

DOING THINGS THE HARD WAY

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-3; I Corinthians 1:26-29

Several years ago I received one of those emails that get passed on from person to person evaluating people in the Bible as to their fitness to be a pastor. How would people in the Bible measure up if they were screened for ministry? Here are some of the comments:

Adam: Good man but problems with temptation. Also one reference said he and his wife enjoy walking nude in the woods.

Noah: Prone to unrealistic building projects.

Abraham: Unsettled, never stays in one place very long.

Sarah: Encouraged wife swapping.

Joseph: A big thinker, but a braggart; has a prison record.

Moses: Wanted for murder in Egypt.

Ruth: An undocumented immigrant.

David: A promising leader, until we discovered he had an affair.

Elijah: Prone to depression.

Jeremiah: Emotionally unstable, always lamenting things.

John: Says he's a Baptist but doesn't dress like one.

Jonah: Refused God's call to ministry until he was swallowed by a great fish. Then he told us the fish spit him up on the shore. We hung up.

You wonder why God chose these people. Take Abraham. Out of all the people in the world why did God choose Abraham to receive this promise? We are not told, but I have a theory. I think God chose Abraham because God likes to do things the hard way. Seriously, why else would God promise land to a nomad? Why else would God promise many descendants to a childless old man and his post-menopausal wife? Why else would God promise to make Abraham a blessing to others when later in the same chapter Abraham needs help from others just to survive? God likes to do things the hard way.

As if the situation were not bad enough, God makes it worse. Let me read again Genesis 12:1: "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'" In Hebrew the verse literally says, "Go from your *land* and your family, and your father's house." In other words, God promises to give Abraham land, but first he must leave behind the only land he has ever known. God promises to give Abraham a family, but first he must leave behind the only family he has ever known. God promises to make Abraham a blessing, but first he must leave the only source of security he has ever known. God not only likes to do things the hard way, but sometimes along the way God makes things even harder.

The Bible is filled with examples of this. Let me show you two of them. Take a pew Bible and turn to Exodus, chapter 3 (OT, p. 50). God calls Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Look at verse 11. "But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'" As Moses admits in chapter 4, he is not a great

speaker. And back in chapter 2, the one time he tried to stand up for the Israelites against the Egyptians, Moses had to flee for his life. Moses is a case of God doing things the hard way.

An even better example is Gideon. Turn to Judges, chapter 6 (OT, p. 223). God chose Gideon to deliver the Israelites from the Midianites, a group of desert marauders who were stealing the Israelites' crops. Look at verse 15. Gideon responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." He sounds a lot like Moses. Now turn the page to Judges 7:2-3:

The Lord said to Gideon, "The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.' Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.'" Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained.

I wonder how that would work in Afghanistan. God chose the weakest person he could think of to save the Israelites and then made him weaker!

I once read an imaginary memo sent to Jesus by a management consulting firm evaluating the resumes of his 12 disciples. It said,

It is the staff opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education, and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you are undertaking. They do not have the team concept. Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The brothers, James and John, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas has a skeptical attitude that would undermine morale. And Matthew, the tax collector, has been blacklisted by the Greater Jerusalem Business Bureau. We recommend you continue your search.

In our first scripture lesson Paul says,

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

The Bible is not talking here only about the Corinthians. It is talking about us. God chose you—you are here today—because God likes to do things the hard way.

And here is the Good News: it works. God in fact raised up a great nation from childless Abraham and Sarah. God in fact rescued Israel from slavery by tongue-tied Moses. God in fact delivered Israel from the Midianites with Gideon and his small remnant of an army. And God used that unlikely band of disciples to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth.

When I was in Potlatch, Idaho, I was the pastor of both the Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, and one day I got a letter sent to all the Lutheran congregations in this area from Clifford Lunde, the Lutheran bishop. I received this letter over 25 years ago, but I have kept it, because it is one of the most eloquent descriptions of the church I have ever read. It begins with a description of creation in Genesis 1-2. He writes,

In addition to all his other qualities, God has a terrific, God-sized sense of humor. How else can you explain the universe God has created with all of its delights and surprises and playfulness and laughter? “The story of creation,” writes Gerhard Frost, “is the story of a divine frolic, the Father preparing a treasure hunt for his children.”

But then he acknowledges the sin and suffering that entered the world in Genesis 3-11. He says,

Tragedy came and sadness and sorrow to spoil the humor of the universe, to take all the fun out of the Father’s frolic. Everything became somber and serious with wars and cancer and starvation and sickness and death and things like that. ...

Then he comes to Genesis 12, the story of Abraham and Sarah. Bishop Lunde writes,

But that could not spoil the Father’s sense of humor. He didn’t go off in a huff or get depressed and discouraged and scrap it all as I am sure I would have done. No, with what has to have been a cosmic chuckle, he set about to the reverse damage, to put the fun back in, to bring forth a brand new creation out of the old withering, dying one. Just to give a sample of what he was up to, he brought Isaac out of the shriveled loins of Abraham and the withered womb of Sarah and sent an old woman into gales of laughter.

You will hear that story in a couple of weeks. When God told Sarah, Abraham’s wife, that she would have a child, she laughed. But God saved the best for last. The bishop says,

The biggest joke of all has to be the church. Who but a comic genius would tackle the most powerful, wealthy, clever—and deadly serious—enemy in the universe with an army like us and fully expect to win? Surely God’s greatest victory will be not that he puts to shame the wise and powerful and noble of the earth but that he does it through the likes of us. How God must laugh when the story of how he defeated his proud and powerful enemy through a birth and a death and a resurrection is told and retold by preachers and Sunday School teachers and little children while the enemy is powerless to stop kids and drunks and harlots and idiots and you and me from believing the story and leaving his kingdom of lies and illusions to return to the Father’s arms!

Some day, when we all see the end of the story, we shall laugh with him, just as God and Sarah laughed when Isaac was born. A poet once wrote: “This is how the world ends—not with a bang but a whimper.” I don’t believe that. I believe that it will end with a laugh. Oh, I know the Bible says we shall gather around God’s throne and sing praises to him forever and ever. I am looking forward to that too. But I expect that we shall settle down to the singing only after we have all enjoyed an eye watering, side aching, thigh slapping, foot stomping belly laugh. Surely the universe will ring for a few centuries at

least with the hilarity of God's people when, like Sarah, we discover to our eternal amazement and amusement that he did it. He pulled it off, just as he said he would. Contrary to nature and common sense, he has worked in the dead, sterile womb of flesh born of flesh the greatest miracle of all. By water and the Spirit, by preaching and teaching, by death and resurrection, he has made us—this ridiculous, laughable church—into the holy, royal children of the living God.

That, friends, is God doing things the hard way.

- Ken Onstot
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