

Avoiding A Shriveled Soul

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When a younger man, I heard someone say that life is the accumulation of one's choices. Now I believe it. I see in myself good things and bad that is the result of repeated choices over the days, weeks, months, and years of my life. I am indeed reaping what I sowed – for good and for ill.

Sometimes this thought scares me, but more recently it has motivated me to start looking at older men and women to examine what choices and patterns have made them what they are.

So far I've noticed two types of prominent patterns in my observations. On the one hand, I notice the vibrant, resilient older folks. These are the people I call "Calebs" because they, like Caleb in the Old Testament (Numbers 13 and 14; Joshua 14), live life to the fullest. They maintain a faith-based optimism, a give-me-this-mountain attitude, and a soft heart of gratefulness and servanthood. They have spent a lifetime living out Psalm 119:32 – running the ways of God's commandments – so that now they have "enlarged hearts" towards life. I want to be like these people.

But I fear becoming like the other type of person I see. I don't have a personal name for these folks; I just call them shriveled souls (I think I got the image from a C.S. Lewis novel). Unlike the

“Calebs,” these people never developed the disciplines and attitudes that expand their souls. Rather than demonstrating a spiritual resilience and vitality, they seem withered by life’s hardships.

Observing the two types of people, I came up with a list of things that I observe about the long-term choices these folks have made concerning character, attitudes, and behavior. I call the list my Ten Characteristics for Avoiding Shriveled Soul Syndrome. Having observed them, now I’m trying to live out them out with Caleb-like positive responses, “following God wholeheartedly” (Joshua 14:8).

AVOID GOSSIP.

“Caleb”-like people try to find good news about other people. They believe the best rather than muck around to assume the worst. They spread good rumors and avoid judgmental condemnation. Gossip shrinks our souls by diminishing our self-worth because we living at the expense of others. We build our identity by tearing others down and saying, in effect, “I may not be much, but at least I’m not as bad as that guy.”

RELEASE BITTERNESS.

Bitter people shrivel spiritually as they walk through life under the weight of "apologies owed me." Everyone else is to blame. Caleb took responsibility for his own life (note in the biblical account that there is no record of Caleb or Joshua living the "if-only" life. They could have exhausted themselves in bitterness by blaming the 10 disbelieving spies ("If only they had believed God, we wouldn't be walking around this stinking wilderness"). They released the people who hurt them and forgave without being asked, and in so doing, they liberated their own souls!

TAKE RISKS.

Caleb gave the report, "Let's go for it" – "we can certainly take this land" (Numbers 13:30). The others cowered in fear of exaggerated giants. Expanded souls step out in faith. Shriveled souls run when no one is pursuing. Expanded souls believe God and take risks. Shriveled souls take no risks because they choose to live in fear of "what might happen."

TRUST.

Living a life of worry guarantees a shrinking soul. Expand your soul by singing Twila Paris' son "God Is In Control." When we try to be God by having everything under control, we shrivel because we cannot bear the weight. Enlarged souls live comfortably with the unknown because they choose to trust God.

DON'T LIVE FOR "STUFF."

Keep the rampant materialism of our Western world in check. Those who live for the accumulation of things – either by purchasing these things or by constantly complaining about unfulfilled coveting (which is more likely in the case of those of us in ministry) – easily degenerate in shriveled souls.

MASTER YOUR APPETITES.

A person controlled by cravings will shrink their spiritual capacity because food, lust, or other unchecked desires will take over. The "Caleb" person attends to physical as well as spiritual discipline; how else could Caleb have said, "I'm just as strong today as when we left Egypt 45 years ago" (Joshua 14:11)?

GROW DEEP.

Enlarged souls think about the meaning of life. They look for purpose. They struggle to understand and live life based on a philosophical and theological foundation. Shriveled souls get pre-occupied with drivel. They burn up their intellectual energies on monumental facts like sporting scores or the weather, and then they find their conversations filled with superficiality.

BE GENEROUS.

Stinginess might enlarge our bank accounts, but it shrinks the

soul.

CELEBRATE THE PAST, EMBRACE THE PRESENT, AND ANTICIPATE THE FUTURE.

Enlarged souls learn from the past but don't live there; they recognize that the "gold old days" are mostly old. They live today and – like the wife described in Proverbs – "smile at the future. Shriveled souls dwell in the past, dislike the present, and tremble at the future.

THINK GLOBALLY.

Enlarged souls follow the Lord of the Universe. Shrunken souls want a village God who attends to their whims. Enlarged souls celebrate the diversity of God's creation. Shrunken souls want a world just like them. Enlarged souls see their role in serving the world. Shrunken souls make THEIR world the whole world.

John Henry Jowett exhorted people to live life to God's fullest and to avoid the shriveled soul syndrome. He wrote,

"It is possible to evade a multitude of sorrows through the cultivation of an insignificant life. Indeed, if a person's ambition is to avoid the troubles of life, the recipe is simple: shed your ambitions in every direction, cut the wings of every soaring purpose, and seek a life with the fewest

contacts and relations. If you want to get through life with the smallest trouble, you must reduce yourself to the smallest compass. Tiny souls can dodge through life; bigger souls are blocked on every side. As soon as a person begins to enlarge his or her life, resistances are multiplied. Let a person remove petty selfish purposes and enthrone Christ, and sufferings will be increased on every side."

David anticipated an enlarged soul when he stated, "I will run the way of Thy commands, for Thou wilt enlarge my heart" (NASV) Psalm 119:32. God's people allow him to set their hearts free, and in so doing, avoid the shrunken soul syndrome.

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