

Isaiah 40:27-31
July 1, '18

“CHARIOTS OF FIRE”
“FEELING GOD’S PLEASURE”

THIS IS WEEK THREE OF A SERIES THAT WE’VE GENERALLY LABELLED “MOVIES WITH A MESSAGE.”

LAST WEEK, FOR OUR VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL PROGRAM, WE FOCUSED ON DISNEY’S “SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON” FROM 1960 BECAUSE OUR THEME WAS “SHIPWRECKED.”

THE WEEK BEFORE – FATHER’S DAY - A LOGICAL CHOICE WAS “FIELD OF DREAMS.”

IF I’D REALLY THOUGHT THIS THROUGH, WE PROBABLY WOULDN’T BE USING THE MOVIE WE’VE CHOSEN FOR TODAY BECAUSE IT SEEMS AS THOUGH THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN “FIELD OF DREAMS” AND “CHARIOTS OF FIRE” MAKE THEM NEARLY IDENTICAL.

THERE’S THE OBVIOUS “SPORTS” THEME WITHIN BOTH OF THEM – BASEBALL & RUNNING.

THERE ARE AREAS IN BOTH FILMS WHERE THE DIRECTOR HAS TAKEN A BIT OF ARTISTIC LICENSE WITH THE FACTS & THEY BOTH INCLUDE A MAIN CHARACTER WITH A FASCINATING LIFE STORY *AFTER* THE EVENTS OF THE MOVIE.

IN THE CASE OF “FIELD OF DREAMS,” IT WAS DR. ARCHIBALD GRAHAM & IN “CHARIOTS OF FIRE,” IT’S ERIC LIDDELL.

EVEN MORE THAN THAT, THE LIVES OF THESE TWO MEN – ARCHIE GRAHAM & ERIC LIDDELL - ARE REMARKABLY ALIKE.

AS I SAID WITH “FIELD OF DREAMS,” IF YOU HAVEN’T SEEN “CHARIOTS OF FIRE,” YOU NEED TO.

AND IF YOU HAVEN’T SEEN IT IN A FEW YEARS, IT’S TIME TO SEE IT AGAIN.

LET’S BEGIN WITH A VERY, VERY QUICK SYNOPSIS:

“CHARIOTS OF FIRE” IS A MOVIE MOSTLY CENTERED ON TWO RUNNERS PREPARING FOR AND COMPETING IN THE 1924 SUMMER OLYMPICS IN PARIS.

HAROLD ABRAHAMS IS JEWISH AND FROM ENGLAND AND ERIC LIDDELL IS THE SON OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES TO CHINA AND HAILS FROM SCOTLAND.

ABRAHAMS WINS THE GOLD MEDAL IN THE 100 METER DASH & LIDDELL WINS THE GOLD IN THE 400.

THERE ARE A COUPLE OF OBLIGATORY SUB-PLOTS, INCLUDING A LOVE STORY INVOLVING ABRAHAMS AND A WELL-KNOWN STAGE ACTRESS. THE MAIN FOCUS OF THE FILM, THOUGH, AND WHAT MADE IT SO BELOVED IS THE REFUSAL OF ERIC LIDDELL TO RUN ON SUNDAY, EVEN IF IT MEANT THAT HE WOULDN’T BE ABLE TO WIN AN OLYMPIC MEDAL.

I MENTIONED THAT THE FILMMAKERS EXERCISED A BIT OF ARTISTIC LICENSE IN MAKING “CHARIOTS OF FIRE.”

I DON’T THINK THEY DID ANYTHING, THOUGH, THAT SIGNIFICANTLY ALTERS THE TRUTH.

ERIC LIDDELL’S SISTER, JENNY, WAS A BIT DISAPPOINTED THAT SHE & THE REST OF THE FAMILY ARE PORTRAYED AS BEING OPPOSED TO HIS RUNNING WHEN, IN TRUTH, THEY WERE COMPLETELY SUPPORTIVE OF IT.

PROBABLY THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ADJUSTMENT OF THE TRUTH THAT IS MADE IN THE MOVIE IS THE SUGGESTION THAT LIDDEL FIRST LEARNED THAT HE WOULD HAVE TO RUN ON SUNDAY AS HE WAS BOARDING THE SHIP ON HIS WAY TO PARIS.

IN TRUTH, THE SCHEDULE OF EVENTS HAD BEEN ANNOUNCED MONTHS BEFORE.

BUT I THINK THAT MAKES WHAT HE DID EVEN MORE POWERFUL BECAUSE HE HAD THAT MUCH LONGER – WHILE STILL IN HIS OWN COUNTRY, NO LESS - TO ENDURE THE RIDICULE, HOSTILITY, ANIMOSITY & PRESSURE TO CHANGE HIS MIND & SACRIFICE HIS MORAL CONVICTIONS FOR THE CHANCE AT WINNING OLYMPIC GLORY FOR HIMSELF AND HIS NATION.

THERE'S ONE PART OF THE MOVIE, THOUGH, THAT WOULD SEEM TO BE FABRICATED THAT IS, IN FACT, COMPLETELY TRUE.

THE MOVIE BEGINS & ENDS IN A CHURCH & THE OCCASION IS THE FUNERAL OF HAROLD ABRAHAMS.

HE DIED IN 1978 & THOSE GATHERED ARE REMEMBERING THE MAGNIFICENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE BRITISH ATHLETES – INCLUDING ABRAHAMS – IN THE '24 PARIS OLYMPICS MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY BEFORE.

WHAT SEEMS FARFICAL – THE FUNERAL OF A JEWISH MAN BEING HELD IN A CHRISTIAN CHURCH – WAS TRUE.

HAROLD ABRAHAM'S SERVICE WAS HELD IN THAT VERY CHURCH BECAUSE 10 YEARS AFTER THE OLYMPICS HE CONVERTED TO CATHOLICISM.

THE SONG YOU HEAR BEING SUNG AT THE END OF THAT SERVICE – AND INDEED, THE END OF THE MOVIE - IS WHERE THE FILM GETS ITS TITLE.

WE HEAR THE CONGREGATION & CHOIR SINGING THE WILLIAM BLAKE POEM, “JERUSALEM” SET TO MUSIC WITH ITS STIRRING LINES – “BRING ME MY ARROWS OF DESIRE; BRING ME MY SPEAR; O CLOUDS, UNFOLD! BRING ME MY CHARIOT OF FIRE!”

AND WITH THAT, WE SEE THESE WORDS ON THE SCREEN: “ERIC LIDDELL, MISSIONARY, DIED IN OCCUPIED CHINA AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II. ALL OF SCOTLAND MOURNED.”

WHAT’S FASCINATING & IRONIC IS THAT WITH THOSE WORDS, THE MOVIE ENDS – BUT THE REAL STORY OF ERIC LIDDELL BEGINS.

IN WHAT IS PROBABLY THE MOST WELL-KNOWN SCENE AND MOST FREQUENTLY-QUOTED LINE IN THE MOVIE, ERIC IS WALKING WITH HIS SISTER, JENNIE, IN THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS FOLLOWING A WORSHIP SERVICE FOR WHICH HE HAD SHOWN UP LATE, ELICITING HIS SISTER’S ANGER.

WHAT IS REMEMBERED IS LIDDELL SAYING, “GOD MADE ME FOR A PURPOSE. BUT HE ALSO MADE ME FAST. AND WHEN I RUN, I FEEL HIS PLEASURE.”

NOW, THOSE ARE NOT ACTUALLY ERIC LIDDELL’S WORDS.

THEY’RE THE WORDS OF THE SCREENWRITER EVEN THOUGH THEY’RE MUCH IN LINE WITH THINGS HE *DID* SAY.

THERE ARE TWO WORDS THAT ARE OFTEN LEFT OUT OF THAT QUOTE – TWO WORDS THAT ARE ABSOLUTELY VITAL TO THE ENTIRE QUOTE TO REMAIN CONSISTENT WITH WHO ERIC LIDDELL WAS.

HE SAYS, “GOD MADE ME FOR A PURPOSE – FOR CHINA.”

YOU SEE, ERIC LIDDELL HAD BEEN BORN IN CHINA.

HE CONSIDERED HIMSELF CHINESE.

IN FACT, HE IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE FIRST OLYMPIC GOLD MEDAL WINNER IN CHINA.

OF COURSE, ONCE BACK IN SCOTLAND, HE WAS COMPLETELY COMMITTED TO HIS NATIVE HOMELAND AS WELL.

BUT HE FIRMLY BELIEVED HE HAD BEEN CALLED BY GOD TO MINISTER TO THOSE IN CHINA WHO NEEDED TO HEAR THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS CHRIST.

WHAT ERIC LIDDELL DID IN THE OLYMPICS WAS TRULY EXTRAORDINARY.

HE WAS A SPRINTER.

HE'D TRAINED FOR THE 100 METER DASH.

UPON HIS REFUSAL TO COMPETE IN THAT RACE BECAUSE THE TRIALS WERE HELD ON A SUNDAY, HE SWITCHED TO THE 400.

ANYONE WHO KNOWS ANYTHING ABOUT TRACK KNOWS THERE'S A HUGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE 100 AND THE 400.

THE CHANCES OF LIDDELL EVEN BEING COMPETITIVE IN THE 400 – LET ALONE WINNING A MEDAL – WERE VIRTUALLY NON-EXISTENT.

IT WAS FOOLHARDY OF HIM TO EVEN CONSIDER COMPETING IN THE RACE.

HIS BEST TIME IN THE EVENT WAS NOWHERE NEAR WHAT THE OTHER RUNNERS HAD DONE.

BUT RUN IN THE 400 HE DID.

NOT ONLY DID HE RUN – HE WON.

AND NOT ONLY DID HE WIN – HE SET AN OLYMPIC & WORLD RECORD IN DOING SO.

WHAT IS EVEN MORE EXTRAORDINARY ABOUT ERIC LIDDELL, THOUGH, IS WHAT HE DID *AFTER* HE WON THAT WORLD RECORD-SETTING GOLD MEDAL.

WITH AN UNLIMITED ATHLETIC FUTURE IN FRONT OF HIM IN BOTH TRACK & RUGBY – WITH ALL OF SCOTLAND & ENGLAND AT HIS FEET, OFFERING HIM EVERY OPPORTUNITY AT RICHES, FAME & GLORY – ERIC LIDDELL LEFT WITHIN A YEAR TO RETURN TO CHINA WHERE HE SERVED THE REMAINDER OF HIS LIFE AS A MISSIONARY.

THAT’S FAR MORE EXTRAORDINARY THAN WINNING AN OLYMPIC GOLD MEDAL.

THE CONDITIONS IN WHICH HE LIVED WERE BRUTAL – AND THEN THEY WENT FROM BAD TO WORSE.

WITH THE BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR II, JAPAN OCCUPIED CHINA & CHRISTIANS WERE BEING BRUTALLY TORTURED & MURDERED ALL ACROSS THE COUNTRY.

LIDDELL SENT HIS PREGNANT WIFE & TWO DAUGHTERS TO CANADA.

HE DID SO JUST IN TIME, BECAUSE SHORTLY AFTER THEIR DEPARTURE, HE WAS ARRESTED & SPENT THE REMAINDER OF HIS LIFE IN A CONCENTRATION CAMP, NEVER HAVING THE OPPORTUNITY TO EVEN SEE HIS THIRD DAUGHTER.

WHILE THERE, ACCORDING TO ALL ACCOUNTS, IT WAS ERIC LIDDELL – FAR MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE – WHO MAINTAINED THE MORALE OF THE CAMP & GAVE OF HIMSELF BEYOND ANY CONCEIVABLE HUMAN UNDERSTANDING.

BECAUSE OF HIS OLYMPIC NOTORIETY, AT ONE POINT DURING HIS TIME IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMP, IT WAS ARRANGED FOR HIM TO BE RELEASED.

HE REFUSED & SENT A WOMAN WHO WAS PREGNANT TO TAKE HIS PLACE.

LANGDON GILKEY WENT TO CHINA TO TEACH ENGLISH AFTER GRADUATING FROM HARVARD & ENDED UP IN THE SAME CONCENTRATION CAMP WITH LIDDELL.

IN A BOOK HE WROTE ABOUT HIS EXPERIENCE THERE, GILKEY SAID OF ERIC LIDDELL: *“HE WAS OVERFLOWING WITH GOOD HUMOR AND LOVE FOR LIFE, AND WITH ENTHUSIASM AND CHARM. IT IS RARE INDEED THAT A PERSON HAS THE GOOD FORTUNE TO MEET A SAINT, BUT HE CAME AS CLOSE TO IT AS ANYONE I HAVE EVER KNOWN.”*

WHEN ERIC LIDDELL DIED IN THAT CONCENTRATION CAMP OF A BRAIN TUMOR JUST PRIOR TO ITS LIBERATION, GILKEY WROTE: *“THE ENTIRE CAMP, ESPECIALLY ITS YOUTH, WAS STUNNED FOR DAYS, SO GREAT WAS THE VACUUM THAT ERIC’S DEATH HAD LEFT.”*

AS WITH ARCHIBALD GRAHAM IN “FIELD OF DREAMS,” THE STORY OF ERIC LIDDELL REALLY BEGAN WITH THE EVENTS OF HIS LIFE AFTER THE EVENTS OF THE MOVIE.

WHY DO WE LOVE THIS MOVIE SO MUCH?

WHY IS IT SO INSPIRING & CHALLENGING?

WHY DID IT WIN THE OSCAR FOR BEST PICTURE, ALONG WITH THREE OTHER ACADEMY AWARDS?

LET ME SUGGEST THREE ASPECTS OF THIS FILM THAT MAY BE WHAT IT IS THAT APPEALS TO OUR PASSIONS & THEN ASK US TO CONSIDER HOW WE REALLY FEEL ABOUT THOSE THINGS OURSELVES.

FIRST OF ALL, MAYBE IT’S ERIC LIDDELL’S REFUSAL TO RUN ON SUNDAY AS A SYMBOL OF HIS COMPLETE DEDICATION TO THE FAITHFUL OBSERVANCE OF THE SABBATH.

IT OFTEN SEEMS AS IF PEOPLE HOLD HIM IN HIGH REGARD BECAUSE OF THAT POSITION.

IF THAT’S TRUE, HOW DO WE COMPARE?

HOW SERIOUS ARE WE IN OUR OWN FAITHFUL OBSERVANCE OF THE SABBATH?

I RECENTLY SAID IN A SERMON, WITHOUT GOING INTO DETAIL, THAT I BELIEVE MORE OF THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS - OUR OWN PERSONAL PROBLEMS & PROBLEMS OF SOCIETY IN GENERAL - COULD BE SOLVED BY A FAITHFUL OBSERVANCE OF THE SABBATH THAN BY ANYTHING ELSE WE MIGHT DO.

I BELIEVE THAT.

I BELIEVE GOD MADE US IN A CERTAIN WAY.

HE MADE US TO BE ABLE TO PROPERLY FUNCTION PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY & MENTALLY AS INTENDED FOR SIX DAYS – AND THEN TO REST FROM ALL OF IT ON THE 7TH DAY & FOCUS ON WORSHIPPING THE ONE WHO CREATED US.

THERE'S A REASON THAT "REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY TO KEEP IT HOLY" IS ONE OF JUST TEN COMMANDMENTS GOD GIVES US.

THERE'S A REASON THAT THERE ARE MORE WORDS DEVOTED TO THIS COMMANDMENT THAN ANY OF THE OTHER NINE.

YES, WE ADMIRE ERIC LIDDELL'S FAITHFULNESS TO THIS COMMANDMENT, BUT WE ADMIRE HIM FROM AFAR & DO LITTLE OURSELVES TO FOLLOW HIS EXAMPLE & WE DO IT TO OUR OWN DETRIMENT.

SECONDLY, MAYBE IT'S ERIC LIDDELL'S WILLINGNESS TO PUT THE CAUSE OF CHRIST AHEAD OF THE CAUSE OF COUNTRY.

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH THAT, TOO, IS SOMETHING THAT APPEALS TO US.

BUT I WONDER HOW MOST OF US STACK UP IN THAT REGARD AS WELL.

I THINK THE WEEK OF OUR NATION’S CELEBRATION OF INDEPENDENCE DAY IS A GOOD DAY TO CONSIDER SUCH A QUESTION.

WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE – IF OUR CHRISTIAN CONVICTIONS & VALUES RUN INTO CONFLICT WITH SOMETHING IN OUR NATION’S CONVICTIONS & VALUES - WHERE DO WE PLACE OUR ALLEGIANCE?

IN THE MOVIE, A MEMBER OF THE BRITISH OLYMPIC COMMITTEE SAYS TO ERIC, WHEN HE REFUSES TO BACK DOWN, “*IN MY DAY IT WAS KING FIRST, AND GOD AFTER.*”

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH WE HOLD ERIC LIDDELL IN HIGH ESTEEM BECAUSE HE REFUSED TO BACK DOWN, EVEN WHEN FACED WITH RIDICULE & SCORN – EVEN WHEN HE WAS TOLD HE WASN’T BEING PATRIOTIC BECAUSE HE WAS PLACING CHRIST BEFORE COUNTRY.

I WONDER IF THERE, AS WELL, WE ADMIRE ERIC LIDDELL FROM AFAR & AREN’T STRONG ENOUGH IN OUR COMMITMENT TO JESUS CHRIST TO BE ABLE TO WITHSTAND THE SCORN OF THOSE WHO WOULD CLAIM WE AREN’T BEING PATRIOTIC IF WE ALLOW OUR ALLEGIANCE TO CHRIST TO TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER ALLEGIANCE TO COUNTRY.

FINALLY, THERE’S THAT MOST FAMILIAR QUOTE THAT WE MENTIONED FROM THE MOVIE – “*GOD MADE ME FAST & WHEN I RUN, I FEEL HIS PLEASURE.*”

I MENTIONED THAT THERE ARE TWO WORDS WITHIN THAT ENTIRE QUOTE THAT ARE OFTEN OMITTED – THE WORDS “*FOR CHINA*” WHEN LIDDELL IS TALKING ABOUT HIS PURPOSE IN LIFE.

BUT THERE’S SOMETHING HE SAYS AFTERWARDS THAT, I BELIEVE, IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT.

AFTER HE SAYS, “...WHEN I RUN, I FEEL HIS PLEASURE...” HE SAYS, “TO GIVE IT UP WOULD BE TO HOLD HIM IN CONTEMPT.”

YOU NEVER HEAR THAT PART OF IT, THOUGH, DO YOU, WHEN THIS QUOTE IS USED?

BUT I THINK THAT’S VITAL TO UNDERSTANDING WHO ERIC LIDDELL WAS.

HE BELIEVED GOD HAD MADE HIM FOR THE PURPOSE OF SERVING IN CHINA & BECAUSE GOD HAD PLACED THAT WITHIN HIM – BECAUSE GOD HAD GIVEN HIM THE GIFTS TO DO THAT WELL – HE GAVE EVERY OUNCE OF HIMSELF TO THAT END.

BUT HE ALSO SAYS THAT HIS RUNNING ABILITY IS A GIFT FROM GOD & TO BE UNWILLING TO EXERCISE THAT GIFT WOULD BE MAKING A MOCKERY OF GOD.

KNOWING THAT THIS GIFT WAS GOD-GIVEN, HE USED IT TO THE BEST OF HIS ABILITY & EXPERIENCED GOD’S PLEASURE IN DOING SO.

I WONDER HOW OFTEN WE MISS OUT ON THE EXPERIENCE OF FEELING GOD’S PLEASURE BECAUSE WE’RE UNWILLING TO PUT TO GOOD USE THE GIFTS GOD HAS GIVEN US.

YOU KNOW WHAT YOU’RE GOOD AT DOING.

THINK ABOUT IT – THERE ARE A WHOLE HOST OF THINGS THAT YOU DO WELL.

ARE YOU UTILIZING THOSE GOD-GIVEN GIFTS TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY?

ARE YOU SHARING THOSE GIFTS WITH OTHERS – WITH YOUR FAMILY, YOUR WORKPLACE, YOUR COMMUNITY, YOUR CHURCH?

I STRONGLY ENCOURAGE YOU TO GIVE THIS PRAYERFUL THOUGHT.

**THE BEST WAY TO TRULY EXPERIENCE GOD'S PLEASURE IS BY
UTILIZING THE GIFTS YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN.**

**THE NEXT TIME YOU WATCH "CHARIOTS OF FIRE," DON'T JUST
ADMIRE ERIC LIDDELL FROM AFAR – TAKE THE LESSONS OF LIFE
THAT HE TEACHES IN THE WAY HE LIVED HIS LIFE & YOU'LL FIND NO
BETTER WAY TO "FEEL GOD'S PLEASURE." AMEN.**

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