Living in Tree Shadows

It all started early one morning with the distant clatter of heavy machinery. Something ominous was happening beyond the wooded ridge paralleling the road where I live. As the noise increased, some of us in the neighborhood sent up drones to peer over our cherished wall of Douglas fir along the ridge. The rumors we had heard were confirmed. Our drone photos revealed a huge expanse of clear-cut land dotted with logging equipment, piles of debris and stacks of fresh-cut timber. We later found out it was about 140 acres.

Suddenly, what had been a stately rampart of forest along our ridge was now punctuated by gaps of daylight. Neighborhood dogs were vexed with the continual buzz of logging machines and the crack and thunder of falling trees. How would this end? Surely they would stop at the top of the ridge.

But no—they continued their march over the top and down our side of the ridge. When it became too steep for machines, chainsaw-wielding loggers advanced on foot all the way to their property line on the slope above our homes. It seemed like our forest had been stolen.

Alarmed neighbors met and decided to do something—but what? We discovered that permits had been filed and environmental rules were being followed. No one was stealing anything. The land owners were simply harvesting their trees. The area is zoned for forest and is already being replanted.

Then, looking out my living room windows, I realized three things:

1) all my trees were still intact. My half-acre of woods still stretched up the hill, plus more forest along a bordering (currently unused) railroad right of way.

2) I could now see the setting sun illuminating the top of the formerly wooded ridge with a yellow glow.

3) My home was filled with a lot more daylight. In the winter, I'll actually see sunlight, previously blocked by the trees on the ridge. Maybe this wasn't such a disaster after all. The neighbors mostly concurred. We all lived happily ever after.

I have friends who are believers, but who seem to live in a shadow of spiritual trees rooted in obsolete religious ideas—a problem I recognize all too well. I know—they believe their trees are beautiful, offering shade, solitude and safety—dogmatic anchors in unanchored times. In reality, those trees are not only blocking my friends' outlook, but blocking the sunlight of freedom in Christ—the great vista of genuine faith. But how can a person know if they're living in a spiritual shadow? They can't see the problem in the dark.

With physical trees, you need to keep an eye on them every season. Are they healthy? Do they need pruning? Are they leaning? Should they come down? Many trees are just fine. But a time comes for some to be harvested. Still others are unhealthy or dangerous. When storms come they may fall and do serious damage. Ironically, as I was writing this paragraph, I noticed a 100-foot-plus Douglas fir in front of my home. It has always leaned a little, but suddenly its needles are brown and dying. The tree is dangerous, and its time has come.

What will I do? I'll talk with my community of friends and neighbors. They'll recommend a skilled professional who knows how to drop the ailing tree so it doesn't crush my house. Sure, there'll be costs and risks, but that's how we'll take care of the problem.

Likewise, spiritual trees require vigilance to determine what might be blocking the full light of the gospel or what might even be dangerous. Is it time for those spiritual trees to be dropped and cut up for firewood?

How will you know? By prayer of course, by serious reading and by discussion with wise friends and qualified counsellors—a community of believers. And even then, there will be costs and risks. Alterations to surroundings, whether physical or spiritual, can be disturbing—but in the end (if they are managed wisely) they may bring light and panoramas we never imagined possible! ❑

—Monte Wolverton