else was doing. Walter spoke for the two of them, as head of his clan. "Well, LuAnn is as ornery as ever, still giving me a hard time about tracking mud onto her clean floors. Milo still talks your head off whenever he's around, and Laurie's still as sweet as honey." We all knew, of course, that LuAnn rarely fussed, if at all, Milo rarely talked, and Laurie had a tongue sharper than Walter's hunting knife.

After we laughed, a pleasant sound I rarely heard, I said, "Now, tell me how things *really* are. Something must be very wrong for you to take the risk of making a trip here with that old museum piece."

Walter wasn't quite ready to be serious. "Oh, come on now, Miriam's not *that* old." His face turned serious after we stopped laughing again. "Things around home aren't good, but you know that. People are still being attacked and murdered, and Boss Richards and her gang get more brazen every day. They attacked our main area, including our own house, a couple of months ago. The Lord warned us through Miriam before they attacked. We were waiting for them, and gave them a good thrashing. Five of them won't be raiding any more innocent homes, and I doubt they'll bother us again for a while. But, we all know, as you do, that the worst still lies ahead of us. If the Lord tarries, we'll all be going to meet Him before the time. As to why we came – let Miriam tell you that."

"Daddy is always such a ray of sunshine," said Miriam, kissing his cheek affectionately. "We're here because the Lord told us we should come. He came right into my room one night, woke me up and said, 'Hank needs you. Take your father and go to him.'"

"So I did. The outlaws stole or destroyed the best of our vehicles, as with everything else we owned, but we patched that old thing outside together with spare parts, and set out for Kentucky. Once we started on the road, we realized neither one of us had any idea where you lived. We decided to go Bentown first, and ask Liz. She's having a rough time, but her faith never seems to falter. She told us what happened to you."

At this point, she began weeping, which made Emily start crying, too. I sat by, silent, while Walter dabbed repeatedly at his eyes. When Miriam regained her composure, she resumed her story. "Liz told us where you lived, and warned us that several bands of dangerous outlaws operated between there and here. I felt we needed to come on as quickly as we could, so, after she scrounged us some gas, we drove as fast as that old rattle trap would allow."

She paused. "One reason we came was to offer comfort, but that's not the main reason. I have a message from the Lord, for you, Hank." She noticed the look of mixed surprise and doubt on my face, but went on. "The Lord says. 'Is it a small thing that I should deliver you from death, not one time, but many times? I delivered you from drugs, when you were a child, and again after you became a man, when you would surely have killed yourself. I kept you from falling from a high place to your death, and twice I delivered you out of the hands of evil men. I provided a place of refuge for you, then sent my angel to lead you back to this place, lest you be slain by bandits. I saved you from slaughter when those all around you died, except you and your wife. .!'"

"Have I saved you without cause? Do not all my plans have an purpose? Why then do you still grieve over that which is gone, and punish yourself with guilt for a sin which I do not hold to your charge? Repent, and turn once more to the path I have called you to walk, or I will spit you out of my mouth, and call another to

complete the work you started. Know that I love you, and that I want only the best for you, and for your wife. Return to me, and cherish the woman I gave you, before the time for action has passed."

She closed her mouth, but I saw new tears form on her eyes, at the realization of what she had said. I sat in my chair, stunned, feeling like I had been severely beaten. The Lord had chastised me, and I knew I deserved every word. Shakily, I rose to my feet, and knelt back down beside my chair. Emily came to kneel beside me, and clasped my hand in hers. I felt another strong pair of hands on my shoulders, and felt Miriam move to Emily, next to her father. I also felt the need to make my confession out loud.

"Lord, I guess I let things get out of hand, again. In times past I thought I was close to you, and that I understood what it meant to serve you. These last few months, though, I've been so wrapped up in grief, guilt, and self-pity I forgot most of what I knew about you. I confess that I have let these feelings control my life, instead of letting you do it. I have failed to serve you in the ways you called me to serve you. I have failed to show your love, either in the things I do or to my wife.. I have grieved your Holy Spirit in the things I have thought or spoken. I am not worthy to be called your son, and I have trampled the blood of Jesus underfoot. Your Word says, Father, 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us of all righteousness.' I pray, Father, forgive me now these my sins, in Jesus' name, and cleanse me of the ugly things I have nurtured all of these months."

The answer came dramatically and immediately. The burden of guilt and anger I had carried around lifted, and I experienced that feeling of peace and acceptance I enjoyed for much of the past thirty years. The Lord spoke to my mind, so clearly I wasn't sure if He spoke audibly or not. "I have heard your prayer and I have forgiven your sin. I will show you what you must do, and I will come to you to speak of things to come. Enjoy the blessings I have given you. Do not dwell any more on the past, but live in the bright hope of my promises."

Miriam and Walter stayed on with us for five more days, helping with some of the repairs and cleaning that had to be done. Her job done, Miriam relaxed, and laughed and played with us in a way I had never seen her do at home. The Lord showed me that this trip served a purpose for her as well, and that the years ahead of her would prove very hard indeed. Walter, I knew, would not survive many more years, and the Lord allowed Emily and I this time as a farewell for a dear friend and brother.

We had more cars in the valley than people, and I made Miriam and Walter take one of them. They didn't protest much, and they showed genuine delight with the gift. On the morning of their departure, we said a special prayer for God's watch care over them for the trip, and sent them on their way. I never saw either of them again. I did hear later, by a message conveyed through Liz by Max Trundle, that they arrived home safely.

The following years flowed through my fingers like water. We fell into a routine of cleaning and repairing the buildings, tending the fields and the goats, and circling the valley anointing every tree and bush we saw. We fasted one day each week, and spent many hours, together and separately, in prayer. The Lord did come to me, in dreams and visions, as He promised, and showed me the valley as a place of rest and refuge.

I understood from the signs I saw that the time of the Great Tribulation was approaching, and that the Lord was preparing places to receive some of his people as a shelter from the storm. I had always believed that the Church would be raptured before the Tribulation started, but I grew less and less sure of that. Anyway, the account in Revelations clearly taught that martyrs would die in Christ during the Tribulation, so someone would always need a place to rest in the Lord..

One day while walking along the top of a ridge overlooking the valley, I heard a noise in some bushes down the hill, a loud noise like some wild creature crashing its way through the undergrowth. Curious, I stopped to see what could make so much noise. Perhaps, I thought, it was a deer, or even a bear. When the creature came into view, I first thought I had guessed right in my second choice. The thing was massive, covered with

thick brown hair, and stood well over six feet tall. Then it looked straight at me, and I saw its eyes. A tingle ran up my spine; this was no bear.

The eyes stared out at me from deep sockets, red, glaring, and full of hate. Those eyes, horrible as they were, belonged to a man, and so did the large white teeth that appeared when the thing snarled at me. I stood still, the Spirit within me assuring me that the demon that drove the man could come no closer. It tried; the creature lunged toward me, deep guttural sounds tearing from its lips, and spittle dripping from its mouth. It ran up against a wall I could not see, and howled as it recoiled, and fell to the ground. Again and again it lunged toward me, always with the same result. Finally, it stood staring at me, chest heaving, and when it opened its mouth again, words came out.

"Don't think you can escape me so easily. Anyone who tries to come to you I will destroy. You will not be around long, old man, and when you're gone, I will come in and destroy everything."

I claimed the blood of Jesus against him, turned and walked away. I heard him howling in rage as I went down our side of the ridge. Often at night, I heard him growl and scream off in the distance, and it always brought a chill to me. I wondered if the screams I heard all came from him.

Lately the body that served me so well for so long has started to fail me. Whenever I try to do physical work, or even walk up the hill around the valley, a crushing pain grabs my chest. I know enough medicine to recognize the symptoms of heart disease. Emily, too, is ill. Always thin, she is losing much of what little weight she has. I hear her groaning during the night, and at times when she thinks I'm not around. Neither one of us has much longer to stay in this troubled world. I wonder how much longer we can last, and what will happen to our beautiful valley then. I pray that we don't go at different times. Neither of us, I think, could abide life for long without the other.