

June 8, 2008

Title: When You Cannot See the Big Picture

Text: Genesis 12:1-9

The Big Picture: God's will for our lives is more likely to unfold than unfurl.

Introduction

We host the perhaps the toughest ultra marathon right here in Colorado... it is called the Hardrock Hundred. It begins in Silverton with runners making a 100 miles cross-country trek. This year on July 11-13, it will be a clockwise circuit through Ophir, Telluride, Ouray, Sherman, Lake City, and back to Silverton.

A year ago, 97 of 134 runners completed the race. The winner of that race was Scott Jurek from Seattle, Washington, finishing in 26 hours, 8 minutes and 34 seconds. Let's take a moment to see how a person finishes a 100-mile run. (You will notice that the announcer mistakenly says he finished in 26 minutes... that would be an incredibly fast pace of something over 200 mph.)

Transition: Here it is...

Project YouTube.Com clip: 2007 Hardrock Hundred Ultra Marathon Finish

As you could see, Scott Jurek had clearly run a grueling race. The Christian life is sometimes likened to a race.

Perhaps the most well known allusion is found in Hebrews where the writer says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses, let us strip off every weight that slows us down... and let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish." Hebrews 12:1-2

Another, is found in Paul's writing where he said, "But I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I strain to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven." Philippians 3:13-14

When he approached his death, Paul summarized his life like this: "As for me, my life has already been poured out like an offering to God. The time for my death is near. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful." II Timothy 4:6-7

I particularly liked the thought from the Hebrews text inferring that our lives are likened to a race that God has set before us. I like the thought that there is a beginning, followed by a circuitous course that lasts something more than 26 hours, 8 minutes, and 34 seconds, and ends with a fulfilling and rewarding finish.

In our story today he lays out something of an ultra, ultra, ultra, ultra, ultra marathon for Abram which would stretch over 500 miles and 100 years. His race, which began in Genesis 12, ended in Genesis 25. "Abram lived for 175 years, and died at a ripe old age." Genesis 25:7

When Abram began his 500 mile, 100 year journey, he knew his point of departure and generally where he would arrive, but the in between and even largely the destination were unknowns. In fact, even at the end of his life there was something of the yet unknown.

God sees a big picture... a bigger picture than any one individual's picture.

1. God's picture is a bigger picture than a person's picture. God's picture begins before us and continues beyond us.

The story of Abram, AKA Abraham and the vision of Canaan did not begin with Abram.

It began with his father. "This is the story of Terah's family. Terah took his son Abram, his daughter-in-law Sarai, and his grandson Lot and left Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan. But they stopped instead at the village of Haran and settled there. Terah lived for 205 years and died while still in Haran." Genesis 11:27-32

This is a fairly typical immigrant story... someone starts out for a final destination but somewhere along the way they say, "You know, this is a pretty good place. Why don't we just settle down here?"

In the ministry and especially when you live some distance from your family, you learn that your vacation time is spent traveling to see relatives. So you make the most of the trip by seeing some of the sights along the way. Once, during my "ghost town" period, while enroute to see family, we visited Jerome, Arizona. Jerome is between Prescott and Flagstaff and is also a mile-high city. It was an historic copper mining town and at its hay day was known as the "wickedest town in the west." Today it is promoted as "Americas Most Vertical City" and "Largest Ghost Town."

We visited the mine and while touring the town, stepped into something of a storefront pottery shop. There at the potter's wheel was a genuine relic from the 60's... a hippie. When I asked him about how he landed in Jerome

he said, "Well, I was on my way to San Francisco when I stopped here in Jerome, and I just never left." Terah and his family were on their way to Canaan when they stopped in Haran...and they just never left.

However, in Chapter 12 we see that the original vision got a jump restart when God said to Abram, "Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you."

I suspect this caught Abram off-guard... Haran had been his home for fifty years. He was all settled in... the house was perfect; he had worked for years landscaping his lawn. His children loved their sandbox and swing set in the back yard. Business was good. He was surrounded by family and friends. Life was good. There was absolutely no reason to move, but God spoke and said, "Go!"

How should we interpret these kinds of promptings or urgings or leadings from God? We need to always remember this about God.

2. God's will is to bless those he calls and make them a blessing to others.

God said, "Go to the land that I will show you. I will cause you to become the father of a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and I will make you a blessing to others... all the families of the earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:1-3

It is God's nature to want to bless us. His ultimate desire is to bless us, those we love, and others. One of the most promising verses in all of scripture is found in Jeremiah.

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11

Do you remember Bruce Wilkerson's little book, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*? The book is based on an actual prayer prayed by a man named Jabez who believed God was a blessing kind of God.

This was his prayer: "Oh that you would bless me and extend my lands! Please be with me in all that I do, and keep me from trouble and pain!" And the postscript says, "And God granted him his request."

God wants to bless each of us and bless others through each of us.

In March of this year, Gordon McDonald fell on the ice and ruptured the ligament that connects his kneecap to his thigh. He managed to crawl to

the back door of his home and attract the attention of his wife, who drove him to the ER.

Three days later, he had surgery to repair the damage and three weeks later was allowed to resume his routine on a limited basis. So he flew to South Carolina where he was to speak at a Southern Baptist Convention.

This is what he wrote about his travel experience: To travel to South Carolina this week meant a ride from my home to Logan Airport in Boston (driven by a friend). Then a slow walk (on crutches, carrying a knapsack) to the ticket counter, through security, to the gate. Throughout this process, any number of people offered to carry my bag, find me a wheelchair, get me a newspaper. Airline personnel provided me with special assistance out to the plane, and in Charleston, the pilot himself grabbed my knapsack and escorted me off the plane to a waiting wheelchair. All this done not for someone who was, in any way, a celebrity but merely one more no-name traveler with a leg in a cast. Cynics will say that the airlines were simply trying to prevent an accident and a lawsuit. But I know better. There is a compelling beauty in human beings when they choose to be kind, and you smell it. A mystery of human connection fills the air, and one travels on a cloud of blessing. (Gordon MacDonald, author, speaker, and editor at large of Leadership journal, on LeadershipJournal.net, April 2008)

If you were to go to the Gospel of Matthew. The first chapter will likely find the heading: The Record of Jesus' Ancestors. In verse 2 it begins, "Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers..." On and on it goes until verse 16 where things begin to wrap up, "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah." Matthew 1:1-6 Those verses reflect forty-two generations between Abraham and Jesus. Jesus was the ultimate blessing that Abraham would bring to the peoples of the world.

God blessed Abraham and made him a blessing to others. That was the big picture. The big picture began in the mind of God before the laying of the foundations of the earth and continued to and through Abraham and his descendants to Jesus and continues on still in and through each of us.

Interestingly enough, the text indicates that God does not discriminate when it comes to calling and blessing people. This is another thing we need to know about God.

3. God is an equal opportunity caller. God does not discriminate on the basis of age, gender, race, or ethnicity.

I like unlikely stories. I love it that God “deliberately chose things the world considers foolish to shame those who think they are wise. And that he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. And the despised by the world to bring to nothing what the world considers important... so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God.” I Corinthians 1:27-29

***The Music Within* is a wonderful story about how one man, an unlikely man, changed the landscape of our country. Richard Pimentel lost his hearing in Viet Nam. Upon returning home he found that he, along with all the other disabled Americans, were told that they would never be able to reach their dreams... disabled people were discriminated against. But Richard Primentel overcame his disability and went on to be a powerful and charismatic voice for disabled people in our country. He is considered a pivotal person in creating the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act). People with disabilities were people who could and should have employment. People with disabilities are people who could and should have access and opportunity.**

I love the way God called out Abram, of all people, to be the father of a great nation.

The bible says, “So Abram departed as the Lord had instructed him and Lot went with him. He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all his wealth, his livestock, and all who had joined his household at Haran. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.” Genesis 12:-4-5

It doesn't really matter how youthful he was at seventy-five... how was he to become the father of a great nation that would be a blessing to all the nations of the world when his wife, according to Genesis 11:30, “was not able to have children.”

God is discerning but indiscriminate when he calls and uses people.

“In Christ there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians in Christ Jesus and true children of Abraham.” Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:1-11

If God calls you and chooses to use you in some way your age, gender, ethnicity or race, ability or disability, status or lack thereof are inconsequential... just get up and go. God will bless you and bless others through you.

You may not be able to see the big picture. You may not be able to see the beginning of the story or the middle parts of the story or the end of the

story... maybe the only part of the picture you can see is the moment you are in.

If Abram's story is anything like our stories, we may never know or see the end. We may indeed arrive but it is still a day by day unfolding.

4. God's big picture unfolds before us day by day...

Upon arriving in the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "I am going to give this land to your offspring... Then Abram traveled south by stages toward the Negev." Genesis 12:7-9

He arrived but he still had not arrived. He had run his leg of the relay but there were more legs to be run. He arrived in Canaan but Canaan was not yet given to his offspring. He was to be a great blessing to the nations but he was not yet so. God's big picture plan was unfolding before Abram bit by bit every day. He traveled south by stages...

Abram's traveling by stages reminds me of the stock response an elderly man always gave when asked how he was doing. He would always reply, "I'm doing steady by jerks." He was saying that he was moving, albeit haltingly.

I don't know how you make a bed but I have my way of bed making. I take the sheet and I give it a snap or two and it unfurls across the top of the mattress. I take a moment to figure out what way is what, snap the sheet into place and tuck in the corners. It is almost a single action... snap and the sheet unfurls and everything is in place.

God's will may be like that but generally that is not the case.

God is more of an unfolder than an unfurler.

"God's plan has been revealed to us; it is a plan centered on Christ, designed long ago according to his good pleasure. And this is his plan: At the right time, he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ – everything in heaven and on earth. Furthermore, because of Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us from the beginning, and all things happen just as he decided long ago." Ephesians 1:9-11

That's the big picture and we, like Abram, are little parts of the picture. We may not be able to see the whole panorama of God's plan unfurled across the sky but we do get to see it unfold.

At a funeral where there are military honors, the Honor Guard lifts the American Flag from the casket of a veteran. They step ceremoniously to the side and stretch the flag taut and fold it into a long layered strip. And then they begin the ritual triangular fold until the flag is a tightly bound and presented to the family, honoring their loved one for his or her service to our country.

I have learned over the years to be patient with this process, knowing that it will in time, despite occasional botches and the need to stretch the fabric and tighten the folds, it will eventually be tightly tucked and turned and presented.

God is a folder and an unfolder. God carefully lays out his plan and God unfolds his plan with equal care... rarely does God unfurl his will in our lives.

Conclusion

So how can we learn to live our little pictures within scheme of the big picture?

If you were to go to the Hardrock Hundred Endurance Run web site (www.run100s.com/HR/) you could pull up a series of topographical maps that mark the course of the run. These maps allow us to hover high above the San Juans and see the big picture.

Here is the topographical photo that marks the last leg of the course as runners have left Telluride, passed the Chapman and KT Aid Stations, crossed Mineral Creek and the finish line in Silverton.

Project Map 1 Silverton/Chapman (Hardrock Hundred Course Maps, Map of the Mountains, courtesy of Drake Mountain Maps, Santa Fe, NM)

This is just one of seven topographical maps posted to mark the 100 mile course... we would have to have all seven maps in place to be able to see the big picture. The runners of the Hardrock Hundred never see the entire "rough and tough" course. They get to see some glimpses of magnificent mountain backcountry... but mostly they get to see what lies immediately before them.

What does an ultra marathon runner wonder he or she guts our mile after mile of a grueling course. Do they wonder if they can finish? Pam Reed is an ultra marathon runner who has run 139 miles in 24 hours and 210 miles in 48 hours, scaled mountains and crossed Death Valley says she has to trust her training and believe she will receive both guidance along the way and a blessing at the end. (Homiletics, Ultramarathon Faith, June 8, 2008, p. 40.)

I sometimes hear comments like: “I don’t know why I’m here.” “I’m not sure what God has in mind for me.” “I don’t have any clue as to where this is going.” “I don’t know what I should do.” I suspect that for some of us, even being able to see the little picture would feel like a miraculous revelation.

Maybe we are like Forrest Gump who one day, for no particular reason, decided to go for a run. “So I ran to the end of the road. And when I got there I thought maybe I’d run to the end of town. And when I got there, I thought maybe I’d just run across Greenbow County. And I figured since I’d run this far, maybe I’d just run across the great state of Alabama. And that’s what I did. I ran clear across Alabama. For no particular reason I just kept going. I ran clear to the ocean. And when I got there, I figured since I’d gone this far, I might as well turn around, just keep going. When I got to the other ocean, I figured, since I’d gone this far, I might as well just turn back, keep right on going... Now you wouldn’t believe me if I told you, but I could run like the wind blows. From that day on, if I was ever going somewhere, I was running!”

The first thing you do along the course of your life is:

- **Trust God’s leading. And believe you will receive what you need along the way.**

And the second thing you do is:

- **By faith, take one-step at a time**

That’s how Abraham did it and he is listed among the faithful in Hebrews 11. “It was by faith that Abraham obeyed God. He went without knowing where he was going. And even when he reached the land god promised him, he lived there by faith, living in a tent. And so did Isaac and Jacob, to whom God gave the same promise. And Abraham did this because he was confidently looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and built by God.” Hebrews 11:8-10

When you can’t see the big picture, live the little picture.