**The Motive of Gratitude**

Long ago, a band of valiant men set out on a night-time trek from the city of Jabesh-gilead in what is modern day Jordan to the city of Bethshan in territory that now belongs to the state of Israel. 1 Samuel 31:12 tells us that they walked all night to make the 20 mile journey that involved traversing the Jordan River. These men were determined to carry out a dangerous, difficult mission, not to save a life, but to protect the honor of a dead man.

1 Samuel 11 tells us that, 40 years earlier, the city of Jabesh-gilead had a serious problem. The Ammonite king, Nahash, besieged the city and the inhabitants were desperate. The men of Jabesh even offered to make a covenant making them servants of Nahash if he would spare the city. Nahash agreed, but with one cruel and vicious stipulation: He intended to gouge out the right eye of every one of them as a reproach to all Israel! When the men of Jabesh requested a 7 day reprieve to request help, Nahash was arrogant enough to grant it. After all, Israel didn’t even have a standing army! Who in the world could possibly muster a respectable fighting force in a week, and why would anyone care enough about one isolated town to even try? The man Nahash overlooked was Saul, the son of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin. Samuel had already anointed him as king, but he had yet to take office. In fact, some Israelites opposed God’s choice. When word reached Saul about Jabesh’s dilemma, he was plowing in the field! We are told that the Spirit of God came upon him mightily and he was livid! The audacity of this foreign king demanded immediate action.

Saul cut his oxen into pieces and had them distributed throughout Israel with the message that the same would happen to the oxen of anyone who did not come out after Saul and Samuel. In a short time, Saul had assembled an army of 330,000 men! His message to the men of Jabesh: “Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you will have deliverance” and Saul was true to his word. With God’s help, the Ammonites were defeated and Jabesh-gilead was delivered!

40 years later, a lot of water had passed under the bridge of life. Saul, over time, had proven to be unfaithful and rebellious toward God and had even made himself the enemy of David, the one God had anointed to be his successor. In a battle with the Philistines, Saul and his three sons were killed. The Philistines made a barbaric display of the fallen, cutting off Saul’s head, placing his weapons in their pagan temple, and hanging the bodies of Saul his sons on the wall of Bethshan, a city under Philistine control. For 40 years, the people of Jabesh-gilead had lived lives of dignity as free men. Were it not for Saul, they would have lived the rest of their lives as humiliated, grotesquely disfigured slaves at the whims of a heathen ruler. The passage of decades could not diminish their profound gratitude for a man who moved mountains to deliver them from a horrendous fate. Their appreciation for Saul’s kindness drove them to make the difficult journey by foot and to risk their lives removing the bodies from the walls of a city of the enemy to give them a respectful burial. It brings a tear to my eye nearly every time I read this touching story of gratitude and sacrifice and the lesson for us is powerful.

Paul taught that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We have put ourselves in a dilemma much worse than anything the men of Jabesh could have imagined. We have enslaved ourselves to the one who is the epitome of evil and his intent is not to gouge out our eyes, but to lead us into eternal destruction. Our circumstance would be entirely hopeless were it not for the sacrificial love of God. Those of us who are convinced of our spiritual dependence upon Christ are driven, not only to comply with His simple commands but to devote our lives to His service. The Hebrew writer penned, “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28). The choice is clear for each of us. Stumble in blindness and degradation or accept His grace, receive spiritual sight, freedom from sin and the pursuit of His righteousness. Sincere gratitude is a powerful motivator. What are you waiting for?

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