



GREATNESS

“The Life and Legacy of
Abraham”

Ingimar DeRidder

One

Great

“I will make thy name great”

There are lakes, and then there are the Great Lakes. There were battles, and then there were great battles. There are teachers, and then there are great teachers. And so it goes. The word great means above and beyond the ordinary and average. There are salesmen and then there are great salesman, surgeons and great surgeons. Every soul is designed and programmed for greatness. Every life has an undiscovered gene, a spiritual DNA, which is just waiting to become animated and developed.

Abraham never sought greatness, and yet greatness found him. God not only promised to give him a son, he predicted that he would make of him a “great” nation. Nehemiah described his life’s mission as a “great work.” Paul called our salvation a “great salvation.”

Everyone wants to be great; that is, every child wants to be great. That is the way we all start off. We all start out looking up with wide-eyed hope and great expectations. It is only later that we are told that greatness is not for us. It is only after many sad circumstances and sorry sermons that we begin to lower our sights. Ask any child what he or she wants to be or do when they grow up and you will see we are designed for greatness. Every kindergarten is filled with tomorrow’s presidents, doctors, lawyers, astronauts. If you don’t believe me, just go ask them. They will tell you with all the assurance and certainty as faith itself. Each child is reaching for greatness, even though they are not quite sure what it is. Something happens between kindergarten and the first grade. We begin to face reality and failure and unless we have great coaches and spiritual mentors we may misinterpret failure as the final word. Everyone was made to be great, that is we were all made to be great at something. Yes, you were made to be great.

It is neither pride nor arrogance that would make such an admission. It is the chemistry of life, for life itself began with a race. You are the result of a microscopic triumph when a single cell won a race against millions of others to fertilize a single egg. Life begins in a biological winner’s circle. It begins with greatness at conception. Any philosophy which attempts to hamstring the runner, or scold us for trying to win the race is more likely to be of hell than of heaven.

Communism attempted to make everyone the same and punished any attempts to excel. Millions marched to war or to work in dull grey or blue costumes and were relegated to become a drop in an ocean of conformity. China is just beginning to awaken from that coma.

Don’t listen to the voice of communism or of a Christianity that attempts to discourage the call to greatness. Don’t listen to those who tell you that you were meant to die a tadpole when you know you have this indescribable urge to hop. Don’t listen to the lies. God designed you for greatness.

This is a little book about greatness, and how to find it. It is a guide to help each soul discover their birthright. The urge for greatness must be turned in the right direction for many who have hoped for happiness have hopped into heartache.

Everyone is different. Everyone is unique. There are no two people exactly alike. Each has strengths and weaknesses. Each was conceived with the culmination of a great race. Each was

born with some great work to do. Those who find the right path to their destiny find greatness.

Two thousand years BC an important meeting took place somewhere in the heart of Ur of the Chaldees. God Almighty talked with a man named Abram. "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee; And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great..." (Gen 12). Abraham was about to break away from the pack. Abraham was about to push off from the shores of the familiar, ordinary, and the known, to sail into unchartered waters. He was about to turn away from the darkness and follow the light.

Greatness is a Himalaic superlative that most dream about, but few attain or deserve to have associated with their name. Most young people have daydreamed and seen themselves in the winner's circle, or on the Olympic platform accepting the gold medal (no one day- dreams in bronze or silver).

Many a young lady has pictured herself making her way down the runway holding roses and wearing the crown of Miss America. Young men have imagined themselves "taking out" that enemy bunker or leading a company full gallop in a furious saber charge. Greatness, means different things to different people.

The sin is not in wanting to be great. The sin, in life, is in being satisfied with mediocrity. The sin is not in dreaming, but in failing to "dream dreams." It is in allowing your imagination to walk barefoot in the bayou when it was designed to walk on streets of gold. It is in allowing the soul to peck in the dirt of the barn yard for some morsel like a chicken, when it was made to mount up with wings as an eagle. The sin is in always being a caterpillar munching on the leaves of mediocrity when designed to become a brilliantly colored butterfly and to drink the sweet nectar of full achievement. Man was designed in the infinite wisdom of God. Man is made up of body, soul, and spirit. Man is not a body with a spirit, rather he is a spirit with a body. It is not until a man discovers he is a spirit that he picks up the trail of his full potential. True Christianity does not seek to crush man's spirit but to set it free. Jesus said, "*I am come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.*" (Jn. 10:10).

There is a greatness on the basketball court, and another greatness in the courtroom. There is a greatness in academia and another in the business. There is another greatness that far exceeds them all. This is a greatness that Jesus spoke of: this is spiritual greatness. It is every Christian's birthright. It is every Christian's heritage. Yet, just as few have ever climbed Mt. Everest or followed the mighty Congo to the foot of Victoria Falls, so it seems most of Christendom is satisfied to read about spiritual greatness without ever discovering it for themselves. What a shame! Churches have a hundred Esaus for every Jacob, and a thousand Lots for every Abraham. There are an incalculable number of spectators who file into the bleachers of Bible believing churches several times a week to watch a religious side-show and be entertained who never discover that they were made for greater things. That is not Christianity. God never meant it to be so.

There is no virtue or victory in being satisfied with the foothills when God bids us to the mountain. There is no joy in the tepid waters of the temporal, when God is offering the cool, refreshing, living waters of the eternal. There is no shame in desiring God's best for your life, and refusing to settle for anything less. There is no apology needed for climbing the sycamore tree to see Jesus as he is passing by, or praying like Moses, "*Lord, show me thy Glory.*" Apologies are only necessary for those who dig a hole and bury that which God has given them to use and invest. Regret belongs only to those who fail to conquer the promised land of their full spiritual potential.

The Gospel indeed is the greatest story ever told, and the Christian life is the greatest life ever lived. Would you know greatness? You may never know the greatness of a Neil Armstrong and place your foot upon the surface of the moon. You may never, like Columbus, discover a new world. You can, however, climb the summit of greatness and enjoy knowing you didn't miss what God had planned for you.

Would you like to discover such a place? Columbus sought a short cut to India. He thought he found it. He did not. There are no shortcuts to spiritual greatness, but be assured there is such a thing. It is there that we find joy unspeakable and full of glory. Columbus was looking for fame and fortune. The person who sets out on the journey to spiritual greatness seeks the most beautiful and special world this side of paradise. This is God's will for each believer. This is not the temporal greatness of man. It is not a crown for our head or a trophy for our case. It is the center of God's will, it is the eye of the storm; it is peace. It may be a windless calm one moment and the next it is the full sail that catches the wind. It is the life so full of satisfaction that it rides low in the water to the gunwales. It is discovering why we were born. It is not for those content to sit on the dock and watch the clouds drift by. It is not for those who choose to be blind to the inviting horizon and deaf to the call of life's unexplored lands and continents. It is for all who wish to discover and experience the fullness of God's will for their life. It is not for the timid of faith who would forever hug the shore line of languid living. It is for those who would obey Christ's command to his disciples, "*launch out into the deep, and let down your net for a draught* (Lk. 5:4).

What is Greatness?

Just what is greatness anyway? Usually we judge greatness by comparisons. As children we compared Duke Synder and Willie Mays to Mickey Mantle and argued passionately about who was the greatest. Mohammed Ali insisted from ring side that he was the “greatest,” as he lifted his bloody boxing gloves in triumph. P.T. Barnum put together what he called the “greatest show on earth.” Even the disciples of Jesus can be found in Scripture forever fighting over “which of them was the greatest.”

The Bible warns us about making false comparisons. *“For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves; but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise”* 2Cor 10:12. But isn’t this what we spend most of our lives doing? How else can we determine which job offer is better, which school is superior, and who is more beautiful? The fact is we cannot help but constantly make comparisons. Everything we see, hear, touch, or smell can only be understood when we compare it to something else.

If being great is being above the average or ordinary is it not reasonable to compare the height of Everest (29,028 ft) and mount McKinley (20,320 ft.) to settle the question? Yes and no. The statistics may settle which is highest but not greatest. Greatness is not measured in inches. Greatness cannot be measured with a tailor’s tape. Greatness cannot be weighed on a grocer’s scale. Greatness is a spiritual thing. It must be measured by the spirit. A great salesman is more than his sales book and his shoe shine. A great teacher is more than her chalk boards, patience and penmanship. A great doctor is more than his strong stomach or steady hand and good memory. If greatness was simply a matter of doing or saying the right things, we could all be in the million dollar round table, or perform heart transplants. Every great person is defined by a certain spiritual something that burns like a fire or beats like a heart. Why do some seem to become great while others struggle to make it through the day?

Several things must be understood about this yearning for greatness found in children and recognized in a few adults. Greatness is the reason you were born. You were born to be great. If being great is being above average or beyond the ordinary you are that on both counts. Everyone is above average in some area and no two people are the same. There never was, nor will there ever be someone just like you. You are unique, you are different, you are special. When your uniqueness finds its path something almost magical begins to happen. You are in your element; you are in a zone. Take that great brain surgeon and put him in a class of twenty-eight restless nine year olds and see how great he is. He would be out of his element. Take that top notch salesman put him in the factory or the mill and see what happens to him and his spirit. Winston Churchill flipping hamburgers would still have been called Churchill by his friends but today the world would be a different place. It was during the darkest days of WWII that greatness lived at number 12 Downing street.

Growing up in New York, I was fascinated by the subway. I was particularly intrigued by what was called the third rail. That was the electrified track of steel that gave life to the train’s engines. A little protruding foot reached out from beneath the car and rested upon this silver ribbon that delivered 600 volts of electricity and gave life to the system. Without that power it wouldn’t work.

Call it God’s will, call it destiny, call it the desire of your heart, his is the third rail that animates certain souls and brings them to an electrified state of being. We have all met great people.

When the car doors of their lives open hundreds of people enter and ride their greatness and enjoy their joy. These “greats” have full classes at the university, their waiting rooms are crowded with patients, their stores are packed with customers. They carry us along through life and we gladly pay for our ticket.

Other souls seem to sit in freight yards or on railroad sidings waiting for large engines to move them about or for forces outside themselves to write their manifest or determine their destiny. These have no ability to generate power of their own and are resigned to being “pushed about” by others.

Faith is the spiritual third rail. Faith is the life force that snaps a soul to life. History is filled with accounts of men and women who somehow touched that rail while reaching out in the dark and, with that, changed their world and made it better. Martin Luther was one. He was prepared by time and circumstances, temperament, and education, just waiting to make contact with a power called faith that would carry him and thousands out of the dark ages into the light of the Reformation. Luther reached out and touched a text that rocked the world “the just shall live by faith.”

Countless millions stand lifeless, just inches from this third rail. Millions are pushed along the tracks by habit, conditions or traditions. Many feel utterly helpless as they are carried off in directions they do not wish to go. Occasionally someone breaks away. They seem to have found themselves or to have found God, but one thing is certain— they have come alive and they have miraculously begun to move on their own.

Children have a clearness and a sparkle in their eyes. With them nothing is impossible. A jolly fat man who loves to give away toys lives at the North Pole, the cow jumped over the moon, and superman is always able to defeat the bad guys. Isn't life great? Those eyes too quickly begin to dim. We don't always get what we want on Christmas morning, moms and dads get sick, and puppies die. If they don't soon discover the third rail they will be a rusting boxcar following whoever is in front of them. The great God of the universe designed each soul for better things than these. It is my prayer that someone will, by reading these words, dare to touch the third rail, that someone will touch the Almighty.

Most look for greatness (this animating joy of life) in all the wrong places. They look for it in positions, or possessions, promotions, or emotions. They think it is just around the corner or just over the next mountain ridge, but it is ever elusive. On occasion we read of someone who appears to have climbed to the peak of success only to take their own life while on the summit. We who are in the valley are stunned. Was not fame, fortune, pleasure, and popularity what everyone wants? No, disappointment is all one ever finds after climbing the wrong mountain, searching for the wrong treasures.

The pirate map shows where the buried treasure is with an X that marks the spot. Happiness will never be found under some X. Many philosophies and twelve step programs that promise a happiness that can be so easily unearthed are leading followers to a fool's gold. Greatness is not something we find; it is something we fulfil. Jesus was misunderstood by both friend and foe who found him to be a curiosity. It wasn't until the crucifixion and resurrection that his disciples saw the meaning of his early lessons. “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.” (Matt5:17). No one is an accident. Each life has a role to fulfil a mission to accomplish. Jesus knew full well where he came from and where he was going and why he was here. To say “I come to do thy will Oh, God,” is to reach out and touch the third rail, to touch the Almighty.

Greatness is not in a place, it is in the person. Greatness is not in the possession but in the pursuit. Greatness is not in shallow applause of our peers, but in the assurance that we are

fulfilling our destiny by doing God's will.

Not everyone is meant to be a Moses leading millions out of Egypt, nor is every maid meant to be a Joan of Arc leading the armies of France against the English; but everyone has the capacity to reach out in faith and touch the power of God and be born again.

We all have brief and close encounters with greatness throughout our lives. We all revisit the magic and memory of childhood in a kind of flashback if only for a wonderful moment now and then. When it passes we might well ask "what was that?" "Why did I feel so alive?" The answer? Enthusiasm. We just witnessed enthusiasm that rushed through like a weather front that bathed us with a welcome and refreshing summer's rain.

Children have it, successful people have it, great teachers, salesmen, and scientists have it. Enthusiasm. Enthusiastic people ride the third rail. They are alive and sharp and joyful. They give us a ride and they give us a rush. They fly by on the main lines of life while the majority stand limp at the station. Enthusiasm means "in God." He who touches God, or allows God to touch them has this power to turn the ordinary into an Opus maximus.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, Satan wanted him to do seemingly great things (turn stones into bread, jump off the temple unharmed, or become the richest man in the world). None of these things would have led to greatness. Satan attempted to have Jesus detach his will from the will of the Father. To do so would have made it impossible for Christ to "fulfil" his mission. Countless millions are turning stones into bread but they are unfulfilled. Millions are bungee jumping in a desire to find happiness in physical, emotional and chemical rushes, but they too are unfulfilled. Untold numbers are in pursuit of material possessions and have secretly made a deal with the devil "all this will I give you if you bow down and worship me."

God has a plan and a purpose for every man, woman and child. The first step in finding and fulfilling that plan is to reach out that little arm of faith and find the third rail, to touch the Almighty. When you do, enthusiasm will run through the circuitry of your inner most being. Look out world, the train is about to leave the station.

Three

Connections

Abraham had to give up the known for the promise of a greater life. That is called faith. And that very thing which others deemed foolish set the patriarch off on an adventure that would change the world. Many dream of better things, of undiscovered lands of glory and adventure but they never dare to even test the waters. They never try the waves. If they do sail, they are certain to hug the shoreline of the familiar and never leave the shallows. Besides, everyone knows that the world is flat anyway, and to sail against such popular currents would only result in another ship disappearing over the edge and into the abyss.

Columbus saw the sun sink beneath the sea each night and longed to follow it. He heard the talk of the day, he heard the church father's and the dogma of doubt, but he felt the call of the horizon as sure as the tide felt the pull of the moon. While others saw the dangers he saw his destiny. Those who are forever tied to the docks never see the wonders of the deep.

What a strange conversation, Abraham talking to God. Proverbs says, "*He that walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed.*" (Prov. 3:20). Satan will do everything to keep you from talking to God. God and Abraham were becoming friends. How many hours or days they enjoyed each others company is unknown, but when the epitaph was written it said, "Abraham was a friend of God."

Every great man has connections. Every successful man has established a network of good will that stretches over land and sea like invisible phone lines from heart to heart. Yet even a swollen Rolodex or a politicians mailing list cannot compare to one single connection that all great men and women have in common. There is a single wire that comes from their heart, that rises up and up and then disappears somewhere beyond the clouds. Abraham talked with God. Again, this is faith. The Scriptures say, "*he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.*" Great men talk to men, truly great men talk to God. That single string, that strand disappearing into the heavens gives life meaning. It empowers, it equips, it enlarges the soul. Cut that cord and not only do the lights go out, but the life is lost in space.

A fifty million dollar satellite was deployed from the space shuttle attached to a mile long tether. It was part of an experiment to see if the energy it absorbed from the sun could be used to generate future space station needs. When the cable snapped, not only was the experiment a failure, but the expensive equipment was lost adrift in space. Each man is lost and adrift in space until he reestablishes communications with mission control, until he learns to talk to God.

Talking to God or what is commonly called prayer is a vital lifeline that constantly reminds us that life is a mission. It reminds us that our life is much more than we can see. It reminds us that we are not alone and that we have access to support and guidance in every situation. Prayer reminds us that what we are doing is important and that our life costs something and our life counts. What emptiness it would have been to land on the moon if no one is watching and no one cared. God is watching and God cares.

Abraham was a man who would change the world. He would become the father of great nations. From his loins would come a people that would give the world the Ten Commandments, the Apostles and the Savior of the World. It all began when Abraham talked with God.

Prayer opens up doors. Prayer celebrates life. Prayer makes little worlds larger. Prayer

enables us to see over the circumstances into a boundless space of possibilities. Talking with God allows us to see the edge of eternity. Prayer lifts our sights and enlarges our soul.

Two men looked out of prison bars
one saw mud, and one saw stars.

Abraham saw stars. In another recorded conversation Abraham had with God, the Creator used a graphic illustration. *“And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell [count] the stars, if thou be able to number them; and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.”* (Gen 15:5). God is ever trying to get us to lift our eyes to heaven. We are so prone to worry about the mud that might get on our shoes. While God is ever pointing out the stars, we are more inclined to talk about our scars. We look down and fear, God wants us to look up in faith. We too often count our troubles; God says “count the stars.” Prayer makes us look up.

If walking with wise men will make us wise what will talking to God do to our wisdom? They say that once stretched by an idea the imagination never shrinks to its original state. Ideas made us larger. Thoughts expand our universe. One who makes it a practice to visit Omniscience is always a larger, not a smaller person.

Now there are plenty of people who boast of being on intimate terms with the Creator. But I don't believe them. When Moses came down from the mount his face had a shine and a glow, his life had a radiance. I am always suspicious of people who claim to have just come from being alone with God who have a scowl on their face, deep ridges of anger, prejudice, and hatred on their forehead. I am always skeptical of religion that makes men ugly. Don't waste your time with those who claim to have found the truth and hold it like a war club. Avoid those who claim to have acquaintance with the One who's very name is Love and yet hate you while they speak. Don't waste your time with those who claim to have talked with the Omnipresent One while they are themselves narrow, small, and provincial.

I cannot tell what mountain they climbed or with whom they have discoursed, but this I know, they have climbed the wrong mountain. They are charlatans and shysters they are emissaries of darkness who are ever trying to keep souls from breaking free. Real religion is recognizable. It is evidenced in acts and deeds of faith and charity (James 1:26).

Prayer is conversing with God and it is out of those stimulating and personal intimacies that greatness is born. Faith is convinced that God is friend not foe. Friends can tell it to us as it is. Friends love us and they seek our best. Friends want us to succeed and become all that we can be. Friends tell us when we are right, but more importantly, they tell us when we are wrong. We accept the truth from a friend even when it hurts. Friends sometimes point out opportunities we are blind to because they see from a different perspective. He who has no friends is poor. But he who is friends with God is rich indeed. The day came when God told Abraham that he could have a much greater life if he left the city of Ur and start a new family based on faith and obedience. Abraham believed his friend. The rest is history.

Relationships start with the first contact. If it was a pleasant experience the relationship is reinforced strand by strand until it becomes unbreakable.

Every story about a great work must have a beginning. Every story of success tells of when a dream was born or when a need moved a person to begin to search for a solution. Every Bible begins with Genesis. The greatest giants are spiritual giants and the greatest works are spiritual works. And the beginning of every spiritual work can be traced to a kneeling figure. Anything

of eternal consequence begins with prayer.

Prayer changes people. It first coaxes us to the outskirts of Ur and then turns our hearts toward Canaan. It finds us little and enlarges us. Prayer peels away layer after layer of the unimportant and helps us find the core. Abraham talked with God, and that conversation became a mountain of transfiguration.

Jesus said that if the blind lead the blind, they will both fall in the ditch. He who talks to God sees he who is invisible. He who talks with God soon walks with God, and he who walks with him, never walks alone.

In industry and science conversations have been the spawning ground for fantastic imaginations. Prayer is the starting point from which wonderful dreams are born. He that walks with wise men will be wise. It is a wonder we do not spend more time in the presence of the Creator of the universe through prayer. Not only may he drop some handful on purpose, he may strike a match that shall set our soul on fire or prepare us to face some darkness. Pray.

True Greatness

Taking up the subject of greatness can be as risky as taking up serpents. We will pay an awful price if we don't do it just right. Children should not play with fire. Many a finger has been burned while playing with matches. To tell someone that they were meant to be great can easily be misunderstood. If we are charmed by a rattlesnake's rattle we might fail to see its fangs. That Satan has his counterfeits is no reason to refuse all money. There is a right way and a wrong way to success. Satan is always offering shortcuts. Satan is a liar. The first lie he made to Eve was that she and Adam could be as gods. This is not the greatness God is offering us. Satan's call to greatness always ends in catastrophe. The child of God knows the difference between his Father's voice and that of a stranger.

Many a soul has chased after the golden grail of glory. Many a soul had consumed itself on a hopeless quest for the wrong kind of greatness. Many have attempted to fly too close to the sun and have fallen when the wax on their wings has melted. True greatness is not found in pride, but rather in humility.

"Seekest thou great things for thyself?" asks Jeremiah *"seek them not."* (Jer. 45:5). Why do moths fly foolishly into the flame? Perhaps they seek after glory or greatness. They are all consumed. Many men confuse glory for greatness. Earthly glory is brief, greatness is eternal. Seeking great things for ourselves is to make castles in the sand. They may be momentarily glorious, but they are but a tide away from destruction.

Pride feeds on the applause of others. Pride is addicted to approval of its peers. Pride will climb over the broken bones of millions to stand upon some summit. Pride is not greatness, nor the path to greatness.

King Herod climbed to the top of the political trash pile until he met an awful end in the year 44AD. He was dressed in a garment so beautiful that the threads caught the rays of the sun and reflected its light like a thousand tiny mirrors. The audience cried out after his speech, "He is a God." His ego drank in the poison and an angel struck him in his bowels. History tells of his agonizing death as he was consumed from within by worms. Herod sought greatness for himself and he paid the price.

Watching the miraculous ability of the Apostle Paul to heal the sick, a charlatan attempted to use God's power for his own gain. The demon he addressed turned on him and said, *"Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?"* With that the spirit set upon him and attacked him with a fury (Acts 19:15).

I do not recommend anyone reach out and touch the third rail of a New York Subway. Misuse of its power can and has killed many people. I do not recommend people toy with God. He who touches the Almighty must be grounded in faith and humility or be burnt to a cinder. Humility is the only insulation needed and the only protection for he who touches omnipotence.

Moses heard the voice come out of the fire and quickly complied with the request, *"Moses remove your sandals, for the ground you are standing upon is holy ground."* There he stood

with naked feet in the middle of nowhere talking to the Almighty. God was about to do something great. He was going to deliver a whole nation out of slavery and break four hundred years of bondage. Such a great task called for great humility and the Bible calls Moses the “meekest” man who ever lived.

We should listen to the whole conversation God had with Abraham. Here is one of the great secrets of greatness. *“In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed”* (12: 3). Greatness is not something to be used for self. Greatness is something to be used for others. This is why there are so few great men. We often want greatness for ourselves. We often want greatness for greatness sake. Such bread is filled with worms.

The story of how Arthur became a king tells how a sword embedded in a rock awaited one whose heart was pure and noble enough to release it from the stone. While just a innocent lad, Arthur, (so the story goes), removed Excalibur and ushered in the age of Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table. This is just a fairy tale, but the Bible is filled with golden swords that protrude from the holy rocks just waiting for someone to take them up and change their world. One such golden sword is found in the words of Jesus about greatness. He said, *“whosoever will be great among you let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.”* (Matt. 20:25-28).

Salome had ambitions for her boys James and John. She tried to use her influence to secure them positions of leadership in Christ’s coming kingdom. It is obvious she did not realize the nature of this kingdom, but she was true to her human nature. *“Grant that these, my two sons, may sit, the one on the right and the other on the left in thy Kingdom”* (Matt. 20:21). She acted like a typical mother. Any parent could understand her desire for her sons to be “successful.” She was however, thinking in a carnal and worldly way. The other disciples were just as guilty. They often argued about whom was the greatest.

Do you want to be Great? Do you want to be great in God’s kingdom? We should remember that there is a great difference between being “great” and being the “greatest” One is virtue the other is vanity. One is a desire to find and fulfil your role in the best possible way, and the other comes from a spirit of pride, arrogance and selfish ambition. When I talk about a Christian wanting to be great, many are surprised. Somehow they have gotten the idea that to be a Christian means that we become “drop outs” or “door mats” upon which others may trample on their way to success. The followers of Christ were challenged to get more out of life, not less. God wants you to be great.

Wanting to be great is not the same as wanting to be the greatest. One brings life the other brings death. The call to greatness invites us to smell the roses, the desire to be the greatest pulls the roses up by their roots so no one else may invade our garden. Be

Where Greatness Begins

Most people don't know how greatness is born. Most are ignorant to the spiritual facts of life. While the stars may inspire us to dream of great things, stars are too far to reach. Jacob's ladder came down from heaven, it did not rise from the earth.

Most think greatness is being high and mighty, when it is in fact very low. Greatness breathes the atmosphere of humility. Greatness is found at the feet of those in need. Most have it backwards. In this world, greatness is usually measured by how many people serve you. In God's economy, greatness is measured by how many people you serve. By this standard every single one of us can attain to true spiritual greatness. Although you may never have a single employee, maid, chauffeur, cook, gardener, or nanny to raise your children; and although you may never be seen in the world as "mover and shaker," you can become a great person. There is a God in heaven who has ordained an eternal life principle which is: he who would be great in God's Kingdom must be the servant of all.

As children we went through a period when we wanted to know how everything worked. Nothing was safe from our screwdriver. We dismantled clocks, and motors, and bicycles. Unfortunately not everything survived our operations. Children are naturally curious. You must be curious about greatness because you are reading this book. If we could take greatness apart in order to study it, what would we find? How many jewels are in this watch? The Bible speaks of three great gifts that come from God. They are faith, and hope, and love. When these three converge like three stars in the heavens, both the magi and the masses will notice their light in an otherwise dark sky. As the wise men of old knew a king had been born and set off to Bethlehem, so customers, clients, constituents, and congregations cannot help but notice when these three graces merge over a humble stable. The star over Bethlehem illuminated the stage for the greatest story every told. I'm not suggesting that any shall approach the greatness of God's incarnation, but I would remind you that you are God's children and thereby heirs and joint heirs to a great inheritance.

Heirs must claim their inheritance. All God's children are heirs to grace. Faith makes all things possible. Hope makes all things bright. Love makes all things easy. Faith is never far from greatness. Faith tells us that our dream is possible. Great men see over the heads of naysayers and those who say "it cannot be done." Great men look beyond what "is" and dream of what "might be." Farmers laughed at the idea of horseless carriages. Henry Ford dreamed of every family owning one. Skeptics laughed at Edison's dream of illuminating whole cities with electric light bulbs and today the light bulb is the very symbol of the bright idea. Some men watched the birds and dreamed that men could fly. Those who dreamed hard enough had faith that somehow it could be done. Those with faith worked, they tried, and if they failed, they tried again. Those without faith laughed until they read about Wilbur and Orville in the newspaper. Find a great man and you have found a man who believes in something. Find a man who believes in something and you will have found a man on the trail of greatness.

Faith gets us started. Hope keeps us going. Thomas Edison and his team at Menlo Park, New Jersey tried and failed ten thousand times to produce a filament for the light bulb. Mounting bills, and continual disappointment hung heavy in the air of the Menlo Park laboratory like the curling smoke from Edison's cigar. At last a strand of carbon burned and continued to burn giving off an intensity of 16 candlepower. "My light is perfected," said Edison. While filaments of a thousand different materials failed before the right combination was found, there was a filament in this inventor's heart that always glowed no matter how dark the night.

That filament is found in every great man or woman. That filament was hope.

As long as a man has hope he can go on. Once faith begins something, failure and difficulty may threaten to crush the dream. Hope keeps the dream burning. No matter how dark the circumstances, hope makes all things bright. Successful people are survivors. Survivors have one thing in common, they never lost hope. A firefighter rescued from beneath the rubble of a collapsed building was asked if he ever gave up hope. "No," he said. "I know that once a firefighter gets in trouble his brothers will do everything humanly possible and even attempt the impossible to get him out." Among the police force the report of "an officer down" will bring an army in blue which will come to the aid of a fallen comrade. Those who have that kind of assurance always have hope. Hope makes all things bright.

Hope is the assurance that things are going to get better. The cancer patient has hope that he will get well. The bankrupt businessman has hope that he will be able to start again. The prisoner has hope that he will one day be set free. Take hope away from these and you have taken away everything. As long as they have hope they can keep going.

The salesman without hope is not a salesman long. Hope keeps him phoning, hope keeps him canvassing, hope keeps him calling. If he believes in his product, that's faith. If he is sure that once people see as he does that they will buy; that's hope.

But there is more to success and greatness than faith, and hope. There is love. The great teacher loves what she does. She loves the children, she loves the challenge, she loves the sight of seeing the light go on when a student finally "gets it." She loves to help people learn. She loves to prepare them for life, to guide, encourage and challenge them. Money has little to do with her motivation, she would pay to do what she does.

Some have said that they would never hire a salesman who was not motivated by money. That's too bad. Good salesmen might be motivated by money, great salesmen are motivated by selling. Money is a wonderful by-product, but it is not what makes them tick. Great salesmen love people. They love helping people. They help people solve their problems, enjoy life, to be healthier, happier, or better.

Find someone who is great and you have found someone who loves what they are doing. These "greats" make what they are doing look easy. Love makes all things easy. The person who loves to teach makes it look like fun. The person who hates his job carries a weight on their shoulders all day long. For him, every day is a trip to the salt mines.

Even the super star of the basketball court begins to dim as he slowly stops loving the game. He has lost his first love. Other things compete for his heart, and once his "heart is not in it" his feet become heavy. Loving what we do makes us a candidate for greatness.

Jacob had to work for seven years to earn his bride. By today's standards and in an era where instant self gratification is the norm that would seem like an eternity. But not according to Jacob. For him, Rachel was worth it. *"And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had for her"* (Gen. 29:20). Love makes all things easy.

Think about that great salesman. Is he the one who tries to rip people off in order to make easy money? Is he the one who tries to sell things people don't need, and to people who can't afford them? No, not the successful professional salesman. He doesn't simply have customers, he has friends. He serves them and they know he cares. He believes in his product enough to be his own first customer. He loves what he does and makes it look easy, and he has hope that when you see what he sees you will want what he has. That's greatness!

The great teacher does not teach lessons, she teaches children. She looks into each child's eyes and loves them. She talks, but she also listens. While other adults, and even parents, may pay sparse attention to these little ones, she pays attention. Years may go by and other teachers will have been forgotten, but not the one who cared, really cared for you.

Greatness has always been touched by love. It might have been a hug, or a tousle of the hair, or a hand on the shoulder. Even a struggling fifth grader can be transformed by a loving touch, or the words "*I know you can do it.*"

Faith touches heaven. Hope touches our soul. Love touches others. The circuit is complete. Faith is the force, hope is the source, and love is the course of our actions. Love is the outlet that keeps us from drowning in ourselves.

The Dead Sea is dead because it does not have an outlet. The melting snows of mount Hermon flow down through the rocks of Ceserea Philipi into the Sea of Galilee then into the Jordan. It is an ever moving stream flowing south, blessing everything it touches along the way. The Jordan is a lifeline running through the heart of Israel. All its waters end at the Dead Sea. No fish can live in its chemically saturated water. There is no life there. So it is with a person who does not love. A person without love is a person who has no outlets. Everything flows into self and eventually the person drowns. But cut a channel, cut many channels and torrents will not only irrigate those living in the low lands, but eventually the Salt sea itself will begin to run clear.

A Dead Sea can become a Great Sea if it can find an outlet by which it can empty itself in service to all around it. You may have faith. You may have hope. But if you don't have love, you have nothing.

Six.

Great Again

How can a dead sea come alive again. Charles Dickens knew. Old Ebenezer Scrooge was a soul drowning in the bitter waters of self. Wealthy and successful according to his counting house ledgers, but he was bankrupt in charity. He did not have a true friend in the world. We are all warmed and inspired as we read the story of his conversion.

After his encounter with the three ghosts of Christmas he saw the error of his ways and pleaded for another chance. The long night ended and upon opening his window he was ecstatic to find that it was Christmas morning still. Determined to rectify as many wrongs as he could, he set out to buy turkeys for the poor, give alms to the needy, and to end his estrangement with his nephew and his family. Suddenly the miser became a fountain of beneficence and joy filled the air.

While the world of Dickens was not always filled with such charity, his imagination captured a dream and his pen described a crushed and bitter spirit that rose up out of darkness, and like a dove, fluttered for joy in the light. It was the song of a soul set free.

We need not wait for midnight visits from apparitions to discover the way to greatness of spirit and fullness of joy. Let us pull back the curtains of indifference and throw open the windows of selfish ambition to let in the fresh air of charity. When love begins to live, the world becomes a new world in which every morning is Christmas morning. Let us think of some kindness we can do today, some person we can encourage, some happiness we can bring. Let us discover the freedom of beneficence and let us become liberal in our charity and gracious in our spirit. Let us discover greatness is not found in how much we gather, but in how much we give. Let us learn that greatness is not found in seeking, but in serving.

The story of how Arthur became a king tells how a sword embedded in a rock awaited one whose heart was pure and noble enough to release it from the stone. While just a innocent lad, Arthur, (so the story goes), removed Excalibur and ushered in the age of Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table. This is just a fairy tale, but the Bible is filled with golden swords that protrude from the holy rocks just waiting for someone to take them up and change their world. One such golden sword is found in the words of Jesus about greatness. He said, *“whosoever will be great among you let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.”* (Matt. 20:25-28).

Salome had ambitions for her boys James and John. She tried to use her influence to secure them positions of leadership in Christ’s coming kingdom. It is obvious she did not realize the nature of this kingdom, but she was true to her human nature. *“Grant that these, my two sons, may sit, the one on the right and the other on the left in thy Kingdom”* (Matt. 20:21). She acted like a typical mother. Any parent could understand her desire for her sons to be “successful.” She was however, thinking in a carnal and worldly way. The other disciples were just as guilty. They often argued about who was the greatest.

Do you want to be Great? Do you want to be great in God’s kingdom? We should remember that there is a great difference between being “great” and being the “greatest” One is virtue the other is vanity. One is a desire to find and fulfil your role in the best possible way, and the other comes from a spirit of pride, arrogance and selfish ambition. When I talk about a Christian wanting to be great, many are surprised. Somehow they have gotten the idea that to be a Christian means that we become “drop outs” or “door mats” upon which others may trample

on their way to success. The followers of Christ were challenged to get more out of life, not less. God wants you to be great.

Wanting to be great is not the same as wanting to be the greatest. One brings life the other brings death. The call to greatness invites us to smell the roses, the desire to be the greatest pulls the roses up by their roots so no one else may invade our garden. Being the greatest means being “king of the mountain,” and then defending that position from all challengers. Being great is reaching out to as many as possible so they too can enjoy the view from the top.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to do a great job or being great at what you do. This is God’s will for every one of his children. When we run a race God wants us to all “go for the gold.” As a matter of fact, everyone should strive for excellence or for what Paul called “masteries” in 2Tim. 2:5. God would have us to be great at what we do. There is no virtue in being mediocre. Mediocrity is a heavy, hindering spirit that keeps us from striving to win the race.

Jesus talked about an “abundant life.” An abundant life is one that has more than enough. It lives as if it has enough for ourselves and enough for others. He demonstrated that abundance and fullness during his life and ministry. In Jesus, God came down to give us life and to show us how to live.

When God visited this planet he lived among us as a servant. He was not a king, but a carpenter. Jesus came into this world, not to be served, but to serve.

Do you want to be Christ-like? Seek only to serve. Open your eyes and look around at all the needs. There is no shortage of need in this troubled world. “The harvest is great,” but still today in the armies of service, “the laborers are few.”

When God visited the world he made, he could have come any way he wanted to. He could have entered the gates of time riding upon a regal litter being carried by a million angels in an awesome spectacle of pomp and ceremony that would have reduced the splendor of Egypt’s Pharaohs to a picture of poverty by comparison. He could have marched into our cities with a parade that would have paled the Roman triumphal by comparison. When God came to visit, he could have taken his rightful place in the holy of holies, that then empty inner sanctum of the temple of Jerusalem. He chose not to come in any of these ways.

When God came to visit his world and his creatures he “took upon him the form of a servant.” It was because he came in such a fashion that the world, for the most part, missed him. It was the common, poor, and humble folk that brushed by his simple garments in the market place, and heard him teach on lonely hillsides, that realized Immanuel (God with us) had come.

Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve, and anyone who would truly follow him must discover that the Christian life should be one of joyful service.

Jesus said, “If any man will come after me let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” These words have often been misunderstood and misapplied. The words “deny self” has led to many extremes of asceticism, physical humiliation and monastic fanaticism. To deny self means to “say no” to self-comfort and selfish immediate gratification in order to fulfil a greater good. It is service. It is a mother staying up in the middle of the night with a colicky baby while every ounce of personal self-interest cries out for rest. It is sacrificing self interest for a greater good.

The young man who aspires to make the grade or the football team must sacrifice personal comfort for what he perceives to be a greater good. Jesus’ call was a call to greatness. It was a challenge to get more out of life, not by seeking, but by serving. One does not climb to

greatness, instead one stoops to find it. The greatest life is the life of service. Jesus lived the greatest life.

Even as Jesus was about to enter the passion of the crucifixion, the disciples were thinking about power and positions. In the upper room of the Last Supper Jesus assumed the position of the lowliest servant. He removed his outer garment and girded himself with a towel. He took a basin and began to wash his disciple's feet. This was more than Peter could bear. He vehemently protested, but Jesus insisted,

“Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord and ye say well; for so I am. If I, then your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.”

We know that Jesus came to die on the cross for our sins. Why did he do it? Why did he come? Listen to him explain: *“For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me”* John 3:38.

We went to an amusement park with a group of teenagers. We older folks watched as they rode those bone shaking, stomach churning, death-defying rides. How was it? We would ask. Invariably they would exclaim, “It was great.” “Great” is a superlative that crowns something a triumph or a success. When our lives on earth are over and finally coast to the last stop, perhaps the angels will ask, “how was it?” Those who took the track of service will be able to say it was “great.”

He lives the most who gives the most. God has placed us in a world filled with needs. Recognizing needs and stooping to meet them is the path of service. Service is doing whatever needs to be done, or at least being willing to do it. There is no shortage of dirty feet in this needy world. There is no shortage of floors that need scrubbing, or people who need encouragement. No one is nearer to heaven than when he stoops to serve.

We are not suggesting that unless we are doing menial, dirty, or difficult work, we are not serving. Serving takes many forms. What we are suggesting is that we “reach for the brush” gladly if there is no one else to scrub the floor; we willingly accept the needed assignment. When we set out upon the road of the Christian life with all its promised abundance, we should go with both a Bible and a basin. We should never forget that we have been saved to serve. Our prayer should be, “Lord, make me a servant.”

How do we serve God?

Here is a provocative thought. Every religion and religious person believes that they are “serving” God. More mischief has been performed in the name of God than we care to say. Each church, temple, denomination or cult insists that they are God’s “true servants.” This, of course makes things very confusing and often unsettling. One man leaving an offering at the temple is convinced without a doubt that he is “serving God.” Another involved in the Inquisition of the Middle Ages was sure he was doing God’s bidding, the cries of the tortured not withstanding. Even those who hung Jesus upon a cross believed they were serving the best interests of the Almighty. Jesus predicted that his followers would be persecuted by those who thought they were doing God a service.

Faith is never greater than the object of that faith. Let us go beyond the kindergarten of Christian theology and assume, as a given, that the object of our faith is Jesus Christ and him alone, so that when we talk about serving God we know what we are talking about. However, let us be careful that our service is not bigoted, ritualistic, or regimented by tradition or heritage. Let us make sure it is a conscious, calculated, and careful service.

There are four types of people in the world as related to God. First there are those who reject the idea of submission and obedience to a Supreme Being and are anti-God. They are against all edicts, standards, and commandments of the Bible. These are those who think nothing of taking God’s name in vain, or defiling a friend or defrauding a neighbor. From a biblical perspective, we can safely say that these people are working “against God.”

Then there are those people who do not necessarily have an axe to grind with God. They do not argue about the commandments or the rules of heaven. As a matter of fact, they have no thought of God at all in their daily lives. They live as if there is no such thing as God. They are unbelievers. They work without God. They don’t pray. They don’t invoke his name or consider his will.

Next, there are those who have read God’s Word and have responded to it positively. They believe in him and in his wisdom so much that they set out to please and serve him. They teach Sunday School. They serve on the board. They sing in the choir, and do a thousand other errands for heaven. These are the dear saints that make up the army for necessary church activity. These are the un-sung heroes of Christian work. From their ranks, all too often we see those who drop out, exhausted, spent, weary and wounded. That there are all too many casualties in Christian service demands an explanation. I believe it is simple. There is a difference between working “for” someone and working “with” someone. Many, in their minds, think they are working for God, while in fact, they are working without him.

It is like the boy scout helping the little old lady across the street in order to earn his merit badge. He is doing a great job except for one little problem. She doesn’t want to go. The parents of Jesus once presumed that their son was in their entourage as it departed from Jerusalem and made its way back to Nazareth. They were wrong, “*supposing him to be in the company*” (Lk. 2:44). They left him behind. Many a Christian is so busy with the work that they “suppose” God is with them just because they are doing religious or church work. We must make sure that Jesus is with us before we teach, or give, or go. We must not just work “for” God, we must work “with” him.

Eight

Who God Uses

We need only study the one who served God more faithfully than any other to discover what serving God is. Jesus said, *“I always do those things that please him”* (Jn 8:29). This “pleasing of God” was the touch stone of the greatest life ever lived. When Jesus was baptized, a voice came out of heaven saying “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” This scarcely resembles much of what passes for religious service today. We pretty much do as we please today. The desire to please God is the desire to serve God. What exactly is serving God?

Jesus was serving God when he was washing the quarreling disciple’s feet. Jesus was serving God when he was feeding the hungry. Jesus was serving God when he was erasing ignorance with truth. Jesus served God when he touched people and made their lives better. Jesus went about doing good everywhere he went. That is service. That is pleasing God. God is still looking for servants who are not afraid to serve.

It is a mistake to think that God is looking for “professionals” to do his work. It is a mistake to divide the church of Christ into laity and clergy. While God has chosen his special people to become his pastor/teachers, evangelists, and missionaries, he most often calls and uses ordinary people to do his greatest work. Fisherman, farmers, shepherds, civil service workers, and soldiers have been his greatest instruments.

God uses ordinary people. When God wanted to impact the world, do a work, or get some job done he used what have been called the civilians of Christian service, the “lay-man.” The idea of “lay-man” is unfortunately an Old Testament carry-over taken from the age of the priesthood and temple. If someone holds to such an occupational distinction today, they should be reminded that God used the ordinary and non-professional, not only to build the New Testament Church, but the lay-man was also God’s most frequent choice even in the Old Testament. Amos was a farmer, Joshua was a soldier, Moses was a shepherd, David was a king. When God had a special job to do, he most often called the “non-professional.”

The Bible is filled with accounts of common people doing uncommon things in the name and in the power of God. In Mark 12:37 we are told that the “common” people gladly heard what Jesus had to say. It should be pointed out that it was the religious professionals who most opposed the work and ministry of Christ. I am afraid that it is the same today. I do not just mean the liberal, modernistic clergy. The church has created an industry of professional church builders who, like the Pharisees of the first century have personal and political reasons to control things. This is an uncomfortable subject that should be considered at some other time, but it will suffice here to point out that given the choice, God usually chose the ordinary lay-man. He is looking for the willing, prepared and faithful person to use in special and remarkable ways. God is looking for servants.

God has a plan for everyone. Because this is so, every believer should set out to discover and do the will of God. How can we discover God’s will? Sometimes Christians worry about being “out of God’s will.” There are several general principles to keep in mind when considering just what exactly is God’s will for our lives. Proverbs gives us real insight into discovering the will of God. *“The path of the just is as a shining light, that shineth more and more, unto a perfect day.”*

Notice first that God’s will is a direction. God’s will is more a path than a place. Where you are or where you have been are not as important as where you are going. Life is a journey. Being in God’s will (being in harmony with heaven) is not something that is static or stagnant.

The question I must ask is, “Am I on the right path?” What is the right path? If my heart is fixed on heaven, I bring heaven down under every step I take. Once I turn my heart to heaven seeking to be in harmony with it, I can make the most of every moment enjoying it, enduring it or learning from it, believing each step is God’s will (or life’s best) for me. I can thank God for every situation or circumstance if I recognize them as simply stepping stones along a path of a glorious journey. No tragedy or triumph is the final word unless I stop. God’s will is an odyssey and an adventure. Jesus said “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man cometh unto the father but by me” Jn 14:6. To place our faith in Jesus is to place our foot on a path. Are we willing to follow the one who lived the greatest life? Are we willing to follow Jesus? Are we seeking to live for him and trust in him and learn of him? It mattered little to the Apostle Paul whether he was working as a tent maker or a candlestick maker. Neither was an end, but a means to an end. God’s will is a direction.

The word repentance simply means “about face.” It means “turn around.” When we turn our hearts toward heaven we are half way home. Remember God talking to Abraham? “Abraham, look now toward heaven.” When we look toward heaven we turn in the right direction. The ministry of Christ was to get people to “turn.” We end up in the direction we point. Where do you want to go?

God’s will is always light. Staying in God’s will requires staying in the light. We get off tract when we leave the light for darkness. “He that saith he is in the light and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now” 1Jn. 2:9. We are to attend to the condition of our heart. This does not mean that we will always be in pleasant situations. It means we will always be pleasant in situations because we see things in the light of eternity.

In Joseph’s case, one day he was in the pit, another day he found himself in a position of power. One day he was in prison and the next he was in the palace. It was all God’s will. Don’t mistake a place for a purpose. It is not where you are, but where you are going that is important. Paul put it this way “*I have learned, in whatsoever state I am to be content. I know both how to be abased and I know how to abound*” Philippians 4:11-12.

The proverb says, “more and more.” That is progress. You have not arrived yet, but you are making progress. God’s will is progressive. God has a plan and a program of growth for every one of his children. Every situation, trouble, and trial is an opportunity for growth. Any task, job or ministry is only a means to an end. It is not the end. The moment it becomes an end it becomes a dead end. It is God’s will that we always grow and learn and progress. Each active Christian worker must realize that even their ministry is not an end, but a place along a long path. God’s will gets clearer as we go along, just as the day gets brighter as the sun rises in the morning. God is progressive. The idea that God is “old fashioned” is ridiculous. God is more modern than tomorrow, for God transcends time. God is marching on. Those who wish to remain in his will must not drive their tent stakes too deeply in the sand. Abraham lived in tents and was ever on the move.

The safest place to be in all the world is upon the path of some divine duty. This is where every obedient Christian will be found. Nothing can harm the saint who is faithfully traveling the path of duty shrouded in the protective mantle of obedience. Nothing can destroy a man or woman on a holy errand.

James Thomas Flexner wrote of Washington in the Indian wars before he led the armies of the American Revolution.

“The officers on their horses were perfect targets. One after another they went down. Washington’s horse was shot from under him. He leapt on another. Bullets tore his coat. Braddock toppled over. Washington’s second horse crumpled; his hat was shot off. However, as he later wrote, ‘the miraculous care of Providence... protected me beyond all human

expectation.” (Washington: The Indispensable Man , Little, Brown Boston 1974 P.26)

History is filled of such unexplainable accounts of deliverance to those who were destined to accomplish some great task and make an important mark in time. *The Psalmist wrote “a thousand shall fall at thy side and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee” Ps 91.*

God’s will is for the pure. This will of God is called the path of the “just.” Jesus said, *“blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”* Yes, there is a sense in which this speaks theologically of our legal standing and justification, but simply put it means God does not use a dirty vessel. It behooves us to walk in cleanliness, honesty and in integrity. We should not expect to find God’s will (God’ purpose) if our hearts are not pure before Him any more than we should expect to abuse our body and expect it to remain healthy. Without a pure heart one might attain notoriety, but never greatness. One may briefly steal a newspaper headline, but today’s newspaper may wrap tomorrow’s fish. We should not expect God’s will if our motives are not pure and our intentions noble.

How can a person prepare his heart to discover and stay on the path of God’s will? Proverbs 3:5-9 answers that question. There are four steps described for us. The first is to “trust” God. We are told in another place that without faith, it is impossible to please him. We trust his wisdom, will and power. We abandon our will and plans for his greater will and plan. We place a complete confidence in his methods and ministry in our lives. We believe that the just shall live by faith.

The second thing we need to do is “acknowledge” him. Successful people are grateful people. The great salesman acknowledges others and thus builds bridges that carry kind words and business back and forth. The most successful people build a network of good will by recognizing the things others do. This “acknowledging” of God brings gratitude to a much higher level. It means that we are to look for God each and every moment of the day, recognizing his hand in everything and being grateful. “In all thy ways acknowledge him.” The puritans of colonial America looked for and saw God in every detail of their lives. Each aspect and element of their life was an object lesson for the goodness, or greatness of God. Every experience was a classroom. Whether they were plowing a field, or mending a fence, they desired that all would be a teacher or a testimony about God. Modern day Christians are more prone to put God away until it is time for church on Sunday. To acknowledge God in all our ways means to look for God, or God’s will, or God’s attributes and character in everything. It might mean thanking God for inventing the cabbage as you place it in your shopping cart at the supermarket. It might mean praising God that he has given you a warm sweater in the winter or a cool glass of water in the heat of Summer.

The third aspect of preparing to discover and do God’s will is holding an appropriate attitude in respect to God’s holiness. The most successful people play fair. They have a real sense of right and wrong and live by a code of integrity that fosters confidence and trust from others. Speaking of God, we are told to “fear him.” While there is much said these days about God wanting to be man’s friend and about God’s love, it is rare to hear anything said about fearing the Almighty. Do people fear God? The result of fearing God is simple and is seen in the completion of the verse (Prov. 3:7) “depart from evil.” If someone does not depart from evil it is because they do not fear God enough. Because they believe they are insured by grace, many foolish souls play with matches. Successful and truly great men do not tempt heaven.

The person who buys a radar detector for their automobile does not display the best intentions to honestly obey the law. If he did, he might invest in an alarm to sound whenever he exceeded the speed limit so he would be reminded to slow down. He fears getting caught, more than he fears being a law breaker. In Genesis 22:12 we are told that the willing sacrifice of Isaac to God demonstrated that Abraham “feared” God. When Joseph fled from Potiphar’s house and

his immoral wife he proved he “feared” God by departing from evil.

No one is going to find God’s will if their heart is dirty. *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”* Matt. 5:8. David prayed *“Search me oh God, and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting”* Ps. 139:23. First there is a fear, which leads to the prayer, which leads to the searching and self-examination, which leads to the “way everlasting.” The will of God is written in the laws of nature and are all around us. It is the will of God that the sun appear to rise every day, and that the world sleep each night in darkness. It is the will of God that stones roll and birds fly. There are also laws of the spirit that must be embraced and employed if we are to get the most out of life. God has a design or a plan commonly called God’s “will.” We can find it if we seek for it with all our hearts.

Geography of Greatness

Life is a journal. It is also a journey. There is a certain kind of landscape to life, and we each must try to find our way across it. There are the mountains and the valleys. We all have been on heights, and who has not at times found themselves in the depths? Every man on a mission must ford rivers, cross deserts, and climb the steeps. But in the geography of greatness there are also the cities. Sometimes the flashing lights of some Vanity Fair can blind the careless and cause men to forget the greater vision. The black light of Sodom blinded those who dared stare too long at its artificial brilliance.

The story of Abraham is that of leaving one city and looking for another. He left Ur and was in search of “*a city which had foundations, whose builder and maker was God*” (Heb. 11:10). Sodom is the enemy to all in search of heavenly cities. Anyone who has ever read the story of Abraham has heard about Sodom. Sodom was the place where Abraham’s nephew Lot chose to live. Sodom was the place marked for destruction and was the object of God’s wrath. It is a foolish bird that builds its nest in a tree marked by the lumberjack.

When most people think of Sodom they think of sexual perversion. This city has lent its name to shamefulness and debauchery. Yet such behavior, which in itself is awful (in its curse and consequence) it is not what should alarm those travelers who must walk near its gates. The sins of Sodom are more sensual and seductive than sex. Few who get caught in its tar pits ever escape its grasp. Many a man (or woman) looking for greater cities have entered its gates and settled for less. Many who have hoped for greater things have lingered too long in its taverns and have become intoxicated with the liquors of a lower life.

The Prophet Ezekiel lays out the great sins of Sodom clearly. They have ruined many a man and they have destroyed many a great dream. “*this is the iniquity of ...Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness...*” Ezk.16:49. These sins can bring down a man or a nation. Many who have avoided sins of scarlet have soiled their robes in these more subtle sins. Pride blinds the man of vision. Pride hardens his heart. Pride deceives people into thinking they have crossed the finish line when they are still miles away from the checkered flag. Proud men are no longer running, and in pride they lose the race. Pride was the blackest sin of Sodom.

The second sin was “fullness of bread.” Jesus said, “blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” It is hunger that pushes us on. It is hunger that makes us go. Without hunger, few would endure the heat of the sun to plant, let alone the backbreaking work of the harvest. We often explain failure by saying that a man “was not hungry enough.” Many a champion suffering from “fullness of bread” is brought to the canvas with a punch from a more “hungry” contender. We should always remain a little bit hungry. Great men know when to push themselves away from the table. It is well known that men who go to bed hungry dream about food. Go to bed hungry.

The third sin of Sodom was “abundance of idleness.” Instead of giving us energy, too much leisure drains a man of power and strength. A mind and soul that feeds on “amusements” is feeding on husks. Sodom may never have been destroyed had it not so prospered. Hard work would have emptied its taverns and busy hands would have had little time to take up serpents. The sins of Sodom should sound a warning to Western Civilization which, if it is not careful, will follow its sister city as much in its burial as it does in its beliefs. Great men on great errands have no time for Sodom and its seductions. Great men walk more quickly when the road brushes by its gates. Lesser men like Lot first look, then linger, and then live within its walls. And if they are fortunate enough to escape the fire and brimstone, their wives, their families, their fortunes and their futures are never what they might have been had they not been so foolish. Humility, hunger, and hard work are the virtues of great men.

One More Mountain

There was one last obstacle that stood between Abraham and his legacy. There was one last final rite of passage before the world would hear of this great “friend of God.” There was the matter of Moriah. Although one hundred and twenty years old, Abraham little realized that his greatest test lay before, not behind him. God would ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

As incredible as it may sound, that is exactly the price of true greatness. One day God asked Abraham to take his son Isaac, his only son and offer him up as a sacrifice to God. How could this be? What was happening? Why would God ask an old man, such a thing? A million sermons have taken up this tale and it has come to foreshadow a much greater test of love and greater sacrifice on Mt. Calvary when God himself would do no less than he asked his friend to do. The Crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the greatest sacrifice the world has ever witnessed, and what happened there is the tale of the greatest story ever told.

What happened there was the playing out of salvation’s symphony and the Hallelujah chorus of hope for all mankind. However, we cannot presume to play the music of so large a theological piece on so small a piano as this. Instead we shall stick with the one movement (or even less), one measure with our study of the great and successful life. This is the greatness found only on sacrificial mountain tops where only the brave and little children that believe in them dare to go.

Abraham and every would be “friend of God” who comes after him, sooner or later, comes to his own Moriah, a place that demands sacrifice.

Nothing great is accomplished without sacrifice. Somewhere in every tale of greatness, you will find an altar; you will find suffering and sacrifice. From the birth of a single baby after hours of labor and anguish, to the birth of a nation after the shivering soldiers of Washington’s army endured and left their trail in the snow with shoeless and bleeding feet. There can be no real victory without suffering and sacrifice. It is the heat from these altars that keeps most at a safe and comfortable distance from true greatness. Most are willing to hold the donkeys as Abraham and Isaac climb the mountain. Most are willing to watch and wait as others pay the price.

Great athletes must make many sacrifices and climb a hundred Himalayas before they reach the summit of success. They rise up early and practice persistently on lonely skating rinks, in swimming pools, and running tracks. They give up a thousand little seemingly innocent pleasures in order to obtain a higher and greater good. They endlessly move their fingers across the keys of a daunting instrument or strain at the heavy weight of full bench press. They get up earlier and stay up later than most. They willingly place sweets and treats upon the altar and gladly sacrifice them in the flames of some great ambition. Painful is the climb to the summit. But those who refuse to quit know that the view from such heights is glorious.

Many have striven for trophies. Yet the world’s trophies are cast with poorer metals than those found in the mines of heaven. Gold, silver, and bronze are the best this world has to offer. God’s medals of honor are made of better stuff. Recognition by man, applause of people, the gold of earthly popularity, and the adulation of multitudes are trophies made of dust. Such temporal tokens are not worth a single sacrifice, when compared to the triumph of what God considers a successful life. Fifteen minutes of fame on earth, a brief flash in the pan, a temporary title, or a name written in journals that will gather dust, is not heaven’s idea of greatness. God wants much more for us.

Real greatness is found not in what we think of ourselves, or how we are thought of by others. Real greatness is found in the answer to the question, "Did I find out what God wanted me to do while I was here, and did I do it?" Every life is great that measures itself against the yardstick of doing God's will no matter what the cost. Abraham demonstrated that nothing was more important than doing what God asked of him. No price was too high to pay.

Many struggle with the story of Abraham like a seventh grader struggling with his algebra and coming up with an incorrect answer. What Abraham did was not sacrifice his son (or almost sacrifice his son) so he could accomplish his own goals and ambitions. Some parents do that everyday, not on altars, but in day cares. What Abraham did was prove that God was first, and that He was more important than any dream or goal. Here we find the alchemy of greatness. It is always made by accident. No man who sets out to make a great name for himself ever does. Greatness is always the by-product of men who are mixing the powders, and elements of character and conviction in a kind of chemistry that tries to make things better, or in order to make some greater "good."

A great life is a life that finds God's will often disguised in the rags of the needy and gives them a coat to protect them against the cold, or recognizes the hand of God trembling while holding an empty cup and then quickly rushes to fill it with cool water. A great life is a life that takes up God's will like the Rod of Moses and is willing to lead slaves out of captivity. A great life is not one necessarily lived out on center stage. A great life may be a life lived in obscurity, where good deeds seem to go unnoticed by every eye but God's. A great life is the life that places itself at the disposal of God by being at the disposal of all.

A Great life is measured in deeds not creeds. Creeds are promises of faith, deeds are the practice. One is the shadow, the other the substance. One is the intent and the other the content. One can fill a hungry stomach, the other may only torment it. James the Apostle said in essence, "faith without works" is not faith at all.

When it came down to it, it was by works that Abraham proved his faith was alive and well. To those who do not understand the laws of faith, Abraham might have appeared rash as he made his way up the slope of Moriah. To those untaught in spiritual things, Abraham's actions may have appeared as a reckless religious risk. To their untrained eye it might have seemed that with Isaac he pushed all his chips to the center of the table in the greatest gamble of his life. That is how it might appear to the unbeliever. But a spiritual sacrifice is not a gamble at all when it places all its money by faith on the veracity, virtue, and promise of God. He who bets on God can never lose. The secret is, you have to bet everything. You cannot play it safe. Faith does not play a penny at a time. As Kipling said, "make one heap of all your winnings, and risk it all." True faith does not even keep back carfare should the outcome mean a long walk home. Faith understands that God holds the cards, and although we may never see what is in God's hand, faith knows that God takes no chances with our life. We never find him bluffing. He only asks us to trust him. Ultimately, that is what sacrifice is. It is not a gamble at all. It is the greatest investment of our lives and God asks us not to diversify, but cash in all our other stocks and bonds and invest every cent in his kingdom.

The history of financial success is full of stories of men who sold, begged, and borrowed from every single source and resource at their disposal, and risked it all. Many of those who envy their success from afar do so because they were never courageous enough to take what looked like a chance.

One need only read the Bible to see that Abraham was a very wealthy and financially successful man. His stocks and bonds were in herds of cattle and folds of sheep. But no accountant

would be able to balance his books, because there was an invisible transfer of trust and a spiritual column that could not be calculated. There was faith. And it was in this currency of faith that made Abraham made his most important investments and became the richest man in all the world.

Abraham was a great man when he went up the mountain. He was the stuff legends were made of when he and Isaac came down.