

Chapter 22

Off Into the Sunset

Bleak! That was a recurring word. As I was finishing high school to face the world, the Dust Bowl created a bleak landscape and the Great Depression made job prospects equally bleak but there was hope for rains to come and for the economy to improve. Even more frightening was the bleakness of my retirement prospects as I approached the age of sixty and my earning power would be diminishing or lost as I grew older.

Few congregations had any retirement plan for their preachers. Old preachers never die; they just move away. Having lived in the church-supplied parsonage which they had actually helped to pay for, few would have a house into which to retire. That is one reason so many preachers left the pulpit by middle age. The support of a mediocre preacher was mediocre so that, if his wife did not work, it was impossible to accumulate a retirement fund. From our earliest life together Lea had often sung, "We'll build a little nest away out in the West and let the rest of the world go by," but as we faced the sunset in the west of life we did not have so much as a nest egg for that little nest which should have already been built.

You cannot see the grinding of the gizzard stones in a chicken but you can be assured of their workings by watching the development of the chicken. The grindings of God's grit in our lives are seen in the outcome.

After Lea's father had a severe stroke, we brought her parents under our care putting them in a nursing home and then we kept her mother in our home for seven years after he died. I was drawing Social Security while Mira was in college. Due to her industry and our help, she left no unpaid bills at school. Then she married relieving financial dependence on us.

Throughout the years I had paid into Social Security as a self-employed person with nothing matched by the church. That, however, would hardly provide rental on a place to live. I have already related how the church in New Braunfels solved our residential problem by giving us a deed of gift on the parsonage. The clouds were lifting dramatically! I had contracted to do the janitorial work for the church. I filled the pulpit in Seguin for a while. You tax payers helped some through a government farm program paying me \$40.00 per acre per year to let my twenty acres of farmland go back to nature.

Along with all this I began selling my books after the second printing of *Free In Christ*. It was not a gold mine but it helped significantly in building some financial security. Now, however, most all *Free In Christ* are printed and distributed in other countries and I receive no income from them. I have kept my prices low in order to help distribution. On a small order, by the time I count the printing cost, the mailer, the postage, and a six-mile round trip to the post office, I may not break even. If I had to hire help for that little chore, I would lose money. But I am thankful for the added income and more especially for the response that I get from readers.

When Lea began to draw Social Security, we gave up the janitorial work. To no longer look to the church for a check for any reason gave us a final sense of freedom. Years earlier we had given ourselves a raise by paying cash for everything we bought. For the first time in our married life, we had no financial worries! I could take Lea out to eat when she wanted – a thing we always had to be stingy about before. We could have bought a new car or done some traveling but we no longer felt the need for toys and efforts of escape. One time I pointed to the stacks of books lining the wall of our garage and proposed that if we sold all those books we could buy a new Lincoln Continental.

Lea's immediate reply was, "I had rather have the books." That was a shared feeling for it had become a most rewarding way of life for us. It was more a ministry than a business. Despite Lea's continued health problems, this was a peaceful and happy time that the two of us enjoyed together.

Paul and Mira had moved to Palo Alto, California where he had a job with Litton. We made two trips by car to visit them in California and one trip to Salt Lake City where Paul and Mira both took some courses at the university. Tom was born in Palo Alto. Then they moved to Portland for Paul to work on his doctorate. Lacking only his thesis, he got a summer job with Intel. Intel quickly recognized his brilliance and integrity and began advancing him so that he never wrote his thesis.

In the meantime, Lea's health problems became more acute. The cardiologist thought her problem was pressure in the chest cavity around her heart. While she awaited surgery in the hospital, Mira called on December 21, 1992 to announce the safe arrival of Joseph Cecil Prince whom she was holding in her arms for the first time. Sol's family came for the surgery. Lea came through the surgery well enough, it seemed, but they had found nothing wrong after that drastic operation. So she still had her problem. Sol's family went back to Louisiana.

Lea's system began shutting down with retention of fluid. The doctor permitted her to munch on crushed ice which she craved even while her body began to swell. There is plenty of reason to question the skill of the doctor in this whole situation but bringing suit against him would not remedy anything any more than one of you readers bringing suit against me for my mistakenly giving you spiritual misdirection.

Her condition became critical with her body greatly distended. Two doctors conferred in the hall that Christmas Eve and then motioned for me to join them. They suggested that I call family or friends to come and be with me because Lea might not live through the night. Sol's family could not have come in time and I did not want to disturb family gatherings of my friends for it was Christmas Eve. I felt that I could handle the situation alone. The doctor gave desperate dosages of heart stimulant and diuretics. Through the night she would drift in and out of consciousness with low moans of "Oh, Cecil" as I stood by in helplessness trying to comfort her. I had seen similar scenes experienced by other families but now I was facing the real facts of life with many thoughts and prayers. By morning Lea was showing some improvement and it continued. In about three days she had lost twenty-eight pounds of fluid.

As weeks passed she became strong enough that we flew to Portland to see Joey and the family. Paul's work with Intel was advancing so that they thought of Tigard as being a more permanent residence. So Paul and Mira proposed that we move there "so we can be family," as Mira put it tactfully.

We were settled in New Braunfels for the duration, we thought. There was no more desirable place we would have chosen to live. After returning home and pondering the matter, however, we realized that we would have been doing our children a disfavor by living so far from them when disabilities would overtake either or both of us. They could not leave jobs and families to take care of us. We knew that Mira's loving concern included the desire that we be close as a family and also near enough that they could attend to our needs. Who could deserve such loving children? And who could refuse such a sensible and unselfish offer. So we agreed. In a short time we would see the positive effect of the grinding in our gizzards.

We had worked with the church in New Braunfels for ten years and then remained for another eleven years. As the three preachers succeeding me served, I became one of those pew warmers! I was most pleased to stay out of the way and let others bear the responsibilities – and they were equally pleased! I was happily writing, packaging and

mailing books, and responding to correspondence – things I could do at home while attending to Lea's needs also.

Mira took the lead in searching for a house for us. She found a good three bedroom, two bath house that needed much refurbishing. I readily agreed to help with that in order to save lots of money. I had just completed repainting our house both inside and outside. In turning it back to the church, it was appraised \$20,000 higher than when we received it. The church paid us the difference which we gave Paul and Mira to use as down payment on the one being bought. So very quickly, as a phantom out of nowhere, we had our "little nest away out in the West!"

I don't see how any place could rival the state of Oregon and the city of Portland for their lush scenic beauty and cleanliness. We made only short excursions exploring the area, however, due to Lea's fragility. I had a great garden in Texas but it could not compare with the fruitful and easy working soil in Tigard. At that late stage in our lives we were at last able to enjoy an innovative congregation in Beaverton that was freed from most of our traditional hang-ups. Tim Woodroof, who served the group, was a keynote speaker for many special gatherings across the country – and he produced that quality of lessons each Sunday. Mira entered into their work programs and Paul soon led the special singing group. I spoke to the church two times in the ten years there.

In our second year in Oregon in 1996 Lea had a slight stroke. She quickly regained most physical losses but less evident effects on spatial perceptions lingered. She had difficulty in following procedures like those in cooking, so I took over that and all housework completely. She had difficulty folding anything and in remembering what day it was – and I was not much better at that myself. A good result was that she had no more headaches as had plagued her all her life. She was the right-brained one and I was the left-brained one. After her stroke in her right brain she never cried again – even when she had much to be emotional about.

Such an emotional time came on July 20, 1997 when I had been invited to speak at the services at Westside in Beaverton. All of Sol's family came for the occasion. After the usual time of singing and the Communion, Ron Stump, the family life minister, got up to introduce me -- I thought! He introduced a surprise for Lea and me. The remainder of the service was given to honoring the two of us for our life's work! Daniel lovingly reviewed our life of ministry. Sol, with humor and emotion, told of our family life with touching tributes to his mother and me. Robert Rowland, also with fun and feeling, paid high honors to us. Ron announced that a scholarship had been established with Cascade College by the congregation in our honor and also presented us with a framed certificate of recognition by the congregation. A late-comer among the 400 present might have thought he got in on our funerals! Lea and I had never received such expressions of love from a congregation before. And I am willing to let that stand as my memorial when I leave this earthly scene.

We lived more than ten miles from the church and Paul's work, and the Princes decided to remedy that. They bought an extra-large house across the street from the Beaverton building and within a mile of Paul's work. It had a large adjoining "mother-in-law apartment" which opened into the kitchen area of the main house. That was ideal for our situation. We still lived independently but were more like a family.

In spite of Lea's constant and varied health problems, we enjoyed some good times there. Any time we were out of the house I steadied Lea to prevent her falling – somewhat like the blind leading the blind. She enjoyed giving hugs to the folks at church. Being unable to keep her hair well, she began to wear hats. When we went to Target or such stores she always looked at their perky cheap hats and she accumulated about fifteen of them. So she gained identity by those hats. My hair turned white many

years ago but, rather than hers turning white, it became what I termed “mousy gray” and she never used coloring.

By our eighth year in Oregon Lea’s health went on a steady decline with visits with many different kinds of doctors, emergency room visits, and hospital stays. She entered the hospital on May 6, 2003 due to an evident mini-stroke. (On May 5 my brother, George, died in Texas.) I brought her back home May 11 and with my help she walked into the house. Two hours later she began to have slight seizures caused by more mini-strokes leaving her left side paralyzed. This left her unable to turn in bed or to sit up, with difficulty in swallowing, with little communication, and lack of clarity. The doctors saw no need for taking her back to the hospital. I had long prayed that God would spare me to take care of her to the end. Mira and I agreed to keep her at home. We had some visits by nurses in the next two weeks, but Mira and I attended to her needs. I could not have done it without Mira. The end seemed very near in the evening of Sunday, May 25. At last her beautiful complexion had turned ashen. She seldom showed signs of being conscious. I kept moisturizing her mouth as her breath grew shorter.

Long ago I had learned that persons in a coma might still hear and be affected by it. As she stirred a bit, I bent close and asked, “Do you think God will let us be together again?” She grunted faintly, “Uh-huh”, puckered her lips, tried to raise her head, and gave me a passionate kiss! A few minutes later I called Paul and Mira and we held her hands and assured her that she could let go for God was with her. She left peacefully in the same confidence with which she had lived.

We had agreed on cremation, and Mira had previously checked in with people who had been recommended. She called them to come and while awaiting their arrival we tried to indelibly imprint that last image of her in our minds. As the very kind husband and wife team took her earthly form away we trusted that God, whose Spirit had indwelled her, had already endowed her spirit with immortality. She was “beyond the sunset’s radiant glow” that we had sung about.

We had not called friends to be with us. This was a loving sharing with family, an intimate bonding with treasured memories.

To enable friends to better attend, we waited until Saturday afternoon to conduct a memorial service for her. Paul and Ryan led us in songs. Daniel recalled happy memories of his grandmother – even how good she always smelled. A friend, Andrea Henderson, sang one of Lea’s favorite songs, “*His Eye Is On The Sparrow.*” Fulfilling Lea’s request, Ron Stump read my “*Riding In The Front Seat*” tribute. Sol gave a loving tribute to his mother recalling many happy things that brought laughter in the midst of our tears. In going through memorabilia Sol had found a valentine she had made for me many years ago. On the outside it read, “You are the answer to my prayers.” On the inside it continued, “You were not what I was praying for but you were the answer I got!” In a time of informality various friends expressed feelings about Lea.

It was October before we gathered at the family plots in the cemetery in Rochester to bury here cremains. With not even a caretaker there, the family dug the burying place in the plot next to my father. Lea always loved and teased him. After burying her ashes the family offered impromptu comments, songs, scripture quotations, and prayers. Again, it was a family experience to live in our memories. Even though she is gone into the sunset of the west beyond our sight, God can use her influence through succeeding generations.

When I returned to the site months later, a modest granite double marker had been erected bearing her and my names and those of Sol and Mira with two dates under her name and one under mine – the other date to be engraved soon. Our vows were not just

“till death do us part” fifty-seven years later but also “till death brings us together again” for eternity.

In his work with Intel Paul had come to Round Rock in the Austin area quite often to coordinate projects with Dell. He saw a better opportunity with Dell and decided it was worth becoming a Texan. In June 2004 the family became happily situated here – in spite of my tagging along with them. They let me share their luxurious house. Mira and I are pleased to be back in our home state and to let Tom and Joey become Texans.

As the shadows lengthen behind me, the glow in the west grows brighter. []

(Cecil Hook; June 2006)