



WE WERE WELL ON OUR WAY. The snow was gone, temperatures were rising, the official first day of spring was within arm's reach. Garden diagrams were drawn up and seeds organized. The snow fences had been taken down, rolled up, and stored in the barn. Rakes and spades and hoes were being inventoried, the garden tiller gassed up for service.

Then, in the evening, in the earliest hours of spring, the snow began to fall. Great wet flakes drifted down and pasted themselves against house and trees. A ponderous storm front moving out of Nebraska had crossed the Iowa border and made its way into the center of the state. Soon everything outside was coated with a shallow layer of white frosting. And the snow increased.

A World Turned Pretty

While it is true that we were ready for spring, the land around us did not yet *look* like spring. It had not yet arrived. All was still painted in drab, muted browns. The flower gardens were slathered in grayish, winter-flattened weeds, the lawn was thatched in the tan monotony of last year's grass. The oak trees were still naked, with black, barren fingers reaching toward a clear sky. After this season's mild winter, not only did everything look dead and dying, but on and beneath the

surface, things were bone dry. Indeed, after a number of grass fires in the area, a burn ban was in effect.

But it snowed all night and into the next day. We awoke the next morning to a wonderland world blanketed in pillowy white—everything draped in six inches of cold, wet snow.

Any thoughts of basking in the greening warmth of early spring were immediately forgotten as we gazed out across the cottony beauty of a pristine country landscape. Yesterday's gray ugliness was now magically gone, and in its place a smooth, glittering blanket of clean white. The naked branches of the oak trees, as well as the still-green branches of the conifers, were now slathered with frosting. Birds who yesterday had been blithely apathetic about their next meal now frantically jockeyed for access to the bird feeder.

Overnight the world had turned pretty—as if winter had parted the drawn curtains, peeked out, and with an amused twinkle said, "I'm still here."

Foretaste of Glory Divine

"But who am I and who are my people that we should be able to offer as generously as this? For all things come from You, and from Your hand we have given You. For we are sojourn-

ers before You, and tenants, as all our fathers were; our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no hope.”

1 Chronicles 29:14-15

There is an odd paradox at work in this world. The unbeliever, whose end is black death and an eternity isolated from God, lives happy as a clam in a fallen world. The one who has nothing whatsoever to live for is yet content with things as they are. On the other hand, the believer, whose end is light and life in close fellowship with God, lives unhappily in the same world. The one who has everything to live for is content with nothing in a fallen world.

No, this doesn't mean that the Christian is perpetually morose, his chin dragging on the ground. Indeed, the active, serving believer can be the most fulfilled individual in the room. But that same person has the Spirit living within—the Spirit who informs him that he now dwells in a strange and alien land, a land no longer his home. And that is how it can feel; like a homesick traveler stranded in an unfriendly, inhospitable foreign land, the believer knows he is not where he belongs—and not where he would rather be.

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:13-16

The Christian, considering his future, should be the happiest person around, but, considering his present environment, is often the most miserable—if not on the surface, at least deep in his heart. For the Christian has had a taste of that which can be—a “foretaste of glory divine”—and thus pines for the perfection he knows exists somewhere other than where he now stands. Rewarding, even joy-filled work on the horizontal plane cannot remove the Christian's longing for the vertical.

Cleansing Grace

This world can indeed be a grim prospect for the believer, but there is beauty lying just outside the senses. There is beauty and grace waiting

just beyond what we can see and touch. For while we may dwell in an inhospitable land, the Lord has not abandoned us to it; while we may dwell in the brown and dull gray of a dying winter, the Lord's clean blanket of grace is always within reach of our soul.

There is a cleansing to God's grace. Before anything else is the gracious cleansing of our sins from Christ's blood. At the cross we permanently, irrevocably receive what king David had to request repeatedly.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.
Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,
And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.
Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Psalms 51:5-7

*O! tell me, Thou life and delight of my soul,
Where the flock of Thy pastures are feeding;
I seek Thy protection, I need Thy control,
I would go where my Shepherd is leading.*

*O! tell me the place where Thy flocks are at rest,
Where the noontide will find them reposing?
The tempest now rages, my soul is distress'd,
And the pathway of peace I am losing.*

*O! why should I stray with the flocks of Thy foes,
Mid the desert where now they are roving,
Where hunger and thirst, where affliction and woes,
And temptations their ruin are proving!*

*O! when shall my foes and my wandering cease?
And the follies that fill me with weeping!
Thou Shepherd of Israel, restore me that peace
Thou dost give to the flock Thou art keeping.*

*A voice from the Shepherd now bids thee return
By the way where the footprints are lying:
No longer to wander, no longer to mourn;
O fair one, now homeward be flying!*

Thomas Hastings

Like the cleansing blanket of snow falling upon dead and dirty weeds, our sins are covered by the redemptive blood of Christ. Once is sufficient; it need never be sought again. But as the believer proceeds through his journey in mortal flesh, inevitably he will become soiled by the climate of sin in which he must dwell. Both from without and within, he suffers from living where not everyone knows and belongs to his Savior. So it becomes necessary to seek out and find relief.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Matthew 11:28-30 *The Message*

Even in those hard moments when we feel the most alienated from Him by our dead and dying environment, God patiently invites us, saying, “Call upon Me, and I can make all things white again. I can cover your transgressions with the blood of My Son, and I can soothe your aching soul with the balm of my daily, blanketing grace. Walk with Me. Learn from Me. I am still here.” 