

God's Accomplishments in Spite of Us

Some years ago, when taking a seminar on the biblical teaching about marriage, the teacher asked this question: Which couple in the Bible had the best marriage? He listed a couple of parameters: we read about them interacting as husband and wife as they planned together, and together they followed through on their plan. They were unified in what they believed and what they did. We thought for a while, and we posed a few answers: Abraham and Sarah were quickly ruled out because of Hagar. (Allowing a third party into the marriage doesn't work that well.) Someone suggested Zachariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. They seem to have had a good marriage, but we don't really see them interacting as a couple. Others suggested Joseph and Mary, but, again, we don't see them interacting as a couple.

When we had exhausted all possibilities, the teacher gave the answer: Ananias and Sapphira. We meet this couple in Acts 5 where we discover that they had agreed to sell a piece of property and donate the money to the work of the newly formed church. But, sadly, although they pretended to give all the money from that property to the work of the Lord, they had decided to keep a little back for themselves. For this sin of lying and cheating, both of them lost their lives. Yet, as marriages go, Ananias and Sapphira had a pretty good marriage in that they were united in both planning and carrying out the plan. They had a good marriage, but they did not have a good relationship with the Lord.

A few years later, after this teacher challenged me to reflect on this, in one of the churches I served we had a marriage enrichment weekend. The presenters spoke at the morning church service, basing their text on a passage from Song of Solomon in which they spoke of the beautiful relationship Solomon and his wife had. What was missing was mention that Solomon had over 700 wives and 300 concubines (women he slept with but to whom he was not married). On the way out of church, two people gave a one-line response to what they had heard that morning, "Which one?" They were rather cynical about the message that had been given, for Solomon does not seem to be the best example of someone who has a good marriage.

The point that the teacher of the marriage seminar who challenged us about biblical examples of good marriages (there are very few, if any), wanted us to think about the greatness of our God. Isn't it amazing, he said, that throughout the 4000 years of post-flood biblical history, that the people were so sinful and yet God accomplished great things through them? It truly is amazing. I doubt that we would let Abraham or David, and certainly not Solomon become members of our church, but that didn't stop God from advancing redemptive history anyway.

I am not advocating that we allow every kind of person, no matter how sinful, to be part of our church. There is no doubt that God has given us excellent and clear instruction about what marriage should look like: a lifelong commitment made before God and his people between a man and a woman. That is the biblical definition of marriage, and we are obligated to follow it, and if we don't we are, in essence, ignoring God's will. When people refuse to do as God commands, we must say something about their lifestyle, and, if they are unrepentant, we must they should not be members in good standing in any church. We

must make it our goal to develop marriages that honour God, but we do so from biblical teaching, not biblical example, for there are few biblical examples of marriages that we would classify as being appropriate and proper.

The point of these paragraphs is not to criticize marriages of the Bible, and it is not to help us understand what good marriages are. Rather, the point is that we marvel at God's ability to accomplish salvation history through sinful people.

Samson is another case in point. We can't point to him as a good example for us all, for not only was his marriage rotten, but much of what he did was badly tainted by sin. Samson is the last of the judges (leaders of God's people) in that book, and he the worst of them all. God didn't have much to work with in Samson, but he still used him to bring relief from oppression through the defeat of the Philistines. God sometimes has to use pretty broken tools, but the amazing thing is that he can bring salvation through brokenness and in spite of brokenness.

Last week I wrote about competency, urging us to become competent, experienced Christians but recognizing that when we are incompetent the Holy Spirit can still use us. This week the topic is somewhat the same but with a bit different perspective. Even if we are poor tools (pliers, duct tape, and WD40 are not the best tools with which we fix a car), God can still build his kingdom. And this should give us confidence in God.

We cannot doubt that there were good marriages in biblical times, marriages which we might want to emulate. We cannot doubt that there were good and faithful people who lived in joyful obedience to the Lord all the days of their lives. But the Bible does not put them forward as examples of how we should live so that God can build his kingdom through us. The Bible presents to us people who are sometimes grossly sinful but are still used by God.

Again, that does not give us the right to sin just so that we can see how powerful God is. But we can see how powerful God is when we consider what he has to work with. In Canada, at present, the church seems to be waning and there are many within the church who are unfaithful, but that should not make us think for a moment that God's hands are tied. They aren't, and he will continue to bring people to himself in spite of who we are and how we live rather than because of who we are and how we live. For that reason, we can continue with confidence, seeking to serve the Lord and live for him faithfully, all the while trusting that God's will get done what needs doing. What he asks, of course, is that we be willing and not rebellious. Annanias and Sapphira wanted to appear willing but were rebellious. David appeared rebellious but was willing, and through him God accomplished great things, in spite of his sin.

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