

Hobab: A Worker for God

[Numbers 10:11-36; Judges 1:16](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

Sunday, August 31, 2003

In my home years ago Labor Day was a big deal. On the first Monday in September my mother packed a huge picnic hamper and we set off for Tucker's Grove, an oak-studded park nestled in a small canyon west of Santa Barbara. My father was a tinsmith, and that's where the Sheet Metal Workers union had their annual Labor Day picnic. I remember gunny sack races, an egg toss, and lots of other games, followed by hot dogs, hamburgers, potato salad, and all the watermelon you could eat. My father was proud of what he did and Labor Day gave him a chance to celebrate his work.

Sadly, not everyone is enthusiastic about work. For example, there was a sign in a San Francisco florist shop that read, "If you don't believe in the resurrection of the dead, you ought to be here five minutes before quitting time!" Then there are people whose brain starts working the minute they get up in the morning and doesn't stop until they get into the office.

All joking aside, work, if it is honest and honorable, is service to God, and therefore as sacred as prayer. The mechanics who keep our cars in good shape are protecting us and others from injury, and that is surely God's work. The next time you stand in a grocery store check out line, remember that we might well starve were it not for people who drive semis loaded with food, and others who stock shelves and bag our groceries. They, too, are doing God's work. John Garner, the former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, once spoke in praise of plumbers. "An excellent plumber is infinitely more valuable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because it is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy; neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water." So, thank God for people who keep the water running in our homes, who respond to our medical emergencies, who serve in legislative bodies, who publish good literature, who keep the information highway humming. Whether they know it or not, they are doing God's work.

And, occasionally, life taps us on the shoulder and beckons us to take on some new work, something different and unexpected, something in addition to what we're already doing, or instead of what we're doing. That's what happened to Hobab. Hobab appears out of nowhere. He's a relative of Moses who lived all his life in the desert through which the Israelis are marching on their way to the Promised Land. Moses urges him to join Israel on their march. But his appeal sounds a bit like the free vacation offers that flood our e-mail inboxes: "We are setting out for the place of which the Lord said, 'I will give it to you'; come with us, and we will treat you well; for the Lord has promised good to Israel." In other words, "We're on our way to the land of milk and honey, it's down hill all the way, and if you play your cards right, Hobab, you'll be a millionaire within a year." It sounded too good to be true, so Hobab refused point-blank: "I will not go, but I will go back to my own land and to my kindred."

Like Hobab, I'm suspicious of offers that promise gain without pain and wealth without work. I'm especially wary when someone invites me to take on a new role and tells me it won't demand much of my time. The last time I said yes to an invitation like that I gave up a lot of days off to attend four times as many meetings as I had been led to expect, all of them at a distance, which meant that I spent more time sitting on a jet than I did in the committee meetings. Let's be honest when we invite people to serve. Let's lay it all out and ask people to count the cost, because in my experience people respond more readily to a tough challenge than to a trivial offer.

Apparently Moses got the message, because he changed his approach. "Do not leave us, for you know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will serve as eyes for us." Now it's not what Israel can do for Hobab, but what Hobab can do for Israel. "We need you, Hobab. You know where to find water in this wilderness. You know where to find grass for our flocks, trees for shade, and viable campsites. Do not leave us, Hobab; we need your eyes."

The Book of Numbers doesn't say whether Hobab signed on or not, but in that brief comment in Judges we learn that Hobab's descendants are among the Israelis in Canaan. And they were there because, without doubt, Hobab did take the job, and the Israelis were so grateful for his keen eyes, and so thankful that he guided them through the wilderness, that they gave his descendants a piece of the Promised Land.

Now my question is, how can you use your eyes, your ears, your hands, your mind, to serve your Savior in some new and unimagined way? Is it possible, for example, to take a break from your profession to serve as a short-term missionary? I think of our youth who gave up vacation time this summer to serve in the Dominican Republic. I think of my friend Wouter Bosch who left his medical practice for a month to treat patients at a Presbyterian hospital in Zaire, and again in Sri Lanka. I think of Dr. Bob Fortune, a world-renowned pediatric heart surgeon, who travels to Miraj, India, to teach surgical techniques to the staff at Wanless Hospital. These were busy people; they had obligations and commitments. Yet God tapped them on the shoulder because someone, somewhere needed their eyes and hands, their talents, their expertise. So, like Hobab, they cleared their calendars, left the comforts of home, and went off to serve in ways they had never imagined.

While waiting for allergy shots one day, I picked up Condé Nast Traveler magazine. It contained a long interview with Jimmy Carter while he was building homes for Habitat for Humanity in the Philippines. Condé Nast doesn't usually devote space to humanitarian causes. The feature article, in fact, described the hot spots of the rich and famous, expensive hotels and restaurants in Rome, Paris, and London. So I wasn't surprised when the interviewer referred to the "do-gooder" ex-president of the United States of America. That was followed by snippets of ridicule, as though any thinking person would never stoop to spend a week abroad building a cement block home for a poor Filipino family. But give the reporter credit: he strapped on a tool belt and went to work so he could get an insider's view of this Habitat thing. A few days later he climbed a tall scaffold so he could look out over the one hundred thirty

homes that were being built that week, and here's what he wrote: it "brings tears to my eyes to simply be a part of it." And at the end of the week, when Jimmy Carter handed the keys to the new owners of the home the reporter had worked on, he said there were tears in the President's eyes—and in his as well.

What happened to that reporter? Eyes that were trained only to see the luxuries of life now saw the underside of life. A heart that had been impervious to poverty softened as he worked alongside a poor but hard-working family. Hands that had penned ridicule now pounded nails. The result? A poor family got a new home, and a cynical reporter got a new heart.

You don't have to fly to the Philippines or Zaire. If, like Hobab, you have eyes to see, a heart to care, and hands to serve, next door will be just fine.