

SERVANT FATHERS

Genesis 41-45

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Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore (Ret.) wrote a book to describe one of the most violent battles of the Vietnam War entitled *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*. It was released as a film in 2002 called *We Were Soldiers* and starred Mel Gibson. In 1965 Moore was the colonel tasked with the first major air cavalry engagement of the war. His job was to fly his men into the Drang Valley, nicknamed the Valley of Death, where there were confirmed reports of enemy troops. Col. Moore had no idea exactly how many of the enemy he faced, and his troops would be a living experiment in flying men into the field of battle by helicopter and out again. This is a violent film designed to show war as bad as it really is, so be forewarned if you choose to see it.

Col. Moore chose the military as his career, and it was a career which, by definition, involved serving his country. Whether one agrees with the reasons behind the Vietnam War, it was Moore's job to lead the fresh-faced sons of America into battle. Moore had his men assemble stateside in formation on the parade grounds in order to brief them on what they were facing and what his role would be. Imagine what was going on inside him as he looked into their faces and knew that they would not all come back alive, and most who returned would never be the same. Some would be scarred in their bodies, all would be scarred in their souls, and all on his command.

So serving his country became extremely personal for Col. Moore because he, as their commander, had to serve the specific men who served under him. How are men who are facing the horrors of war best served? What serves men who soon would be watching their comrades die horrible deaths, and if they got distracted by those deaths, would be killed or wounded themselves? What kind of service from their colonel did those men need to keep from cutting and running when the enemy opened fire on them?

Col. Moore delivered a short speech to them which was much more than rhetoric. He placed his personal honor before them to be the commander they needed him to be. He said: "I cannot promise that I will bring every man home alive. But I promise you, with God as my witness, that my foot will be the first one to touch the field of battle and the last one to leave. I will leave no man behind. Dead or alive, we will all come home together, so help me God" (paraphrased).

Then, when the battle was engaged, he did what he promised. Amid sporadic small arms fire, his boot was the first to step off the chopper skid. What military intelligence did not know was that Moore had been sent to a mountain where an entire division of the enemy army was hiding in underground bunkers. Under heavy fire the choppers flew in and out incessantly, delivering fresh troops and ammo, and flying out the injured. The opposing armies pushed back and forth against one another, using every shred of military wisdom their commanders could muster. Men on both sides were cut down in heart-stopping numbers.

The colonel ran from place to place the whole time, personally leading several charges. He stood amid flying bullets looking right and left to learn as much as possible about the progress of the battle. He encouraged his men every way he could, comforting the wounded and dying. When told by command to leave the field of battle in the middle of the fight he refused the order. When the smoke finally cleared on the third day the American forces had won. When the last of the wounded and dead were removed by helo and the last soldier had flown away, Col. Moore stepped up on the chopper skid and was the last man out.

You see, what those men needed most of all was a commander who would serve them by leading. They needed a father figure who was also brilliant in commanding men on the field of battle. Bad leadership on the field means death and dismemberment. Only the best of leaders can preserve life and limb under those circumstances. It was a horrible battle, but Moore did his job with heart and distinction. There were many casualties, but the day was won in the end.

I am struck that this is what families, churches, and communities need from fathers--that strange combination of caring, heart, and real leadership. The world is a dangerous place and God has given fathers the job of protecting, providing for, and serving their wives and families. If fathers do not rise to the challenge which God has given them there is a high price for everyone to pay. After years of pretending that fathers do not matter to families and communities, I believe that our society is just starting to understand how high a price it is.

The caricature of fatherhood men often have is that it merely involves telling your wife and kids what to do, providing food, clothing and shelter, and fulfilling a role which tradition has mapped out for them. That false set of expectations leaves families and communities--especially sons and young men--starving for the oxygen of male leadership. God made the whole world to turn on servant leadership because that is what he is like. Men only become real fathers when they become servant fathers who lead. I want to share three key aspects of servant leadership for fathers taken from the life of one of the patriarchs of Israel, Joseph, son of Jacob.

1. BEYOND GIVING ORDERS TO BEARING THE BURDEN OF LEADERSHIP

First of all, servant fathers go beyond giving orders to bearing the burden of leadership. Joseph was the beloved son of Jacob and had eleven brothers. When Joseph was seventeen his brothers got sick of him being their dad's favorite and plotted to kill him. Reuben convinced them instead to pretend that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. They showed Jacob Joseph's coat of many colors all ripped and bloody, and he believed the deception. They threw Joseph into a pit for a while and then sold him to Ishmaelite traders who took him to Egypt.

There the Lord blessed Joseph as head servant to Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's bodyguard. But Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of an unwanted sexual advance, and Potiphar cast Joseph into prison where he was forgotten for two years. While Joseph was wrongfully imprisoned he interpreted a dream for Pharaoh's cupbearer. When Pharaoh had a dream about seven healthy cows and seven emaciated cows the cupbearer remembered Joseph and called for him to be brought from prison. Joseph promised that God would give the interpretation, and explained to Pharaoh that the cows represented seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine which would come upon the land and destroy Egypt if steps were not taken. Joseph advised

Pharaoh to gather grain into his storehouses for the first seven years and then all Egypt would eat from those granaries for the next seven years.

Here is where we pick up the story in Genesis 41:38: **"Then Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?' So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.' Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. He had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, 'Bow the knee!' And he set him over all the land of Egypt"** (Genesis 41:38-43). Joseph then did exactly what he had promised, and when the seven bad years came Egypt became the breadbasket for the whole ancient near east.

We tend to hear things according to the grid in our heads, so if we have a concept of leadership which involves just giving orders to others who do the work we will see Joseph leaning back and eating grapes fed to him by veiled women waving fans over him. Sometimes fathers see their families that way, as people who are supposed to serve them. To counter that some have said that fathers are to be nurturers only, pretty much like mothers. Joseph's work in Egypt shows the real picture. We must realize that Pharaoh had laid upon this one man the responsibility for the lives of everyone in Egypt! Do not imagine that Joseph successfully saved Egypt from famine without a total personal buy-in and a huge measure of good-hearted toughness. Though we are not told the details, I am confident that Joseph was on-site making things happen when everyone else had gone home.

Back in the 1980's I was one of a handful of people responsible for founding a crisis pregnancy center for the Lord. At our first organizational meeting I was elected chairman of the steering committee. That committee was tasked with investigating every aspect of crisis pregnancy center ministry and shaping the center in that particular place, a county which performed about four thousand abortions a year. As the plans developed and things fell into place the steering committee was supposed to convert into the first board of directors.

I remember the meeting when that was supposed to happen like it was yesterday. It was filled with acrimony against me, a full-time pastor, because it took me two years to get us to that point. I lost my cool--not a fond memory. Then, as we took the vote to convert ourselves to the board of directors who would actually launch the center, three of the most key people announced that they were dropping out, including a businessman, an evangelist, and a pastor. I was stunned. No one had said a word to me. In spite of feeling and speaking strongly about the need for such a ministry center, none of them were prepared to move into the full burden of servant leadership. I felt abandoned, but it was also God's way of challenging me to face the task of servant leadership which lay ahead. For all my fine words, was I really prepared to shoulder the burden?

Col. Moore stood before his men and promised them that he would take the load of leadership they needed him to take. His boot really was the first to touch the field of battle and the last to

leave, and he bore that responsibility every minute of that horrendous battle. And Jesus Christ did it for all of us. He took the whole load, and we should do the same for our people.

2. BEYOND PROVIDING TO BEING A FAMILY MAN

Secondly, servant fathers go beyond merely providing to actually being family men. Providing is a wonderful God-blessed thing to do, but it is not the full picture of what God wants from a man. Because of God's blessing on him in Egypt, Joseph became the single biggest provider on earth! But Joseph was not only a provider. It came to pass that Joseph's family in the land of promise eventually needed to send his brothers to Egypt to buy food. They found themselves standing in front of their own brother without recognizing him. They probably thought he had died before then at the hands of some cruel master who worked him to death. Instead he was the second most-powerful man in the most powerful empire in the world.

Joseph was moved to see this contingent of his brothers come to buy food, but mindful of his treatment at their hands he hatched a plan to get his whole family to Egypt. He began by accusing them of being spies and letting them roast a little while in this false accusation. They were in the grip of an unknown ruler and probably thought they would soon be thrown in prison. Instead Joseph pretended that he needed to see their youngest brother, Benjamin, to prove that they were not spies, and kept Simeon hostage until their return. The story picks up in Genesis 42:18-25: **"Now Joseph said to them on the third day, 'Do this and live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers be confined in your prison; but as for the rest of you, go, carry grain for the famine of your households, and bring your youngest brother to me, so your words may be verified, and you will not die.' And they did so. Then they said to one another, 'Truly we are guilty concerning our brother, because we saw the distress of his soul when he pleaded with us, yet we would not listen; therefore this distress has come upon us. Reuben answered them, saying, 'Did I not tell you, 'Do not sin against the boy'; and you would not listen? Now comes the reckoning for his blood.' They did not know, however, that Joseph understood, for there was an interpreter between them. He turned away from them and wept. But when he returned to them and spoke to them, he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes. Then Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain and to restore every man's money in his sack, and to give them provisions for the journey. And thus it was done for them."**

Did you catch the evidence that Joseph was not merely interested in providing for them, but in being restored to them? Some men might have become hardened by what Joseph endured, but the second most powerful man in Egypt who had relentlessly extracted grain from every Egyptian farmer wept at his brothers' admission of guilt. I think he was also weeping simply at the prospect of being reunited with his family. He was bent on being restored to them and on their restoration to him.

Servant fathers go 'way past merely providing for their families to making investments in them as people. Col. Moore, though he was a warrior, was also a family man. The film shows him tucking his children into bed one by one at night. There is another scene in the film where Moore, a serious Roman Catholic, knelt with his little brood by the bedside and prayed bedtime prayers with them.

The thing most men need to see is that there is no contradiction between being a warrior and a family man. There was no contradiction between Joseph being the second-most powerful man on the planet and weeping over the prospect of being reunited with his family. The Bible verse which commands parents to "train up a child in the way he should go" is not just about techniques of discipline. Servant fathers invest their very selves in their families, and that can only be done on purpose. Personally, if I had been an American soldier in the Drang Valley on those fateful three days in 1965 I would not have wanted a commander who was bent only on his career and did not invest in his own family. God commands fathers to go beyond merely providing. He wants them all to be family men who can tenderly carry a little girl upstairs to bed as well as defeat an enemy in battle.

3. BEYOND ROLE EXPECTATIONS TO CARING

Thirdly, servant fathers go beyond acting out family roles to genuine caring. Watch what happened when Joseph finally revealed himself to his brothers: **"Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, 'Have everyone go out from me.' So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. He wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it. Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Please come closer to me.' And they came closer. And he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life'"** (Genesis 45:1-8). This is not the look of a man who had a merely mechanical concept of family roles. He cared deeply for his family. By his words and actions we see that he had already forgiven his brothers. If it had just been about roles, he would have written them off because they had violated their role as brothers. But he saw family as indelible, a part of God's design which cannot be erased. Even great wrongs can be overcome by forgiveness and the family be preserved. Have you had great wrongs done to you by a family member? I don't know anyone who has not. Joseph forgave.

If a father sees himself merely as fulfilling a traditional role, he will sleepwalk through the most meaningful moments in his family's life because he really does not care. Too many men just want to get back to the shop so they can continue rebuilding an engine or a piece of furniture. By the same token, if a man thinks that the family is only about roles to play he will expect his wife to perform according to his expectations even when she is tired, sick, or miserable. He will do the same thing with his children.

But life is not just about getting homework done, cleaning house, and mowing the lawn. People are not robots! Servant fathers go beyond roles to genuine caring for each family member as a cherished gift from God. Jesus Christ did this to the very end. Even when he was dying on the cross he told the one remaining male disciple who was there: "Take care of my mom" (John 19:26-27, paraphrased).

Col. Moore bore the burden of leadership for his men. He invested in them as people. He genuinely cared what happened to them. When the battle was over and he could think about all

the wounded and dead boys who had served under him he went off by himself and wept for their suffering and loss. It was not just a role he had to play. He cared what happened to them.

Our families, our churches, and our communities need the fathers God has given them to be servant leaders. There is an investment which servant fathers can make which will make a difference no one else can make, and if that investment is not made, no one else can make up for the loss. Servant fathers themselves get the greatest blessing from this commitment of themselves because God eagerly seeks to bless every man who attempts to live this way.

The final essential thought is that Joseph did not do what he did on his own. Col. Moore openly confessed that he did not do what he did on his own. Both of these men relied upon God for wisdom and strength. The challenge of servant fatherhood can only be met by faith. It is incumbent upon each man to trust Christ for salvation, and then trust Christ to make him into the man God wants him to be. The world is screaming out for a contingent of men who will do that very thing. Will you be such a man?