

# To Those Who Have Gone Before Us

by J.K. McKee posted 01 September, 2007 www.tnnonline.net

The month of August is never an easy time for people in ministry. Statistically speaking, this is the time when the least number of people attend church or synagogue. It's hot outside, and you wonder when things are going to cool down. Tithing and donations are down, and finances can be tighter than usual. Sometimes, you wonder if the faithful have abandoned their support of your efforts and whether or not you are appreciated. *On top of all of this*, the month of August since 1992 has been a very hard time for the McKee family, especially as we recall memories of the past and some of the difficult things that brought us to where we are today.

It was during the month of August in 1992 that my father, Kimball McKee, was losing his battle with malignant melanoma. He had been accepted to a cancer treatment center in Frederick, Maryland, and was doing quite well with his medication. But there were side effects. While tumors were being killed throughout his body, the principal side effect of his treatment was a low blood platelet count. This meant that the most miniscule cut or bleeding could cause major problems.

At the time, my sister Jane and I were staying with my grandmother in Annapolis, Maryland, and we were able to make frequent visits to see my parents and our infant sister Maggie. On August 16, 1992 we had our last family outing together—my parents' seventeenth wedding anniversary. We all drove to Gettysburg to survey the battlefield and take in some history. As we drove through the battlefield and looked at the monuments to the fallen, I remember my father looking very closely at the monuments for the fallen from Pennsylvania, where my father's family had originally emigrated to from Scotland and Northern Ireland in 1775. I remember him looking for anything that might have had the name "McKee" on it, and him being very solemn with what he observed.

The last weekend of August 1992 we had to return home to Northern Kentucky. School was about to start, and life was going to have to return to some normality. My father stayed on in Frederick a few extra days. He came home the last week, and my grandmother also visited to handle some of the household responsibilities, as in a short time he would return to Frederick with my mother for more treatments. But that did not happen. I remember on that Sunday morning being told by my grandmother that my father went to the hospital in the middle of the night complaining that he had a massive headache.

When we went to the hospital later that Sunday afternoon, he was being taken into ICU in a coma. Five cancerous lesions had been discovered on his brain stem and were massively bleeding. Little did I know this, but my mother was already writing his obituary on a legal pad. After two days of being on a respirator, my father was declared brain dead and we released him from the machines. September 1, 1992 was a day none of us can ever forget.

We all went to Linneman's Funeral Home and made preparations. You cannot imagine what it is like for an eleven and nine year old to accompany their mother with the clothes that their father's lifeless corpse will wear. Most of you cannot imagine what it is like to have to pick out a casket, or go to the family plot and decide if a loved one is to be buried next to his father or mother.

Every year at this time, these memories resurface as though they happened yesterday. Fifteen years and running, and I still do not have complete and total closure regarding the death of my father. I still wonder some days: "What would Kim McKee think about this? How would he handle this situation? Would he approve of me being a teacher in Messianic ministry?"

Death is undeniably one of the most difficult subjects that anyone has to contemplate. No one—Christian *or* Messianic—is innocent of not avoiding the subject. We do not like to think about not only the question of "What if I die?" but also "What happens if I die?" This pertains to not only what happens to the person who dies, but also to the survivors who are left behind. While as Believers we have a hope of seeing our Lord in Heaven in all His glory, and of the future resurrection of our physical bodies—it is still not easy to think about.<sup>1</sup> Whenever someone passes

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that I am fully aware that there is a segment of Messianic Believers who deny the reality of an afterlife, and instead advocate a doctrine known as "soul sleep," where the dead remain only interred until the

away, things change.

Even though the subject of death is present all throughout the Scriptures, we still often do not know how to deal with it. Some people react to the death of a loved one with extreme sorrow, others react with extreme anger, and still others react with complete denial. The Disciples themselves did not react positively when Yeshua told them that He would have to suffer and die, and many of them denied what He said:

“And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him” (Mark 8:31-32).

While our faith is firmly based upon the resurrection of Yeshua (Acts 4:10; Romans 6:9; 8:34; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Ephesians 1:20), in order for Yeshua to have resurrected, death must still be considered as a factor. Even the Disciples themselves largely did not know how to handle their Teacher telling them that He had to die. Death forms a substantial part of who we are as human beings, because death—no different than work, worship, relationships with others, sexuality, and contributing to society—is a part of living.

For the past fourteen years until 2006, the month of August has always stirred up thoughts of my late father. September 1 has always been a bittersweet day, as we remember the good times *and the bad times*, of his life. But this past year August became an even more severe time for the progeny of Kimball McKee to consider their mortality. Once again we experienced the loss of someone we cared deeply about—someone who ministered to us, who encouraged us, who recognized the calling of God upon our lives, and the immense workload that He had given us to help the fledgling Messianic movement.

On August 13 of this year, our dear friend Mary Reisman passed away. I did not know Mary for that long—just about four years—*but they were some four years!* Mary and her husband Brandon, a Jewish Believer, had been in the Messianic movement for over twenty years. They had served in positions of eldership in Messianic congregations. They had seen the ins-and-outs of the movement, the ups-and-downs, the good and the bad. They would speak frankly to our family about, “Y’all know what you’ve gotten into?” We were able to bond spiritually with great ease. And perhaps most importantly, they were people with whom we had the Georgia-Alabama connection. It was certainly nice to get to know some Messianics from the South!

Just like the passing of my father, Kim McKee, Mary Reisman too had a great impact on me and how I consider God’s call upon my life. I would like to take just a few moments, and allow you to consider how important these two saints are to me. I would not be the person that I am were it not for the legacy that both my father and Mary have left for me. Before I do anything of spiritual consequence, I not only have to ask myself, “What would my father think of this?”, but now I have to ask—in Southern accented English of course—“What would Mary Reisman think of this?”

## Kim McKee

None of you will ever have the privilege of getting to know Kenneth Kimball McKee (1951-1992). The only way that he lives is through the memory left by him to those who loved him. The only way that he lives in today’s world is through his three children: John, Jane, and Maggie. While I myself have a unique personality—and while it is not all Kim (indeed, I would be remiss to not mention my grandfathers Professor Bill Jeffries and G.K. McKee, and my great-grandfather Bishop Marvin Franklin)—too much of what I do is very much like Kim McKee. I might be a little more contemplative at times like Granddaddy



John, Jane, and Kim  
Jane’s fourth birthday, May 1987

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resurrection. I have responded to the false claims of soul sleep in my article “To Be Absent From the Body.”

Jeffries, or not take any nonsense like Granddad McKee, but ultimately the major part of my personality comes from Kim McKee.

In his short life, Kim McKee was an American history scholar, he was a successful businessman and entrepreneur, but most importantly he was a dedicated Christian layman on the road to ordained ministry. Both of my parents were active in both the Lay Witness Mission and Walk to Emmaus outreaches in the United Methodist Church. In 1991 my father was the male team leader that took the Walk to Emmaus to Madras, India. Kim McKee was very serious about God and about the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was very serious that people know the Lord and that they feel loved by Him, and by all other Christians. At his visitation and funeral, most of the people who came were somehow connected to the church activities that he had been involved with, and testified how Kim McKee had impacted their lives.

In the mid-1980s, my late father was also one of the few people who saw the importance of the Hebraic Roots of our faith. He understood the symbolism and significance of the Biblical festivals, even though the Messianic movement was not as large (and hence largely unknown) as it is today. In the early 1990s before being diagnosed with cancer, my father was preparing to become a part time Methodist pastor, and was readying himself to go to Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and take advanced classes, and be mentored by the local Methodist superintendent. My father knew the steps that he would have to take to be in ministry. But this was not meant to be. As a seminary student today and burgeoning Messianic theologian, while I know the right steps that I have had to take with training, education, and being informed to the discussions going on in the religious world—I also feel like I am not in this just for myself—but *also for Kim McKee*. In a way, perhaps I work so much because it is not just J.K. McKee working, but I also have to carry on the work of K.K. McKee as well!

With this said, though, if my father were in the Messianic movement today he would differ from the approach that is taken by many of the “leaders” that you encounter. Kim McKee would not be a person who would easily “buck the system” and criticize people—particularly Christians—without due cause. He would extend proper respect and courtesy to our Jewish forebearers and Jewish tradition. Kim McKee would want a well-reasoned and firmly established Messianic movement to emerge. Kim McKee would want our Messianic theology to be based more on study and exegesis of the Scriptures, than so-called “revelations.” Most importantly, Kim McKee would want all to feel loved, and for the Messianic movement to be more engaged with our Christian brothers and sisters who need to know the greater Hebraic richness of the Messiah we serve and love so dearly.

I think about my father a great deal when I have to tackle a controversial issue that is plaguing the Messianic movement. I really do not think about those who have caused the problem, the same people that may be critics of my work, but I think about what Kim McKee would have done. I remember false accusations being levied against my parents in our new church in 1989 because the pastor had done something inappropriate. I remember the gossip and mistruths that were spread about them. But I also remember how my parents, and Kim McKee especially, endured and did not give in to the slander. They let the facts speak for themselves, and in time, the truth all came out. And so today when a Messianic issue comes up that is divisive, I let the facts stand and do not allow innuendo or sensationalism get the better of me. **Margaret and Kim McKee raised me better than that.**

The most significant impact that my father ever had on me came on that morning of September 1, 1992 in the ICU ward of St. Elizabeth Hospital in Edgewood, Kentucky. It is one thing to be at a funeral or funeral home, but it is truly another thing to be at the deathbed of a person. When the machines that monitored my father’s heartbeat flatlined, this man who was brain dead raised up both of his arms, and then they slowly came down again. At that moment, a true sense of *shalom*—total peace and communion with God—was felt by all in the room. It was not as though someone just died; a human person had a non-corporeal part of his being removed from his body. The consciousness, the emotions, the essence or soul of Kim McKee that so many people had known and loved was gone. **No one can ever convince me from that day onward that**

there is no God, or even an afterlife. We experienced it in that hospital room. After my own salvation experience—which would come about three years later—this has been the most important experience of my life.



Tel Dan Nature Reserve, Israel  
November 2004

## Mary Reisman

Mary Reisman and I—sort of like the United States and United Kingdom—had a “special relationship.” We originally met in late Summer of 2003, when Brandon and Mary were making one of their yearly treks, or “pilgrimages” as they would say, to Disney World. They had heard about our ministry, and had taken the time to make our acquaintance. Over the next year we got to know Brandon and Mary very closely via a few visits to their home congregation in Birmingham, and reciprocal visits to Orlando. Brandon and Mary joined us on our Israel tour in November 2004, and Mary and I stuck closely with one another.

We were some of the few English speakers in the main cabin on that El Al flight to Tel Aviv, and talked and talked and talked. We each frequently reminded ourselves that “What happens in Israel stays in Israel.”

Mary Reisman and I “got along” very well. Outside of my own family, Mary was one of the few people around with whom I could completely be myself. Our conversations would go in a cycle of being extremely serious, not so serious, not at all serious, not so serious, and back to extremely serious again. We would talk about deep theology or spiritual forces, and ten minutes later be joking about how Mary was a secret shopper and as one who had worked in the entertainment business how I could spot secret shoppers.

Mary was one of those people to whom you could just say anything, and because she had enough life experience she would not even flinch. We would exchange stories—sometimes horror stories—of what Messianic ministry was all about. I would tell her about phone calls or e-mails we would receive, or about some of the rogue characters we have encountered. Mary Reisman understood my personal philosophy, “It’s better to make a joke out of the whole situation than get angry,” very, very well.

I was able to benefit a great deal from the conversations I had with Mary Reisman. She was a very wise older woman, and while our talks were certainly littered with their fair share of humor, she imparted a great deal to me as an elder’s wife. She shared a great deal about her encounters with Messianic leaders and teachers, she had either seen through the congregation she and Brandon served, or through their own Messianic experience. She shared stories about congregational crises, family challenges, and relational hardships. Mary would remind me on several occasions to never rush to get married, because as she said, “I’ve already had three husbands and you only need to have one.” I would jokingly remind her, “I hope I never have one husband,” and then she would just say in her own way with a short nod of the head and pointed finger, “*This is true.*”

This past year, Mary had been battling her own war with cancer. While the cancer itself was in remission, the side effects of the chemotherapy were not going away. My mother kept saying over and over to herself, “I don’t know what we are going to do if we lose Mary.” That is how important she was not only to our daily encouragement—not just knowing that someone out there who had been Messianic for many years recognized God’s call upon us—but most importantly because we had become close and dear friends. Mary, because of her time in the Messianic movement, was one of the few people who *knew exactly* the kind of challenges we go through with the kind of teachings we have and the methodology we take to the issues. While we certainly have many friends and encouragers, very few of them have the collected wisdom of Mary Reisman.

I had my final meeting with Mary in late July as we were passing through Birmingham on our way home to Florida. We met the Reismans for breakfast, and I strategically sat next to Mary.

We went through the usual pleasantries. She asked me how school was. She asked me how my “love life” was. I told her school was fine, and that I am really enjoying bachelorhood quite thoroughly.

Throughout our breakfast, the conversation got really serious. I told her about many of the classes I had taken in my M.A. program at Asbury, and how in the next ten years theological doors that had remained closed in the Messianic movement for the previous forty years were going to open. She expressed the extreme spiritual pain she had for some of the things that she was seeing in the Messianic community, especially the tendency for some people to deny Yeshua and convert to Judaism. I then told her that as a direct result of this apostasy and the anti-missionary influence the doors that had remained shut were now going to have to open. After all, after denying the Messiah the only other big denial that one can make is declaring that God does not exist. I told her, half-jokingly but very serious, “For a forty year old movement it is hard to believe that we haven’t gotten out of our training pants yet—because we should be far beyond this.” We had a good laugh, but both knew the implications of the statement.

I then proceeded to tell Mary that in 2008 our ministry is planning to begin to address the relevance of the Messianic movement to society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> I told her that many of the issues that she would ask us about, and ask us to write about, we were going to begin addressing directly. (Note that Mary Reisman is directly responsible for us quietly posting some distinct FAQ entries in the current database, which as of yet have not been sent out to our public e-mail list.) I told her that it was time that we come to grips with modernity and post-modernity, the issues of the world, and the issues of how we can make a difference. I reminded her that we were waiting for the right time to talk about a variety of subjects—mostly pertaining to social and personal issues—that Messianics have avoided for far too long.

I was the one who answered the phone on August 13 and heard that Mary had passed away. I had to relay the news to everyone else. I did not feel overwhelming thoughts of sorrow or anger, because I knew that Mary was a strong Believer and Mary certainly would be thrilled to see Yeshua, but I was in a state of disbelief. I still am, some three weeks later writing this. But Mary’s time had come, and in a way I believe that a torch was passed from Mary’s Messianic generation to my generation. She gave me her blessing. Many of you will never know Mary Reisman, but you will get bits and pieces of her from me—that is how close our personalities were.

When I think of Mary now, I am reminded of a statement made by Dr. Walter Kaiser in a televised theological debate. He told the moderator that “While I have no proof of this, I think that Heaven is more than just about music lessons. I think it is about each of us attending seminars on how the universe was designed and operates.” If anything, Mary Reisman was one of those people whom God is going to truly train to help Him run the universe. Just ask Brandon, as she was truly his queen!

## **Continuing the Legacy of Those Who Have Gone Before Us**

While awaiting his appearance before Caesar, the Apostle Paul expressed some important thoughts to his Philippian friends that we all need to consider:

“[F]or I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Yeshua the Messiah, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but *that* with all boldness, Messiah will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Messiah and to die is gain. But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Messiah, for *that* is very much better” (Philippians 1:19-23).

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<sup>2</sup> I have already been compiling notes for the lead article of 2008 on the TNN website, tentatively entitled “How Are We to Live as Modern Messianics?” It will list a variety of issues and topics, that while common to the Bible (especially the Torah and Tanach), and both Jewish and Christian religious literature, are nonetheless often avoided by today’s Messianic community.

Here, Paul very clearly tells his friends that for him to die, depart, and be with his Lord in Heaven is far better. While Paul clearly expects an afterlife—and so should all of us—the “gain” of which he speaks is far more than just meeting Yeshua. *The “gain” is also leaving behind a testimony by which others can be encouraged and emulate in their own experience of faith.* As Believers today, each one of us benefits from the legacy of those who have gone before us. We have the responsibility of building upon their work, and continuing what they were able to accomplish. When we join in corporate worship, we actually join with the company in Heaven—including our departed loved ones who eagerly anticipated meeting their Lord. Take to serious heart the following words from the author of Hebrews, and consider them the next time you go before the Lord in worship:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and [congregation] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the righteous made perfect*” (Hebrews 12:22-23).

When I consider the lives of Kim McKee and Mary Reisman, I see two strong Believers who are rooting me on. Their course is now finished, and they have both been able to see Yeshua in all His glory. But their “gain” is also that they have made an impact on me as I continue the legacy that they have left for me to consider.

I have a strong responsibility to not just honor their memories through positive action and a loving attitude, but also to leave behind something to those who will follow after me. This is why my continual focus is on Messianic theology, and will increasingly be focused on those subjects and books of the Bible that we have commonly avoided. I need to take action so that I can impact Messianic men and women of God who can also make a difference in the world, and see that the lives of others are transformed to be more like Yeshua.

Who do you think about in your own life who made a profound difference in your spiritual character and current pursuits? Would such people approve or disapprove of your actions today as a Messianic Believer? Are you continuing a life of holiness and godliness that they modeled for you? Are you continuing the work that they accomplished? If you could talk to a departed loved one today, what progress report would you give them? These are all questions that I know I ask myself on a regular basis—having seen death firsthand. *How often do you ask them?*

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