

Leaf Your Troubles to the Lord

(Family Issues)

Word Count: 1,541

Fall's foreboding presence was making itself known that blustery October day, as I busily cleaned out my garden. The gloomy grayness of the sky mirrored my innermost feelings of sorrow. Getting outside in nature, gathering the piles of leaves wedged between the fence posts with my rake felt therapeutic. I mulled over the recent news about my Great Uncle Les and his refusal to eat. That past week I had visited the retirement facility, and the nurse informed me they had transitioned him to Hospice care.

I thought back to how my dear Uncle had lost his spouse, Berniece, the previous year. They had been abundantly blessed in their marriage of seventy-seven years. They were two peas in a pod. Over the past couple of months, Les had become lethargic and weary. His body was worn out. He had lived life to the fullest, he was ready to go be with the Lord, and once again be reunited with his wife.

I finished collecting the fallen leaves and went inside to clean-up. I needed to put my mind at ease. The one thing that always gave me peace and comfort was reading God's word. It helped me to collect my thoughts and see the bigger picture. I sat down at our dining room table and opened my Bible to one of my favorite verses, Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Just reading those words out loud to myself eased my anxiety. I needed to quit trying to control situations in my life to feel okay. God was watching over my Great Uncle and knew what was best for him. I needed to hand over the reins of worry to the Lord.

It was hard to accept that Uncle Les wouldn't be with us much longer. He had become an anchor of strength and assurity to my immediate family, after my oldest son was born. Before that time, I only knew of him through conversation with my father, who he had a close bond with.

Our family was formally introduced to my Great Uncle in the Summer of 1997. My husband and I had purchased our first home in Wichita, Kansas. Shortly after we had moved in, there was a knock on our front door. I unlatched the front door, and there stood my Great Uncle. He had a bouquet of fresh flowers in one hand and his Bible in the other. I invited Les to meet my husband and two young children. He greeted us warmly and was passionate about sharing the Gospel with us; as well as getting better acquainted with our family.

Uncle Les was my grandpa's younger brother, there was a five-year age span between them. I immediately felt connected to him, and so did my family. There was a tenderness and caring manner about him.

Les was "80 years young," as he could most likely recollect. He had worked as a professional photographer since he was 17 years of age, and was in no hurry to slow down any time soon. The bouquet of lilies he had brought over, were from his own garden. His charisma and energy for life intrigued me. Les invited us to his church that next Sunday and we accepted graciously.

Our little family visited the Baptist church that next weekend. We felt so welcomed by their small congregation. We were also introduced to his wife, Berniece. It wasn't long before we decided to join the church and become active members ourselves.

Uncle Les inspired me, he was such a vital part of the church services. He would saunter into the church early each Sunday morning before the service, bringing freshly cut bouquets for the pulpit. Les loved sharing words or stories of encouragement with the congregation.

Having grown up with a grandpa who never sang out loud, I was shocked one Sunday when my Great Uncle marched proudly up to the pulpit, cane in hand to sing a solo. His deep baritone voice belted out the old-time hymn “In the Garden.”

He sang the lyrics with such sincerity and pride: “In the Garden. I come to the garden alone, While the dew is still on the roses, And the voice I hear falling on my ear, The Son of God discloses... And He walks with me, and He talks with me, And He tells me I am His own, And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other, has ever known!”

I was overcome with the gifts Les shared with our small congregation, he made me want to be a better person. By his example and support, I started to play the flute again in the church band. I hadn’t played since high school, but with my family’s encouragement I began playing on a weekly basis.

Many lunches were shared with Les and Berniece, after church. Les formed a deep friendship with my husband and helped lead him to the Lord. He was baptized that next Spring. He played a vital role in helping with marital disagreements, and being there as a male Christian role model to my husband.

Les and I bonded even more, when he asked if I would help him with his photography shoots out in nature. With his bad balance and necessity for a cane, I would help him carry the tripod and camera equipment. Les always had such a positive, lighthearted way about him. My favorite part of working as his assistant was the deep conversations between us on the car rides to and from our destination. I learned so much about appreciating God's gifts out in nature, never taking daily life for granted, and never giving up.

Life changed drastically for our family unit when my father became disabled, after congestive heart failure and lack of oxygen. After that dad, Lane, had multiple health problems and was in-and-out of the hospital. Until the day that my father passed away, Uncle Les was always by his side, offering his prayers and support to our family.

I adopted my Great Uncle as a father figure and my three children thought of him as a Grandpa. When my marriage fell apart in 2006 due to domestic violence, and I had to move to my family's hometown, Les would phone me regularly to make sure I was alright.

Little did I know, God had plans of his own to keep our families connected. Les and his wife moved to Marion that same year. Berniece was developing dementia. She wasn't able to be left alone. They sold their Wichita home and he moved into the nursing facility with her, so they could still live as a married couple.

In the years that I worked at the nursing home where they resided, I found our daily visits to be such a comfort. I would often sit in their room, Uncle Les would read from his Bible. One of the

verses he read to me was Psalm 91:1-2, “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” He would give me a hug, and say “It’s going to get better, you just have to trust in the Lord.”

I truly believe that God brought my Great Uncle into my life, because he knew how much I would need that Christian male role model. When life seemed to be falling apart, from all directions, Les was there to give me encouragement and comfort from sharing God’s word.

On the morning of October 22, 2016, I received a phone call letting me know that my sweet Uncle had passed away peacefully in his sleep. Many tears were shed by our family.

His service was performed early in the morning, on a beautiful, crisp Fall day. One of the songs they played at his service was his favorite hymn, “In the Garden.” Little did I know how much I would need to hear the lyrics from that song that day, “And He walks with me, and He talks with me, And He tells me I am His own.”

As I sat in the wooden pew gazing at the dimly lit stained-glass window, I reflected on the meaningful life lessons my Great Uncle had inspired and taught me to follow in my own life: To always have faith in God and read the Scriptures daily for strength and peace; get out in nature and savor life; find joy in the little things; be passionate in your life’s pursuits; always put your family first; and grasp life by the reins, we don’t know what tomorrow holds. Les was my Angel on Earth.

As we walked out of the church, the sunlight shone vividly through the beautiful Fall colored trees. Uncle Les would have appreciated the bright hues of red and deep orange leaves that were falling and congregating artfully on the ground. I smiled up at Heaven. I could picture my Great Uncle being reunited with his true love, Berniece, and singing his praises to the Lord in Heaven's garden. For this I am thankful.