



Minutes With Messiah

Volume 22, Issue 5

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

March 2021

NOTHING BETTER

There are compliments and there are insults. In between comes the backhanded compliment. This appears to be an honest compliment, but ends with an insult like the back of a hand across the face. One example is, "You look good for your age." It starts with a compliment about appearance, but ends with a reminder of how old you really are. "You look really nice today." Yes, but does that mean you don't look nice other days? "Congratulations on the new job. I didn't think you would get it." Clearly the person making the statement was less than complimentary about the other person's talents.

Then there is another class of compliment/insult. It uses the same words, but depends on how you say them. In this class there is a song recently on Christian radio that says, "Nothing is better than you, Lord. Nothing is better than you." It was obviously meant as a compliment, but said differently it could be construed as an insult.

How could that phrase be insulting? By stating that "nothing" is better than you. "I would rather have nothing than to be associated with you."

Jesus had fasted forty days and the devil came to tempt him. The first temptation was to turn rocks to bread, which by now he desperately needed. The second temptation involved jumping off the temple so that the angels could protect him from certain death. Those were some very real temptations which Jesus answered by scripture. The third temptation involved receiving power over all the nations.

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. (Matt 4:8-9)

To this Jesus replied, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." Essentially, he said that the devil could offer him everything, but he need take nothing rather than worship the devil. "Nothing" is better than the devil.

We face all the same temptations that Jesus did: daily needs, self-preservation, and fame. We need to remember that "nothing" is better than giving in to

temptation. That is because nothing is better than following God.

That is the other side of the statement. It is the true side. The early Jewish followers of Jesus were faced with a dilemma. They had been raised in a culture that included animal sacrifices administered by a priesthood of descendants of Levi. If, as is likely, it was written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, their Jewish friends probably expected them to continue in that culture. The letter we know as the book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians so that they could explain to their friends that they had found a better way, which was foretold and symbolized in their native culture. The whole point of the letter is that the old ways were good, but nothing is better than Jesus. The angels are not better. The priesthood is not better. The sacrifices are not better. The faith is not better. Truly, to put it in a way that cannot be misconstrued, there is nothing better than Jesus.

While Hebrews was written to Messianic Jews, it bears the same message to Gentiles. Wealth is not better. Fame is not better. Personal accomplishments are not better. Just as there was nothing bad about the Jewish sacrificial system, there is nothing inherently bad about these things. But, "what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." (Jas 4:14) These things can be good, but are at best only temporary. Jesus, however, "sitteth on the right hand of God" (Col 3:1) forever.

Thus we can truly say to the devil, "Nothing' is better than you." And to Jesus we can say, "Nothing is better than you.

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I WAS THERE

It's not easy being a Hebrew in Egypt. We are told by some that there was a time we were free and were granted the best Egypt had to offer. A Hebrew named Joseph was even second in power in Egypt. But that was a while back, apparently. Now we are mostly slaves. A lot of our people have been taken to build treasure cities. They have the worst lot because they have to make bricks and build storehouses. I am one of the "lucky" ones. I am a sheep herder. The Egyptians couldn't live without the flax farmers and the sheep herders, but they consider us beneath their consideration. That is why they leave those tasks to Hebrews like me.

I guess I could have it worse. I could be one of those flax farmers and linen makers. Once the plants have grown they have to soak the stalks for several days until they start to rot. Then they have to beat the stalks with a flail to separate the fibers. Then comes a second soaking and more beating. Not only is it backbreaking work, it stinks. No wonder the Egyptians don't want to do the job themselves. But they want the finest linen in the world, so

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the flax-workers have to go through the retting and beating process several times. Once the fibers are fine enough, someone has to spin them into linen thread and then weave the cloth. Most of us get the simple linen fabric. The Egyptian royalty, however, wants linen so fine that it is practically sheer. Why they want cloth you can see through is beyond me, but who can understand Egyptian royals?

I have it a little easier. As a sheep herder I just have to make sure that I find good grazing for my charges. We were assigned Goshen, in the Nile delta, so finding good grass is not hard. Once or twice a year I have to shear my sheep. This isn't too bad, because the oils in the wool keep my hands soft. Then I send the wool to be carded, spun, and woven. The Egyptians prefer linen to wool, so most of what comes from my sheep goes to clothing the slaves. If it doesn't get carded fine enough it can be hot in this Egyptian climate. It would make good tent material, if we needed to live in the desert.

Recently a man with the Egyptian name Moses came and told us that our God was going to free us from this slavery. He dresses and acts like a sheep herder, but he speaks like an Egyptian. Some say he is actually an Egyptian prince, while others say he is a Hebrew raised in

the court. There is even a rumor that he was once wanted for murder, but that was before I was born. Most of us don't know exactly what to make of him. He promises us freedom, but had easy access to the rulers. Are his promises true, or only a trick to get us into worse trouble.

The brick makers think it is the latter. After he first went before the rulers, a new decree came down. They had to continue making bricks at the same pace, but instead of being provided the straw to bind them they had to gather their own straw. This affects not only them but the linen-makers and the wheat farmers. The brick workers take some of the flax fibers as straw, reducing their ability to make the flax the royal house wants. The wheat straw is only available during two harvests a year, and the wheat farmers are not inclined to save the straw. This new decree affects a lot of people, and they are not happy.

Some are even asking who this God is that Moses says will lead us out of slavery. If he is a god that cares, why is he making work so much harder. If he is making our lives harder, why should we worship him? Moses performs some pretty amazing magic tricks and tells us to wait.

Shortly after Moses got here we had a problem with the water. People say it was because of something Moses said. Anyway, I couldn't find any clean water for my sheep. It all seems to have turned to blood. Sheep will not drink blood, and my flocks were beginning to weaken before the water suddenly became clear a week later. That was a real scare for me and my fellow sheep herders. It almost put us out of business entirely.

Just when we thought that problem was solved, along came the frogs. They didn't affect my livelihood so much, but they affect all our lives. After all, who wants to go to bed with frogs? Who wants frogs in the ovens? Frog is supposed to be a delicacy, but too much of a good thing is a pain. Suddenly all the frogs died, supposedly at the command of Moses. I thought linen making was a smelly job. With the stench of all these dead frogs, even the flax smelled good.

After the frogs came lice. Have you ever tried to delouse a whole herd of sheep? I thought I was about to lose a whole season of wool.

One of my neighbors told me that Moses next promised to bring swarms on the land. Whether he meant swarms of flies or of wild animals I don't know, because he promised that those of us in Goshen would be exempt from this and later plagues. Apparently the ruler promised to let us go if Moses would get rid of the swarms, but he changed his mind after the plague was ended. How like a politician! Promises only last until you get what you want.

Not much later all of us herdsmen learned of a disease on all the cattle of all sorts. Now God was striking close to home for us. Apparently this pandemic spread quickly. We were ready to quarantine our herds, but Moses said God had already done so. Apparently he was right. Not a one of my sheep got the plague. Some of my fellows that kept the flocks for the Egyptians said it was really bad. Whole flocks would die off in just a day. I was worried, but I was beginning to think this Moses knew what he was talking about. Then the plague ended just as quickly as it had begun. No “flattening the curve” or “social distancing.” It just ended when Moses told it to end.

Next we heard that all our Egyptian masters had blisters and inflammation. They say Moses threw a handful of ash in the air and that cause the inflammation. Of course, all of us who dealt directly with Egyptian taskmasters were afraid we would catch it. But Moses said we wouldn’t, and we didn’t.

Lightning and hail. Those of us in the sheep business don’t like to hear those words. Of all the weather phenomena those are the most hazardous to our flocks. Moses at least warned the Egyptians to get their animals inside, although few listened. When the hail came it killed a lot of Egyptian animals, but we were safe in Goshen. It also struck down the flax and barley crops. No flax, no linen. No barley, no beer.

Next came locusts. By then the wheat had grown up, and it was destroyed. All the trees were destroyed. Between the hail and the locusts, the entire agricultural economy of Egypt was destroyed. Yet the rulers would not let us leave. Those were some hard-hearted individuals.

Have you ever felt like there was an invisible wall all around you? That’s how we felt the next time Moses went to the rulers. All of a sudden it was dark in all of Egypt except where we were. For three days we had light, but didn’t dare leave Goshen. Even from within the light the darkness felt solid. I’m told the Egyptians were afraid to even move. But Moses could. He went back to the rulers, and all he was told was never to come before them again.

Moses came to us and told us another plague was coming. This would be one that sealed the deal. But we had to be prepared for it ourselves. He said every firstborn in Egypt was going to die. We were not exempt, unless we followed his commands. First we were to ask our Egyptian neighbors for gold and other precious items. Surprisingly they gave them to us. Then he said that on a specific day we were to select and unblemished, first-year lamb for each family. Now that was music to my ears, because it meant that I would make quite a bit of money selling lambs. We were to hold these lambs apart for four days. What was to happen next was a bit strange.

On the evening after the fourteenth day of the month we were to kill the lambs. Then we were to put their blood on our doorposts and lintels. Then we were to

eat the meat of the lamb, roasted and not boiled, accompanied by unleavened bread and bitter herbs. After that, nobody was to leave the house for any reason. We were to be dressed, packed, and ready to leave.

About midnight there arose a great wailing throughout Egypt. In every house the firstborn died. If we hadn’t put to blood on the doorposts, the same thing happened. The angel of the Lord passed over the houses with the blood, but killed the firstborn of people and animals everywhere else. That was enough for the Egyptians. We were kicked out of the country.

Because we were packed, it didn’t take us long to leave. By now all the Hebrews were ready to follow Moses. We had eaten enough to travel on. Our bread was unleavened because our kneading boards were packed

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with all our belongings. And we took with us the gold and other valuables that the Egyptians had given us.

Freedom! We had been slaves for a long time. We weren’t sure we even knew what it would be like to be free, but we followed Moses. He seemed to know what he was doing.

Now I could probably tell you about some other amazing things that happened as we fled. There was this pillar of cloud and fire that Moses seemed to be following. There was some darkness that separated us from the pursuing Egyptian army. (Yes, they had changed their mind about letting their slave labor force go.) There was even the way we got saved from that army by crossing the sea on dry land. There were other miracles in the three months we were in the desert before camping here at this mountain Moses called Sinai.

Moses told us those things were important to remember, but not the most important. He said that we were to hold a memorial every year to remember when God passed over our houses. Some of these other things would come up in the celebration, but the important thing was that we would call the holiday “Passover.” God spared all our firstborn because we had obeyed him by putting the blood on the doorposts. Our obedience saved us the heartache the Egyptians felt.

Moses says that in the celebration of Passover even future generations are to celebrate and tell the story as if they were there. Well, I was there. And that is the story. Moses may tell it from his perspective, but all I can do is tell it from mine.

(Passover begins the evening of 27 March in 2021. The story is taken from Exodus, chapters 1-12)

A SHORT PRAISE

We are told that good things come in small packages. That may be an overgeneralization. There are some good things that won't fit in small packages, and some pretty poor things that do. Nevertheless, on the television game show *Let's Make a Deal*, quite often it is true. When given a choice between a small envelope and a large box, sometimes it is best to pick the envelope. Inside may be notification of a trip, as opposed to a booby prize (called a zonk on the show) in the box. Obviously this is not always the case, or everyone would pick the smaller box or envelope. It is true sufficiently to prove the maxim. In the Bible this saying may also be true. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible, and contains a lot of good things. (See "But It's So Long" in the June 2008 *Minutes With Messiah*.) Just two psalms earlier, however, is the shortest chapter in the Bible, being only two verses in length. True to the nature of the Bible, good things come in that small package.

O praise the LORD, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people. For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the LORD endureth for ever. Praise ye the LORD.

Unlike many of the other psalms, this is purely a song of praise. David has other songs of praise that are longer, so you can read nothing into the length. However, in many public prayers today there is not much more praise, often less. Every now and then it would be good to follow the psalmist's example and just say a prayer of praise, even if it is only two sentences long. (But you could probably come up with much more than two sentences.)

The psalmist begins with a typical Hebrew couplet. "Praise the Lord, nations/Praise him people." If you examine many of the psalms or proverbs, you will find that this is the Hebrew equivalent of English rhyme for poetry. The Hebrew word for nations in the first phrase (*goy*) could be translated exactly the same as that in the second phrase (*uma*). Both refer to nations. The origins of the words do reveal a subtle difference; the first means a body or group while the second comes from a word for mother. Thus, the first phrase may tell the entire body of people in the world to praise God, while the second refers to a specific heritage. On the other hand, we are all of the heritage of Mother Eve. Another distinction is made in actual usage. Even to this day, *goy* refers to non-Jewish people. So the psalmist may be telling Gentiles to praise God, just as Jewish people praise God. In other words, let everybody praise Him.

The next verse is also a couplet. It contrasts God's *chesed*, His mercy, with God's *emet*, truth. These are two of the foundational concepts in Jewish ethics. Because God is merciful, we should show mercy. Because God cannot lie, he hates false witnesses. In fact, the psalmist is saying that mercy and truth may be the same. God's mercy is great toward us, and that is a truth that lasts through eternity.

Finally, the psalmist repeats "Praise the Lord." He gives a command, he explains why we should praise. Then he repeats the command for emphasis. Because God is truly merciful, it is our obligation to praise Him.

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