

THE LAST LEAF

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." John 15:14

While in Northern Virginia to celebrate the Christmas holiday with our daughter and her family, a winter storm swept through the area bringing sub-freezing temperatures and extremely high gusts of icy wind. Unfortunately, my responsibilities included taking the dog out for his early morning routine. My ordeal ushered in a bout of flu for three or four days, perhaps caused by exposure. As I shivered in the miserable cold, I noticed one single leaf on the tree in the front yard that was desperately hanging on while flapping violently in the wind. I scanned the tree carefully with frost covered eyeballs and confirmed that this was, indeed, **the last leaf**.

Immediately I recalled a story from the collections of William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), pen named, O. Henry. The **Last Leaf** is the story of two young aspiring artists, Johnsy, and Sue, who shared an upstairs apartment in Greenwich Village. The winter was extremely harsh during the December of this story's setting. In addition to the severe weather, there was a flu and pneumonia epidemic that spread throughout the inhabitants of New York City. Johnsy was one of the statistics and became seriously ill. As the doctor left the girl's apartment, he told Sue that Johnsy had pneumonia and there was nothing more he could do. Johnsy stared outside her bedroom window at the adjacent wall that had a vine growing on it with one single leaf. Johnsy told Sue that she was dying and had a premonition that she would die when **the last leaf** fell.

As she pulled down the window shade, Sue told Johnsy to focus on something other than the leaf and try to get a good night's rest. Sue shared Johnsy's prognosis with old man Behrman, who lived in a first-floor apartment and who was also an artist. Old Behrman never fulfilled his dreams of painting a masterpiece and had given up any hope of greatness. That night another cold front swept through the city with an abundance of wind, rain, and ice. On the next morning Sue reluctantly raised the shade at Johnsy's request. The leaf was still there! It stood strangely still in the high wind, and its vibrant green and red colors were inspirational. Johnsy looked at the beautiful leaf, took heart, regained her strength, and began to improve. They found old man Behrman lying on his bed in wet clothes, mud on his shoes, and with green and red paint on his weathered hands and painters attire. He himself had succumbed to pneumonia while giving his life for a friend. Behrman had painted his masterpiece.

There are a couple of connected narratives in the Scriptures that are similar to O. Henry's story. The first is from the Old Testament and found in Numbers 21:8, 9. **"And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."**

The second similitude is found in the New Testament in John 3:14 – 16 and refers to the passage in the book of Numbers. **"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."**

The Lord proceeds in this and the following verses to state the reason why He came into the world, and He illustrates His design, and the efficacy of His coming, by a reference to the case of the brass serpent. The people were bitten by serpents and there was no cure for the bite. Moses was directed to make an IMAGE of the serpent, and place it in sight of the people, that they might look on it and live. This historic and typological event was used by Jesus to illustrate His work. Men are sinners. There is no cure by human means for the maladies of the soul; and as the people who were bitten might look on the image of the serpent and be healed, so may sinners look to the Saviour and be cured of the moral maladies of our fallen nature.

The typology and its fulfillment are of a similar manner and a similar design. He is referring, doubtless, to His own sacrificial and substitutionary death. In each case those who are to be benefited can be aided in no other way. The bite of the serpent was deadly, and could be healed only by looking on the brass serpent; and sin is deadly in its nature, and can be removed only by looking on the cross.

The mode of their being lifted up is similar. The brass serpent was in the sight of the people by being placed on a pole. So Jesus was exalted from the earth, raised on a cross, on Mount Calvary.

The design was similar. The one was to save the life, the other the soul; the one to save from physical death, and the other from eternal death.

The manner of the cure was similar. The people of Israel were to look on the serpent and be healed, and so sinners are to look on the Lord Jesus if there is to be redemption by grace through faith.

Johnsy looked out of her window at the **Last Leaf**, giving hope that she would live. Old man Behrman died in her stead, becoming her substitute by weathering the storm to paint a leaf for her to look upon. There will come a time when we all must look out the window at the **Last Leaf**. Christ died in our stead, as our substitute, satisfying the Holy demands of a Just God. We must look to Him and live. Faith is as simple as lifting your eyes and looking.

"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:2

LOOK AND LIVE

William A. Ogden 1887 (Key of G) (Public Domain)

"I've a message from the Lord, hallelujah! This message unto you I'll give,
'Tis recorded in His word, hallelujah! It is only that you look and live..."

Refrain:

Look and live, my brother, live, Look to Jesus now, and live;
'Tis recorded in His word, hallelujah! It is only that you look and live."

Semper Fi

Chaplain Ron

