

## **“Bold Faith and Great Sacrifice”**

6<sup>th</sup> in a 6 part series on World Evangelization  
 (“Seeing” the future makes the present sacrifice possible)  
 Dr. Jerry Nelson

Something has happened in our culture that it makes it very hard for us to think seriously about and give sacrificially to world evangelization. Steven Covey has written a book entitled, Seven habits of highly effective people. The book has been very popular in business circles and just generally for the past few years. The subtitle on the cover of the book is: "Powerful lessons in personal change". But inside on the title page the subtitle is "Restoring the Character Ethic". There is every appearance that marketing has forced the change in subtitle from an emphasis on "character" which evidently doesn't sell too well to "personal". It is ironic that in a book that emphasizes character the publishers had to downplay that issue and play up the individual in order to sell the book. (From Mars Hill Tape interview with Dr. Phillip Cushman).

Covey himself notes there was a time when our culture was interested in developing "Character" (integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, patience etc.) But increasingly our culture has become obsessed with developing "personality". "Your attitude determines your altitude" the sales trainer says. "Smiling wins more friends than frowning." "Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe it can achieve."

Dr. Philip Cushman (Professor at the California School of Professional Psychology) has recently written a book entitled: Constructing the Self - Constructing America. In an interview with him that I heard, he argues that something changed in America at the turn of the last century. - We moved from a concern with character to a concern with personality.

The quest became one of finding out what others like about people and then attempting to project that image. Advertising became the art of telling us what will make us acceptable to others. Advertising no longer centers on the product being sold but on what you will be like if you buy the product. The emphasis is on how good you will look, how healthy you will be, and how acceptable or even desirable you will be to others. And because life has become centered on personality (how do I project myself) rather than character (what I am truly like) we have lost ourselves. We are no longer real people but merely a reflections of what we think those around us want.

Many have noted that today we don't have heroes who demonstrate vividly and boldly some character trait, some virtue INSTEAD we have "stars" who project an image. Instead of the emphasis being on some higher good, some noble deed the emphasis has been placed on the person. Personal fame has become the definition of success. To be well known is more important than being good.

And with that change from character to personality something else changed. Before, "Give me liberty or give me death" was heroic. The emphasis on sacrifice for a

cause was noble. But now a person's life is worth more than any cause. I remember in the height of the cold war when Communism was perceived as a real threat to our country and nuclear war seemed imminent: The slogan became popular: "Better Red than Dead"

The slogan revealed that personality (the person) was more important than character (the cause). Even in Jr. High we reflected a changing culture. For when we wanted to justify cowardice we would say, "Better a live coward than a dead hero." The self has become so important, so dominant, that everything is judged by how it will affect my life.

This turning inward is profoundly troubling. Our well-being has become the most important criterion of life. Theologian Francis Schaeffer called it the modern person's quest for personal peace ("just leave me alone") and personal affluence (comfort). That is why it is so difficult to sacrifice today. It is because we are so focused on self, striving to fulfill our individual needs.

Dr. Dick Swenson (author of Margins) appeals to us to create "margin" in our lives. What was so appealing to us in his suggestions? Was the appeal "personality" driven? Do we want margin to simply make life easier for us?

Was it our ego-centricity that was appealed to? Or was the appeal "character" driven? Do we want margin so we are more available for the purposes of God?

What is truly most important in life? Is it our personal well-being?

Or are there virtues, and goals, and ideals that are worth even more than our lives? I'm convinced that our answer to that question is based almost entirely on our vision of the future. I think our culture moved from an emphasis on character to personality when we stopped believing in a God who matters. When we stopped truly believing that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. I think our culture changed when we stopped seeing the future as God sees it.

I bring all of this up about our culture because when I go to the Bible, especially the 11th chapter of Hebrews I see a people who lived very differently. In fact the author of the book of Hebrews saw them as very different than the people around them. I see a people of bold faith and great sacrifice. In chapter 11 the author gives his first readers and us this great list of historical characters who saw something that others don't see. And that "sight", that vision of the future, is what allowed them to keep on, to persevere, to remain faithful, to live by very different values than others around them. But before listing some of those people, the author tells us HOW they saw what others don't see. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1) Just as our eyes are the physical organs by which we see what is around us SO faith is the spiritual organ by which we see what is ahead for us. That is spiritual "vision". They saw the future and they were so convinced it would come to pass that they lived their lives accordingly.

Now beginning in v 4 of chapter 11, the author lists many people who lived by faith- that is people who ordered their lives not only by what they could see but more

importantly by what they could not see but believed God for. We don't have time to look at all of these examples but I want you to notice the commentary that is interspersed among the examples. After mentioning the faith of Abel and Enoch, vs 4&5, the author adds the following from verse 6: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." God says faith is imperative - absolutely necessary. But notice the faith is not just "faith in faith". Today we hear even among Christians such things as: "His faith will see him through." "She is a person of strong faith." "I know they'll make it - they have great faith. Such phrases come terribly close to being a belief that it is "faith" which actually produces the desired results. But the author makes it clear that faith has an object. Faith in what? or Faith in Who? Faith is in God. Believing that He is and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. These people had faith in God. They believed that what God said the future would be like, is exactly what it would be like. Continuing then at V 7, the author goes on to give many examples of those who believed God and directed their lives by that belief even though they did not see the results at the time they believed or in some cases they did not ever see the results in their lifetime.

In verse 7 we read that by faith Noah acted on the basis of "things not yet seen". He had God's eyesight into the future and he believed the picture of the future that he saw - a flood. In verse 8 we see that by faith Abraham obeyed sight unseen - "even though he did not know where he was going".

But what I want you to see is the commentary of verse 10. It says that Abraham was "looking forward" - he had vision. He had God's eyesight into the future. What did he see? "He was looking forward to a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Clearly the language used here indicates that Abraham saw more than a Promised Land where his children and grandchildren would live in peace and prosperity - He saw God ruling over the whole world. And in verse 11, again, the author mentions Abraham's faith and Sarah's. But beginning in v 13 we have commentary again. The people mentioned here were still believing God and acting on that faith, that vision of the future, when they died - they didn't receive the thing promised. Faith is believing God and what He has promised even if in this life we don't see the results. That is what these examples demonstrated. But again, what enabled them to do that? In verse 13 we read, "They saw the result and welcomed it from a distance. They had "vision" - they saw the future and believed it would come to be. As verses 13-14 instruct us: they were "looking" and "longing" and "thinking" about a better "country" a different "city" - one God was preparing for them. The truth is their "homeland" was not Canaan - their true homeland was the Kingdom of God - that Kingdom that God was preparing to usher in. These people ordered their lives by a vision of that future - distant as it might be.

In verses 17, 20, 21, 22, and 23 we see that by faith Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses acted in obedience because they believed God - they saw the future.

In verses 24-26 by faith Moses was looking ahead to his reward. In verse 27 it

says, "By faith Moses saw him who was invisible." He had spiritual eyes to see the future - he had faith.

Look at verse 39. "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised." This verse confirms or restates the idea in verse 13 - these people all "saw" the future from a distance. But none of them saw that future come to pass. You see, historically, the Kingdom of God was in the distant future. But they KNEW it was coming. They SAW it with eyes of faith.

And here's the point: Though they could not see it with their physical eyes and even though they might not see it in their lifetime - they lived, they conducted their lives, they invested in that future - because they believed it would come. The entire book of Hebrews reflects on the fact that the Kingdom that was promised throughout the Old Testament HAS NOW BEEN USHERED IN!

What message did John the Baptist preach? "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near." He preached that the Messiah, a new king would come and usher in the Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God. Jesus repeated the theme of John the Baptist and preached it: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." A new kingdom was about to begin.

And all through the Gospels Jesus spoke of the new Kingdom he was establishing. And then with the death and resurrection of Jesus that Kingdom of God was ushered in. That Kingdom is God's rightful rule over everyone and everything. Jesus himself said that the kingdom he began would start small but spread and spread until he, Christ, returns and brings that kingdom to completion.

And so, as we have seen before, Christ commissioned his followers, us included, to proclaim the Good news of the Kingdom to every people group on earth. So that more and more of the people of the earth would gladly come under the rule of almighty God.

But in Hebrews 12:1 we read, "Since we are surrounded by such a group of faithful people - people who trusted God even though they didn't see the final product - let us press on, persevere, run the race before us.

Let us "fix our eyes on Jesus". Here is that idea of "seeing" again. - faith-seeing! Jesus is the final and ultimate example of faith - seeing the future. This verse says by the "joy that was set before him" he was able to endure the cross. He had an unshakable mental picture of the future. And when we consider that Jesus as well as Abraham and Moses, and Gideon, and Daniel and all the rest persevered, we will be encouraged to do the same.

In verse 3 it says, "don't lose heart." In verse 7 we read, "Endure hardship."

And in verse 14 we see, "Make every effort to live holy lives."

And why should we do this? Because, like all those who have gone before us

(verse 18-28), we see something in the future. WHAT VISION DOES GOD GIVE US OF THE FUTURE? In verses 18-21 the author speaks of the experience of the Israelites when they came to MT Sinai. The whole experience of the Jews in getting the Law of God and getting a land of their own was a precursor, a type, a small picture of what would happen one day when the Kingdom would come in its fullness. Yes, in verse 18, the Jews had a mountain and it was an awesome experience with God. But in verse 22 you have come to a different mountain - You see into the future with eyes of faith to the completion of the Kingdom of God. Yes, here in verse 22 the author uses Jewish places and symbols("Mount Zion" , "Jerusalem") to explain it but notice verse 28 the author uses the more universal language, describing it as the Kingdom. "Therefore since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe." WE look forward to the fullness, the completion, the full extent of the Kingdom of God. What has begun with Christ's first coming will grow and grow and finally be completed with his second coming.

BUT what I want you to see is what the Kingdom in its fullness will look like. In Hebrews 12:22ff we read, "thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly (the angels of God)." "To the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven (all those converted to Christ since he left the earth). "To the spirits of righteous men made perfect" (Old Testament believers) and to Jesus..."

As we have already seen in weeks previous, this is how the Apostle John saw it: "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb"- the Lord Jesus. And they weren't ignoring God, they weren't pursuing their own selfish interests - they were worshipping God. We look around and see people denying Christ, whole religions antithetical to the claims of Christ, People who deny that God exists. People living only for their own well-being.

But the picture we are given by God is that it shall not always be so.

There is coming a day when God shall reign supreme and everyone will know it - and everyone will bow to it - with delight or by demand.

NOW THE QUESTION is: Is that the future we see with eyes of faith?

Do we believe that's what God is doing? That God is building his kingdom?

Is that our vision of the future? There is not a man or woman alive who does not live life based on their vision of the future. The only question is: what vision is it? Is it a true picture of the future or a false one? Now because these people had a true picture of the future and they believed it - they were willing to give their lives to that vision. No sacrifice was too great because they were not focused on their own well-being but they were focused on the future. In Hebrews 11:7 we are told Noah withstood the condemnation of everyone around him. In verse 8 we are told Abraham left his family and his country. In 11:17 Abraham was willing even to give the life of his own son.

In 11:25 Moses chose to be mistreated along with God's people rather than to enjoy the

pleasures of sin for a short time. And in verses 36-37 we read: "Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned, they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword...." Is there anything we are willing to die for? For that matter what are we willing to live for? What do we give our energy, our time, our money to accomplish?

About a week ago I spend some time with a young man who proudly spoke of his goals in life. He was in pre-med because he believed medicine is how he could make the most money. He was choosing not to return to his native country after medical school because he couldn't make as much money there. He had chosen his school on the basis of the one that would most likely position him to earn more money. He said it over and over again.

It seemed that his vision of the future is similar to many Americans - even many evangelicals: Work hard, earn as much as you can, live as comfortably as you can, and retire with enough money to continue your comfortable lifestyle. And Christians add the idea of "inviting Jesus into your heart as your own personal savior" so that when you die you go to a comfortable heaven rather than hell. These Americans and that young medical student sound very much like they have adopted the "personality"-centered life that Covey and Cushman describe. Their well-being is central.

I don't mean to embarrass them but in contrast I want you to think about Bill and Laurie Bolthouse or Jon and Kathy Haley. What future do they see, what vision do they have that would cause them to give up a lucrative medical practice or business here in the U.S. to leave family and friends, to humble themselves to ask for support and live in a foreign city, in a foreign country - and tell people who don't want to hear that Jesus loves them. What must they see to do that? What must we see to live our lives differently than our neighbors? What do we see that causes us to invest our lives the way we do?

Great Sacrifice comes from Bold Faith. Bold Faith comes from a God-given picture of the future that is so clear in our minds that we will pay any price including life itself to be God's instrument to bring it about. What picture of the future are you living your life for? Let me ask it differently:

If any one person could see how we spend all of our time, our energy, and our money - what future would they say we believe in.