



Dave Gibbons

"Obedience: The Call to Die"

(Excerpt: Xealots - Chapter 6)

OBEDIENCE **The Call to Die**

This is the life I chose, or rather, the life that chose me. —Jay-Z

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. —Dietrich Bonhoeffer

MY FRIEND Dave Brubaker is all passion. We play basketball together. I enjoy our games because he brings it all out on the court. Once, we were playing a two-on-two pickup game,

one of those back-and-forth games. Dave did not want to lose. Suddenly, the ball was dropped, and it looked like a turnover. But with his usual passion, Dave chased it down, just as an opponent was about to grab it. The only way Dave could guarantee that he would get the ball first was to dive for it. Did I mention that we were playing outside, on an asphalt court? Afterward, Dave's back looked like a pepperoni pizza. As we helped him pick the rocks out of his skin, we laughed at his passion, his willingness to sacrifice his body.

Passion is like a fire inside of you. It's an amazing force in our lives. It can lead to incredible change and motivate people to unparalleled feats. But at some point, passion falls short.

We need to be aware of its limitations as well.

When I think of passion, I think of the hare in Aesop's classic tale of the tortoise and the hare. Passion can fill us with a burst of motivation and energy, but it doesn't always enable us to complete the race. In the fable, though the hare takes the early lead, the tortoise crosses the finish line first.

That tortoise is obedience.

Take love, for example. Love is often a pure act of obedience. How many couples decide it's just not worth it during those first few turbulent years of really getting to know each other? How many feel like quitting after the third month of changing diapers every night at 2:00 a.m.?

In trying uninspired moments, passion fails to fuel. Why? And how do we discipline our passion, developing it into the commitment that leads to obedience?

The following are common responses people give for why their passion runs dry.

“I’M JUST NOT FEELING IT ANYMORE”

We make plans, try to choose the career, the relationship, the calling that best fits our gifts, passions and talents. We examine all the options. Eventually, we choose a particular path.

The problem with this way of thinking is that when we follow God, often our desires are, well, irrelevant. If not irrelevant, it’s certainly not the most important factor in determining our purpose. Like a servant or a soldier, sometimes we simply have to accept the assignments we’re given.

My friend Dave Brubaker is more than just an insane basketball player. I asked Dave to share this story about a time when he wasn’t feeling the passion to work with youth anymore:

I remember when I first started working at a church; it was a great job, but sometimes it didn’t feel very rewarding. Dealing with people can be tiring, and sometimes at the end of the day it’s hard to see a return for your labor. I started feeling jealous of people who work in construction. At the end of the day, they have something tangible that they can point to and say, “I did that.”

Ironically, I am probably the least handy person in the world. I can’t even put up a shelf without having it end up crooked. Yet I still had this fantasy in my mind: “If I could do anything, I would work in construction.” One day, I came home to my apartment complex and saw some guys doing a renovation on one of the buildings. As I got out of my car, one of the workers walked by. I couldn’t resist making a comment.

“Man, you’ve got the best job in the world.”

He stopped, then asked me, “What do you do?”

“Oh, I work at the church down the street.”

He seemed a little puzzled and challenged me. “You do an important job like that, and you’re jealous of my work?”

I felt kind of sheepish. I had just been making polite conversation, and suddenly he was calling me out. Then the conversation took a crazy turn. He said, “When you get home, get your Bible and look up 2 Timothy 2:4, see what it says.”

The construction worker giving the pastor a verse to look up? But after I got home and read it, I was stunned. No joke, I think the guy may have actually been an angel sent to teach me a lesson. Here's what the verse said: "No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs; he wants to please his commanding officer."

Whether he was an angel or just the most theologically profound man ever to pick up a hammer, the lesson was clear. God didn't want to hear me talk about construction anymore. I was a soldier and I had an assignment, and even if there were other things I wanted to do, my real job was to please my commanding officer. Whether I was "feeling it" or not.

Our sense of passion can be misleading. Far more important is our willingness to serve, our openness to God's direction, and our submission to his leading.

"I HAVE NOTHING TO OFFER"

This excuse is the tag team of "I'm just not feeling it." Tag team member 1 typically hits you when your circumstances no longer inspire you. The powerful emotion or the initial excitement has been replaced by tolerance and the ordinary routine.

Tag team member 2 hits you when the well within runs dry.

Any great endeavor worth pursuing will stir up these questions about your abilities or lack thereof.

At some point in life, we all reach this stage. You set out to do something great, believing that you have ideas to contribute, work to do, insights to uncover that no one has ever heard before. Just a bit of wisdom, some creativity, and a fresh idea will soon put you at the front of the pack.

Then you experience a setback. People aren't excited about your ideas. You disappoint that person whose opinion means the world to you. Or you start working alongside someone who is ten times better than you are. Afterward, all you can do is sit. You feel dead inside. Passionless. Defeated.

It's a nauseating feeling. But in moments like these we become open to God and his Word in a unique way. During a personal crisis, God led me to Psalm 51, which was written by King David after perhaps the biggest failure of his life. David wrote this to God:

You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one. You do not want a burnt offering.

The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.

There are two ways we can say “I have nothing to offer.” One is the cry of frustration, as we look to ourselves in bitterness and despair. The other is the cry of a broken heart, looking for restoration, calling out to God in weakness. Though I felt passionless in the moment when I finally came to God, I felt like he was saying, “Dave, I’ve been waiting a long time for you to get here.” I sensed that day that God was not interested in reigniting red-hot passion in me, a passion that is here today and gone tomorrow. He was interested in breaking my heart, preparing me to obey.

THE ROAD JESUS TRAVELED

John 12:27-28 gives us a window into the way Jesus processed his emotions, the troubling thoughts that threatened to overwhelm him as he looked to the cross, the pain and suffering that awaited him: “Now my soul is deeply troubled. Should I pray, ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But this is the very reason I came! Father, bring glory to your name.”

Here we see Jesus in anguish. He gives us an opportunity to listen in on his thoughts. Like most of us, he knows the normal desire to be delivered from a difficult situation. We too wrestle with God’s calling on our lives. We are tempted to pray that God would artfully place us in a space that’s easier, a situation that we can feel passionate about. We want to do something that we feel

matters. But Jesus rejects that option. He doesn’t pray for the Father to save him from his journey to the cross. Why? Because Jesus knows that even if it is difficult, even if it leads to pain and suffering, this is the assignment he was born to complete. The passion of Jesus is his suffering. His example proves that godly passion is born not of our desires but in the difficult path of obedience, where our lives bring glory to God.

DAD

Recently, my dad passed away. As you might imagine, we had a volatile relationship after he left our family. Much of this was my own fault. But over the years, my heart toward my father changed. At first, I began reconnecting with him simply as an act of defiance. There was no passion, no desire to know him or understand him. But as I moved toward him in obedience to God, I began to see my dad in new ways, through a new set of eyes. I began to see him as Gary, not just my dad but a man like me, broken and human. Slowly I began to see my own sin and hypocrisy. I saw how easy it was for me to throw stones and ignore my failures in the relationship. I saw, in a fresh way, God’s grace in my life.

Though I am rebellious, he still pursues me. He still loves me.

MORE THAN A FEELING

Rodney Stark, a church historian, wondered why Christianity grew with such speed during its early years. And as he studied, he uncovered an interesting truth: when pandemic occurred, people fled the disease-filled city, leaving behind the suffering and dying. But the Christians stayed behind, caring for the victims, putting their own health at risk. These were clearly acts of love. They were not decisions to make their own lives happier or more convenient. They were not decisions driven by temporary feelings or concerns. They were rooted in God-inspired compassion.

True love is a radical act of sacrifice, trusting God to catalyze and sustain change. Following Jesus involves our passion, but it is more than transient feelings. It's about trusting the Father enough that we follow his calling and walk in obedience to him even when we don't fully understand his ways.

Sacrificial obedience defines the XEALOT life. It's a contrarian path. Jesus taught and modeled this way of life for us. Consider how he taught us to act. Remember, this is not just something we believe but is the way we live. Jesus defines a new movement, something he not only believed, but also lived out through suffering and death on a cross. He taught us:

"Love your enemies"

"Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them."

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Take up your cross, and follow me."

"You are no longer part of the world."

"Forgive others, and you will be forgiven."

Following Jesus is about more than good feelings, a prosperous life, and calling him your good buddy. It's about obedience to these imperatives. Yes, joy is a part of the journey, but like any relationship, there will be highs and lows, moments of frustration and disappointment. Still, in the end, following Jesus is less a matter of knowing our passion, our inner desire, that thing that makes us feel fulfilled and happy. It's actually the opposite of the self-directed life. It's learning to die, each day, in obedience to God's will and his purpose for our lives.

He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. —Philippians 2:8



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