



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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AN EXTRA TRIP

“Are you going to stay in Jerusalem until the next holiday?”

“No, I have to get home to Capernaum. Can’t let my business slide for another two months. But I’ll be back, although it is an added expense. It seems the only times we get to see each other are the holidays.”

Perhaps conversations like that occurred every Passover. All Jewish men had to travel to Jerusalem for that holiday, and also had to be there for Shavuot (Pentecost) fifty days later. Maybe some could afford to stay for both holidays. Most probably had to make two trips out of it. And for what? Just to bring a couple of loaves of bread for the priest to wave. Well, also a sacrifice, but that was incidental.

Ye shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two tenth deals: they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the firstfruits unto the LORD. And ye shall offer with the bread seven lambs without blemish of the first year, and one young bullock, and two rams: they shall be for a burnt offering unto the LORD, with their meat offering, and their drink offerings, even an offering made by fire, of sweet savour unto the LORD. Then ye shall sacrifice one kid of the goats for a sin offering, and two lambs of the first year for a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits for a wave offering before the LORD, with the two lambs: they shall be holy to the LORD for the priest. And ye shall proclaim on the selfsame day, that it may be an holy convocation unto you: ye shall do no servile work therein: it shall be a statute for ever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. (Lev 23:17-21)

A trip to Jerusalem just to offer two loaves of bread. Some might think it a waste of time. Sure, it was a holiday commemorating the giving of the Law. And yes, it was an offering of firstfruits, to show that God came first in the lives of every Jewish family. But couldn’t that have been done at home? Why go home and then travel all the way back to Jerusalem just short of two months later? The simple answer is that God said so. Maybe it was a test of faith. Maybe it was to emphasize the importance of the Law, or of reliance on God.

Unlike the other holidays, no special ceremony is designated, other than the sacrifice. Why not? Today it is common for the Jewish people to spend all night in Torah study, because this was the night on which the Law was given. The Torah is ceremony enough; there doesn’t need to be anything else. And yet, perhaps there is a special ceremony associated with Pentecost.

And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 17:22)

This verse seems out of place. In between discussions of holidays, the Jewish people are told to take care of the poor and the stranger. Maybe, though, it isn’t between discussions. Maybe this is the ceremony for Shavuot. God gave the bread of his word to the Jewish people; they are to give bread back to him, but also grain for bread to those in need.

We are surrounded by homeless, poor, and needy. There are many “strangers” among us, illegally or with permission. It is not our job to determine whom to help and whom to ignore. It is our job to leave some of what we produce for them, all of them, whether we think they deserve it or not. Whether they are in our country legally or not. Whether we can “afford it” or not. In fact, Shavuot says that since we are all dependent on God for everything that we have, we cannot afford not to help others. Even if it means traveling an extra couple of hundred miles once a year.

(Shavuot/Pentecost is June 4 in 2014.)

CONTENTS

An Extra Trip	1
Be a H.E.R.O.	2
Clean Up Your Act	4

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BE A H.E.R.O.

Church programs are not a bad thing, but are often not the answer that people make them out to be. This is not programs, as in the order of worship; this is programs as in ways of accomplishing an end. There are many valuable programs. Youth programs, recovery programs, jail ministries, homeless ministries. The problem is that when it becomes a program rather than a way of life, it loses its validity and often fades away. That being said, though, we might propose a program with the hope that it becomes a way of life.

This is the age of superheroes. It started decades ago with the comic books. Then it spread to television and the movies. Batman, Superman, the Avengers, the X-men, Power Rangers, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Everybody (well, nearly everybody) likes a superhero. Kids, and even some adults, want to be one. While it might not always be possible to be a superhero, everyone can be a hero. Everyone can become a H.E.R.O.

H.E.R.O. may become a program, or an umbrella for many programs in a church. More importantly, it can teach those young people who want to be a hero that it is

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possible. It is easy. Every Christian can be Helping, Encouraging, Reverencing, or Overcoming.

Helping

A hero may look outward. Superman wouldn't be the hero he is if he used his powers only for his own good. What if he just used his strength to break into bank vaults to take the money? Would he be a hero if he used his invulnerability to shield the crooks from gunfire? What if his super speed was only used to help in a getaway? It is that he uses these powers for good that makes him a hero.

Anybody can help somebody else. It doesn't have to be a big thing.

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. (Matt 25:33-36)

Jesus mentioned six things. Helping, though, is not limited to these six, although much could be broken down into these categories. Adults and older teens may be able to give someone a ride to where they need to go. Money, even as little as a dollar, may help someone in need. But there are many ways that others can help.

The very young among us need to know that they can make a difference, too. Sometimes it is bringing a can of food or a few pennies, especially if it was their idea. Having young people at a senior center to talk to or entertain the residents is a way of helping that is very much appreciated. Children as young as age two can do chores around the house, if they are presented as ways to help and not as a job that needs to be done or they will be punished. It is amazing how one person's attitude goes from rebellion to compliance just by changing the words "do that" to "will you help me do that?" People intrinsically want to help.

While we want to help, too often we want it to be in a big way or a noticeable way. Somehow it seems that giving \$100 to help distribute Bibles in Ukraine is more important than giving \$1. We forget what Jesus said about the widow who gave *leptons*. "Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living." (Matt 12:43-44) It is not the amount we give, but the amount we want to give. If all you can do is open the door for someone who uses a walker or a cane, that is helping in a huge way.

Sometimes the best thing a person can learn is that helping does not have to be public. It often is more enjoyable if people don't know who did the deed. A teenager rakes the leaves from a neighbor's yard or clears the driveways of snow, without being seen. An office worker makes a pot of coffee when someone else emptied it, even if they don't drink coffee themselves, just because it is the right thing to do.

Those in the H.E.R.O. club who are helpers are important. They are heroes. But not everyone can be a helper.

Encouraging

One of the early Christians who sold land and brought the proceeds to help those in the church was "Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement)." (Acts 4:36, ESV) While he was also a helper, this Joseph was mostly noted for being an encourager. Indeed, he encouraged the apostle Paul after his conversion, when many were afraid of him. (Acts 9:27)

Psychiatrists tell us that a child becomes what he hears. If all he gets, especially from his parents, is negativity and being told “you will never amount to much,” he will never amount to much. The child who is honestly being told “you can do it” will do more than he thinks possible. Encouragement (and its opposite) is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some overachievers become so to prove the naysayers wrong, but most are those who have been shown that they can do anything they want to do.

Encouragement is so much a part of the Christian life that it is incorporated into our assemblies. “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another.” (Heb 10:24-25) The word “exhorting” is the same word in the Greek as “encouragement” in the translation of Barnabas’ nickname.

Encouragement is something that does not need financial ability or physical strength. Sometimes it is merely being present. In fact, sometimes being truly present (actively listening) when another is speaking is a great encouragement. A kind word, even a simple “thank you,” may be all a person needs to encourage them. Any child in sports or the arts knows how important an encouragement a parent’s presence can be. More importantly, they know how discouraging a parent’s absence is.

One athlete recently said the most important words his parents ever said were, “I believe in you.” Sometimes a young person feels like they don’t want to hear it anymore, but deep down they know it is an encouragement, if sincerely stated.

Revering

The church needs revering heroes. I recently had a man tell me that every time he gets up to say a public prayer, it terrifies him; but it is not all about him. One young man (at least one) cried the first time he got up to lead singing; but he became a very good song leader. Preaching a sermon at age eight was not easy, but it led to a life of teaching, preaching, and writing. Getting up in public often takes immense courage, but we need men and boys who can lead in reverence to God.

Reverence, however, goes beyond the public worship. And it is not just for men. Priscilla taught one of the great preachers of the first century. (Acts 18:26) Women are often the ones who lead family worship to God, because some men fail to do so. Nor are they forbidden even if the man leads the family. Women even participate in the public assembly. They are allowed to sing with the congregation, and some do so very enthusiastically.

New Christians in a congregation that participates in congregational singing are often afraid to sing. They don’t know the words to the songs, and they may have

never sung in public before. Let us never forget that any attempt to sing praise to God is a heroic act.

Young people may be revering heroes at the most inopportune times. Any time one stands up for the truth of the gospel in the face of humiliation or persecution, one is a hero. “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 5:10) When one refuses to participate in hurting others, or chooses to assemble with the saints over other activities, one may be a H.E.R.O.

Overcoming

Sometimes overcoming is the most heroic thing of all. Just the simple act of choosing to publicly confess the name of Christ and be immersed for the forgiveness of sins, thus allowing Jesus to overcome sin, often takes courage. Even more so, if the person’s family oppose Christianity. The humble act of submission to Jesus overcomes sin. Everyone who does so is a hero.

There are other overcomers among the H.E.R.O. club. While we let Jesus overcome sin in the general, there

Encouragement does not need financial ability or physical strength.

are also specific problems that some people face, and overcome. Addictions are a serious problem today, and the church is not immune. Drugs, alcohol, sex, tobacco. When these become addictions they take one away from Christ. It is not easy to overcome an addiction, but it is possible with Jesus’ help. Just overcoming may be the only heroic act one can do. But some are heroes because they not only overcome their problems; they then use that to help others be overcomers.

The best person to teach an alcoholic is a recovering alcoholic. There is a reason that the twelve step programs insist on a person having a sponsor, or becoming one. The sponsor can help in ways that someone who never experienced the problem cannot understand.

The church is made up of forgiven sinners. Everyone has a particular sin or issue that they must or have overcome. Some people wonder why they have to “go to church.” Perhaps that is God’s way of putting them in touch with the right person to help them overcome a problem. A parent who has lost a child may just be waiting to help another grieve. A caregiver of a developmentally disabled person or an aged parent can help one through those situations.

Jesus said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28) He is the ultimate overcomer, because he overcame death. Every one of us, though, can say the same thing. Everyone may be a H.E.R.O.

CLEAN UP YOUR ACT

I am a slob. I know it. Although I may not be proud of it, neither am I ashamed. I don't like rooms where you would be afraid to sit on the furniture. I would rather call my house "lived in." At work, people wonder what my desktop actually looks like. My younger son once took my lifestyle to the extreme. In his high school years we wouldn't tell him to clean his room, just to "make a path to your bed before you go to sleep." My physical surroundings are a mess, and I don't subscribe to the theory that this makes my mental outlook the same. In reality, though, everyone is spiritually a slob, or at least has been.

Sin makes a huge mess out of our lives. Sometimes we are just comfortable with it and go on about our business until we become like the hoarder who died when a stack of old newspapers fell over on her. Some people collect pet sins like the "old cat lady" who can't live in her house because of the hundred or so cats living there. We lose all sense of the stench, and begin to think this is a normal life.

Jeremiah dealt with such people as we all have been. He preached to a people who had become accustomed to their sin.

For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them every one is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one dealeth falsely. They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore they shall fall among them that fall: at the time that I visit them they shall be cast down, saith the LORD. (Jer 6:13-15; 8:10-13)

Sin makes such a mess of our lives that we consider it normal. We forget to blush when we are caught in a sin, or see it in someone else.

Sometimes we realize how sinful we are, and try to fix it ourselves. After all, I am a basically good person; I don't need help, just willpower.

When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. (Matt 12:43-45)

This is the condition of the one who can fix himself, by himself. Sin is an addiction. There may be smokers who quit and never started again. Most, however, are like this man with the unclean spirit; they go back to their habit with a vengeance. Unlike smoking, though, nobody has figured out how to quit sinning cold turkey. Even the apostle Paul struggled with it. (Rom 7)

If we can't get rid of sin, how can we get rid of the mess? Won't it come back? Jesus is the one who can clean up the mess; and Jesus is the one who can keep it clean. In him "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." (Eph 1:7) Through immersion in water we wash away our sins. (Acts 22:16) Unlike the man with the unclean spirit, though, after he has "swept and garnished" our souls, he does not leave us empty. We receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) to live in us and keep the house clean. We may have been a mess, but Jesus is the "Merry Maid" service for sin. Except, he gives his service without cost to us.

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