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“Choose This Day”

Joshua 24: 14 -15 ; Luke 9: 51

To explain exactly how a young Davidson graduate of a creative, literary bent found himself in a navy jet, operating as its navigator on a mission over Vietnam would require a lengthy exposition, so let me simply say that as a college graduate in 1963 Porter Halyburton assumed he would be drafted anyway, so he opted to enlist. He dreamed of being a pilot, but initially failed the eye exam and was assigned instead to be a flight officer. He passed the eye exam later, but decided to stay with his original assignment, which is how he came to be in the back of an F-4 on a mission over Hanoi in 1965. He was married, though he and his bride had enjoyed less than two years together, and he was a father, though his child had been born four weeks after he was shipped out, so he had never seen her – and it would be a long time before he ever would.

For in that moment, a missile hit their bomber and the front of it exploded, killing his pilot and friend. Porter Halburton looked up to see his plane flying into a mountain wall, and as the mountain loomed ever closer he knew he had to make a choice, life or death. It was not an easy choice, but he made it: he hit his ejector button and soon found himself parachuting to earth, a very hostile earth.

Soon Porter Halyburton was captured and brought before a series of interrogators.

Every one of them offered him the same simple choice: “Better place, worse place.”

If he would give them the information they desired, they would ensure him reasonably good accommodations.

If he chose not to cooperate, however bad he thought his life was in the moment, it would become worse.

Porter was 24 years old, and the pressure on him to break was intense.

His captors beat him, taunted him, starved him and threw him in solitary confinement.

Every time they brought him out for more interrogation he faced the same question: “better place, worse place.”

Every time he chose not to cooperate, they made good their threat.

Yet throughout his ordeal Porter Halyburton chose to draw strength from God. Prayer became his lifeblood.

He asked God not for freedom, or food or any material comforts.

What he begged for was the strength to survive. He prayed for the welfare of his family.

He noticed a beam of sunlight filtering through his cell’s shutters and tore a piece of toilet paper into the shape of the cross and fixed it to the window with a kernel of rice.

The next morning he watched with great delight as the light slowly passed over the cross, and he whispered the Lord’s Prayer in gratitude. Even in the worst place, God could find him.

After seven weeks of captivity, most of which were spent in isolated squalor,

his captors took him to a place they assured him was the worst of all:

in that hell hole known as the Hanoi Hilton, they threw him in a cell with a black man who outranked him, because his captors figured that was the worst torment they could do to a white boy from the South.

In truth, Porter Halyburton had never been brought up to be an overt racist.

His racism was one of subtle paternalistic scorn and racial superiority. He even doubted that his black cellmate was a pilot because in his experience black people were not responsible enough to be pilots.

Yet, in truth, the man sharing his cell was one of the best pilots in the Air Force, one of its most experienced – and undoubtedly one of its most courageous. Fred Cherry had actually completed his term of service and was

on his way home when he begged his commanding officer to cancel his orders and let him fly more missions. He was in that cell because of that choice.

His shoulder had been wrenched completely out of his socket, his ankle and wrist were broken, and his physical condition was deteriorating fast. This situation gave Porter Halyburton one more choice to make.

He could ignore the man's need, or he could minister to him in love.

Nobody would ever know if he simply let him die. But he chose instead to love him.

It wasn't easy initially, because Fred Cherry, for his part, thought Halyburton was a spy.

But slowly they began to talk, slowly they began to trust each other, and slowly these two people who had been thrown together so as to break each other's spirit chose to form a friendship.

They chose to meet the violence of their world with the violence of love.

Cherry would be operated on by incompetent physicians, and soon his condition significantly worsened.

Malnourished, his thin body was rapidly burning its own tissue, until he weighed just 85 pounds.

The Vietnamese doctors inexpertly put him in a body cast that nearly suffocated him, and it would have had not Porter Halyburton finally compelled the guards to take it off.

Cherry became so weak that he couldn't go to the bathroom.

Porter carried him, stood him up, held him over the toilet. Cherry needed to walk, but he couldn't even stand.

Porter put his arms around him and walked him around the cell.

When Cherry needed a shower to wash his wounds, it was Porter who risked the wrath of the guards to demand that Fred be allowed to have one. Then he carried his friend to the shower and bathed him.

Fred Cherry came to realize that Porter Halyburton's choice to befriend him, a choice made not once, but over and over and over, was the only thing keeping him alive.

What he couldn't fully appreciate, but what Porter Halyburton knew all too well, was that ministering to Fred Cherry gave his life a purpose that allowed him to endure the horror of his captivity.

In choosing to love Fred Cherry he felt himself becoming the Christian that he'd always felt called to become.

In the so-called worst place their captors could imagine,

Porter Halyburton and Fred Cherry managed to form a redemptive and life-changing friendship.

Pause for a moment to ask this question:

why would a pilot in a prison cell, starved, tortured and isolated instinctively look to God for guidance and strength? Why should God care?

The answer is because the God Porter Halyburton worshipped had known exactly what it was like to be imprisoned, to be hated, tortured, tormented in solitude and publicly humiliated.

There is a famous command voiced in the book of Joshua, put forth to the Hebrew people from the mouth of their leader as he prepared to cease from his labors: "Choose this day whom you will serve."

This phrase reverberated in the Hebrew faith long after Joshua uttered it, and surely Jesus knew it well.

"Choose this day whom you will serve."

Jesus chose to be the kind of servant of God willing to endure starvation, torture, isolation, humiliation and death in order to embody the depth of divine love.

He chose very clearly to serve his heavenly Father through vulnerable suffering and creative weakness.

Luke expresses the starkness of his choice with one memorably piercing phrase:

"And he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

In a sense, the tenor of our Lord's ministry and the arc of his life were defined through the series of choices that were presented to him in the so-called "Temptation in the desert."

Each of those temptations carried with it an appeal to Christ to make choices that would make his life easier.

Why should you suffer hunger? the Tempter wonders.

Choose to use your powers to satisfy your needs. Use your power for your own pleasure!

Why should you suffer anonymity and obscurity?
Choose to make a spectacle of yourself!
Why should you die in poverty, on a cross?
Choose to orient your life to this world and enrich yourself.
Become a king, a ruler, a potentate, a benevolent dictator. It's all within your grasp.
Easy choice, hard choice.
Use your powers to make your life easier, not harder.

These were the choices our Lord considered. These were the choices our Lord denied.
He chose to be what his heavenly Father had called him to be, a Christ who carried a cross.
And anyone who has chosen to carry a cross in the footsteps of that Savior has looked to that
cross-bearing Christ amidst their own dreadful experiences to provide them redemptive strength.
That's why an imprisoned pilot could draw strength from a paper cross shining in a window's sunlight.
He drew strength from a Christ who knew what it was like to feel God-forsaken.

Yet, as we follow the story of Christ, we are following a drama that discloses the very nature of God.
In Christ we find a God who chooses to be a different kind of God than what we expect.
We would prefer a God of absolute power.
God chooses instead to be a God of suffering love.
We would like a God of magic who can instantly meet our hungers and cast away our fears.
We receive instead a God of presence who imparts peace to us regardless of our circumstance.
We would like a God of brute force who imposes the divine will upon His creatures.
What we find instead is that God chooses to be a vulnerable God who submits to the machinations of
those who wield weapons of violence.
God chooses to hang with his suffering son upon the cross -- chooses to be a different kind of God,
a God of suffering love who lets the darkness temporarily quench the Light He has sent into the world.
Yet God also chooses to be a redemptive God whose Light cannot ultimately be quenched.

I would only add this: Porter Hayburton's open parachute was not witnessed by any of the other fighter pilots
in his squadron. The fiery crash of his jet was witnessed by most. The worst was assumed.
Two men in uniform and a chaplain soon came to Porter's young wife Marty and told her
that her husband was dead. She mourned, and the town of Davidson mourned with her.
The flags of that small town flew at half-mast, and the Davidson chaplain gave the eulogy to a congregation that
overflowed St. Alban's Episcopal church.
Porter Halyburton's gravestone was placed upon an empty grave with these words:
"Killed in combat over North Vietnam, October 17, 1965."
But heedless of the news of his death, heedless of the heartbreak that he had caused,
Porter Halyburton continued to change his life and that of his neighbor by his choice to love.
By so choosing, he saved a man's life – and his own.
What kind of impact might our own choices have upon those who in need come to call us "neighbor?"

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Holy Week Wednesday
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