



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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AS GRASSHOPPERS

Moses sent a dozen men to spy out the land of Canaan. They all brought back a favorable report of the produce of the land. Ten of them, however, went from there to unfavorable reports. They called Canaan a land that ate its inhabitants. (See "A Carnivorous Land" in the February 2004 issue.) Then they made a statement about the people of the land.

And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight. (Num 13:33)

Note the unusual phrasing in the latter part of the verse. Most people would say, as we often hear the verse misquoted, "and we were as grasshoppers in their sight," and leave it at that. These ten men reveal much more in the way they stated their objection.

The spies first tell Moses and the people of Israel how they thought of themselves. "We were in our own sight as grasshoppers." These are the most valiant men Moses could muster? "Yes, Moses, we went out to spy out the land. But you really should have sent someone bigger/better/braver, because we are really just cowards at heart." Why didn't they say so in the first place? Then maybe Moses could have picked somebody else.

Before I get on my high horse, I need to look at myself. Am I, are we, any better than the spies? Have we ever been tempted, for instance, to say, "that person won't listen to me talk about Jesus so I just won't bring up the subject?" Do we limit our own ability "in our own eyes" and use that as an excuse?

Paul says we are not grasshoppers. We should not think of ourselves as grasshoppers. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." (Phil 4:13) In another place he says that in tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword "we are superconquerors through him that loved us." (Rom 8:37) If we can conquer these things, if we can do all things, then who are we to tell God that we are grasshoppers in our own eyes? He will just laugh and tell us that we are looking through the wrong eyes. If we look through his eyes we are giants, and even the biggest, baddest, tallest dude is less than a grasshopper.

What is more psychologically revealing about the spies is how they continued the thought. Because we were as grasshoppers in our limited view, "and so we were in their sight." Sometimes how we see ourselves influences either how others perceive us or how we think others perceive us. The people of Canaan may not have even noticed the spies. They were, after all, spies. They were not to make their presence obvious. Because the people did not notice them, they projected their own self-image on the land's inhabitants and assumed that they weren't noticed because they were "as grasshoppers." It couldn't be that they did their job so well that they weren't noticed. Their low self-image mandated a negative reaction by the inhabitants rather than their own superior ability.

Because of their faulty perception they presented a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Self-fulfilling prophecies are often, well, self-fulfilling. There is a big difference between "let me tell you about the greatest thing to happen to me" and "you wouldn't want to hear about Jesus, would you?" When we project our own feelings of inadequacy on others, is it any wonder they react the way that we expect? These spies, and the people who followed them, could never have conquered the land, because they felt they couldn't conquer.

Joshua and Caleb, in contrast, felt bigger than the giants because they had the creator of giants on their side. As a result, Caleb had no trouble in conquering them, even forty years later. By ourselves, we are as grasshoppers. With God, we are as giants. Let's make sure we are giants "in our own eyes."

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FAMOUS LAST WORDS

Books have been written about them. People wait for them. Sometimes they are profound; other times they are unremarkable. They are famous last words. They include Churchill's "I'm bored with it all," and Douglas Fairbanks' "I never felt better." Karl Marx thought the obsession with last words was ridiculous, so he told his housekeeper, "Go on, get out—last words are for fools who haven't said enough." In contrast, Pancho Villa was overly worried about his last words, saying, "Tell them I said something." Among those others whose last words were recorded, Jesus stands out as having several last words recorded. The scripture tells of seven last sentences.

Woman, behold thy son; Son, behold thy mother

You can tell a lot about a person's priorities by what he says at the end of his life. P. T. Barnum asked, "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?" Jesus, on the other hand, was not thinking of money. He was thinking of family.

Most of his followers did not make it as far as the cross. For whatever reason, they stayed away. Not so a few of his closest friends and relations. His mother was

Death doesn't absolve us of our responsibility to our family.

there. So was his (probably) cousin, the apostle John. As the oldest child of the family, Jesus would have been responsible for his widowed mother. (That is, probably widowed mother.) His own siblings did not, at this time, believe in him. So he chose to give the care of his mother to John. Even as he hung in pain on the cross he spoke to his mother, "woman behold thy son." (John 19:26) Lest she think he was speaking of himself, he immediately said to John, "son, behold thy mother."

Jesus shows us that we have a responsibility to take care of certain obligations. It would be easy to imagine that someone in his situation could forget legal duties. We wait until we are sick to make funeral arrangements. We wait until late in life to write a will, if we write one at all. Some might even wonder why they should worry, since they won't be around to hear the complaints. But Jesus tells us that death doesn't absolve us from our responsibility to our family.

Father, forgive them for they know not what they do

Not only did Jesus show compassion for his family, he also showed his compassion for those who rejoiced in his death. He had no obligation to do this. Even God apparently wants us to ask for forgiveness before he grants it. But Jesus asked God to forgive his enemies whether they repented or not.

The Jews recognize that some people can meet only the basic obligation of a *mitvah*, but the more righteous may go beyond in their observance. This seems to be the case here. Jesus, the ultimately righteous one, goes beyond what we might be able or required to do by asking God to forgive. In this case, he even gives a reason for going to the extent he did

He says, "Father, forgive them." Why? "For they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) Some of those who demanded his crucifixion thought they were executing a blasphemer. Others thought, perhaps, that they were getting rid of a troublemaker. None of them knew that they were doing the most important thing in the history of the world.

One of the few complaints I have heard about Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is that it gives the impression that the devil knew what would happen when Jesus was crucified. Some say that if the devil truly knew, he would not have allowed Jesus to be crucified. (They may be giving Satan credit for more power than he truly has.) Whether the devil knew what Jesus was accomplishing or not, certainly those who put Jesus on the cross did not understand that they were bringing about the salvation of the world. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he asked God to forgive them.

This day shall you be with me in Paradise

This is perhaps the most controversial of all Jesus' statements on the cross. Two robbers (not thieves, as stated in the King James Version) were crucified with Jesus. Matthew says (27:44) that they both mocked Jesus. Luke describes the situation in more detail.

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in the garden. (Luke 23: 39-43)

How often have members of the churches of Christ heard people argue against the necessity of baptism by bringing up the “thief on the cross?” Even one of our most famous preachers and writers has changed his position on baptism, and used this man for support for his position. He seems to have forgotten two or three reasons that the robber is not good for this argument.

The most common argument is that since this man died on the same day as Jesus his death precedes the requirement for immersion that Peter first announced in Acts 2. The second, perhaps related, argument is that while Jesus was on earth, even on the cross, he had the power to forgive whomever he chose. “But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.” (Matt 9:6) In like manner he forgave the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:11). Regardless of any future conditions on salvation, Jesus had the power to forgive as long as he was on the earth. He could forgive this robber by his own choice.

The third argument is that Jesus may not have forgiven the robber. If, as Matthew says, both robbers “railed on him,” then it is possible that his comment that “this man has done nothing amiss” was said mockingly or sarcastically. If so, then Jesus’ comment, “this day you will be with me in the garden,” was a rebuke rather than a promise of salvation. It would be the same as saying, “be careful about mocking me, because you will also be in the grave [many graves were in gardens] today, just like me.”

Whichever of these three options you choose, the man on the cross can not be used as an example of how we are to receive salvation. His situation just doesn’t apply to us.

I thirst

This is another statement that may be open to a choice of applications. One common interpretation is that this shows the humanity of Jesus; that he was the son of man as well as the son of God. John, who records this last word, gives a different spin on it. “After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst.” (John 19:38) He says Jesus said this because he knew he was the son of God. He had an obligation to fulfill all the prophecies, and made sure that he did.

Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit

When I am dying, I hope that I have the presence of mind to say what Jesus said. “Father, into thy hands I commend [commit, deposit] my spirit.” (Lk 23:46) To whom else would we want to commit our spirits? The alternative is to commit ourselves to the one for whom hell was prepared.

Jesus statement here may be more than just giving his spirit to God. An alternative meaning of the word used here is a deposit. Jesus became our deposit on eternal life. “Ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest [deposit] of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.” (Eph 1:13-14)

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

Most preachers take Jesus’ statement in Matthew 27:46 to be an indication that all the sins of all time were laid on the Christ as he hung on the cross, so God had no choice but turn his back on his own son. This is probably true. However, there is another way to look at this statement.

It is a long-established principle among Jewish teachers that quoting part of a passage is equivalent to quoting the whole passage. Jesus was aware of this principle. By quoting the opening of Psalm 22 he was associating himself with the whole psalm. By doing so he is saying to those at the cross, “look at what is happening;

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forgive whomever he
chose.

it is just as David predicted.” He is telling the observers of his execution that he is Messiah. No other explanation could be made for the “coincidence” of every description of David’s psalm happening in their eyes.

It is finished

The apparent true last words of Jesus are, “It is finished.” (Jn 19:30) So much was truly finished at that time. His life was finished, although it would really continue. His mission was finished; salvations work was done. The Law was fulfilled (Eph 2:14-18). Of equal importance, the power of death was finished. “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 15:55-57)

In the collection of last words, perhaps these final words on the cross are the finest of all. The finish of so many things may have been famous last words. But because of the words and their meaning they are to us equally famous first words. They are the words that give us new life.

A DAY OF STUDY

The Jewish holiday of *Shavuot*/Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Law at Sinai. Last year at this time I wrote about the validity of the Oral Law/traditions. (See “The Traditions of the Elders” in the June 2003 issue.) In that article I concluded that tradition is not, in itself, a bad thing, but that one is wrong to put tradition above the written word of God. That brings up the primary remaining practice on the holiday of *Shavuot*—reading and studying the Law. How, after all, can one know what is in God’s direct revelation to man without studying that revelation?

On *Shavuot* no constructive work is to be done. A person is not to light a fire, carry anything in public, or even pack bags for a trip to Texas the following day. Yet in a very real sense, constructive work is done every year on Pentecost. One just has to make the distinction between what realms the work is done.

In the worlds of the mind and of the spirit, study of God’s word is the most constructive thing that can be done. Concentrating on a job, a livelihood, or enhancement of the physical is actually somewhat “destructive” work. As one rabbi put it, “Bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness if profitable unto all things.” (1 Tim 4:8) Spiritual construction makes enjoyment of the physical more sweet.

The psalmists, as may perhaps be expected, celebrated the virtues of study. Psalm 119, besides being the longest chapter in the Bible, makes mention of the Torah in every verse. The first psalm begins by saying the upright man meditates on God’s law “day and night.” (1:2) Another psalm extols the constructive value of the law. “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.” (Ps 19:7) Yet another calls constructive study a blessing. “Blessed is the man

whom thou chastenest, O LORD, and teachest him out of thy law.” (Ps 94:12)

The law itself mandated constant study to build up the nation and its children. After the statement of the *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel”), Moses told Israel:

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. (Deut 6:6-7)

He continues by telling them to keep God’s word between their eyes and on their doorposts. This advocates study more often than once a year, but shows how important it is, even once a year.

The same rabbi quoted earlier said study built up a man. “Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim 2:15)

I have known congregations that were very good at throwing a “pot luck” dinner. Much time and effort is devoted to feeding, or overfeeding, the body. This is an important and enjoyable thing. At least it is enjoyable until you realize that you have eaten too much. How much better would be a day reserved to the feeding of the soul. The greatest thing about such a day, devoted solely to the study of God’s word, is that it is impossible to overeat. The spiritual man never gets overstuffed when feeding on God’s Torah.

Of course, we must not limit our study of God’s word to one day a year. We are lessened if it occurs only once a month, or even once a week. We are certainly increased, though, if we take one day a year and devote it to more intense study than is possible on most days.

Pentecost is Wednesday, May 26, 2004.

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