

RANSOMED HEART

LOVE GOD. LIVE FREE.

February/March 2015

Dear Allies of the Heart,

One exhortation of Scripture I long to keep far better than I do is this wonderful charge:

Therefore, since we are surrounded 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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...(Hebrews 12:1-2).

As I fight my way through the battles of this world, my eyes aren't normally fixed on Jesus; I do look his direction more than I used to, but far more often my eyes are fixed on the crisis before me. They have a way of arresting your attention.

A dear friend is currently in a heinous battle with cancer. Only God knows the number of prayers that have gone up for him; it feels like the number of stars in the heavens. This morning we received a bit of bad news, and immediately went to prayer. But I did not feel confident and assured; I certainly did not feel triumphant. I felt discouraged, and distressed—my gaze was fixed on his suffering, not upon the resources of the Living God.

And oh, what a difference it makes.

There is a beautiful scene in the third of the Hobbit trilogy of films, *The Battle of Five Armies*. The dwarves (and Bilbo) have awakened the dragon Smaug from his slumbers; the beast is enraged that anyone would dare challenge his stolen kingdom. Lashing out with indiscriminate vengeance, Smaug swoops down upon the unsuspecting village of Laketown, breathing fire and death with every pass. In moments, the wooden township is engulfed in flames. One man dares to rise against him—the Bowman Bard. While the hamlet rages and the rest of the townsfolk flee, Bard climbs to the top of the bell tower and begins to fire arrows as the murderous beast passes by. But the armor of Smaug is impenetrable, save only by a black arrow from the elder days.

Bard's son Bain knows this, knows where the last black arrow lies hidden. As Bard takes his final shot and the wooden arrow bounces off the dragon's armor, Bain appears in the tower with what might be a miracle. Smaug detects the movement, and while the inferno that was once Laketown rages all round him, the scaled malice turns his full attention on the two figures in the tower...

“Is that your child?” (The bloody monster licks his lips as he advances.) “You cannot save him from the fire... he will *burn!*”
[Father and son are working together; Bard is using Bain's shoulder as a rest while he aims the black arrow for the one chink in Smaug's armor. Smaug is coming on with dreadful finality.]

“Tell me, wretch, how now do you challenge *me*? You have nothing left but your death.”
[The dragon’s roar shakes the timbers and the marrow in their bones; he is coming on like the Day of Judgment. Bain turns to look at the advancing monster. Then, a calm and reassuring voice says]
“Bain! Look at me—you look at me.”

The boy turns his gaze from the nightmare to his father’s loving face, and my heart sees myself in him, sees the answer to all my fears. I’ve watched the scene several times now, and I think of Jesus—this was the secret to his prayers. In the feeding of the five thousand, it says Jesus took the fish and loaves “*and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves.*” When he stands before Lazarus’ tomb, preparing to raise him, it says, “*Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me....”* (Mark 6:41; John 11:41)

Jesus is not looking up like a man trying to recall something he just forgot. He looks up to heaven to fix his attention on his father’s loving face. He is orienting himself to what is most true in the world—not the impossibly inadequate resources for the need of the five thousand, not Lazarus’ sister’s grief (they were his dear friends), not even the finality of death sealed with a stone rolled over the tomb. He turns his gaze from all that “evidence” and fixes it upon his Father God and the resources of his kingdom.

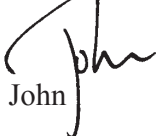
It is human nature to look at the problem before us, the crisis that has caused us to pray. But the problem is exactly the thing we should *not* be looking at. We must look from the debris to God. Peter looks at Christ, he can walk on the water; he looks at the waves, and he goes down.

This is really helping my prayer life—learning to fix my eyes on Jesus. Consciously and deliberately turning my attention to God, and not the many needs around me.

What will help you turn your attention to Jesus? I respect the Orthodox church’s use of icons; they are meant to be understood as “symbols” that help the believer turn their attention to God. It’s better than looking at the stain in the carpet or the tiles on your ceiling. C.S. Lewis had only one picture on the walls of his bedroom—an image of Jesus he would gaze upon as he prayed. I believe that as we grow in “fixing our gaze on Jesus,” we can learn to turn our inner eyes to him and actually see him. But I’m not proficient at that, so I have a journal I keep in front of me; key truths I must remind myself on a daily basis of just how wonderful God really is.

Find something that helps you turn your gaze upon Jesus, and keep it nearby where you pray. I think you will find a new hope and power developing in your life with God. And your prayers.

Offered in love,


John