

Without Malice

by: Ronald L. Dart

I'm 72 years old now and I know a lot less than I did when I was 30. No, I don't have some form of senile dementia. It's not that I've forgotten everything. What I mean is that I'm a lot less confident that I have all the answers than I was when I was 30. I've been wrong about a lot of things over the years. For example, I thought our soldiers did exactly the right thing when they captured Saddam Hussein alive. I thought, we need to try this man. We need to put all this stuff out so the whole world can see what Saddam Hussein did. After seeing how his trial is going, I can see how wrong I was. It's entirely possible that the whole situation in Iraq would have been a lot better if the troops had rolled a live grenade into that hole just as a precautionary measure, just to be sure it was safe to go looking in there. It would have gotten rid of Saddam Hussein. I know it seems strange to us sitting here in the United States, as safe as we are, but an awful lot of people in Iraq are still hedging their bets against Saddam Hussein getting back into power. And the news media don't help.

They show this man in court, and they give him a lot of dignity in the way they present him apparently. He doesn't deserve any, but nevertheless. You know, it tends to explain in some measure why political assassinations take place, and have done down through the generations. Some people are just too dangerous to leave floating around, even when they are out of power. They can't be trusted to retire and stay there. I read a lot of news and commentary, and I have been known to watch the "talking heads" on television. The amazing thing to me is how many retired colonels have a better grip on what to do in Iraq than the insiders who live with this question day after day. I don't mean to say that I don't have any advice for the president, but I do have the good sense not to give it to him. Some time ago I thought it might be useful for us just to forget trying to tell North Korea and Iran to stop their nuclear weapons programs. I thought maybe what we should do is have several of our nuclear submarines equipped with the Trident missiles—change the programming on a good set of missiles: some of them to Iran and some of them to North Korea. And we would just tell them, "We wish you well in your nuclear program, we hope you'll keep it safe and... and oh, by the way, because you do have a nuclear program we have now added your country to the nuclear target list on several submarines that previously we had targeted on the Soviet Union. We don't need them for the Soviet Union any longer because they're not trying to blow us up. But we want you to know this: if ever a nuclear weapon goes off in this country, or those of any of our friends, and we have any reason to suspect the weapon originated in your country or was detonated with your connivance, we will launch." As John Wayne once

said, “Your fault; my fault; doesn’t matter. You’ll die.” But, of course, I was wrong again. We have nations with nuclear weapons, or at least developing nuclear weapons, who don’t care if they die. They’re looking forward to Armageddon. They are looking forward to a holocaust, a great destruction, and they want to bring it on.

You want to hear another one? I was wrong when I thought nuclear weapons would probably never be used in anger again. After all, how long has it been since the last person died in a nuclear blast? Fifty years since Hiroshima? But now, I feel it is almost certain that a nuclear weapon will be used in anger. My best hope: that I’ll be wrong one more time. One of the reasons I have been wrong so often is because I have been listening to and reading the mainstream media. But, who knew? I would never in a million years have suspected that Dan Rather would try to pull that deal on Bush’s National Guard record. Wrong again. Now it’s becoming routine for the *New York Times* to have to retract stories, wipe the egg off their editors’ faces, and try again. With all the plagiarism, all the lies, and all the invented stories—even Oprah has had an author on her couch whining about plagiarism of his book. One of my biggest cases of whiplash came from the old BBC. I lived in England for a while and stuffy old Miss Accuracy herself has now become a leftist propaganda machine.

So I hope I’ve learned my lesson. What is it? Nobody is to be trusted. An old friend of mind, King David of Israel, once lamented in a fit of frustration, “*I said in my haste all men are liars.*” Now I know exactly how he felt. And I wonder if he was really all that hasty because it sometimes seem that everybody is a liar. I decided that I would take a more careful look at Psalm 116 where David made that statement. The Psalm begins with David saying, “I love the LORD, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications. Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.” One wonders how he knew. It’s plain enough that God is very subtle in his dealings with men. A lot of people in this world believe that God has answered their prayers on more than one occasion but even then, they will admit, it was subtle. Even when God absolutely, positively answers prayers for his reasons, he leaves a door open for people to reject it if they absolutely have to do it. You doubt me? Think about Jesus for a moment. Jesus walked up and down the hills of Galilee and Judea. He healed the sick, he cleansed the lepers, he cast out demons, and he returned people who were crazy to their right minds. And when all was said and done, after some three and a half years of this, how many disciples do you think he had? You would think after a man had done all of that there would be great crowds of people committed to him for the rest of their lives. Three and a half years of this— when he had to go up into the mountains to get away from the crowds, when he had to cross the Sea of Galilee to get away from the crowds. But in the end he had 12 disciples and the crowds and the multitudes hated him. That really ought to tell us something about why God is subtle in his dealings with man—because we don’t seem to like it when he’s not. It works better in the Generation of Faith to be subtle. It wasn’t Jesus’ miracles, it wasn’t all the wonderful things that he did, all

the sick people he healed, all the demons he cast out, those weren't what got him killed. What got him killed was what he said. But, back to my question. How did David know that God heard his voice and his supplications? Well, all his life God had been there for him. David called on God regularly, and I think this is important. David was looking for the response and, so, when it came, he recognized it for what it was.

I harken back to the Book of Acts, where Luke and Paul are traveling around and Luke writes at one point that they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the Gospel in Asia. So, they say, "Okay, let's try to go into Bithynia," but the Holy Spirit wouldn't let them go there either. If you or I had seen this, we would have said to ourselves, "Oh, well, that's just a customs agent, hard to get along with. Or, that's just immigration people who wouldn't let them cross the border." Whatever took place, Luke and Paul—who were on a mission for God, to whom God had given a commission, who had already been blessed in their ministry as they went, and who were praying for guidance along the way—were watching for God's guidance. They recognized it for what it was. Think about this phrase from the Psalm: *"Because he has inclined his ear to me..."* You can tell when someone is listening to you. Even a child can tell that. There's this marvelous commercial I enjoy so much: A little girl comes home from school and she's got this picture that she's drawn with crayons to put on the refrigerator. She shows it to her mother, and her mother says, "uh huh, uh huh, um hmmm," paying very little attention to it. She shows it to her sister and her sister brushes her off. She shows it to her brother, her brother says, "That's cool," and he keeps right on running. She shows it to dad who is working at home, still looking at things, and he takes one glance her way and says, "oh, that's nice honey." The little girl goes outside and sits down with her one true friend who will look at whatever she wants—her dog. Good old big dog.

We know when someone inclines their ear to hear us. You can tell. There's a subtle change in posture; it's subtle, but it's there. A person may turn his head, may tilt it slightly. He inclines his ear to hear you. The image of God actually hearing me when I pray to him? Well, it takes a lot of faith to see that image. Who am I that the Creator of all things would turn his ear in my direction, lean his head forward to hear carefully what I'm trying to say? But that's what David believed, and we have every reason to think it was that way. He said, "Because he has inclined his ear to me, therefore, I will call upon him as long as I live." I guess that's where the difference lies for many of us. We don't really have the sense that God has turned his head, tilted his ear toward us and is listening carefully to what we are saying. If we did, do you think maybe we would go to him more often? David had called upon God ever since he was a little boy. He began to pray when faith was much easier and because he knew God heard him; he never thought of doing anything else. I think this is the key to understanding the relationship between David and God. David was not what I would call a pious man. That was not his calling, that was not his gift. But he was a man who was utterly

committed to God. He would just as soon cut off his right hand as to serve another God. It's interesting to think that these other gods were all represented by images. David's God forbade that nonsense. He said, "Don't you dare." He was represented by words. You might even say The Word.

Returning to the Psalm again, in verse 3 he said, "The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow." As you make your way through this Psalm, it's clear enough it wasn't merely an illness which was taking David down. He had enemies often enough in his own household. He had to run before his own son. "Then called I upon the name of the LORD; O LORD, I beseech thee, deliver my soul. Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful. The LORD preserves the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me." Boy, that's easy, isn't it? I was done, and God brought me back up because he preserves the simple. What an interesting thing to say, "The Lord preserves the simple." The Hebrew word for "simple" means silly or seducible. I have a hard time imagining David that way, but he doesn't seem to have any trouble with it. And when you think about it, David was a simple man which, in the end, makes it a whole lot easier to be single-minded. Remember the Scripture says, "A double minded man is unstable in all of his ways." That does not describe David. He was also a trusting man and that nearly got him killed. Except, of course, that God was with him and God saved him, and he spotted it because he was looking for it. "Return unto thy rest," he continues. "O my soul; for the LORD hath dealt bountifully with thee. For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living. And then he comes to the point I mentioned earlier. He said, "I believed., therefore I said I am greatly afflicted." I really meant it. "I said in my haste all men are liars." He was pretty frustrated. I think what David was saying is that he had believed what he said, but he had become altogether too cynical. The temptation to be cynical is powerful, because it seems that the pessimistic people you know are right far more often than the optimists. It's tempting to be pessimistic. So, when I am tempted to say, "All men are liars," I am being tempted to cynicism.

David said, "What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people. Most of us don't have true vows, but we do make statements of intent, we do make promises to God. When we've done that, we need to stick to our word. We may not be a David, but we have responsibilities and we need to see to them. "O LORD, truly I am thy servant; I am thy servant, and the son of thine handmaid: thou hast loosed my bonds. I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people, In the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem. Praise ye the LORD." I think a lot of us, David included, may be wrong for some of the same reasons

President Lincoln was sometimes wrong. Funny comparison, but stay with me. He was a kind man, he was a man notably lacking in cynicism. I came across an article about Lincoln some time ago—so far back that I'm not really sure where it came from. The man who wrote it was Doug Pokorski, a staff writer for a newspaper out of Springfield, Illinois. He said, "Most northerners find it hard to understand the kind of hatred for Abraham Lincoln that was evident in some protests that had taken place over a plan to erect a public statue of Lincoln in Richmond, Virginia." I would think that, after the Civil War, this wouldn't have happened, but in Richmond there was a real problem when they wanted to put up a statue of Abraham Lincoln. A lot of people said, "No, I don't want that." And, during the time he was president, a very large body of people hated him with a passion. He continued in the article: "Lincoln probably would have found it hard to understand as well." There was a historian who spoke at a Lincoln's birthday celebration there in Richmond, and Pokorski quotes this fellow, Brian Dirk, Assistant Professor of History at Andersen University: "As a man Lincoln was remarkably free of malice." Even Lincoln's fiercest critics concede his lack of malice, even in the middle of the Civil War when he received bags of hate mail. His speech continued, "Lincoln was awash in a sea of hatred, but Lincoln was able to rise above hatred. He did possess an unusually high degree of forbearance and calm. He was able to forego hatred of any kind." There are people like that, but they seem to be so few and far between. The people who are this way have a difficult time understanding people who hate. It doesn't make any sense to them. They can think it through and say, "Well, what's the point in getting mad at this?" Lincoln advised everyone around him to avoid demonizing Southern whites. He was working himself to exhaustion trying to defeat the confederacy. He was notoriously lenient in punishing Union soldiers for offenses, especially the ones involving desertion and cowardice. Think about that for a minute. Why would a president be lenient toward soldiers who were showing cowardice in the face of the enemy or who had deserted? Probably because he could understand their fear. Lincoln urged understanding and forbearance towards Southern slave holders. "The absence of malice set Lincoln apart from the radical party who were prepared to treat slave owners as evildoers, outside the boundaries of decent society." But Lincoln's lack of malice had its downside. Lincoln probably did not understand hatred very well. Brian Dirk noted this in his speech: "It led Lincoln to take chances with his personal safety as he often eluded his own guards when traveling in public." And, of course, in the end that may have led to his assassination.

From Pokorski's article I gathered five important phrases: "Almost naive," "absence of malice," "baffled by the hatred of others," "forbearance and calm," and "notoriously lenient." What was surprising to me when I thought about it is, that these are the same qualities I found in King David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, who was also a man after God's own heart, a man who turned out to be an ancestor of the Messiah. And I can't help wondering where these qualities come from. Why is one man a Lincoln and another man a Saddam Hussein? I can't say with certainty, but some thoughts come to mind. A man who is

notoriously lenient is a man well acquainted with his own limitations. If I know all too well what a sinner I am, why would I want to throw stones when I have done the same thing myself, or when I even think I might have done it, in that man's shoes? I think this is one of the reasons why David was so lenient with his sons. With all his mistakes, all of his error, all of his stupidity, he really didn't have a very good position for coming down hard on his sons. At least, not in his own mind.

In studying the history of Israel, I find myself being very critical of Eli, the high priest in Samuel's days, for being so indulgent of those two louts of his sons. Yet I find Samuel making the same mistake with his sons. And Samuel was a good man. Good men do stupid things and, oftentimes, those same good men are pretty lenient when they see others making those same mistakes. The Apostle Paul in his early years was not a very patient man. He was too smart for his own good at times. It nearly got him killed. But over the course of time he came to understand himself much better—chiefly to understand his personal limitations. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he said, "For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Every time Paul felt like coming down on somebody, every time he felt like punishing someone, every time he felt like criticizing someone, he had to remember the time he went to the high priest. He had wanted letters of authority to go to Damascus and bring all the Christians back, bound, and have them tried. He had to remember the death of Stephen when he stood there and held the coats of the people who stoned Stephen to death. But, he went on to say, "But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." This simple concept will make all the difference in the world to the man who is aware of what he has done, of his mistakes, of his weaknesses. "I am what I am by the grace of God." It may well have been that same kind of spirit in Lincoln which caused him to be lenient with other people.

Late in his life Paul wrote to Titus (in Titus 3) one of the really striking statements he made. He said, "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, [let's get over this rebelliousness] To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, showing all meekness unto all men." Think about that. He said "to speak evil of no man." But why? What should block us from running people down? "For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. [We were never any better than these people.] But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us. . ." We're not where we are because of our own goodness. We are where we are because of the goodness of God, which has rescued us from our malice. Malice

is a singularly non-Christian state of mind, as is hatred in all of its forms. Cynicism has no place in the heart of a man of God. We would all do well to keep this in mind.

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