

## **Robert E. Lee is Dead!**

I am writing these words from Columbus, Mississippi. Today, I'll be preaching for Pastor Jimmy Banks, the great, great, great, great grandson of the famed southern general, Robert Edward Lee. Whenever we are together, naturally our conversation gravitates toward the old south and General Lee. The most recent biographer of Lee is Roy Blount. Although Mr. Blount's politics would be very different from ours, he made a true statement about boys reared under the southern influence. Blount said every boy from the south has to deal with Robert E. Lee. When we grew up, his name was mentioned with the highest respect and honor. We were taught to be brave like General Lee, be loyal like General Lee and be virtuous like General Lee. In every family reunion at Big Sandy, Hawkins, Gladewater or Gilmer, Texas, the subject of General Lee would eventually come up. The older men would speak in hushed tones, the younger would sidle up a little closer. In our family the War Between the States was not fought 140 years ago - it was fought yesterday. The old timers would go into detail narrating the story of our ancestors' who fought in gray; they would tell of my great-grandfather returning from the war with wounds and scars he took to the grave. They would tell of one sister and brother of my grandmother who died on the banks of the Colorado, outside of Austin where they settled after the war. The death of this boy and girl were the results of the reconstruction. Hope would buoy as the old men told of General Lee. Although some of what we know about the general would be categorized as legend, there is no mistaking his life was an inspiration to the sons of the defunct Confederacy.

Four hours ago, my friend and direct descendant of General Lee just walked into my room and said, "I called my daddy with some of our questions and he told me Robert E. Lee IV had died." Then Jimmy informed me there are no more Robert E. Lees in the direct male line, because R. E. Lee IV had only two daughters. I know it may sound crazy to those of you who are not into this sort of thing, but there was a sadness that came over me, followed by gladness. A sadness because the regal line had been interrupted, a gladness because among the boys of our culture, Robert E. Lee will never die. For us, he is in the hurrahs at our ball games in an almost revived "rebel yell." He is in the accent of some of our leading generals from Longstreet to Tommy Franks. He is in the perfumed air provided by the sweet magnolia tree; he is in the flavor of my mother's chicken-n-dumplings. He is our proverbial knight in shining armor that rides in our dreams of youth. He is the old soldier that never fades from our middle-aged memory.

Robert E. Lee is dead, but not his principles. Allow me to list four important qualities that would still be inspiring for youngsters to emulate.

### **(1) He recovered a good name.**

*"A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold"* (Proverbs 22:1). Lighthorse Harry Lee, the father of R. E. Lee was one of the finest officers that George Washington had under his command; his bravery was amazing. It was Lighthorse Harry who originally said of Washington, "He was first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." The love of the Lee family to the Washingtons was ever in the inheritance. So much so, that young Robert Edward was smitten with the daughter of Washington's step-son. He eventually married young Mary Custis.

As illustrious as the name of Lee had become, after the Revolutionary War, Lighthorse Harry managed to bring it down with his lack of personal and temperate discipline. He squandered the family livelihood and even served time for being a debtor. By the time R. E. Lee wanted to further his education, his options were limited due to his father's disgraceful lifestyle. Yet in charity, officials of the government and West Point, remembering what his father had at one time done for their country, allowed young Lee to become a cadet at the national military academy. Single-handedly, Lee brought their formerly good name, back into good standing through discipline, moral action, Christian principle, and just generally doing his best. Lee set an example that one can recover great losses, no matter how

severe. *"And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you"* (Joel 2:25).

## **(2) He saved a city.**

It was not Alexandria, Richmond, or Petersburg, towns he is still associated with; it was St. Louis. True to his training as an engineer at West Point, he was assigned as a young man to go to St. Louis and see what (if anything) could be done to save the eroding town of St. Louis which little by little was being washed away by the mighty Mississippi River. Young Lee studied, drew up then executed an ingenious plan for routing the water away by irrigation and then forming an island relief that, history has told us, saved the city of St. Louis. In his youth he is a reminder, *"Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity"* (I Timothy 4:12). You are never too young to do the right thing, the best thing that should be done!

## **(3) It is at the altar of God irreconcilable differences are settled.**

It was time for the observation of The Lord's Supper at a church many years ago in Virginia. It had not been long since the war that tore our country in half had ended. The first partaker of the Lord's Supper approached the altar. He kneeled to receive the elements. He was a black man and former slave. An uncomfortable quietness filled the church and no one moved. This had not been seen before. No one moved until, from near the front a white haired, white bearded old gentleman rose from his seat, walked to the altar and knelt in equanimity next to the old black man. After this striking action, communion started and the church emptied their pews to join the black and white men at the altar. The older white gentleman of whom I speak was also a man who before the war began had granted his inherited their freedom. He was not one who could own another man. Yet he was the same general who spent the night pacing when offered the head of the entire Union Army and answered the next morning with, "I cannot raise my sword against my native Virginia."

After the war, Lee was asked again and again to stand against or criticize the United States of America, he would not do it. As president of Washington College, later named Washington/Lee College, he constantly pushed for differences to be settled. One day a lady told him she could not forget the harm the north had done to her family, pointing out the tree where atrocities had been committed that cut deep into her heart. She said, "General Lee, every time I look at that tree, I think of the unkind things the Union has done to me and my family, what, Sir, am I to do?" He simply replied, "Cut the tree down, ma'am." *"Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven"* (Matthew 18:21, 22).

## **(4) He died doing good.**

On the last day of his conscious life, Lee had traveled to a church that had just been built and now pastored by one of his former junior officers. It was dedication day for the new church building and it was built on land that was donated by Lee. He made a special effort to be there. It was Sunday afternoon and he and his wife had just settled down to eat their dinner. Lee led the family in grace then he collapsed at the table after thanking God humbly for their food. He soon afterwards died pleasantly in bed having spoken his final words, "Strike the tent." This was a military term used for breaking camp before moving on. Well, the old general moved on to "Higher Ground." He died as he lived - doing what he believed was the right thing.

May we emulate the highest calling of all, i.e., to be like our Savior of whom the Bible records, *"...went about doing good..."* (Acts 10:38). Having the ability to do well is inextricably linked with relationship with Jesus! Even the Old General would tell you, if he were here to speak, if there was any goodness in him, it came from Jesus.

- Pastor Pope -

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