

LISTENING TO GREAT LIVES

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Romans 15:4



THE COMMON EXCUSE FOR MODERN CULTURE—specifically, the cesspit that bubbles and curdles its way out of Hollywood and Madison Avenue—is that it simply mirrors true life. All sorts of base machinations are portrayed at the local Cineplex, in daytime soaps and evening sitcoms, and in all the advertisements in between as something natural and profound, when all they are really is just base.

This culture is rationalized by reason of its authenticity. Since there are some teenagers that smoke and drink and curse and while away their idle hours with recreational sex, then that is made the subject of most films, television programs and advertisements. Since about half the adult population has experienced divorce, then that is portrayed as the more common status of the adults in the same programs. Since there are murders and drug addicts and foul-mouthed cops, then that is portrayed as the common currency of the streets. They are just being true to life, the purveyors explain.

Yet history proves that a popular culture that is 'true-to-life' has an odd way of *drawing down* the real culture. Portraying the meanest, most base behavior as typical results only in a lowering of the high standard. If children on television use profanity

and coarse slang, the result is more profanity in the real schools—not less.

The human spirit does not rise into the heights by a steady contemplation of its own transgressions, and man does not rise above himself by wallowing in his own filth.

A Yearning Beyond Ourselves

There is in every person (whether they realize it or not) a yearning to reach beyond themselves—to somehow rise above what they already are. Some people think of this only in economic terms: they wish to be wealthier tomorrow than they are today. But some people practice it on a more spiritual level, pursuing a process that improves the *quality* of their life from the inside out.

A vital component of this pursuit is the biography. The lives of great individuals are classrooms of higher learning. They are places where higher ideals are established and learned, where grand concepts add color and depth, and where examples of moral strength add character. Biography is where we learn what we didn't already know, and live what we may never live. Biography is where we are given the privilege to walk alongside great men and women who have sacrificed and suffered for the world which we now enjoy.

Aspects

Encouraging believers to know
God and His ways,
and to enjoy a more intimate
communion with Him

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Biographies of great lives are the opposite of our more common, pedestrian culture. Rather than debase, they uplift; rather than contaminate, they purify; rather than darken our lives with the worst of man, they brighten our lives with his best.

Whether found on the library shelves in Dewey 920, or in the onion-skinned pages of Scripture, biographies are the stories not of plasticene saints wrapped in the ivory glow of unsullied perfection, but of otherwise normal men and women who, for one reason or more, have left their mark on the world. Whether for good or bad, they are remarkable. There is something about their lives worth the telling.

There has been only one flawless human being upon the earth. His name was Jesus of Nazareth, and we have His biography in the pages of Scripture between Matthew 1 and Acts 1. Jesus'

perfection came from the fact that He was also God—God in flesh. No other person can make that claim, thus they are rendered as imperfect humans.

But those imperfections do not disqualify their lives from our consideration. Rather, their flawed humanity endears them to us, a constant reminder that their greatness was something that rose out of their normalcy. This one quality of biography, more than any other, is what commends it for our use: Individuals as imperfect as we somehow rose higher than their flesh to become or do something remarkable.

We learn from these lives. We learn how to become something more than what we were born, to shed unhappy beginnings; we learn what it is to be noble, and good; we learn the value of a gentle, flexible spirit; and we learn, most of all, how to sacrifice ourselves for the greater good.

An Indomitable Will

WINSTON CHURCHILL HAD A MISERABLE CHILDHOOD. Though born into the English aristocracy—actually, *because* he was born into the English aristocracy—the young Winston, according to Violet Asquith, had a “solitary childhood and unhappy school days.” William Manchester writes,

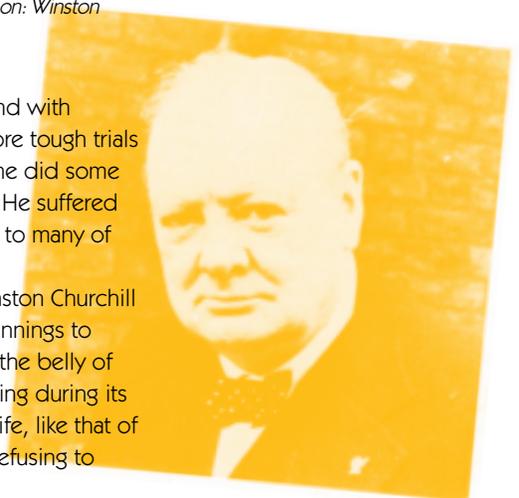
Except at bedtime, when mother appeared for good-night kisses, nurseries, like kitchens, were rarely visited by upper-class parents then. Like popes granting audiences, they received their children at appointed times, when the small ones, scrubbed and suitably dressed, presented themselves for inspection while their nannies reported on their deportment. Randolph and Jennie [Winston's father and mother] appear to have omitted even these token meetings. They had no time for them. Every hour appears to have been devoted to the pursuit of pleasure.

When Winston was packed up and sent away to a hellish school at the age of seven, part of his misery was from his parent's—and especially his father's—indifference toward him and his situation. He was desperate for them to be a part of his life, yet the demands and desires of their social life were always the higher priority.

Jenny had her priorities to consider, and while the frail child in Brighton was not at the bottom of the list, he scarcely led it. She wrote him, but except when he lay at death's door and propriety gave her no choice, she avoided the school. Pleas continued to pepper his letters: “Will you come and see me?” “When are you coming to see me?”... He ached for the sight of her—“Please do do do do do do do come down to see me... Please do come I have been disappointed so many times.” He was disappointed once more. Learning that a dinner party...conflicted with a school play, he begged her to cancel the dinner—“Now you know I was always your darling and you can't find it in your heart to give me a denial.” Nevertheless, she found it in her heart to do just that. (*The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Visions of Glory.*)

Winston's hard knocks didn't end with graduation. He experienced many more tough trials and disappointments. During his life he did some grand things and some stupid things. He suffered the slings and arrows of others—and, to many of his countrymen, *he* was insufferable.

But as all the world knows, Winston Churchill eventually rose out of his painful beginnings to become, as Prime Minister, the fire in the belly of England that kept that great nation going during its darkest hours of World War Two. His life, like that of so many great men, was the story of refusing to



accept defeat—whether it be alienation from a parent, exile into a political wilderness, or the fierce fire-bombing of his country by a brutal and unremitting foe. Through willpower, an uncommon spirit, and sheer bull-dogged tenacity, Churchill

rose from being the whimpering schoolboy crying for the affection of his mother, to a colossus that will be remembered until the writing of the last page of history.

Earnestness is good and impressive: genius is gifted and great. Thought kindles and inspires, but it takes a diviner endowment, and more powerful energy than earnestness or genius or thought to break the chains of sin, to win estranged and deprived hearts to God, to repair the breaches and restore the Church to her old ways of purity and power. Nothing but the anointing of the Holy Spirit can do this.
E. M. Bounds



Principle Sources:
William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, Visions of Glory: 1874-1932* (Little, Brown and Company, 1983).

Genesis 37:1-50:26.

JOSEPH WAS A SPOILED BRAT. He was his father's favorite—blatantly so—and seemed to go out of his way to alienate and anger his ten older brothers.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it." Genesis 37:5-7

Joseph had never read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. We was oblivious to the effect these pronouncements might have upon his jealous brothers. Not surprisingly, they were less than pleased.

His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Genesis 37:8

Neither was his father, Jacob, much help in the matter. He lavished special gifts on Joseph, including a beautiful, multi-colored tunic. Then after sending the older brothers to pasture the flocks in Shechem, he sent out Joseph, like a diminutive foreman wrapped in his royal finery, to investigate and report on their welfare and the job they were doing.

Joseph had a favored, but poor childhood. Like the young Winston Churchill, he was born into the good life, but also like Churchill, he wasn't favored with very sound parenting. Churchill was ignored; Joseph was indulged, and his poor upbringing did little to prepare him for the trials that were to follow.

So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the richly ornamented robe he was wearing—and they took him and threw him into the cistern. Now the cistern was empty; there was no water in it. As they sat down to eat

their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt. Genesis 37:23-25,28

"The Lord was with Joseph..."

No man is a prisoner of his past. Joseph grew up, and he grew up with the advantage of not being around those who had been spoiling him—and not being around those who wished him dead. He grew up as do most people: in the world of hard knocks.

Joseph was indeed sold as a slave, but to someone of influence in the Egyptian court. He showed himself responsible and dependable, but responsibility can carry its own burden. Being a person of character, he spurned the affections of his master's wife, and thus landed back in prison.

After several years, Joseph once again found himself in a position of favor in the royal court. His ability to interpret dreams propelled him into the second position of power in Egypt—second only to Pharaoh. And the spoiled brat, favorite of his father and hated by his brothers, one day found himself the Prime Minister of Egypt.

Like Churchill, Joseph had an indomitable will to survive, to make something of his life. More than that, however, Joseph developed a servant's heart. He didn't just rise above an indulgent youth into being a responsible man, but grew deeper into an obedience to the Lord. His remarkable life was not a monument to self-determination, but a testimony of allegiance to an all-sufficient God. His life became a fragrant offering of praise to his God. And 'the Lord was with Him.'

Goodness in a Foul Land

NOT ALL GREAT LIVES ARE LOUD AND FLASHY. Not all great lives are played out in the arena of public leadership or royalty. Some great lives are more quiet, modest, and take place within walls of mud brick rather than hewn marble. They are, from all outward appearances, resoundingly normal—even mundane. They pass along, day to day, unnoticed, blending in with all the other lives with which they are surrounded.

Just such a life was Alfred Wight's.

The life of which the public eventually became aware is now only a recollection of an almost-forgotten era. It began in a quiet time and place—the period just before the tumult of the second World War, in a tiny place in the Yorkshire Dales of England—a centuries-old market town called Thirsk.

Then there came a day when Alf Wight sat down to write a book about his rather normal life. Then he wrote another, and another. Then a movie was made from the books, and eventually a television series.

All Creatures Great and Small is less a biography than a warm, affectionate remembrance of a way of life now foreign to most of the modern world. Without being simplistic or bland, it is a story of quiet relationships, dignity, humor, character, and good common sense. James Herriot (Alf Wight), a veterinarian by trade, treats animals with respect and dignity without setting them on a pedestal. People, in the stories, are treated with a similar respect, men of all stations are addressed with “Mr. So-and-so”; farm wives are “Mrs. So-and-so.”

In the stories, crises are met with determination, joys are celebrated with earthy gusto. In hard times, people dig in and do without, neighbor helps neighbor; in good times, generosity abounds, and thanksgiving is expressed.

It is not a prettied-up life. It's hard to be stylish when one is stripped to the waist in a cold, cobblestone barn, with one's bare arm buried inside the south end of a north-facing cow. It is gritty, but real. The *people* are real—the sort of people you want to have as friends: tough as nails,

maybe a little stand-offish at first, but authentic—and true right down to their bones.

All Creatures Great and Small is an oasis in a society gone mad. In a world of cell phones and television programs requiring V-chips and children killing children, it is a haven of un-plasticized dignity and worth. It is populated not by perfect people, but people of determination and grit—a world that just possibly may now be gone forever.

It is fashionable today for fashionable people to ridicule the simple naiveté of the 1950's—that straight-edged, button-downed era of goodness and prosperity just after the war. But those of us who lived through it recall with fondness at least the texture of that time. Maybe they *were* black-and-white days; maybe there were dirty secrets hidden behind the scrubbed fronts of suburbia. But for the most part our mothers were waiting for us when we arrived home from school, and we didn't feel like we needed a bath after watching television or a Saturday afternoon matinee.

Some of that goodness is written into the biographical stories by Alf Wight as James Herriot. In the pages of the books, and in the episodes of the television series, goodness is reaffirmed not so much in the individual characters, or in the story lines, but in the integral goodness of the setting. Like breathing in clear mountain air after a day in the smog of a city, one comes away from these stories—and the life of Alf Wight—feeling better about life in general, feeling better about oneself.

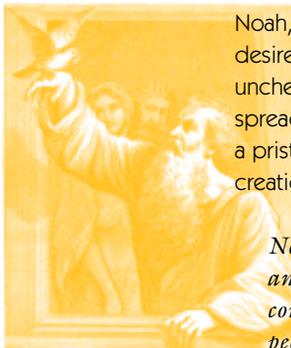
And that, today, is no small thing.

The essence of Christ's teaching concerning greatness was this: true greatness among humans must be found in character, not in ability or position. A.W. Tozer



NOAH AND HIS FAMILY WERE AN OASIS in a world gone mad.

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. Genesis 6:5-6



From the fall of Adam and Eve to the time of Noah, man had had plenty of time to pursue the desires of his dark heart. Like a cancer spreading unchecked through a healthy body, the sin of Adam spread through his descendants, across the face of a pristine earth, to corrupt completely the perfect creation of God.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways. Genesis 6:11-12

But somewhere in that mass of corruption there was a man by the name of Noah. Somehow a small oasis of righteousness had survived.

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God. Genesis 6:8,9b

We know next to nothing about the man Noah. Was he a farmer? a city administrator? a shop keeper? Did he build boats as a hobby, a profession, or had he never done anything like that before? Was he a nice person, a gentle soul, or was he a little cantankerous? Did his neighbors like him, admire him, or hate his guts? We don't know.

We do know, however, what God *wants* us to know; that is, *Noah was righteous*. Whatever his neighbors thought of him, he was not like them. They were part of the spreading corruption, while he was a small bit of goodness in a foul land; they had become a pestilence that God was preparing to wipe out, while Noah and his kin were to be the only ones saved.

Imagine stepping back into that time, and walking down the main thoroughfare of an ancient city of Mesopotamia. The dirt street is crowded with shoppers, people coming to and from work, people on their way to a friend's house, and people just looking to be a part of the rest of the

city. Some of the shops are familiar and inviting. Here is a bakery, its front counter piled high with round loaves of fresh-baked bread. Across the street is a milliner, the shop's entrance a heaped profusion of rich, multi-colored fabrics supplied by traders from the west and east. Next door is a cultic shop, the walls of which are lined with shelves containing versions of the local deities in every shape and size and color.

In fact, returning to the street, we realize that the area is virtually littered with larger statues of the gods. Like light posts on a modern street, the pillars and statues line the main thoroughfare. They are painted in brilliant colors, some are profane to our sensibilities. We feel a flush rise in our face and we turn away from the sight—embarrassed by the images, shocked that they are on such public display. But there they are, with children playing beneath them.

Further down the street is a large, stone building. From a distance we wonder if it might be a governmental building, or a large church. But as we draw nearer, we realize that it is actually a corrupted version of the latter. A huge statue of the local fertility goddess stands almost as tall as the building itself, around its base dance scantily-clad women and men, their faces and bodies painted into garish caricatures. The steps of the temple are crowded by worshippers of both sexes, waiting to enter and make their offering in the bed of one or more of the temple prostitutes.

We heave away from the sight, feeling the filth and corruption cloying at us. We feel it pressing into our flesh, and want only to get away and bathe in a cool, clear stream.

As we continue down the street, the commercial center gives way to a more residential area. At first the homes and their occupants seem to be as base and profane as those earlier, but then, near the outskirts of the city, we come upon a modest home surrounded by none of the cultic paraphernalia common elsewhere. Here there are shade trees sheltering the small house, children play in the dust of the front yard. But even more distinctive is the latticework of timbers rising behind the house.

Even as we stand gazing at the construction, struggling to identify its use, an old but vigorous man strides toward us. Wiping his dirty hands across the front of his well-worn tunic, he smiles, and kisses us in greeting. Total strangers to him, we are welcomed into his modest but comfortable home, offered the best of the meal, and made to feel a part of his family. In a very short time our bodies and minds are cleansed of the depravity outside. We are refreshed, and embraced by the

Principle Sources:

James Herriot, *All Creatures Great and Small* (St. Martin's Press, 1972), et al; BBC television series by the same name.

Genesis 5:31-9:29.

warm integrity of not only the man, but the household.

And as we lean back into our cushions, letting the meal settle in our bellies, the man grins broadly, leans toward us eagerly, and exclaims, “Now, let me tell you what God is having me do!”

In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and

clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work. Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 2 Timothy 2:20-22

Devotion to a Higher Cause

MOST PEOPLE HAVE A PRETTY GOOD IDEA who Abraham Lincoln was. If George Washington, the first president, is the “Father of our Country,” then Abe Lincoln, the sixteenth, is the “Great Emancipator.” He was president of the United States during the entirety of our Civil War, and was assassinated just a few months after being re-elected for a second term. On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, a document from his own pen that freed slaves in the states that were in rebellion against the government.

Beyond the issue of slavery, Abraham Lincoln is, in a very real sense, responsible for the salvation of the United States we know today. As he came to Washington to serve his first term in 1861, the nation was, quite literally, splitting apart. There was a real possibility that the one nation would become two, and if that had happened—if the Civil War had not been fought and won by the Union—today this continent would be spanned not by “one nation under God,” but by two.

More than any other person alive at the time, Abraham Lincoln was responsible for holding together the states into one nation. He had strong feelings regarding the evils of slavery, and his efforts to free the slaves were genuine. But the Civil War was not fought to free the slaves—it was fought to save the Union. Lincoln sacrificed health and family—and, ultimately, his very life—to save the integrity of the United States of America.

There was a great and profound sadness in the man Lincoln. His was not a happy life, but one hard and filled with great sorrow. He carried a heavy personal burden into the White House—a burden that only grew heavier as he took on the burdens of a nation at war with itself.

Abraham Lincoln epitomizes selfless devotion to a higher cause. He could have taken a more permissive, *laissez-faire* attitude, doing nothing to prevent the South from doing as it wished. No one expected much from this country bumpkin anyway; he could have saved a lot of heartache, a lot of lives by sitting back and letting events play out on their own. But Lincoln loved his country too deeply to sit by and let it disintegrate before his eyes. His life—like the lives of so many men lost on the battlefields—meant little against the prospect of losing the country he loved. If he had permitted the South to secede it would have meant that the great experiment called the United States of America had failed.

That singular devotion to a higher cause is encapsulated in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, delivered at the dedication of a cemetery on the Gettysburg battlefield.

Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. ■ Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 2 Cor. 5:14-15

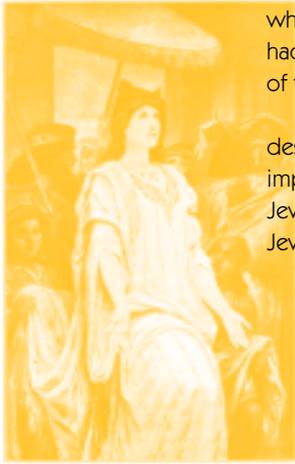


long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. ■ But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather,

to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.
A. Lincoln

QUEEN ESTHER WAS LIVING A PAMPERED LIFE. She had been selected out of many virgins who had vied for the king's favor—and a chance to replace the previous queen, Vashti, who had displeased King Ahasuerus. Esther, a Jew, had found favor with the king, and was now queen of the Persian Empire.

Esther had it good; everything she wanted or desired was hers for the asking. But then Haman, an important official in the court and an enemy of the Jews, hatched a plan that would destroy all the Jews in the kingdom of Ahasuerus.



Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain. If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries."

Esther 3:8-9 nkjv

Esther's cousin, Mordecai, got word to her of the plot to kill all the Jews, asking that she plead their case before the king. At first she demurred, pointing out that anyone who came into the presence of the king uninvited risked death—unless the king proffered his golden scepter. But Mordecai pressed his case most eloquently.

"Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your

father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?" Esther 4:13b-14 nash

It is hard to know Esther's ultimate motive. As it would be with most people, her reasons for taking the high road may have been many and varied. But take the high road she did, risking her life to present herself before the king uninvited. When she did, the king received her graciously.

*Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."
Esther 5:3*

Esther's unselfish bravery ultimately resulted in the salvation of the Jews, her cousin Mordecai's advancement and praise, and, in a bit of delicious irony, the death of the evil Haman upon the very gallows he had constructed for the neck of Mordecai.

The book of Esther is an invigorating true tale of a good and righteous woman doing the right thing; of a man with a heart for his people; of a king who, though of a different culture and disposition, does the right thing for people exiled in his land. It is a story of greed, jealousy, bigotry and prejudice, family and national ties, of a people triumphing against seemingly insurmountable odds by doing what is right.

Modercai's counsel to his beautiful cousin Esther could be the watchword to us all as well: *Follow through, and do the right thing, for who knows whether you have not been placed where you are for such a time as this.*

Principle Sources:

William Safire, *Freedom* (Doubleday & Company, 1987); Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1939).

The Book of Esther.

Aspects

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