

# Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

*Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

Pastor Matt Cadora

Week of September 13, 2009

## *Memorial Service for Earl Witmer*

In last week's edition of Meditations of the Heart, I told you about my friend, Earl Witmer, whose memorial service I was asked to speak at this past Friday in Atlanta. The service was truly the celebration of someone who glorified God all of his life. It was the way a person's life should be celebrated. In lieu of my normal practice of following up a sermon, I thought I would give you an insight on Earl's life and how God used him. Below are my words at his service last Friday.

In the spring of 1996, Earl came up to me one Sunday morning and asked me if I wanted to go with him to the Braves game that afternoon. I readily said yes and we got down to the old Atlanta Stadium shortly after the customary Sunday afternoon start time of 1:05 PM. At the end of nine innings, the game was tied. Around here, they call that "free baseball". At the end of 10 innings the game was tied. And the 11<sup>th</sup>. And the 12<sup>th</sup>. The Braves finally lost in the 15<sup>th</sup> inning and, unless I am mistaken, Earl and I left the stadium around 6:00 o'clock that evening, nearly five hours after we had arrived. At no time during that game do I ever recall Earl wanting to leave before the game was over, either. Hold that thought. I'll come back to it.

The last time I spoke with Earl Witmer was three weeks ago. We talked about a number of things including the pastoral ministry that he had been working with here at Intown and what he hoped to see develop here in that regard. There's no way I really could have known that it would be the last time I would speak with Earl, but as I've thought back on that conversation, I realize that there were things I should have picked up on. He DID talk about his health and said that he didn't have a lot of energy, but what he was really implying was that his work of serving the Lord was done here on this earth. He didn't say it with any sense of resignation or despair or even sadness; it was more matter of fact. I should have caught that because Earl was always passionate about serving God in any way that God put before him. Don't get me wrong. In his heart, Earl was no less passionate about serving the Lord three weeks ago than he had ever been – but, in his body, he knew he had little strength left with which to serve and he was content with God's hand upon his life, however few his days on this earth might be.

Now I began with the story of that extra inning baseball game because Earl's life was somewhat like that 15-inning game. Ten years ago, Earl suffered a heart attack. Many people feared that he would not survive that ordeal. But to say that Earl SURVIVED that heart attack would be a significant understatement. He recovered and had no intention of sitting on the bench when it came to honoring God with his life. In fact, during the aforementioned phone conversation that I recently had with Earl, I found myself thinking about those 10 "extra inning" years that we all had with Earl – 10 years that were a great gift from God to all of us who knew him. Many of you here were cared for by Earl in a myriad of ways in those extra inning years of his life.

Now, I could tell you of Earl's love for the Lord. I could tell you of Earl's concern, as an elder, for the flock of the congregation here at Intown (and I learned much from him in that regard). I could tell you of Earl's heart for the gospel of Christ to spread in his own community and around the world. But I'm just going to briefly tell you about one person because it was always in the lives of individual people where Earl left his greatest impact and this person was no exception. His name was Bill Barton.

Hardly any of you here knew or even knew about Bill Barton and Earl's friendship with Bill, but nine years ago - YES, less than a year AFTER Earl's heart attack, Earl reached out to Bill at the VA Hospital. Bill had a terminal illness and someone asked Earl if he would go visit Bill. Bill Barton was a man in need of God and in need of a friend and Earl was a truly a gift from God to Bill. Eventually, Earl brought me along and we would visit Bill together. Perhaps the best way to describe what was going on in Bill's life would be to refer to the 17<sup>th</sup> French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, who said something that applies to every human being: "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus." Bill Barton was realizing how much he needed God and, at just the right time, God brought Earl into Bill's life. Earl had a gentle but very passionate way of bringing people close to God - of pointing people to the His Redeemer, Jesus Christ. And so it was, through Earl's friendship with this very sick man, that Bill Barton placed his faith in Christ a month or two before he breathed his last.

No matter where a person was in life, whether they were considering the Gospel of Jesus Christ or whether a person had, for many years, looked to Christ as their only hope in life and in death, if you knew Earl, you had someone in your life who was devoted to being a vivid encouragement for you to grow close to God.

It's with that that in mind that I want to close with a passage of Scripture that describes Earl. The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Hebrews is described as the Hall of Faith. It is a listing of people in the Old Testament who had had sought to trust God, even amidst great trials and testing. The 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews makes a reference to those saints of old and follows with an encouragement to us: **1Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.**

In his life on earth, Earl Witmer cheered those around him on to a deeper trust and hope in God, but now, Earl taken his place in that great cloud of witnesses and he is now cheering you on from that vantage point. When Earl and I were at that 15-inning Braves game, he stayed to cheer the Braves on for every pitch and he wasn't ready to go home until the game was over. In the last month or so, Earl reached the point where he was ready to go home. And so the Lord brought him home. And now he is among the saints of old as well as the saints of recent days (people like Bill Barton), and Earl is pulling for you and me to cling tightly to Christ Jesus as our only hope in life and in death.

(For more reading on Earl's life, check out the PCA's By Faith online article about his life: <http://byfaithonline.com/page/pca-news/a-heart-of-mission-and-care-remembering-earl-witmer> )

