

Dr. J. B. Buffington, Man of Purpose

Recently I was in Florida and had the privilege to visit Dr. J. B. Buffington. He is suffering from advanced dementia and is, as David said, "... *truly as the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me (he) and death*" (I Samuel 20:3). As we honored America and her Patriots last Sunday, our goal this Sunday is to honor America and her Purpose. What has made Americans great is the group of individuals like Dr. Buffington who live and die with a purpose they believe to be greater than themselves. This morning in the Pastor's Word, I want to challenge you with the life of my mentor, my friend, Dr. J. B. Buffington. Dr. Buffington was attending the University of Florida when World War II broke out. He could not bear not being involved so he dropped out of college and joined the Army. Uncle Sam soon realized the potential he had in J. B. Buffington and asked him to be part of the Officers Training School. He was brilliant and came out as a lieutenant and became part of the United States Army Air Corp.

J.B. Buffington became one of the youngest (if not the youngest) pilot to have commandeered the famous B-17, commonly called *The Flying Fortress*. He flew 13 missions over France and Germany and became part of the legacy of "The Greatest Generation," a term made popular by Tom Brokaw in 1998 referring to those who won the war on the battlefield and home front. His bravery and valor was something he never boasted about; it was simply something he regarded as his duty.

After the war, he worked for J.C. Penney and then for Belk-Lindsey. Mr. Lindsey was very impressed with this young war hero and gave him ample opportunity to test his skills in business acumen. J.B. advanced and began the trip up the all-American ladder of success. While traveling up this ladder, happily married to Betty and just beginning to set up housekeeping, young Junius Brison Buffington dedicated himself to the Christ he accepted in his youth and answered the call to preach the Gospel. J.B. explained to Mr. Lindsey of his decision to go into the ministry and Mr. Lindsey tried to talk him out of it, trying to impress him with the promise of a bright future in the company. Although Mr. Lindsey was very disappointed, he admired this young man who was willing to give up everything for Jesus.

J. B. wanted to finish college and, at the same time, change his major to theology. He and Betty moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee to finish his schooling at Tennessee Temple University where he graduated valedictorian of his class and to this day still holds the record for having made and maintained the highest grade point average of anyone who has ever attended this school!

Dr. Buffington came back to his home state of Florida and began to pastor. After a brief tenure in the Ocala area, he accepted the call to pastor Calvary Baptist Church of Lakeland. In God's great timing, this is where I came under his influence in my youth. I admired him from afar and then in my early ministry he began having me preach for him and did so until his resignation. Dr. Buffington was a man of purpose for three outstanding reasons:

1. A Vision for World Missions

When Dr. Buffington was breaking attendance records and conversions were weekly at Calvary, he was simultaneously a driven man to get missionaries to the uttermost parts of the earth. He did so very effectively. He was a man of faith promise and had this insatiable desire to see regions where Christ was not named evangelized. He took the Great Commission seriously and understood the aspect of these words: "*But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). At a time when veracity was measured greatly by how things were going on the home front, he never sacrificed the call for regions beyond. In other words,

missions never suffered because of neglect, due to a desire to impress other ministries in the United States. A vision for missions flourished under this man who lived with a purpose greater than himself.

2. Utilized the Spirit of Teamwork

I remember when a movie entitled *The Memphis Belle* had been released, many told Dr. Buffington he should see it. He waited until it came out on video and watched it and when we talked about it, he was livid. He said to me, "That movie was written by a bunch of baby-boomers who had no idea what it was like in a war zone." He was most frustrated by the movie's depiction of the arguments that the crew of *The Flying Fortress* had, especially during combat. Dr. Buffington told me, "When flak is hitting your plane and you don't know when ground to air is going to send you plummeting to the ground, nobody is arguing. When we flew, we were a team! This modern generation doesn't understand teamwork."

As I was visiting Betty Buffington, I was deeply touched by her undying loyalty that keeps her steadfast by her husband's side for well over 60 years. They were inseparable for those years after the war. Other than when he was away preaching, he was there helping her and she helping him with child-rearing and ministry. Teamwork is what this generation full of "throw-away marriages" needs to incorporate. J.B. and Betty Buffington were and still are one of the greatest "Team Marriages" ever!

Recently, I was talking to one of the longest term staff members Dr. Buffington had, Dr. Joe Bryant. He, too, was a loyal, faithful man. Dr. Buffington not only understood the value of teamwork; he taught it. "*Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful man who can find?*" (Proverbs 20:6). Dr. Buffington did not tolerate someone on staff who did not become part of the team. It might be interpreted as hard today, but that is what made Calvary Baptist Church so great yesterday.

3. Finishing the Job in Every Area

One day, our young officer was sitting in the pilot's seat of his B-17. The plane was full of fuel, the four engines were running and the plane was loaded to the hilt with bombs. Then just before taking off, he and his squadron received this message: "Cut the engines boys, the war is over." He and his peers shut down the greatest world threat the world had ever known. He finished his job!

There is a wonderful ending that needs to be said. Lindsey and the Belk-Lindsey store went on to obtain great revenue. It had been years since Dr. Buffington had seen his old employer, Mr. Lindsey. The time had come for Lindsey to die when he got the word out - he wanted to see J. B. Buffington. Our old friend, Dr. Buffington, now in his peak and prime of ministry walked into the hospital room. Soon after greeting Lindsey, the old tycoon said, "Tell me what you told me when you worked for me (the Gospel)." Dr. Buffington, after several decades, picked right up where he left off and was able to see Mr. Lindsey ask Jesus Christ to become his personal Savior. Lindsey then told Dr. Buffington to preach his funeral. Dr. Buffington asked him, "And what shall I tell them?" Lindsey answered, "Tell them what you told me today!" He did exactly that; Dr. Buffington finished the job.

Last week as I held Dr. Buffington's hand that was now folded into more of a claw, I placed my hand upon his silver hair and looked into those blue eyes. I saw a look that saw beyond the room, into another land, another time. Soon the pilot will be going down the runway. The last time I preached for Dr. Buffington, I had finished my introduction and I was launching into my discourse and while sitting behind me, I heard him laugh and say, "Take off; your train is loaded!" Well, Dr. Buffington's plane (not train) is loaded. Loaded with a life full of love, memories, and a cause and purpose greater than himself.

- Pastor Pope -

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