

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Jonathan Hughes

Four things we need to follow: Follow Faith

The pod of killer whales were finally closing in on the Grey Whale calf. The stricken mother was powerless to help. The pursuit of her offspring had been going on for hours, covering a distance of over a hundred miles. Now the calf was at the point of exhaustion and the predatory Killers knew it. I remember watching in morbid fascination this life and death pursuit on a natural history documentary. Remarkable though that was, I want to consider this morning a far greater pursuit and fleeing - one that will last a lifetime. We are going to continue our study of 2 Timothy 2:22 and see what it has to say to us in relation to faith.

Let us begin by reminding ourselves of this important verse: *"Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the name of the Lord out of a pure heart"* (2 Timothy 2:22)

We also need to remind ourselves of the important verse at the beginning of Hebrews 11, the chapter that stands as the great gallery of faith in the New Testament: *"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen"* (Hebrews 11:1).

I really like those two key words: substance, evidence. They lend a solidity to our consideration. They are words that I can relate to. Perhaps, like me, you may think that what Paul had to say to Timothy was really nice and important, but it is a bit airy-fairy! It sounds fine but what did Paul really have in mind in terms of Timothy's behaviour in the day to day choices that he would make. It is always so much better when we have real examples, involving real people so that we can see what may be involved as we pursue faith and flee youthful lusts. We need to remember that Timothy was probably in his thirties, at least, by the time that Paul wrote to him - hardly very young, so the lusts that Paul had in mind were ones that we would associate with adulthood. To add substance then to our considerations this morning we are going to look at the lives of six men and women who came into contact with David, the greatest of Israel's kings, and see how the choices that they made were examples of the faith that they had, and helped them to avoid the fleshly lusts that affect us all.

Eleazar and Shammah

Let us begin then by considering two men, who feature in the roll call of David's mighty warriors. We read about them in 2 Samuel 23:9-12: *"And after him was Eleazar the son of Dodo, the Ahohite, one of the three mighty men with David when they defied the Philistines who were gathered there for battle, and the men of Israel had retreated. He arose and attacked the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand stuck to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to plunder. And after him was Shammah the son of Agee the Hararite. The Philistines had gathered together into a troop where there was a piece of ground full of lentils. So the people fled from the Philistines. But he stationed himself in the middle of the field, defended it, and killed the Philistines. So the LORD brought about a great victory."*

All the characters we shall think about this morning were real people. They were not born super heroes. They did the ordinary things that make up living, with families and work and leisure time. And yet in the choices they made, they became a part of history that will never pass away. Those choices were made because of the faith they had. One of the youthful lusts that we face is the desire to fit in, to be popular, to be surrounded by people who like us and with whom we share a common bond. We fear loneliness and being in a minority of one. But look what happened to Eleazar. The Philistines were attacking and the army of Israel was retreating. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for Eleazar to go with them, to fit in, to be a part of the crowd. After all, isn't there safety in numbers? But no, that path was not for him. Faith enabled him to see that these were the enemies of God, and that His name, the name of Jehovah, was on the line and so he stood his ground. He soldiered on alone until his hand was so weary that his hand stuck to his sword. Another of modern society's failings is that we want everything to happen straight away. The idea of persistence and commitment is seen as old fashioned. And yet that is what is needed in the service of the Lord. Sometimes we may seek to serve Him, but nothing happens and so we give up. Or carrying on in what we have been doing for Him just gets so hard that we look for an easier path. Both choices were open to Eleazar, but in rejecting them, his faith would be remembered forever!

Similarly Shammah. What a persistent bunch the Philistines were! We should not be surprised when the temptations and challenges we face occur over and over again. Shammah appreciated his inheritance. God had given Israel their land and it was not to be lost to the Philistines lightly. Again, the rest of the Israelites fled in the face of danger. But not Shammah. He stood his ground in a field of lentils, and God gave him a great victory. I don't know about you but I would have hardly thought that a bean field would be the greatest of defensive positions, and yet Shammah knew that it was what he had been given and so stood firm. As we consider the attacks that are made today upon the absolute authority of the Bible, let us be similarly resolved to stand fast. Others may retreat from holding what God has said as important, explaining away difficult and uncomfortable truths. Never more so than today, we need men and women of faith, who are prepared to make their stand upon what God has said and given us in His word, and not to move from that.

Ittai

Next, let us think about Ittai the Gittite, of whom we read in 2 Samuel 15:18-23: *"Then all [David's] servants passed before him; and all the Cherethites, all the Pelethites, and all the Gittites, six hundred men who had followed him from Gath, passed before the king. Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, 'Why are you also going with us? Return and remain with the king. For you are a foreigner and also an exile from your own place. In fact, you came only yesterday. Should I make you wander up and down with us today, since I go I know not where? Return, and take your brethren back. Mercy and truth be with you.'* But Ittai answered the king and said, *'As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be.'* So David said to Ittai, *'Go, and cross over.'* Then Ittai the Gittite and all his men and all the little ones who were with him crossed over. And all the country wept with a loud voice, and all the people crossed over. The king himself also crossed over the Brook Kidron, and all the people crossed over toward the way of the wilderness."

What a terrible time it was for David, rejected by his own people, usurped by his son Absalom, and forced to flee from Jerusalem. It must have been one of the lowest points in his life. And yet at just such a time God sent him Ittai. He was from Gath - the Philistine town whose champion, Goliath, David had killed. Perhaps all those years ago, a younger Ittai had stood in the Philistine ranks and watched in awe and then terror as their champion had fallen. Yet here he is with his family and followers following David into rejection. In 2 Samuel 15:20, David even tries to persuade him to go back. Ittai had only recently come to support David, so why should he be expected to follow him into the wilderness and rejection. It was hardly a good move for a soldier of fortune! But that is exactly the point that faith makes. It enabled Ittai to see past the immediate situation to the reality, the substance of all that God had in mind for David. The silent, but almost deafening question, that Ittai asks from the ages past of a Judean mountainside is "Are we ready to forgo instant gratification, pleasure or prosperity for the certainty of future glory with Christ?" Note the certainty of hope that Ittai had. Under the walls of Jerusalem, perhaps in the hearing of all those who had chosen to stay behind and throw in their lot with the usurper, he boldly declares, *"As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be"* (2 Samuel 15:21). In death! Ittai was ready to make the ultimate sacrifice so that he could remain true to David, rather than looking for personal gain.

Following Jesus faithfully today will cost us. Financially, in terms of our time, our energy, our friends and in many other ways. We need to have the kind of faith that Ittai had that will enable us to forgo present, temporary benefit for the incalculable gain of eternal reward. Too often we are like children in this respect. Perhaps they have been given some holiday money and immediately they need to spend it. The prospect of saving it for a better deal another day, or for getting something better later is beyond their ability to understand. Their world view is entirely based on the here and now. Paul and Ittai would join their voices in urging us to flee youthful lusts and to pursue faith - the certainty of all that God has for our good in a future day.

Abigail

Next we shall look at Abigail. As her story takes the whole of 1 Samuel 25, perhaps after this broadcast you can read the chapter for yourself. To summarise, David had in his time of rejection protected the flocks and shepherds of a rich farmer, Nabal. At shearing time, he sent some of his men to request some form of recompense, but greedy Nabal sent David's men away empty-handed. In a rage, David arms his men for a violent reprisal, and is only stopped from shedding innocent blood by the timely intervention of Nabal's wife, Abigail. She quickly gathers together a wonderful array of food as payment for David and takes it to him. She intercedes for her husband, claiming that it had been she who had been at fault. She recognised that God had marked David out for greatness and prevents him from making a terrible mistake. Her faith had consequences on her actions. She was ready to give away her material possessions for the good of others. She despised the "get rich quick" attitude that so affects our society today when we look for something for nothing. So many employers look to get more than is reasonable from their employees. People play the benefits system to get what they do not deserve. Casino bankers look to make a fortune using other people's money and so the list goes on. I remember many years ago we had been shopping for shoes for the children. Absent mindedly, I paid for them using the credit card, wanting nothing more than to get out of the shop. It was not until we

got home that Dawn realised we had only really paid for one of the three pairs. My initial reaction was "Well, we have got a real bargain then", but she was adamant that we wrote a cheque for the balance and enclosed a note and a tract, and returned full payment. Like Abigail, Dawn had the faith to know that what was right was more important than money, and instant gratification was no substitute for doing the right thing. Sometimes, we even display this attitude in spiritual things. How often do you hear people want a single proof text verse to make a point, rather than realising that the whole of the Bible needs to be used for us to understand what God is saying to us. But then that would involve reading it all, and that takes time and commitment. Faith would see that as a good investment of time!

Solomon

The next person who came into contact with David that we shall think of this morning is his own son, Solomon. There was a time shortly after he came to the throne that God appeared to him with a remarkable promise. We will read about it in 1 Kings 3:5-13: *"At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, 'Ask! What shall I give you?' And Solomon said: 'You have shown great mercy to Your servant David my father, because he walked before You in truth, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You; You have continued this great kindness for him, and You have given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?' The speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. Then God said to him: 'Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you. And I have also given you what you have not asked: both riches and honour, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days.'"*

Can you imagine being Solomon? God has just promised you whatever you wanted - anything at all! And all that Solomon asks for is the wisdom needed to be a good king so that he could rule God's people well! What incredible faith in God! Solomon knew that God would provide everything that he needed and so he could ask for something for others. Do we know God in this way? The writer to the Hebrews, in Hebrews 10:24 wrote: *"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works."* Faith will allow us to recognise, like Solomon, that God is well able to provide for all that we need, and so we are free to focus on the needs of others! What a challenge!

Mephibosheth

Next let us consider the actions of Mephibosheth. You can read about his meeting with David in 2 Samuel 9:1-13. Mephibosheth was Prince Jonathan's son, perhaps the last surviving male of the house of the previous king, Saul. David so wanted to show him kindness, for the sake of his father Jonathan, in memory of the great love that they had shared. So he is brought to the palace. Perhaps Mephibosheth was expecting imprisonment or execution. Instead David welcomes him with open arms, and thus we come to 2 Samuel 9:13: *"So Mephibosheth dwelt in Jerusalem, for he ate continually at the king's table. And he was lame in both his feet."* So often when we think about this story, we think about it from David's side, considering the great grace that was shown to Mephibosheth. But we ought not to forget the faith that would accept that grace. It may not have been an easy thing to accept the charity of another, to become totally dependent on the good will of king David. And what would happen to him if David suddenly fell from power? Well, we get the answer to that last question in 2 Samuel 19! The faith of Mephibosheth would allow him to become totally dependent on David. Now in some measure an independent spirit is a good thing. But sometimes the pride of the human heart cloaks itself in this spirit. Old folk too proud to accept a lift to church from someone else, and so they do not get out when the weather is bad. The young mum struggling with household chores and her children, rather than admitting that she needs the help of others. God has placed us in the community of a local assembly so that we can be a help to each other, at different times and in different ways. Mephibosheth would call to us across the centuries, and say that faith must allow us to overcome our pride and accept the help of others, for their good, as well as ours.

Jonathan

Lastly, we come to David's closest friend - Jonathan. Jonathan was heir to the throne; he was a great warrior in his own right and yet none of that stopped him from being ready to play second fiddle to David. Caught between obedience to his father and love for David, whom he knew God had chosen to be the next king, he is torn between irreconcilable loyalties. So we come to the time when David and Jonathan are to part, in 1 Samuel 20:13: *"...And the LORD be with you as He has been with my father. And you shall not only show me the kindness of the LORD while I still live, that I may not die; but you shall not cut off your kindness from my house forever, no, not when the LORD has cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth."* The faith of Jonathan is quite remarkable. He clearly

understood that it was not his future to be the next king, even though he was the king's son. And yet there appears to be no spirit of resentment towards David. I think by this stage Jonathan may well have understood that he would end up dying alongside his father, and yet he still felt that that was where he should be.

Conclusion

When we come to the New Testament, we get the testimony of John the Baptist, in John 3:30: *"He must increase, but I must decrease."* In a society obsessed with celebrity, faith will allow us to be a nonentity, an unknown, a quiet grey person who quietly goes about serving the One who must increase, with no desire for recognition, reward or thanks. Oh, that we might have just such a faith!

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