

**Precious Memories and Important Advice**

I write these words from the campgrounds of Triple S Christian Ranch in Rose Bud, AR. I am inundated with memories of years gone by. My history goes back to the founding days of this camp three and a half decades ago. I recall when our evangelistic services were held under the stars and boughs of towering trees above. Our illumination were strung light bulbs. Hot water was a luxury and the swimming pool for the kids was a pond. My kids were reared up with Triple S being a routine summer experience. They remembered well waking up with Patch the Pirate booming over the loud speakers every morning.

So many memories flood my mind in these Ozark foothills. I was born in Little Rock and my first home was Sylvan Hills in the suburbs of North Little Rock. Although we moved away when I was a baby, every summer we returned to the hill on Kiehl Avenue and stayed with my grandmother. I surrendered to preach in my first year of college in northwest Louisiana and soon afterwards I was preaching all over in the Ark-La-Tex. However, most of my preaching was in Arkansas. We saw many souls birthed into the Kingdom of God and it was a place where I grew leaps and bounds in my Christian walk. Some of my most memorable places of prayer took place in these hills.

Yesterday I had the privilege to visit my Aunt Florene (93), Uncle Columbus Franklin (will be 90 on Christmas day) and Uncle Benjamin Franklin (the baby at 80). Including my mother and Uncle Benny's twin, Glenna these are the five survivors of the thirteen children. My father and his siblings have all passed. Aunt Florene is in rehab recovering from a severe broken hip. Uncle Red (Columbus) was just released from the hospital having experienced a serious stroke. My Uncle Benny is bent with tumorous cancer. I had a delightful day with all three. I took away more than memories yesterday; I took away three important reminders.

**1. Don't get over righteous roots.**

My grandmother was a preacher's daughter reared up in the old-time religion. She got saved as a teenager at what was intended to be a community dance. My old-time Methodist great-grandmother said to her daughter, "Mary, I have a feeling you are not telling me the truth about where you are going tonight." (Dancing was forbidden in the Sutterfield household.) Great-grandmother continued, "Mary, I am praying God will get 'a hold' of you tonight." Mary proceeded with her plans. I imagine her as the belle of the ball from the acclaim of those who knew her in her youth. My grandma told me, "Son, I was thirsty and went out to the long porch where there was a barrel of cool water. When I dipped the ladle in the barrel, I saw this light approaching me, that kept getting larger, I got scared and I know you may not understand this and I don't rightly think I can explain it, but I knew it was the Lord. I fell upon my knees and began to pray the Lord to have mercy on me and save my soul. When I got off my knees, I commenced to shoutin' and I just couldn't stop! I carried on while on the porch, then I entered back into the dance and kept a-shoutin'. The Lord fell on

that place, son! They finally called the preacher, he preached and over fifty young people got saved that night!” Well, that was my Grandma’s testimony; she never changed and I for one am sticking to it also!

Uncle Benny fought with the marines in the Korean War. He told me yesterday his mama was prone to shout when she got blessed. He knew that when she learned he was coming home from the war, she would greet him with both hands up in the air shouting praises to God. With a twinkle in his eye, he told me he decided to come home in the middle of the night. As he was walking up that road that led to home, here she came anyway (it must be noted: everyone knew my grandmother had such contact with God, that He tipped her off), in the middle of the night -- here she came, arms flailing and shouts that would wake up the dead! Uncle Benny laughed, because he couldn’t fool Mama. Then with tears in his eyes, he recalled, “I still remember how Mama would gather us around her chair and pray with us as children.”

I said, “Uncle Benny, once a Marine, always a Marine, right?” He quickly responded, “Semper Fidelis.” That’s the motto of the Marines, meaning “Always Faithful.” As I left, I took my uncle’s hands and we prayed. He was happy to follow the tradition of our family. As I walked away, I thought to myself, he is still faithful to the righteous roots of our heritage. *“The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places ; yea, I have a goodly heritage”* (Psalm 16:6). *“Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set”* (Proverbs 22:28).

## **2. Make the most of the time we have.**

The next stop on my journey was with World War II veteran, Uncle Red. Only Heaven can reveal the impact of this man on my life. I preached my first unofficial sermon in his presence and then I preached my first revival meeting at Landmark Baptist Church in Newport, Arkansas where he was pastor. In my teens he taught me the value and importance of hard work. Before he was a preacher he was a very successful businessman.

My Uncle Red has been gifted with wisdom. Although recovering from a stroke, he has not lost his “cutting edge.” He looked me square in the eye with that penetrating look, which I have seen so often in my youth when he would “prophesy” over me. He said, “Johnny, think about how you’re going to spend these years left God is going to give you.” He began to talk about things I should do and things I should not do. He talked about not preaching just because it is a big crowd. He said, “Preach to people who want to hear from God, not Johnny Pope.” That is a humbling piece of information, isn’t it?

Recently, I have been meditating on the inspired words of Peter, *“That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God”* (I Peter 4:2). As I looked back into those blue eyes of my uncle, I appreciated what he had to say. I found myself glad that I had certainly made the most of that day! *“The words of a man’s mouth are as deep waters, and the wellspring of wisdom as a flowing brook”* (Proverbs 18:4). I pray God will always help me keep that flowing brook of wisdom coming our way from my loved ones like Uncle Red.

## **3. Don’t forget to say I love you.**

The final stop of the day was with the grand old dame of our family, Aunt Florene, who refers to my ninety-one year old mother as her “baby sister.” As we visited, she began to tell me how often grown middle-aged ladies will find her, just to tell her thanks for winning them to the Lord when she was a faithful Sunday School teacher at Victory Baptist Church in Sherwood, Arkansas. My aunt had only one child and he has passed away. I had the privilege of preaching his funeral. Her husband passed away just a couple of years before her son. She cherishes her two grandsons, her remaining links with her past immediate family. During our entire visit, she kept saying, “Johnny, I love you.” As I left, she said, “Tell you mother I love her and, Johnny, I love you so much.”

As a pastor, one of the most frequently heard statements after someone has died is, “I forgot to tell them I loved them.” My advice is to say I love you to people you love whenever you leave their presence, because you’ll never know when it is the last time. Aunt Florene is just staying ahead of the game! Oh, by the way, whenever she said, “I love you,” I returned the love and said it too. *“As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love”* (John 15:9). *“This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you”* (John 15:12).

-Pastor Pope-

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