

ZAMBIA DEVOTIONS

1. LOOKING PAST THE LIES

“Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, ‘We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.’ But the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.’” (Numbers 13:30-31, NIV)

One could imagine the courage it took for Joshua and Caleb to stand against the whole assembly who believed the negative information shared by the other ten spies about the ‘giants’ in the land of Canaan (Numbers 14:1-10). Joshua and Caleb knew the people they were serving were full of rebellion and bitterness, but still they tried to convince them of the truth of the situation.

When problems come, we should not put all our focus on them or rush to try to sort them out. Focusing on the problems and trying to solve them on our own reduces our ability to look at the big picture.

In the case of the children of Israel, their mission was reach Canaan and possess the land God was leading them to, step by step and one day at a time. Already they had advanced by spying out the land and returning safely. That should have given them enough courage, knowing that God was with them. However, the 10 spies saw some ‘giants’ and allowed the devil to plant seeds of doubt in them – the ‘giants’ were like scarecrows that presented a false picture and filled the spies with fear!

Sometimes in our daily lives we have fears that may not be justifiable. Whenever the devil brings up negative pictures of how a certain situation is going to work out, we need to pray. Without prayer, we will be far more susceptible to the devil misleading us.

2. WHAT’S IN IT FOR YOU?

“Peter answered Him, ‘We have left everything to follow You! What then will there be for us?’” (Matthew 19:27, NIV)

Our Master’s teaching was very hard. In this chapter (Matthew 19) we see Jesus instructing a rich young man to sell all he has and give the money to the poor (19:21). This made the rich young man sad, and he went away.

In our day, there is a great temptation to accumulate wealth or riches for ourselves; some have even gone as far as turning ministry into a means of amassing wealth for themselves. Due to the prevalent preaching of an ‘easy’ gospel message focused on worldly riches (“Come to Jesus and you will be healed or become rich”), God is seen by many to be a ‘magic charm’.

This is all contrary to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, who never made it easy for people to follow Him (Luke 9:23). All believers should seek to strike a balance between the blessings that we have in Jesus and the cross we should carry. If we are going to be true followers (disciples) of Jesus, we really need to check our motives for following Him.

Someone made the following comment: “Do not be willing to accept His salvation if you are not willing to give God all that you have if He should ask for it.”

We are more than volunteers, and our commitment should not be for gain. We are unworthy servants who are called to fulfil our duty.

3. THE WORLD'S GREATEST SCANDAL

“Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, ‘You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined Him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against Him.’” (Luke 23:13-14)

How an earth could a court sentence someone – who is proven ‘not guilty’ and acquitted as innocent – to die?

There was weakness in the one in whose hands the case of Jesus was resting – Pilate. What were his weaknesses? It appears he was not courageous enough to handle an angry crowd. It also appears he was afraid of losing his position as a governor if he judged against the demands of the people; they would have reported him to Caesar. Pilate was ruled by the fear of man, so contrary to the situation in Acts 4 when Peter told the judges boldly that he would obey God rather than man (v. 18-20).

Looking at the charges that were falsely laid upon our Lord Jesus, there was a ‘generalisation’ to confuse the judges. Where there are rulers and priests, one would expect wisdom to be found, but it was not so at that particular time – the hour of darkness was ruling (Luke 22:53).

Nevertheless, when the devil thought he was winning, God was turning that supposed victory into the greatest defeat. Out of darkness came our salvation. We thank God through Jesus Christ that He was willing to take upon Himself the world’s darkness and turn it to light and life.

4. DO NOT WAIT FOR A MIRACLE TO BELIEVE

“But Jesus answered, ‘No more of this!’ And He touched the man’s ear and healed him. (Luke 22:51, NIV)
“Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of His miracles had been performed, because they did not repent.” (Matthew 11:20, NIV)

The age we are living in is not that different from the one in which Jesus scolded people for demanding signs and wonders (Matthew 16:1-4). Many ministers and servants of God are under pressure to ‘authenticate’ their calling through miracles or supernatural works. My experience in Tanzania when I worked there as a missionary confirmed this. The fastest-growing religious groups or ministries there are those where miracles are being performed and prophecies are being made. I do not deny that the ‘charismatic gifts’ are active today, but sometimes these gifts are abused, and we need to be careful to not place more emphasis on the gifts than on the Giver.

Miracles stir people to believe after seeing, and that is not genuine faith. If true faith was generated by seeing miracles, things would have been different when Jesus was arrested. He performed a miracle in the very presence of his captors (Luke 22:51), but still they did not believe. Only when hearts are prepared for salvation will a miracle aid someone in their search for salvation.

So, dear reader, let us not be like ‘doubting Thomas’ and wait to see something spectacular before believing God. God has given us His Word, and the greatest miracle in our day is people being transformed from their old sinful lives.

5. A DIFFERENT MOSES

“But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in Me enough, ‘honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.’” (Numbers 20:12, NIV)

Scholars are not entirely sure about the nature of Moses and Aaron's sin that displeased God so much. What we know is that God told Moses to speak to the rock in order to bring forth water, but Moses does otherwise, striking the rock and calling the people "rebels" (Numbers 20:10b). After much courage and obedience, Moses faltered.

This, to me, seems like a terrible situation. For Moses to end his 'career' like that is heart-breaking. Throughout his life, he had been humble and loyal to the Almighty God. Many times, he intervened when God wanted to punish the people. But here we see his love, compassion and patience failing him. When he called the people "rebels", it was like he was judging them.

Moses was angry when he appeared before the people. He may still have been in mourning for his sister Miriam who had died (20:1). Still, this was not an excuse for the servant of God, because before him stood people who were dying without water. Instead of looking at them with pity, he spoke something closer to a curse. This Moses was different, compared to the one who was normally compassionate towards the people.

May God forbid that we as leaders worsen the situations that people are going through, even when they stretch us to a point of breaking. We are always supposed to exercise patience, love, longsuffering and compassion – and we are able to do this by God's grace working in us.

6. SIN AND DELAYS

"So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back." (Numbers 12:15, NIV)

Extended reading: Numbers 12

When the children of Israel came to a place called Hazeroth (Numbers 11:35), something unusual happened that hindered their progress – Miriam and Aaron, Moses' brother and sister, spoke against Moses because of his marriage and questioned his leadership (saying that the Lord had spoken through them as well as Moses). Their attitudes revealed deep bitterness, pride and jealousy.

Miriam and Aaron failed to recognise that the relationship between Moses and God was very unique and was different to what they had. In fact, many children of Israel knew only the acts of God. In his devotional journal, "Experiencing God", Henry T. Blackeby said that Moses knew God in a different way, and because of this, he was able to make better judgements about situations.

My own view is that when God summoned Moses, Aaron and Miriam to His 'court of law' (the tent of meeting), and told them that Moses is "faithful in all My house, with him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles", God was saying that they questioned His guidance upon Moses' life. This was an offense that called for punishment.

The punishment delayed their advance – the whole community could not move for the next seven days. The sin of two people affected the whole community. When we are working as a team, it is important to move together before God, and to always bear in mind that our mistakes may affect the whole team.

7. PRESUMPTION OR FAITH?

"Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the highest point in the hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the Lord's covenant moved from the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah." (Numbers 14:44-45)

The “Complete Christian Dictionary for Home and School” defines PRESUMPTION as “an act of supposing” and FAITH as “being certain of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see”. In other words, faith is being able to see what God has already worked out in advance. This is not possible unless one is close to God, who reveals His will and plans to His servants.

In Numbers 14, the people of Israel rebelled against God. And it was very unwise for them to presume God was with them after they had rebelled. In verse 42, Moses warned them: “Do not go up, because the Lord is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies.”

How many times have young and immature Christians ignored the advice of the elderly – about certain career options, or about serving God or going into the mission field? We really need to be able to differentiate between the voice of God and our own feelings, and God often speaks to make His will clear through other mature Christians as well as the inner peace of our mind and heart.

Don’t allow yourself to be guided by presumption – rather seek the voice and leading of the One whose guidance can be trusted!

8. PRIORITIES IN MISSIONS

“...and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation...” (Romans 15:20, ESV)

In Church history, there was no greater missionary and statesman than the Apostle Paul. He was a ‘latecomer’ in terms of conversion, but he went on to accomplish much.

For those who are involved in church planting, like me, it is important to study his life and the strategies he used. Paul’s ministry came from God – he was called and commissioned by God. He valued teamwork. He always paid attention to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. He would reach big cities before aiming for the interior. He was a tentmaker (self-supporting).

These are some of the principles and strategies he used. But what really enabled him to make an impact? He focused on pioneer missions, going to people who were truly in darkness, gentiles who might not have been given a chance to hear the Gospel from others. The same applies to us today: God will not fail to shower His grace upon us if we are willing to go to those who have never heard the Gospel even once. In those places, there is total darkness, and our lights will shine brightly.

It is a shame when people fight for pulpits, or fight over members because churches are too close to each other (making the ‘competition’ high). Why plant many churches in one place while there are still billions of people who have not even heard of Jesus’ birth? May God help us!

9. BARGAINING VS. TRUSTING

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.’” (Daniel 3:16-18, ESV)

To bargain is to try by all means to get something to your advantage in a deal. This is no place for a minister of the Gospel – or, in fact, for any child of God. We do not go to God with an appeal to get more out of ministry.

We should not even consider 'conditions' for serving Him, or say things like this: "I do not think it is God's will for me to be working without a bicycle (or this or that)..."

In the passage above, we can see how the three young men stated the facts about God – that He is all powerful and there is no situation that is impossible with Him. They did not try to bargain with God – they knew what He was capable of doing in their situation, and they left matters in His hands.

They also made sure that the king knew where they stood in terms of their faith and allegiance. This is total worship.

May God help us to know Him as those three young men did – putting our complete trust in Him, and surrendering to His will.