

Learning from Cows

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The Glory Departs from Israel

In Old Testament Israel the Lord's presence often dwelled above the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle. Thus, to the Israelites, the Ark itself became a symbol of the presence or glory of the Lord. (Twice in the Old Testament God, not simply His presence, is referred to as the "Glory of Israel." See 1 Sam 15:29, Mic 1:15.)

There is a very sad story in 1 Samuel 4 concerning the glory of God and the Ark. It tells of a time when the Israelites were in rebellion against God and deep into sin. During this period the Philistines invaded Israel. Early in the battle the Philistines were winning so the desperate Israelites got an idea. They said, "Let's bring the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord into battle with us! Surely then we can defeat the Philistines!" Why did they think this? Because they believed that by bringing the Ark physically into the battle they were bringing with it the presence of God thereby assuring victory. So that's what they did. But the Philistines not only went on to defeat Israel, they also captured the Ark, took it back to the Philistine city of Ashdod, and placed it in the temple of their god, Dagon.

During this period Eli was the judge over Israel. When the Philistines captured the Ark, they also killed Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. When Eli heard of their deaths, he fell over and died. Upon hearing all this, the pregnant wife of Phinehas went into labor and delivered a son. The grief of the news of the deaths of her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law, and the loss of the Ark was more than she could bear, and she too died. As she was dying, she named her newly born son Ichabod. In the Hebrew language "Ichabod" means "the glory has departed." So, by giving the boy and name Ichabod, God made a prophetic declaration of the departure of His glory from Israel.

Mankind Today

We can draw a direct parallel between the Israel of Eli's time and the spiritual condition of the world today. No matter where we live, we can see sin and debauchery all around us. So we also could easily declare, "The Glory has departed!" The apostle John warns us about the love of the things of the world.

"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world." (1 Jn 2:15,16 NIV)

God's Desire and Plan

The departure of God's glory from Israel was not His choice. It happened because of the sin and rebellion of the Israelites. Nor is it God's choice to withdraw His glory from us today. It's always been God's strong desire throughout the ages to live in the midst of His people, and that includes us, so that He can be our God, our Healer, our Provider, our Savior, our Sanctifier. . . and our LORD.

The Philistine's Problem and Plan

At first the Philistines thought they had really scored a major victory by capturing the Ark. But they quickly realized that their illegal possession of it had brought plagues upon them. Within a short period of time God had inflicted them with rats, disease, and painful tumors resulting in death. (See 1 Samuel 5:1 through 6:6.) (The literal translation of tumors is "hemorrhoids.")

So their leaders met to determine what to do about their horrible situation. Notice in the following Scripture they knew that the Ark was the key to their release.

When the ark of the LORD had been in Philistine territory seven months, the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us how we should send it back to its place."

They answered, "If you return the ark of the god of Israel, do not send it away empty, but by all means send a guilt offering to him. Then you will be healed, and you will know why his hand has not been lifted from you."

The Philistines asked, "What guilt offering should we send to him?"

They replied, "Five gold tumors and five gold rats, according to the number of the Philistine rulers, because the same plague has struck both you and your rulers. Make models of the tumors and of the rats that are destroying the country, and pay honor to Israel's god. Perhaps he will lift his hand from you and your gods and your land. Why do you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh did? When he treated them harshly, did they not send the Israelites out so they could go on their way?"

"Now then, get a new cart ready, with two cows that have calved and have never been yoked. Hitch the cows to the cart, but take their calves away and pen them up. Take the ark of the LORD and put it on the cart, and in a chest beside it put the gold objects you are sending back to him as a guilt offering. Send it on its way, but keep watching it. If it goes up to its own territory, toward Beth Shemesh, then the LORD has brought this great disaster on us. But if it does not, then we will know that it was not his hand that struck us and that it happened to us by chance."

So they did this. They took two such cows and hitched them to the cart and penned up their calves. They placed the ark of the LORD on the cart and along with it the chest containing the gold rats and the models of the tumors. Then the cows went straight up toward Beth Shemesh, keeping on the road and lowing all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left. The rulers of the Philistines followed them as far as the border of Beth Shemesh. (1 Sam 6:1-12 NIV)

So we see the Philistines devising a plan to return the Ark of the Covenant to Israel. It's obvious that they knew nothing about how to handle it or carry it. However, they did know enough to realize they needed to give it honor by placing it on a new cart with their own golden offerings.

But why did they come up with the idea of taking two cows that had never before been yoked, each having a young calf, and hitching

them to the cart while penning up their calves? It was the Philistines' way of determining if their troubles were really caused by the God of Israel. In effect, they were going to test God. How? Anyone who has ever worked with animals knows full well what would normally happen when those two cows were released and allowed to move freely. They would drag that cart straight to the pen where their calves were! So if the cows headed for Israel, leaving their calves behind, the Philistines would know that it had to be God compelling the cows to do something completely contrary to their nature and desire.

God's Will, the Compelling Force

What force compelled those two cows to go against their natural instincts and instead head straight for Israel? I believe the answer is that *they were bearing the burden of the Lord and fulfilling the will of God!*

So it is and always has been. Those whom the Lord calls to do His bidding will do what those two Philistine cows did. They will submit to God's compelling force. If necessary, they will forsake their own human instincts and personal desires in order to fulfill the will of God for their lives. Remember when Jesus spoke to the wealthy and educated Matthew. It's apparent that Matthew had a home, wife and children, and a prominent position in society. Then one day Jesus came by, looked at Matthew and said, "Follow me." Scripture tells us that Matthew got up right then and followed Him! (Mat 9:9)

Let's Continue to Examine These Two Cows

What more we can learn from these Philistine cows in addition to their submitting to the compelling force of God?

1. They Had Never Been Yoked

Scripture states that the Philistines chose two cows that had never before been yoked. I believe their reasoning was to make the situation as difficult as possible for God. The process of training an animal to serve under a yoke takes time and patience. Usually a younger, untrained animal is paired with an older, trained animal who takes control.

No matter how difficult or stressful it may be to follow God's call on our lives, our Lord's yoke on us is never more than we can bear. His grace is always there in abundance. Look at what He said in Matthew.

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."
(11:29-30 NIV)

Jesus promises us that He will be our Yoke-fellow. He will carry the larger share of the burden as He teaches us to bear that yoke. He knows what we can bear and will never overburden us. And the wonderful payoff of bearing this yoke with Him is that we get to share His companionship all during our journey.

2. They Did Not Turn

Scripture also tells us that the cows didn't turn to the right or left, they went straight up the road. In other words, they went with a purpose. That same compelling force that drew them from their calves also focused them on their objective.

So we too can be confident that those whom the Lord calls and sends will know what they are about. Oh, we may not know the details, but we know who our God is and what He has called us to do. The cows were not double-minded nor should we be. They are

not distracted by the things of the world or what the devil could use to draw them away. See what the writer of Hebrews and Paul say on this subject.

Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. (Heb 3:1,2 NIV)

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (2 Ti 4:7 NIV)

3. They Lowed As They Went

For those who have never been around cattle, let me explain what "lowing" is. Lowing is a low, guttural sound cows make especially when they are discontented. I'm certain these Philistine cows were lowing because they were being separated from their calves.

I have heard many men and women of God tell of the pain they experience at being separated from loved ones. I myself have experienced this many times. It's quite human to miss those we love when we are apart.

Or maybe the Lord doesn't call on us to separate from those we love. Maybe He calls on us to give up something else we desire. For example, we may want to have a successful career in business, or we may want to earn a lot of money in our lifetime. Let's not kid ourselves, going thorough the process of dying to self hurts. I'm sure that sometimes our prayers concerning our circumstances must sound to the Lord like the lowing of those cows.

4. Their Destination

The Bible tells us that the cows carried the Ark as far as the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh and then stopped beside a large rock. (1 Sam 6:14) This is so significant. In Hebrew "Joshua" means *salvation*. "Beth Shemesh" means *house of the sun or light*. The mandate of every person called of God is to bring salvation and the light of Christ to the lost of this world.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." (Isa 9:2 NIV)

"... in him [Jesus] was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in darkness ... " (Jn 1:4 NIV)

Symbolically our final destination is the same as those cows, Joshua's field in Beth Shemesh.

But ... Cows?

Cows, indeed! I would feel much better being compared to a more noble animal, wouldn't you? Why didn't the Philistines choose beautiful white or black stallions to pull the cart? Again, Scripture points the way.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and things that are not—to nullify the

things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1 Cor 1:25-29 NIV)

Paul also says, “Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought . . .” (Rom 12:3 NIV)

What Happened to the Cows?

Early in our call to the Lord’s service most of us have grand thoughts as to how our fellow man is going to regard us as we fulfill our noble, successful service for the Lord. But, alas, the fate of the poor Philistine cows paints a much less desirable picture!

Now the people of Beth Shemesh were harvesting their wheat in the valley, and when they looked up and saw the ark, they rejoiced at the sight. The cart came to the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh, and there it stopped beside a large rock. *The people chopped up the wood of the cart and sacrificed the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD.* The Levites took down the ark of the LORD, together with the chest containing the gold objects, and placed them on the large rock. On that day the people of Beth Shemesh offered burnt offerings and made sacrifices to the LORD. The five rulers of the Philistines saw all this and then returned that same day to Ekron. (1 Sam 6:13-16 NIV, emphasis added.)

What?! They sacrificed the cows? How dare they! Why didn’t they have a banquet and honor the cows instead? After all, they did perform a noble service by returning the Ark.

So does this mean that God may even require us to be sacrificed as we fulfill our call? Yes, I think it does. I certainly don’t mean to imply that the people we serve will always be ungrateful, but what happened to the Philistine cows does send a message. In a sense those who are led by the Lord do perform a sacrificial service will often go unrecognized. After Paul’s sacrificial ministry to the Corinthians listen to what some of them said about him . . . “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” (2 Cor 10:10 NIV)

How Do We Measure Success in Fulfilling Our Call?

Several years ago in Africa I asked some pastors to describe a successful pastor. Some of the comments I heard were that a successful pastor would have a church with new people coming in regularly, enough money to pay the bills, it’s own buildings, and the pastor would be important in the community and in his or her denomination. Then I reminded them that Paul had received forty lashes minus one and was beaten with rods. He was shipwrecked and spent a night and a day adrift in the open sea. He was constantly on the move, in danger from rivers, bandits, his own countrymen, and the Gentiles. He was in danger in the city, in the country, at sea, and from false brothers. He had gone hungry, thirsty, without sleep, and had been cold and naked. (See 2 Cor 11:24-29.)

I doubt most of the Christians of Paul’s day would have called him a terrifically successful apostle or church leader if they judged by the world’s standards. Yet he is quite possibly the most effective minister of the gospel of all time in God’s eyes!

Obedience Should be the Only Criterion of Success

I believe the only criterion of success which should ever be used in the Church of Jesus Christ is, “Has he or she, (or have I) been obedient to God’s call?” Let’s look at just a few of the many verses in the Bible on the requirements and blessings of obedience.

But Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” (1 Sam 15:22 NIV)

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (Jam 1:22 NIV)

If you love me, you will obey what I command. (Jo 14:15 NIV)

If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment. (Job 36:11 NIV)

Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” (Jo 14:23 NIV)

We have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. (1 Jo 3:21b,22 NIV)

If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land . . . (Isa 1:19 NIV)

Our Labors Rewarded

Lest we conclude with our focus on what happened to the cows, let’s now look at just a few of the rewards, both temporal and eternal, awaiting us as we are obedient to our call. The Apostle Paul, while recognizing our troubles, takes us beyond them into the eternal.

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. (2 Cor 4:17,18 NIV)

Earthly Rewards

1. An Inward Renewal

Again Paul takes us beyond our outward troubles into our inner renewal daily as we labor in our Lord’s vineyard.

All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. *Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.* (2 Cor 4:15,16 NIV, emphasis added.)

2. A Sense of Accomplishment

I was in the United States Marine Corps for 27 years and I loved being a Marine. I have also worked for secular companies in jobs that I enjoyed. Yet there is no job or work on this earth that can give us the same sense of satisfaction and accomplishment as working in the Lord’s vineyard, wherever that might be for you right now.

3. Feeling the Lord’s Pleasure

When we are moving in our call, no matter how hard the immediate circumstances are, I believe we can sense the Lord’s pleasure in our work. He joyfully accepts whatever sacrifices we make and we can actually feel His pleasure if we just take some quiet time and seek His presence.

4. Working With Others to Accomplish the Mission

We have the privilege of being a part of our Lord's work in this generation and to experience the wonderful satisfaction of working with dozens or hundreds of brothers and sisters in Christ. Note this interchange between Jesus and Peter.

Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mk 10:28-30 NIV)

Jesus seems to be saying several things in this passage. First I believe He is reassuring Peter that even though he left his own blood family behind, the Lord will more than make up for that by giving him companions who, as followers of Christ, will be closer than family. Jesus is also telling Peter and His other followers that whatever they have given up, they will receive a hundred times as much during their lifetimes. These rewards may be in the form of good health, long life and prosperity, good family relationships, many wonderful friends, or whatever.

Note also that in this passage Jesus promised us a hundred times more than we give up both during our lives and for all eternity!

Eternal Rewards

Paul tells us,

No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." (2 Cor 2:9 NIV)

James wrote,

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. (Jas 1:12 NIV)

Conclusion

God has promised us that if we are moving in obedience to His word and His call on our lives, we will have an inward joy, a peace, and a contentment that the world cannot give. I'm not saying that every day will be a wonderful mountain top experience. Life doesn't work that way. What I am saying is that there will be a genuine peace and inner satisfaction that can only come by fulfilling the Lord's call on our lives. Praise His name!

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