

## A GOOD HERITAGE

5-25-03

Heb. 11:23-12:3

TEXT: *All these people we have mentioned received God's approval because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had far better things in mind for us that would also benefit them, for they can't receive the prize at the end of the race until we finish the race. (39-40, NLT)*

### INTRODUCTION

Our former church in Whitefish, MT is celebrating their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year and invited former pastors to come and be part of that. We won't be able to come on the big day of the celebration in August, but thought this last weekend would be a nice substitute. So, over last Sunday, we took a week's vacation to visit them as well as my Montana family. As I was thinking what to say to them, I became aware of how much a part of my ministry all those people still are. They taught me much about being a pastor, their stories have served as inspiration and instruction over the years. All that we went through together in those 15 years I was their pastor is interwoven into who I am now as a follower of Christ and as a pastor. I told them how deeply grateful I am for all those gifts they gave me.

Of course, visiting with my brother and his wife and my sister and her husband brought to the fore the wonderful family connections I continually reap a harvest from. Each of our lives are a vast network of interconnections that enable us to be what we are.

Memorial Day is (at least in part) a remembering some of those connections. It's roots go back to May 30, 1868, shortly after the Civil War, when a former Union general, John A. Logan, called upon the nation to remember those who died in the Civil War. It soon became a remembrance of all America's war dead. And, for many of us, also a time to remember family members who have died. For several years in my childhood, I remember us taking lilacs to decorate the grave of my sister, Lois, who died in infancy about eight years before I was born. It was a sober reminder to me that there was more to our family than the brother and sister I knew.

This morning, I want to focus upon how remembering, as we do on Memorial Day, can be an important spiritual activity. Some memories are nostalgic and kind of fun, remembering past events and "the good old days." There are painful memories we'd like to blot out, but no matter how many coats of the paint of living we put over them, they keep bleeding through. But the kind of remembering I want to lift up today is of another order, one that is crucial to our spiritual health and living well. It is an awareness of our interconnectedness with those who've run the race before us that leads to humble gratitude for their gifts.

### ARE YOU A GIANT?

The Jewish poet and storyteller, Noah ben Shea, tells a parable I think illustrates our first point.

After dinner, the children turned to Jacob and asked him to tell them a story. "A story about what?" asked Jacob.

“About a giant,” squealed the children.

Jacob smiled, leaning against the warm stones at the side of the fireplace, and in a soft voice, he began. “Once there was a boy who asked his father to take him to the parade that was coming through the village. The father quickly agreed, and they set out together. As they got to the site for the parade, there were mobs of people pushing in from all sides. They couldn’t get to the front row and people formed a wall several people deep, preventing the father and son from seeing the parade. So, the father lifted his son onto his shoulders. As the parade began to pass before them, the boy kept telling his father how great it was. He described the colors, the people, the bands, the floats in the parade. Then, the boy grew prideful, even mocking those who couldn’t see, and finally saying, even to his father, ‘If only you could see what I see.’”

“But,” said Jacob looking into the faces of the children, “what the boy did not look at was why he could see. He forgot that it was his father’s shoulders and sacrifice that enabled him to see.”

As Jacob finished, a disappointed girl said, “I thought you were going to tell us a story about a giant.”

“But I did,” said Jacob. “I told you a story about a boy who could have been a giant.”

“How?” the children asked.

“A giant,” said Jacob, “is anyone who remembers we are all sitting on someone else’s shoulders.”

“And what does it make us if we don’t remember?” asked the boy.

“A burden,” answered Jacob.

Our remembering is the key as to whether we become giants or burdens in this world. As we remember rightly, our hearts are humbled and we are filled with gratitude for the shoulders we ride on.

None of us likes being taken for granted. If there are very many people in your place of work, there’s bound to be someone who takes you for granted. They drop their end of things and expect you to pick up the slack. Polly seems to feel this way when three or four of my pairs of shoes accumulate in the living room. It is easy to assume others are there to do whatever it is we’d rather not do.

We are referred to as “the me generation.” It seems second nature for us to be self-absorbed, thinking the world centers upon us. We easily think we deserve all the good things that we have. McDonalds even made it into a jingle in their commercials, “You deserve a break today.” Polly was at the opening of the new Super WalMart, and as she entered, trying to take in the wonders

of it, a stranger turned to her and said, “You know, we *deserve* this!” I’m not exactly sure what that was supposed to mean. But I do know I quickly begin to think of good things as something I deserve rather than gifts and blessings. Then, I can look at good things others get and feel envy because I think I deserve them as well.

Here’s where remembering can restore our health. Let’s begin with this wonderful nation we are blessed to live in. It was given to us by countless ancestors who fought in wars for our freedom, who risked their lives as pioneers opening up new country, and who worked hard inventing and building things that have made our nation prosper. Can you take any credit for being born in this country rather than, say, North Korea? Memorial Day is a chance to honor those who gave their lives for our freedom and prosperity. None of us can take credit for this nation.

As we enjoy “the good life,” it is easy for us to begin thinking we deserve it. We think, “I worked hard. I made good investment decisions. Therefore I deserve to take it easy now and indulge myself.” But think about it. Do you work harder than that peasant in Bangladesh who struggles from morning to night to get enough to just stay alive another day? Did you choose your parents, or your genetic makeup? What if your IQ were 50 points lower or your physical stamina far less?

It doesn’t take long for us to begin to realize we are sitting upon the shoulders of countless people. That should humble us and make us grateful. When you really think about it, there’s not much we can take credit for. It all brings us ultimately to God and His goodness and grace.

### **OUR SPIRITUAL HERITAGE**

The Preacher in Eccl. 12:1 admonishes, *Remember your Creator in the days of your youth*. We have a loving Creator who created all things. This lovely world we enjoy is His handiwork. Your life is no accident, but a gift from God. And Ps. 77:11 is typical of a theme often lifted up in the Psalms, *I will remember the deeds of the Lord*. He watches over us and cares for us.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us of the gifts the Lord gives us through the lives of the saints who’ve gone before us. After cataloguing an inspiring list of those who have been faithful through incredible difficulty, we come to this amazing text:

*All these people we have mentioned received God’s approval because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had far better things in mind for us that would also benefit them, for they can’t receive the prize at the end of the race until we finish the race. (39-40, NLT)*

Abraham, Moses, Gideon, David, and many others are all connected to us. It is easy to understand how we are blessed and strengthened by their faith. But, amazingly, the text says it also goes the other way. What we do also benefits them. Another translation, The Message, amplifies this truth:

*Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours.*

This gives an incredible picture. All of human history is being played out in a huge contest with evil according to God's master plan. Enoch, Abraham, Joseph all had their roles. But we have ours as well. The awards ceremony doesn't come until the end in which it all comes together in "one completed whole." Those from the past contribute to the victory, but we also are part of it in what we're doing today. Think of a basketball game. A girl is in the game only the first ten minutes, scores ten points and then is injured and taken to the hospital for X-rays so she is not there when their team wins. But, does she share in the victory? Of course!

Isn't this an exciting picture? None of us are alone, living just for ourselves. We are part of a vast team stretching over all time. Rahab, and Noah are all on your team. When you start to feel beat-up in life and are tempted to quit or feel sorry for yourself—remember your teammates and their commitment, faithfulness, and suffering all for your benefit as well as the benefit of God's kingdom. Heb. 11 closes with that listing of a number of those who experienced marvelous, miraculous deliverance. Listen again to those... (33-35a). Then, we get to that transition word, "others" and a list of those who went through incredible suffering... (35b-38). Now, note verse 39, "these were **all commended** for their faith." Some were healed, delivered and others were not. But, it makes no difference in the long run, because they were faithful. Whether healed or not, it is God who determines your role. And if that is not enough to make you buck up and quit nursing your wounds, Hebrews goes on to give us the ultimate model to look at, Jesus himself.

*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Heb 12:2-3)*

And, there's something else here too. If I lead a person to Christ and through the years, they lead a dozen others to Christ and that dozen leads more to Christ, am I part of all that which continues on perhaps even many years after I'm gone? Will that be part of my reward? I think so. Even smaller things like an encouraging word, a helping hand that was maybe one tenth of the ingredient to make a significant change in a person's life— a formation of something critical in their character— will not be without reward. In fact, Jesus affirms, even a cup of water given in his name will not go unrewarded (Mtt. 10:42).

Someone once noted some of the survivors in the bloody Civil War battle at Shiloh where there were 24,000 casualties. Lew Wallace fought there and went on to give us Ben Hur. The Union general was Ulysses S. Grant who went on to become a president of the U.S. And the Confederate general was Francis A. Shoup who later became a university president. What a loss if they had been among the 24,000. At the same time though, we can think, didn't those who lost their lives contribute to the success then of those who survived?

The great point of Memorial Day is that we live for far more than ourselves. It reminds us of the higher calling for the good of others: our nation, our family, our friends. Even more important is the implications we've noted for the great sweep of God's Kingdom we too are part of.

## CONCLUSION

Charles Plumb, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate, was a fighter pilot in Vietnam. After 75 combat missions, his plane was destroyed by a missile. Plumb ejected and parachuted into enemy territory. He was captured and spent six years in a Vietnamese prison camp.

One day, after his release, he and his wife were sitting in a restaurant and a man came up to them and said, “You’re Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier, Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!”

Charles Plumb was mystified because he didn’t recognize this man. “How in the world did you know all that?” he asked.

The man replied, “I packed your parachute. I guess it worked!”

A grateful Plumb assured him, “It sure did. If your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.

That night, Charles Plumb couldn’t sleep. He thought of this faithful sailor carefully packing the silks of each chute, holding in his hands the fate of someone he didn’t know. He cared enough to know who had the parachutes he packed. But Plumb knew nothing of this man. He was a hotshot fighter pilot and an officer, and this man was just a sailor. A humbled and sobered Charles Plumb now lectures on his Vietnam experience and regularly asks his audience, “Who’s packing your parachute?”

Memorial Day is a chance for grateful memory for all who’ve contributed to our survival and well-being. It should humble us before Almighty God. It should inspire us to run our part of the race well. Looking at the great gifts we’ve been given should quiet our whining and complaints about the tough places in our lives. Next time you feel tempted to feel sorry for yourself or give in to a victim mentality, read these two chapters, Hebrews 11 and 12. It will put some spiritual adrenalin into your soul!