

Straining for the Prize

(assorted passages that have challenged and inspired me to become a Bible translator)

August 8, 1993

Intro:

As always, it is good to be back here at Elim this morning. Paula and I would like to thank you, again, for the opportunity to come and speak to you and to just be with you. It is always such an encouragement for us to be here with you to enjoy your fellowship and your kindness.

It is also a special day because we have so many old friends visiting with us this morning. Seeing them all here reminds me of my college days when I would bring friends home from college for the weekend and we would fill up whole rows and after the service Phil Howard and Ken Cook would come by and vigorously shake every one's hand!

Body:

I guess, some things never change! (pause) Some things never change—Have you ever thought about that? If some things never change, that means that most things do! Kids grow up, people grow older, companies and governments rise and fall; come and go. Even churches undergo change, don't they...

And, as you well know, change is frequently painful, but through it all the Bible reminds us that there is at least one thing that NEVER changes: Jesus Christ, our ROCK and our redeemer! He is faithful and he will be with us and love us to the end.

Paula and I have experienced **a lot** of changes. We are getting ready to make our tenth move. We've attended four different schools plan to attend and a separate training program which is going to be the fifth! No wonder we've put so many miles on our car!

Whenever we face one of these changes there is at least one person who will approach us and ask, "WHY?!" "Why do you put yourselves through all of this?!" "Why don't you just settle down and find a nice house somewhere?!" "You guys are CRAZY!" (pause) Sometimes I wonder! (pause)

This morning I want to try to answer these questions and by so doing I want to encourage you by giving you some insight into how I believe God has led me to make the choices I have which have brought us to this point. In a few weeks we will be going back to Texas for three more months of training in order to be Bible translators for a group of people in Mexico who do not have the Bible in their own language yet. Why are we doing this? I could talk about the incredible need of a people living in ignorance of God and bondage to idol worship, but I want to focus this morning on biblical several passages that have significantly impacted me and my thinking. The Biblical basis, if you will.

I will be referring to several different places all throughout the Bible so don't feel obligated to turn to each one trying to keep up. I suggest that you write down the verse references down and look them up when you get home if you want to.

Before we look at the first passage let me say that one thing I have learned over the years is that, it takes all kinds of people. In other words, don't take these verses that I am going to share as saying that you **have** to be a missionary to be a good Christian. The fact is, in order to fulfill our responsibilities as the Church universal in the world today it takes Christians in all kinds of vocations. We couldn't do it all if Christians were all the same and were all doing the same thing. So, do not feel guilty just because you are not doing the same thing I am.

From the very beginning, since the first few chapters of Genesis we find what I consider the primary challenge. A challenge that you and I face in subtle way every day but which from time to time surfaces to challenge the very core of our faith.

Having said that, I have to admit that, personally, I have been powerfully moved by biblical passages related to missions and evangelism. You have heard me talk about several before today (like Rev. 7:9-17) so I won't spend much time on them this morning but I want to draw your attention again to the most familiar passage known as the Great Commission: Matt. 28:16-20: "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and

teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’ ”

Notice that Jesus didn't say “convert people”—instead he said what? “make disciples”—conversion is just the first step. Step two is discipleship. Who are we to make disciples of? “**All** nations.” But that's not all. Jesus also said, “teach them.” Teach them what? “To obey.” To obey what? “**Everything** I have commanded you.” (pause) I am convinced that people can **not** be “taught to obey everything that Jesus has command us” unless they have the Bible available in their own languages. (Now, you didn't think you'd get by without hearing at least one reference to the importance of Bible translation this morning, did you?!) (pause)

In the Garden of Eden the serpent challenged Eve's TRUST in God's goodness (Gen. 3:4-5). “Go ahead, eat the fruit. You won't die! God just doesn't want you to become like him having the knowledge of good and evil.” What was the question Eve was challenged with? (pause) “Can God really be trusted?” I believe that this is the question whenever we have to decide whether to obey God or not. If we really believe that God knows what is best, then we will consider him trustworthy and we will live as he as instructed us to live. But, when we doubt God's goodness or we ascribe to him some underhanded motive then we take matters into our own hands and literally REBEL against God. The essence of sin then becomes a simple matter of not trusting God and thinking that we have a better way.

When I first became a Christian some 13 years ago I made a decision that **if** I was going to trust Jesus for my salvation then I was also going to have to trust him with regard to everything else he had to say as well. I have not always succeeded, but it has been one of the foundational principles of my life ever since. This point reveals an interesting and real connection between faith, trust, and obedience. If we believe that God is good then we will trust him and if we trust him then we will obey what he has commanded. Disobedience implies either a distrust of God or disbelief that God knows best.

Not only can we see the issue of trust being raised in our own lives, we can also see it being raised all throughout the Bible. Will Noah trust God when he commands him to build an ark, will Abram trust God when he says, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.”, will Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Saul, David,

Solomon, the other kings of Israel and Judah, the people, the prophets, Mary, John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, the rest of the Apostles, Barnabas, Paul, Timothy, and the rest of the early church trust God? (pause) Will you?

If you have to ask how far should one trust God, the Bible gives an interesting answer. In Job 13:15, Job says of God, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope (trust) in him.” Regardless of how outward circumstances appeared, Job believed in the **goodness** of God and was prepared to trust in him **no matter what**. In other words, even “though he slay me, I will trust in him!”

Therefore, one thing you need to know in order to understand why I am willing to be a Bible translator in Mexico is that I believe in a God who is good and who is worthy of our trust regardless of our circumstances.

Another verse that has had an impact on me is found in Luke 12:48. Jesus concludes his explanation of a parable about servants being watchful and faithful until their master’s return by saying, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.” That is a very powerful verse for me because I feel that God has really given me a lot. I’m not just talking about materially but in every way! The family I was born into, my wife, my friends, education, health, opportunities, our country, talents, spiritual gifts... the list is endless. If you think about it, I’m sure that you will have to conclude with me that you have also been given a lot. Indeed, everything good that we have and everything about us that is good is from God. We have absolutely NO reason whatsoever to boast in ourselves. I Cor. 4:7 says, “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” Our very lives and who we are have been given to us by God, and we are obligated to be good stewards of what he has given us, to do all that we can to bring him glory. (pause)

Giving our best to God can be scary because it challenges us again with the question of faith and trust: Do we really believe that he is good and that he loves us; Are we really willing to trust him completely without holding anything back? When I struggle with issues like these I meditate on passages that remind me about who God is (like Gen. 1-2, Job 38, Ps. 115, Is. 6, 40, Eph. 1,

Col. 1, Rev. 1, etc.) or I think about how God has been faithful to me and others in the past. It is motivating to remember that God has never broken a single promise! (pause)

The above passages refer to trusting in God. Other passages that have had a powerful impact on me refer to goals that God has given us to pursue. For Paul and for us as well, God-given goals are to be seen as more important than even life itself. In Acts 20:24, Luke records Paul's farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus as he traveled to Jerusalem for the last time. Paul said, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me..." This is not a license for recklessness but it is a challenge to participate in the kind of radical Christian life. "And whatever was my gain I now consider loss so that I might obtain the glory of the cross. And I know no greater prize than the one I'm reaching for to know and follow Jesus my Lord." That is the life-style that turned the world of the first century upside down. If the goal that God has given us is more important than our very lives than surely it is more important than the comfort in our lives. Many people find it difficult to believe that Paula and I are willing to give up the comfortable life-style that we are accustomed to here in the United States, but the pursuit of a comfortable life-style is **not** a worthy goal in comparison to a God-given goal such as Paul had: "to testify to the gospel of God's grace." [Acts 20:24] We need to make sure that our priorities conform to God's priorities for our lives. Being comfortable is nice, there's nothing inherently wrong with it, but we need to understand that it might not be one of God's priorities for us in this life. (Dr. Warner...)

In Romans 8:18 Paul wrote, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." We need to keep an eternal perspective in front of us at all times. We need to remember that this life is not all there is. The best is yet to come! In II Cor. 4:16-18 Paul wrote, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." Don't believe them when they tell you, "It doesn't get any better than this!" It does! It gets **a lot** better than this! (pause)

The last passage that I want to mention this morning is Phil. 3:10-14. Paul writes, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” There is so much in this short passage but one thing we’re immediately struck by is Paul’s use of athletic terminology. Twice he says, “I press on...”; he mentions “the goal” and “winning the prize.” In verse 13 he says he’s “straining toward what is ahead...” I can’t help but picture a marathon runner stretching his/her neck forward as the finish line comes into view. Or a running back who is plowing toward the end zone dragging three other players with him! Indeed, one commentator put it this way, Paul is “animated with a scared discontent... running, pressing on, remembering at every step that although grace is present in power, and glory is in view, still this is the **journey**, not the **home**; the **race**, not the **goal**.” (pause) That’s the kind of single-mindedness Paul would tell us to cultivate this morning. (pause) And the good news is that there is **joy** in the journey and Jesus is with us all along the way!

Everyone has a goal. Everyone has something they are seeking after more than anything else. What prize is it that are **you** straining for in your life? For Paul there could be only one: He longed to hear these words from Jesus himself, “Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Lord.” (Matt. 25:21) (pause) That’s the only prize I’m interested in. What about you?

Conclusion:

I would like to leave you this morning with the lyrics of a song by Glad, which restates Paul’s sentiments in perhaps a more memorable way: “Whatever was my gain, I now consider loss, so that I might obtain the glory of the cross. And I know no greater prize, than the one I’m reaching for, to know and follow Jesus my Lord.” Make sure that the prize you are straining for is to know and follow Jesus our Lord. Nothing else can compare!

Pray:

Benediction:

May you, like Paul, know him in whom you have believed, and may you be convinced that he is able to guard what you have entrusted to him for that day. Amen