

## *Whited Sepulchers*

In the Midwest, spring storms sweep through small communities often leaving destruction in their wake.<sup>1</sup> Our family felt the full force of such an event while we were living in Illinois. One morning the town's emergency siren sounded, alerting citizens of the severe weather conditions. I rushed Zane and Karen, my two youngest children, to the lowest level of my home to seek shelter as torrential rain, hail, and damaging winds blasted over businesses and residences alike. When the storm subsided, we ventured upstairs and outside to survey the scene. Trees littered the ground, and leaves, stripped from branches, were plastered to the siding of our home. Many of the screens on our windows were ripped open and we found hail on the inside of window ledges.

Shortly thereafter, panicky parents converged on schools to pick up their children. Frantic mothers descended *en masse* and found their students huddled in hallways because classrooms were full of shattered glass from broken windows. I was among this anxious group.

After all my children were safely stowed in our car, instead of going straight home, we decided to discover what damage had been done and began to drive around town. Although debris littered lawns and roads everywhere, the streets were mostly passable.

As we neared the courthouse, we saw that a stately tree lay like a fallen friend in the middle of the lawn. It had

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<sup>1</sup> See original publication: Gail H. Johnsen. "A Fallen Tree and a Whited Sepulcher," *Deseret News*, April 11, 2011.

a massive trunk and must have stood there for many years providing summer shade and beauty to the area. We knew the winds alone could not have produced these results, so we clamored out of our car to get a closer look.

What we found startled all of us. The inside of the tree was completely hollow. What had occurred? Perhaps termites had gradually gobbled up the interior over the years. Or was it some kind of beetle or an undetected tree disease? We didn't know.

While the tree looked impressive on the outside, it could not withstand the powerful storm. It reminded me of a moment in the Savior's life when he denounced those who appear to be one thing, but were really something else. He said, "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees and hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead man's bones and of all uncleanness" (Matt 23:27).

In his talk, "The Practice of Truth," Bishop J. Richard Clark reminds us, "Our souls must be more than 'whited sepulchers' which appear praiseworthy but inside are hollow chambers bereft of goodness. We must not only seem but also be what God would expect of His sons and daughters."<sup>2</sup>

When the twin tempests of trial and temptation twirl around us, we can be assured that we will stand "steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works"<sup>3</sup> as we keep clean the inner vessel by obeying the commandments and following the brethren.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Clarke, "The Practice of Truth," *Ensign*, May 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Mosiah 5:15

