

Joshua 17:12-18 (1984 NIV)
Living above Spiritual Mediocrity

Introduction

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOzsJEmjHs>

Nick Vujicic is an Australian born with physical handicaps. He has no hands and legs, except for a funny looking “foot” at the lower end of his supposedly incomplete body.

Unlike Nick Vujicic, many of us do not have the limitations that he has.

But in another sense, his achievements far surpass that of many people in spite of his limitations in that he has touched more lives for Jesus’ sake than many of us. He has been greatly used by the Lord as a motivational speaker and evangelist to bless thousands around the world—leaders, ordinary folks, marginalized people, young people with much promise and potential.

Nick Vujicic is a living demonstration of how we can live above our limitations in the Lord’s strength, even living above spiritual mediocrity.

Today, I want to talk about living above spiritual mediocrity as we look at Josh 17:12-18. First, a quick review of the Book of Joshua:

- Chapters 1-12 cover the seven years of Israel’s movement into the land. They focus on military battles, strategy, and conquest.
- Chapters 13-24 focus not on military battles but on the administration of allocating territory and settling down in the land. This settlement process takes up some eight years.

As we look at Josh 17:12-18, we will see how the Ephraimites and Manassites (the tribe of Western Manasseh) failed to live above spiritual mediocrity. They failed to maximize their lives spiritually.

Let’s try to understand why they failed and learn two lessons for ourselves.

I. People fail to live above spiritual mediocrity whenever they focus on complaints and excuses (vv. 14-18).

In vv. 14-16, we read that the two tribes, Ephraim and Western Manasseh (collectively called people of the house of Joseph), had complained to Joshua about their inheritance.

14 The people of Joseph said to Joshua, “Why have you given us only one allotment and one portion for an inheritance? We are a numerous people and the LORD has blessed us abundantly.”

15 “If you are so numerous,” Joshua answered, “and if the hill country of Ephraim is too small for you, go up into the forest and clear land for yourselves there in the land of the Perizzites and Rephaites.”

16 The people of Joseph replied, “The hill country is not enough for us, and all the Canaanites who live in the plain have iron chariots, both those in Beth Shan and its settlements and those in the Valley of Jezreel.”

In simple terms, these two tribes were complaining that God hadn't given them enough. Remember, God's sovereignty was at work all this time, and the territory that the tribes received was His decision. So their problem behind their complaining was not with Joshua, but with God Himself.

Verse 15 exposes two issues that these two tribes were really struggling with—“If you are so numerous,” Joshua answered, “and if the hill country of Ephraim is too small for you, go up into the forest and clear land for yourselves there in the land of the Perizzites and Rephaites.”

Their first issue was related to their attitude. We sense that they're not interested in the hard physical work of clearing the heavily forested hill country.

Their second issue was related to their fear. We sense that they're afraid of the Canaanites—the Perizzites and the Rephaites. These were giants occupying the territory that was eyed by the two Hebrew tribes who were afraid to drive them out.

Thus, the tribes of Ephraim and Western Manasseh were not interested to clear the forest for more of the land, and they were also afraid to fight the giants for more of the land. They wanted to enjoy the comfort and security after the conquest; yet they were whining for more but without working and fighting.

The response of these two tribes in v. 16 to Joshua is basically this: “We don't want to do the hard work of clearing the forest and fighting the giants. We don't even think we should have to do it.”

There's a hint in this conversation that they viewed themselves as deserving special treatment as the “house of Joseph”. Joshua himself was a descendant of Joseph, an Ephraimite. So there might be a subtle appeal to him as one of their fellow tribesmen, hoping that the mention of Joseph would somehow influence Joshua to give them some preferential treatment.

But in verses 17-18 Joshua told his fellow tribesmen to do what Caleb did—go up and claim the mountains, defeat the giants.

17 But Joshua said to the house of Joseph—to Ephraim and Manasseh—“You are numerous and very powerful. You will have not only one allotment

18 but the forested hill country as well. Clear it, and its farthest limits will be yours; though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out.”

The spiritual lesson for us is this—do not complain about our circumstances, but ask, “Lord, how can I live above spiritual mediocrity in the place where you have already put me?”

I also want you to notice another thing that keeps people from living above spiritual mediocrity. Look at verse 14: “The people of Joseph said to Joshua, ‘Why have you given us only one allotment and one portion for an inheritance? We are a numerous people and the LORD has blessed us abundantly.’”

Note that these same people who were unable to drive out the Canaanites, these same people who were unable to possess the lot that God had already given them, were now asking for more. They hadn’t even possessed what they had been given, but they were saying, “I am so great that I need a bigger place. I need a bigger lot. I need a bigger possession. Give me more!”

This is another thing that will keep us from living maximal lives for the Lord—prideful complacency. It leads us to think that we have arrived—“We are so big in numbers and we are so abundantly blessed. It is only right that we ask for more and have more.”

The caution is this—if you think that you’re already what you ought to be when you are really not, you will never be what you ought to be. Rather, you will live in the delusion that you have already arrived.

Growing in Christlikeness is not so much a destination to reach, but a journey to travel here on earth. Hence, we are to carry with us a sense of holy dissatisfaction with our spiritual life so that we will keep pressing on towards Christlikeness in our earthly pilgrimage. The moment we feel satisfied with our spiritual life, we may be in danger of becoming spiritually complacent.

Complaints and excuses are expressions of prideful complacency that can hinder us from living above spiritual mediocrity ... because we think we have arrived and deserved to be served with more rather than have to work for more.

The people complained to Joshua, “This land is not big enough for us. We need bigger land. We should be given more because we are a great people.”

What’s God’s answer to such prideful complacency? God said to them, “Before you ask for more, and before you get more territory, you take care of

what I have already given you—clear the forest and drive out the Canaanites. Then you'll have more.”

Some people today may be saying, “I want to know more of the Bible. Teach me more of the Bible.” But one main reason why it is fruitless to know more of the Bible is because we are not obeying that part of the Bible we already know. If you want to know and understand more of God's Word, then you must begin to obey the part that you already know. Knowing God's truth alone doesn't transform lives. Only God's truth applied can transform lives.

Do we want bigger blessings and better opportunities from the Lord? If we do, then we need to start clearing the forest where we are. What would the tribes belonging to the house of Joseph do with more land when they couldn't even take care of that portion that God had already given them?

Before we ask God for more and bigger things, we need first to maximize what we already have. We need to cut down the trees where we are, and to drive out the giants where we are. And then we can be free to receive more from God.

Are you maximizing the spiritual potential that God has given you? Perhaps, the reason why some are not is because they are just not interested to make the effort to clear the forest and drive out the giants.

The people came to Joshua not filled with gratitude and thanksgiving for what they already had. Rather, they were full of complaints and excuses for what they didn't have but wanted. Maybe they hoped that by complaining and making excuses, God or some other people would do for them what they ought to do for themselves.

An old man approached a young stranger in the post office and asked, “Young man, would you address this postcard and write a short note for me? I have such a difficult time writing these days.”

The young man gladly did so, and when he was finished, he asked the old gentleman, “Now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

The old man looked at the card for a few moments and said, “Yes, at the end could you add, ‘Please excuse the sloppy handwriting.’”

Complaining and making excuses will not help us to be grateful and thankful for the blessings we have already received. In fact, such an attitude will keep us from living above spiritual mediocrity and bringing our God-given potential to God-intended fulfilment.

Like the Ephraimites and Manassites, we too can fail to live above spiritual mediocrity whenever we focus on complaints and excuses.

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A second lesson we can learn about living above spiritual mediocrity is this ...

II. People need to personally remove two things in their own lives if they are to live above spiritual mediocrity (vv. 12, 13, 16, 18).

12 Yet the Manassites were not able to occupy these towns, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that region.

13 However, when the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor but did not drive them out completely.

16 The people of Joseph replied, "The hill country is not enough for us, and all the Canaanites who live in the plain have iron chariots, both those in Beth Shan and its settlements and those in the Valley of Jezreel."

17 But Joshua said to the house of Joseph—to Ephraim and Manasseh—"You are numerous and very powerful. You will have not only one allotment

18 but the forested hill country as well. Clear it, and its farthest limits will be yours; though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out."

First that must be removed so that we can live above spiritual mediocrity are the things that corrupt our lives. Look at v. 13: "However, when the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor but did not drive them out completely."

Here we read that the Israelites grew stronger. Perhaps strong enough to drive out the Canaanites. But they said, "Well, there's no reason to get rid of these Canaanites. Rather than driving them out, we'll make them our slaves. And rather than getting rid of them, we'll make them work for us for free. We will be better off with them in the land."

Do you have a Canaanite that you're refusing to drive out? Is there some thought, feeling, attitude, habit, behaviour, relationship or business in your life that is not right before God but you are refusing to remove?

You say, "Well, I think I'm strong enough. I can handle it. I can make it my slave." But are you really making it your slave or are you already enslaved by it?

Verse 12 says: "Yet the Manassites were not able to occupy these towns, for the Canaanites were determined to live in that region." One reason why Christians do not live above spiritual mediocrity and experience spiritual victory is not because the Canaanites in their lives are determinedly refusing to leave, but because the Christians themselves are determinedly refusing to let go.

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- So there is one group of Canaanites that can corrupt us and we need to remove them—those whom we are friendly with and refuse to drive out.
- There's a second group—those whom we are fearful of and reluctant to fight against. Verse 16 says: "The people of Joseph replied, 'The hill country is not enough for us, and all the Canaanites who live in the plain have iron chariots, both those in Beth Shan and its settlements and those in the Valley of Jezreel.'"

Now, these are the ones the people feared and didn't think they could drive out. These Canaanites were strong; they had iron chariots. Is that how we feel too? Are there things in our lives we say, "I can't fight it; so I just have to live with it."

If we do not take steps to remove both these groups, we will always feel defeated rather victorious in our Christian lives. I'm not talking about sinless perfection. I am talking about a life where God's people no longer feel bound by some things they know for sure not pleasing to God. Are you still keeping company with Canaanites that should have been removed a long time ago?

Second that must be removed so that we can live above spiritual mediocrity are the things that clutter our lives. Verse 18 says: "... but the forested hill country as well. Clear it, and its farthest limits will be yours; though the Canaanites have iron chariots and though they are strong, you can drive them out."

Joshua told the people to clear the forest—chop down the trees! Now, there's nothing wrong with trees, unless you want to build or grow something else in where they are. Trees are beautiful things; trees are often harmless things; trees provide useful shade. But if the trees are cluttering the land, then you have no reason to say, "There's not enough room." There's plenty of room ... if you cut down the trees.

So the second thing that Joshua was saying to the people who wanted more is this—"Get the things that clutter your life out of your life." They needed to clear out even the seemingly harmless trees that forested their land; the seemingly harmless things that cluttered their lives. He was not talking about the hurtful things, but the seemingly harmless things—the trees ... the trees that cluttered their land.

Some people may say today:

- "I want to be more devoted to God and His work, but I don't have enough time. I don't have enough room for God."
- "I don't have enough time to read my Bible."

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- “I don’t have enough time to pray.”
- “I don’t have enough time to love and help others.”
- “I don’t even have enough time for my family.”

But God gives everybody the same number of time—24 hours a day. The reason why some are not living above spiritual mediocrity, not doing the things that God wants them to do is this—they have not clear out the things that clutter their lives. You see, it’s not that we need more time, but we need to chop down some seemingly harmless trees (e.g. hobbies, computer, newspapers, TV, meaningless socializing, and even some church activities).

Do you know that doing church work is not a substitute for your personal time with God? Some of us can be so busy doing godly things that we don’t have time to be holy—i.e. being alone with the Almighty God.

Few would disagree that Willow Creek Community Church has been one of the most influential churches in America for many years. The church had promoted a vision of doing church that was big, programmatic, and comprehensive in past years.

In 2007, the church leaders made a shocking statement arising out of an evaluation of the church ministry over the years. They said, “We made a mistake.”

Basically, this evaluation looked at what programmes and activities of the church were actually helping people mature spiritually and which were not.

In Willow Creek’s philosophy of ministry, participation was a big deal. The presumption was that the more people participating in church activities and with higher levels of frequency, the more likely this would produce disciples of Christ. So, the church created many and big programmes/activities. People participated in these. The outcome expected was spiritual maturity.

However, the evaluation report revealed that “increasing levels of participation in these sets of activities does NOT predict whether someone’s becoming more of a disciple of Christ. It does NOT predict whether they love God more or they love people more.”

The then Senior Pastor of the church, Rev. Bill Hybels, confessed after the findings of this evaluation report were revealed: “We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become self feeders ... how to read their bible ... how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.”

In other words, spiritual growth doesn't happen best by becoming dependent on elaborate church programmes but through the age old spiritual practices of personal prayer, bible reading, and relationships. Ironically, these basic disciplines do not require multi-million dollar facilities and hundreds of staff to manage.

(<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2007/october-online-only/willow-creek-repents.html>)

The warning for us is this: spiritual activism/busyness in church has become a very subtle and dangerous enemy of good spiritual health.

When a pipe is choked with rubbish, no water can flow through no matter how much you pour in until and unless the rubbish is cleared. In the same way, when your life is choked with the presence of some Canaanites, no church programme or activity can flow godliness into and through your life no matter how many you have participated in until and unless you allow God to come in and flush out those Canaanites in His strength.

Participation in church programmes and activities is helpful, but by itself is inadequate, especially if it is merely an outward form to cover up our inner lack of intimacy with God. Many can make a big outward show of sacrificing for Jesus Christ in a multitude of ways. But by their disobedience to the Word and will of God in their heart, they displease Him.

There are trees that clutter our lives, and the axe needs to be laid at the root of these trees, and we need to clear the woods. Don't say you can't do it; don't say that you need more room and more time. God has given you enough of what you need to live above spiritual mediocrity.

Conclusion

I became a Christian when I was 23. Before that, I had heard of Jesus Christ many times. But I did not believe in Him. Because I thought to believe in Jesus Christ was to lose control over my life, to give up what I like to do so much in my life. Christianity to me seemed to be so restrictive then—cannot do this and cannot do that; must do this and must do that.

That day when I believed in Jesus Christ, I was struggling to get rid of an addiction (nicotine addiction). I had picked up smoking during my National Service days. I first smoked for fun, then for relaxation, and then for my life (I called cigarettes as my “oxygen sticks”). I spent quite a lot of money on cigarettes. Because of this habit, I had to see the doctor ever so often because I was often troubled by throat infection. So, smoking was draining my pocket and my health.

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The day I became a Christian, I was still not free from this habit. I was told that I could come to Jesus “just as I am” and that’s what I did. I became a smoking Christian that day. But I became more and more troubled by that as days went by.

I read the Bible and realized that the Bible did not command, “You shall not smoke.” But I became more and more sick of the habit and wanted to get rid of it.

I was so convicted one day that I knelt down and prayed to Jesus, told Him of my desire to kick the habit, and asked Him to help me. And you know what? I did not light up a cigarette that day ... and had not light up a cigarette since that day.

My friends who wanted to quit the habit asked me how I did it. I told them I prayed to Jesus and He helped me. Until today, they still think that I am joking!

But it’s true. To believe in Jesus is not to lose control over your life, but to have better control over your life because He is helping you. To believe in Jesus is not you have to do this or that, but it is you don’t have to do this or that because you have overcome in Jesus’ strength.

We can overcome the Canaanites in our lives and live above spiritual mediocrity because God has given the Holy Spirit to help us. This is the promise of God for us today.

Let’s allow the Holy Spirit to break in so that we can break off with the things that corrupt/clutter our lives, thereby experiencing victorious breakthrough that frees us to live above spiritual mediocrity.

Amen!