

Memorial for Ralph Larson —September 1, 2007—Loma Linda

On one of our walls at home is a signed copy of Edwin Markham's ageless words that he read at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. I read it often, wondering if I would know someone who would come close to deserving those words, especially the last lines.

I repeat them today: "And when he fell in whirlwind, he went down /As when a lordly cedar, green with boughs/Goes down with a great shout upon the hills/And leaves a lonesome place against the sky."

Not many men or women in the last fifty years or so have left a more lonesome place against the sky for so many people across this planet.

How does one describe that lonesome place today? Those who found Jesus during those memorable years in Hawaii will never forget him. Nor those who were privileged to hear him throughout his preaching career on several continents. They wonder if we can find such men anymore!

But perhaps those in his various college and seminary classes will remember him the most. Those grateful, privileged students knew they were listening to a man with great mental capacity that could turn theological jargon into profound simplicity. He had the wit and mental skills to turn complexity into frank candor, without guile or conceit—whether speaking or writing his numerous articles.

That lonesome place will be felt by his children and grandchildren who will soon understand that a tree can't be measured until it falls. Thank you Lord, for lending Ralph to us these 87 years!

I think that it is appropriate to ask, "What is the explanation for such a man? Whence came his power and influence?"

I suggest an answer that Luke found fitting to describe a first-century Christian called Barnabas. Reading in Acts 11:24: "For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord."

"A good man." Not stuffy, not pretentious, not a porcelain saint that could not withstand difficulties. Just a good man who went out of his way, time after time, at the hint of a suggestion to help someone, whether

physically or spiritually. Ask those who found him day or night by his phone when they needed some clarity or courage. And to do it quietly, without wishing to be known for his many kind and good deeds.

I have seen him almost buried under unfortunate and unfair charges but his response was always gracious and generous, knowing that truth will always find its way up the flagpole, sooner or later.

I remember when I was president of Atlantic Union College that when we were looking for the best available to fill the vacancy in our Religion department, especially for pastoral training, my mind went to the west coast where I had met that seasoned, red-headed evangelist everyone was talking about, shortly after he arrived from Hawaii. In between preaching throughout Northern California, he had built his own home in Angwin—and that was the panache for me.

It wasn't long after Ralph and Jeannie arrived that everyone was convinced that we had chosen “a good man” and a “good woman.” Ask my children, Jeannie taught them their English classes.

Ralph and I would sit together on many committees and faculty meetings. He was never the first to speak but when he did everyone listened—never some pet idea or project to push, always with that great smile and insight.

Barnabas was a “good man, full of the Holy Spirit.” Those who knew Ralph well, recognized that he and Barnabas were soulmates. Where does one think his amazing energy came from, even when he was bone-weary? Or the contagious enthusiasm of his prayers—so practical, so honest? Or the energy to complete his research on two enormously important and timely books, *The Word Was Made Flesh* and *Tell of His Power?*

The Holy Spirit is that energy and teacher and Friend that makes men and women into “lordly cedars, green with boughs.”

Barnabas was a “good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith.” I think of those lines that surely identify Ralph: “One who never turned his back but marched breast forward; never doubted clouds would break. Never dreamed, though right were worsted, Wrong would triumph.”

Ralph's focus was anchored on the "new and living way He [Jesus] consecrated for us through His flesh. (Heb 10:20). Faith to Ralph was not a theological set of facts to believe in. No, he simply listened to the New Testament gospel that taught him to say Yes to whatever Jesus had taught him. Ralph's faith embraced trust, obedience, and joy. **That kind of faith also made Jesus into an overcomer.**

Yet, never easy to die, friends. Not even at 87. So much unfinished business, so many incompleting projects, wondering how everything will turn out for Betty, for David and Bronwen, Karen and Richard and for the grandchildren.

Never easy to die, especially for those who helplessly stand by while their loved one is hurting. But I hear Ralph telling me to remind us all today that "we must not lose heart, Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor.4:16-18).

Only men who live like that can talk like that! If anyone knows, I know, that Ralph lived out this fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians: "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, life in you, And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, 'I believed and therefore I spoke,' we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you.

Ralph made Paul's words **relevant, real, and believable** to thousands of students, both young and old. Those advanced in years caught his buoyancy and resilience. I find all this remarkable. He knew how to live a life of faith!

For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.” People on three continents will make a long line on the sea of glass to get their first chance to thank Ralph for inviting them there. He knew how to blend the Word and the Life in all of his teaching and preaching as no one I know has ever surpassed. “And a great many people were added to the Lord.”

I also hear Ralph telling me to remind you that some die easier than others, because they trust the words of his best Friend who said, “Let not your heart be troubled, believe in God believe also in me. In My father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.”

In the courtyard of Trinity Church in Boston, a city where Ralph loved to visit, there is an August St. Gaudens statue depicting the great preacher of the 19th century, Phillips Brooks. In the sheltering alcove, Bishop Brooks stands with his left hand clutching the pulpit upon which his Bible rests, while his right hand is extended outward—a friendly beckoning gesture of invitation and appeal. Immediately behind Brooks, St. Gaudens sculpted a second marble figure, a statue of our Lord. And the right hand of Jesus rests gently upon the left shoulder of Phillips Brooks.

Those two statues best represent how I have viewed Ralph through the years. Humble, fearless, gracious reflector of our Lord’s passion for truth and His passion for those who hungered for it.

Betty, David, and Karen and Richard—grandchildren—your husband, father, and grandfather, in the flick of the eye, not many days from now, will be walking down a garden path and a hand will reach out, and it will be nail-scarred. He will breathe the new air and find it celestial; He will feel invigorated and discover immortality, He will throw His arms around Jeannie and Betty and David and Karen and Richard and children and hug and run and dance with you, and ride horses again—and call it home.

O Lord, we are Adventists. We long for the eastern sky to brighten as we have never seen it before, we long for trumpets and violins that we have

never heard before; we long for the swish of angels as they bring lovers and children together, never again to ever say “Good-bye.” Please, Lord, come quickly!

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