

FOR VETERANS DAY . . .



Last Wednesday night I joined with Drs. Ben and Janet Davis and Drs. Francine and Erika Johnson to talk about how we came to earn doctor's degrees and why we put ourselves (and our families) through such an experience. It didn't happen on Veterans Day, but my Ph.D. studies and my military service came together in a powerful, holy, and sobering moment on an October afternoon in 1990.

I was still a drilling Reservist in those days, and the first Desert War was underway in Iraq. Many, many Reservists were recalled to active duty during that conflict, and the active duty unit that my reserve unit was assigned to augment (being translated—to fill in for those who'd been killed in action) was already in the desert.

Now what Reservists get paid for is to be ready for just such an assignment, and we were ready to go. During that conflict, at least, we were told that we'd get 24-hours' notice if we were mobilized for an adventure from which we might . . . or might not . . . come back. As it happened, no one from my unit was mobilized, but of course we didn't know that until all the shooting stopped.

I was writing my dissertation during the entire period of Desert Shield/Desert Storm, and that's what I was doing on this particular October afternoon. I was in my study carrel in the seminary library, looking out the window at the afternoon sun much as I'm doing right now. As I mused, I had this thought: "Here I am, having been in school 'for a hundred years,' and now I'm going to go get myself killed right before I finish. What sense does that make?"

In the same instant that I had that thought, God spoke these words into my spirit: ***"Just listen to yourself!! You're acting as though you're more important to me than those nineteen year-olds who are going to die today in battle. That is simply NOT TRUE, so get down off your high horse and report for the duty to which I send you."***

As it happened, although my twelve years in the Navy included several periods of war, I was never actually involved in combat . . . but I have never forgotten that moment, nor the vivid truth of the message I received from the Lord. And so on this Veterans Day—indeed, on every day—when you see a soldier in uniform or a veteran who bears the scars of war, I urge you to walk over to him or her and offer a heartfelt THANKS!

As you may or may not remember, I spent my first six years in the Navy as a Line Officer, specifically as an engineering officer on destroyers, ending up as a Surface Warfare Officer. My last six years were spent as a Navy Chaplain. That's what I was doing during Desert Storm.



One of the responsibilities of a military chaplain is to do everything possible to be sure the troops are prepared to die. This means spiritual preparation, to be sure, but it also means working with the troops to be sure they've completed their final documents so that if they (we) come home in a body bag, our families will be provided for. That's not what I would call cheerful work, but it's a whole lot better than making death notifications, which it usually falls to Reserve Chaplains to do.

Military or not, because none of us has the guarantee of even one more breath, **we are all wise to make sure that we are prepared to die, both spiritually and in every other way.**

If you're not sure about your preparations, it would be a privilege for me to help you make them.



the number of months that remain, and the small cup in the middle represents the number of years that remain . . . statistically speaking.

It's really quite impressive what effects accrue from sober thinking about the end and legacy of our lives. One of the ways I try to do the *carpe diem* thing has to do with the picture you see here. About ten years ago, I looked at the actuarial tables and determined what my statistically-expected life span would be. The beads in the jar on the left represent the number of Sundays that remain to me in that life span. The marbles on the right represent

the number of months that remain, and the small cup in the middle represents the number of years that remain . . . statistically speaking.

Every Sunday morning, on the first day of every month, and on every birthday, I take one bead or marble out and throw it away. Some find this macabre, but I find it helpful. Besides, it's a countdown to resurrection, should the Lord tarry!

And of course, as a pastor, it's my privilege to journey fairly often with folk as they take the last few turns in the road before their own deaths. I was reminded of some of those holy conversations this week as I read the following reflections from a British hospice nurse:

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"For many years I worked in palliative care. My patients were those who had gone home to die. Some incredibly special times were shared. I was with them for the last three to twelve weeks of their lives.

"People grow a lot when they are faced with their own mortality. I learnt never to underestimate someone's capacity for growth. Some changes were phenomenal. Each experienced a variety of emotions, as expected, denial, fear, anger, remorse, more denial and eventually acceptance. Every single patient found their peace before they departed, though, every one of them. When questioned about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently, common themes surfaced again and again. Here are the most common five:

**1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.**

"This was the most common regret of all. When people realise that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honoured even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made.

“It is very important to try and honour at least some of your dreams along the way. From the moment that you lose your health, it is too late. Health brings a freedom very few realise, until they no longer have it.

## **2. I wish I didn't work so hard.**

“This came from every male patient that I nursed. They missed their children's youth and their partner's companionship. Women also spoke of this regret. But as most were from an older generation, many of the female patients had not been breadwinners. All of the men I nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of a work existence.

“By simplifying your lifestyle and making conscious choices along the way, it is possible to not need the income that you think you do. And by creating more space in your life, you become happier and more open to new opportunities, ones more suited to your new lifestyle.

## **3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.**

“Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming. Many developed illnesses relating to the bitterness and resentment they carried as a result.

“We cannot control the reactions of others. However, although people may initially react when you change the way you are by speaking honestly, in the end it raises the relationship to a whole new and healthier level. Either that or it releases the unhealthy relationship from your life. Either way, you win.

## **4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.**

“Often they would not truly realise the full benefits of old friends until their dying weeks and it was not always possible to track them down. Many had become so caught up in their own lives that they had let golden friendships slip by over the years. There were many deep regrets about not giving friendships the time and effort that they deserved. Everyone misses their friends when they are dying.

“It is common for anyone in a busy lifestyle to let friendships slip. But when you are faced with your approaching death, the physical details of life fall away. People do want to get their financial affairs in order if possible. But it is not money or status that holds the true importance for them. They want to get things in order more for the benefit of those they love. Usually though, they are too ill and weary to ever manage this task. It is all comes down to love and relationships in the end. That is all that remains in the final weeks, love and relationships.

## **5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.**

“This is a surprisingly common one. Many did not realise until the end that happiness is a choice. They had stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. The so-called ‘comfort’ of familiarity overflowed into their emotions, as well as their physical lives. Fear of change had them pretending to others, and to themselves, that they were content, when deep within, they longed to laugh properly and have silliness in their life again.

“When you are on your deathbed, what others think of you is a long way from your mind. How wonderful to be able to let go and smile again, long before you are dying. Life is a choice. It is YOUR life. Choose consciously, choose wisely, choose honestly. Choose happiness.”

While there is much to commend in these words, this nurse failed to mention the most important preparation we can make: CHOOSE JESUS. Choose Jesus NOW. *Let the adventure begin!*

## **The Joshua Code: Fifty-Two Verses Every Believer Should Know**

O.S. Hawkins (Thomas Nelson, 2012)

### **Week forty-three: Integrity: Don't Leave Home Without It!**

*“Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but whoever takes crooked paths will be found out”*  
(Proverbs 10:9).

What is the single most important trait of a person who desires to truly make a difference in our world today? I contend the most important trait is integrity. We have all known people who have incredible intellect, but no integrity, and they are no longer in the race. Others possessing amazing intensity or insight or passion but little integrity have gone the same way. Integrity is our most valuable commodity.

Integrity is that state or quality of being complete, and it is freedom from corrupting influences or motives. The thesaurus equates it with such words as *honesty, completeness, and incorruptibility*.

Each of us lives in four distinct spheres of life and influence. You live in a *private* world. You also live in a *personal* world. Next comes your *professional* world. Finally, you live in a *public* world. The reality of these four spheres raises an important question: where is integrity in life rooted?

#### **INTEGRITY IS ROOTED IN ONE'S PRIVATE LIFE**

Integrity is rooted in that private life we develop alone with God in the secret, hidden place. We often hear architects, engineers, or builders say, “This building has structural integrity.” That is, the public beauty of a tall skyscraper relies on its private, unseen foundation that is dug deep into the earth and solidly constructed. It is that hidden life of a building that brings structural integrity. And so it is with us. Integrity is rooted in the private life.

#### **INTEGRITY IS REFLECTED IN ONE'S PERSONAL LIFE**

Once integrity is rooted in our private life, it begins to be reflected in our relationships with those closest to us. Many seem to think that integrity is rooted in these close interpersonal experiences, but it is not. It is only reflected there, if, in fact, we are men and women of integrity. If you want to know whether I have integrity, ask my wife or my daughters who really know me in the intimacy of close family relationships.

#### **INTEGRITY IS REINFORCED IN ONE'S PROFESSIONAL LIFE**

If you have a hidden life where your own integrity finds its roots, it will not only be reflected in your close relationships with those around you, but it will also be reinforced in your day-to-day dealings in the work world. Integrity is reinforced on the anvil of personal experience and practiced in the marketplace.

Our greatest opportunity to make a difference and engage our culture is out in the marketplace. It is imperative that, as Christians, we are men and women of integrity in the professional world around us.

#### **INTEGRITY IS REVEALED IN ONE'S PUBLIC LIFE**

Once we are thrust into the public arena, it is too late to look for integrity. If we do not already possess it, it is too late. However, some seek to put a spin on their personal promotion in a hopeless effort to somehow lead others to believe they are people of integrity. But integrity is not rooted in spin, it's rooted in our private world.

When integrity is rooted in the private world, it is reflected in the personal world, reinforced in the professional world, and, ultimately, revealed in the public world for the glory of the God whom we love and serve.