

FAREWELL AT SHILOH

JOSHUA-THE ADVENTURE AND VICTORY OF FAITH

by Doug Goins

This passage is written for people who are trying to fulfill the calling of the Lord on them in some specific leadership role in ministry. Joshua is going to speak to the leaders of the nation of Israel, but we're going to see very easily how this truth applies to all of us, whatever responsibility God has assigned us. I must confess, this study came at a good time for me over the last couple of weeks, perhaps because, anticipating the new year, I've struggled more with what constitutes authentic spiritual leadership.

I read an article in *Leadership* magazine that was trying to analyze the necessary qualities for spiritual leadership. The rationale for the article was a statistic that eighty percent of the churches in this country are declining in membership. The premise of the article was that it's a crisis in leadership: We don't understand leadership, and we aren't exercising leadership correctly. The article surveyed leadership qualities that a church might legitimately seek in order to reverse this trend: evangelistic passion, relational sensitivity to people, administrative strength, strong teaching of the word of God, decisiveness. There was a point-counterpoint debate between two theoreticians. One advocated servanthood leadership, the other a CEO-type, strong, decisive, top-down leadership.

Most of us don't get bogged down in the theory or the theology of leadership. It's our practical, day-to-day attempts to work it out that concern us as we try to be the leaders God wants us to be in our families, in Sunday School, in youth ministry, in outreaches to the community, and so on. We can all get a bit demoralized and confused about what and who we're supposed to be.

This passage in Joshua 23 is a sermon Joshua gave, yet it's very personal. It has been encouraging for me to work through it, but it has also been convicting and unsettling in some ways. I hope it can be a word of encouragement for you and a reminder of what God cares about in ministry leadership.

Let's look at verses 1-2a:

A long time afterward, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their enemies round about, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, Joshua summoned all Israel, their elders and heads, their judges and officers, and said to them...

Now Joshua is at the end of his life. He has finished a twenty-five year calling to give leadership to the nation in the conquest and settlement of the land. Without apology for his old age, he will speak from the perspective of the long haul, from the steady understanding that comes through decades of accumulated wisdom. What we're going to read are not casual remarks. Joshua means business. He is concerned about the next generation of leaders that God is going to raise up to follow him in the life of the nation.

The central issue for Joshua is that of faithfulness to God and to his word, to "the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you" (verse 16). Faithfulness is going to have priority over any other issue. In the life of the church faithfulness is more important than ecclesiology, or governmental style and structure. It's more important than personal temperament, personal gifting, or even spiritual gifting. It's more important than any kind of leadership style.

The foundation of spiritual leadership

We're going to hear some strong commands to leaders on how to lead. But underneath the imperatives is going

to be the wonderful reminder of God's faithfulness. The reason we have any hope at all of being faithful is because of his absolute commitment to be faithful to us in our lives. Listen to this call to faithfulness in verses 2b-11, which is the first half of Joshua's message:

"I am now old and well advanced in years; and you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you. Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the west. The LORD your God will push them back before you, and drive them out of your sight; and you shall possess their land, as the LORD your God promised you. Therefore be very steadfast to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not be mixed with these nations left here among you, or make mention of the names of their gods, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down yourselves to them, but cleave to the LORD your God as you have done to this day. For the LORD has driven out before you great and strong nations; and as for you, no man has been able to withstand you to this day. One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the LORD your God who fights for you, as he promised you. Take good heed to yourselves, therefore, to love the LORD your God.

Foundational to this call to faithfulness is the positive promise of God's faithfulness to us. In these opening verses Joshua promises that there will be success in ministry, at least from God's perspective. The conquest is now complete; all of the land has been allocated to the twelve tribes. But Joshua reminds them that the struggle is not over; there are pockets of resistance from some of the Canaanite residents who are still there. These Canaanites are also going to try to seduce Israel away from their love relationship with the Lord. But Joshua says in these verses that a life of faithfulness to the Lord will bring success. Verse 5: "...And you shall possess their land, as the LORD your God promised you." God is in the process, Joshua says, of making good all his promises.

Hundreds of years later the apostle Paul, writing in his second letter to Timothy, has the same confident certainty. Just as Joshua did, he looks back and remembers God's faithfulness to him. He has been able to respond to that, to fight the fight and run the race. He challenges Timothy, "You be faithful; finish the ministry that you started." Paul's confidence is amazing as he approaches the end of his life. He will be executed shortly, and will face the Lord who called him. But his confidence is in the Lord. When he stands in the Lord's presence, he will feel no shame, because he has been successful.

But from a human perspective, was Paul a success in what he did? He ended up a prisoner of the state and was executed for crimes against the state. History tells us that not one of the churches he founded or wrote letters to survived in the next generation. Does that mean he didn't do a very good job of training leaders and planting churches? Yet he can talk about his eager anticipation of facing the Lord because of God's faithfulness. Paul didn't have a human view of success. His view was radical. Spiritual success doesn't necessarily look like success defined in worldly terms. I've known people who have been very successful in organized religion in terms of their vocation, their salary, or the numbers of people they influenced religiously. But their personal and spiritual lives were in shambles. I know others who have experienced an entire lifetime of obscurity, with minimal results, humanly speaking; yet they were faithfully serving the Lord throughout.

What Joshua calls us to, as Paul reminds Timothy, is being committed to finishing the process, trusting that God is at work in us. Paul says in Philippians 1:6 that God will finish what he started in us. And whatever we put our hand to in ministry, no matter how insignificant it may seem in terms of leadership responsibility, we need to hold on to the confidence that God is going to be faithful to work through us and to change us in the process. That's what's important.

Give God the credit

I want to focus on four ways to define spiritual success from the verses we read above. These are action items for success in ministry. The first one is in verse 3: "...And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you." Spiritual

success gives God all the credit for every single thing that is accomplished, for who you are and what you're able to do. It's all from the Lord.

I don't know about you, but my hindsight isn't very good. When I'm in the middle of a difficult struggle in ministry, I can usually remember to focus on the Lord, call out to him, and depend on him. But when things have gone really well, I'm much too quick to give myself credit for how things have gone. I end up thinking, I did a pretty good job of handling that. This passage reminds me that every single day I have to remember that good and perfect gifts come from the Lord, not from me. He is the one who has won the battle over sin and death and hell. He is the giver of life and health and opportunity and effectiveness in ministry.

Joshua has tremendous humility. The mentions of himself in this sermon are very brief and incidental. He is a leader who doesn't draw attention to himself. The important issue for Joshua is what God did and what he can be trusted for, not what Joshua did. It wasn't those in the leadership of Israel who were responsible for the successful conquest of that land. God was the one who fought the battles and gave them rest. And there won't be any lasting spiritual success in any of our lives in ministry without the grace of God at work, directing everything that we do.

Billy Graham is a man I respect. Like Joshua, he has spent a lifetime giving God all the credit. I just read an article about him in *Time* magazine. The secular press respects him after fifty years of public life and ministry. I don't think he is respected because he is a brilliant speaker and evangelist, because he is an obvious leader, or because he has had great success in the growth of his organization. All those things are true. But what I respond to and what even nonbelievers respond to in Billy Graham is his integrity and his humility, more than anything else. Billy Graham doesn't draw attention to himself. In one of his biographies the author talked about Billy's accountability to other men. He was always saying, "Brothers, what do you see in my life? What are the failures, what are the mistakes?" The author spoke of Billy spending time on his knees before the Lord, asking God's forgiveness for failure in his life and ministry, asking God to be at work through him as a leader and a preacher.

According to this biography, at one time or another in the fifty years of Billy's public life, both the Republicans and the Democrats asked him to run for vice president on their ticket. He was also offered roles in Hollywood as a young man, because he was so handsome and charismatic, Hollywood figured he would be a box office smash. He talked about the struggles he had with all of those offers, because he could rationalize, "Well, I could have more exposure for Christ, the gospel could be expanded." But Billy talked about his awareness that the God of the universe who judges the human heart and who defines what success is would not allow him any of those opportunities. Billy Graham is somebody who for fifty years has given success in ministry back to the Lord and has acknowledged his total dependence on God for effectiveness.

I'm learning personally that when I'm able to give my successes back to God as his accomplishments, then I'm also free from being demoralized by any superficial evaluation of failure in my ministry. The first principle is, if you want success in ministry, give God all the credit and try to stay out of the way.

Immerse yourself in God's word

The second principle is in verse 6. To achieve success on God's terms, obey God's word completely: "Therefore be very steadfast to keep and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left...." In chapter 1 God told Joshua that he would be successful if he obeyed the word. That was paramount in Joshua's life, and one of the keys to success in his leadership. He loved the word of God (the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible, which were his Scriptures at that time). He also had a deepening relationship with the Author of the word that got richer and richer as he submitted to the word. And as he trusted God's promises, obeyed God's directives in the Pentateuch, and developed a more intimate relationship with the Author himself, God blessed what he did and gave him success.

Last week I thought about my own odyssey in relationship to the Bible. I have to confess that around the time I was in college, I went through a season of being more in love with books about the Bible than with the Bible itself--historical theology books and the like. I can also think of times when ignoring the word of God, getting

pulled off to the right hand or to the left in terms of my own ethical standards, resulted in tragedy.

Now, as much as I know, the Bible is the authority upon which I live my life. I don't claim to understand everything in the book, but that doesn't diminish its importance in my life. I do have a desire to spend some time every day in the word. When I choose not to do that, I'm really depriving myself of sustenance. The psalmist called it food that is good to eat. When I take the word seriously and meditate on it, it's not just that I learn a lot more Bible information. I fall more deeply in love with the divine Author as I read it conversationally with him. I know him at much deeper levels.

One of the concerns I've heard is that if we really challenge people to read their Bible every day, that's legalism. But the result in my life when I read the Bible seriously and interactively is not legalism. The result is greater freedom, the ability to live life more gracefully and creatively.

When I'm not in tune with the Lord through his word and I neglect the word of God, people around me know it. Rich Carlson will say to me, "Goins, you're losing your sense of humor." That's one way you can tell. Arthur Rubinstein, the world-famous pianist, wrote years ago about the importance of practicing every day: "If I don't practice one day, nobody knows. If I don't practice two days, then I know. But if I don't practice three days, the whole world can tell."

We are called to immerse ourselves in the word of God, to sell ourselves out to it, if we want God to bless us in the ministry responsibility he calls us to.

Cling to the Lord only

The third principle is in verse 8: "...But cleave to the LORD your God as you have done to this day." The word "cleave" means to hang on tight, to stick like glue. The same word is used in Genesis 1 about the exclusive relationship between a husband and wife. Trust God and don't trust any other resources but God.

As the nation Israel had to contend with the influence of the Canaanite population on them, we also have many other philosophies of success in the world competing for our attention, many other ethics that persuasively undermine the Biblical ethics. There are also many temptations that can capture our attention, trying to seduce us with false promises. There are many books (in Christian book stores), video tapes, and seminars that will tell us what we can add to God to have success in ministry: how we can have more presence and power in our leadership, how we can attract and hold more people in our ministry, how we can make our ministry more enjoyable and fulfilling for us personally. There are many temptations, even when we're trying to do the Lord's work, not to rely on the Lord.

But Joshua calls us to hang on to the Lord. The literal call is for the leaders of Israel to firmly attach themselves exclusively to the Lord in willing, practical obedience. And the promise is that as long as we're holding on tight to the Lord, God will honor what we do.

This reminds me of the twenty-year pilgrimage that Mark and Suzanne Jacobsen have been on to translate the word of God into the Abaknon language on Capul Island in the Philippines. They're going to dedicate the New Testament and the Psalms at the end of April. It's a great high point. I know all the temptations that Mark has experienced to turn away from the Lord in this, either to bail out on the project totally because of discouragement, disillusionment, and insufficient resources; or to pursue other ways to get it done that he knew were not from the Lord. All kinds of seductive religious influences have come in from various sources, trying to get him to do it differently so it would be more acceptable in the Abaknon culture, trying to water down the word of God.

Mark has told me about times when he would go away alone to escape all the other voices and just be with God for two or three days, pray, and try to hear the Lord. He said that he had to hang on to the Lord and nothing else. God has honored Mark's and Suzanne's faithfulness and struggle, and this April is going to be a glorious time as the word of God is finally printed and distributed in the language of the Abaknon people.

Love God more than anything else

The fourth principle is in verse 11: "Take good heed to yourselves, therefore, to love the LORD your God." The call is to intense self-examination: Do I love God more than anything? Do I love him more than my ministry or the people in my ministry? It's an echo of Moses' call in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the Shâma': "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your might." The good news about how we are to love God is that God himself is love, the author and the source of love. Whatever love we have to give him is just a response to his great love for us. The apostle John said, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Passion for God isn't something I have to crank up. It's part of who he is, and as I get to know him better, that love is imparted to me. It is easy, though, to grow cold in love and distant, to stop interacting with the Lord. The call in verse 11 is to keep the fire of passion for the Lord burning.

I was thinking about how this applies to me personally. Sometimes I struggle in ministry because of relationships that aren't working right, usually because of my own impatience and frustration with people who aren't what I think they ought to be in the work of the ministry. Whenever I give in to discouragement or disillusionment because things don't go the way I wish they had, or when I get depressed because people don't like my leadership style, or my preaching or teaching, I'm reminded of Jesus and the apostle Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after the resurrection, and their beautiful breakfast of reconciliation. Jesus said to Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15-19.) Everything depends on that. As I grow more deeply in love with the Lord Jesus, everything else in my ministry will find its proper place. Relationships will work the way they're supposed to work. Loving him fiercely will result in spiritual success in the things that really matter from God's perspective.

Let's read the second half of this passage. There are some explanations here of why this commitment to faithfulness is so important in ministry. It warns us of dangers that are real, and speaks again of the faithfulness of God. Verses 11-16:

Take good heed to yourselves, therefore, to love the LORD your God. For if you turn back, and join the remnant of these nations left here among you, and make marriages with them, so that you marry their women and they yours, know assuredly that the LORD your God will not continue to drive out these nations before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge on your sides, and thorns in your eyes, till you perish from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you.

And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed. But just as all the good things which the LORD your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the evil things, until he have destroyed you from off this good land which the LORD your God has given you, if you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them. Then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land which he has given to you."

The danger of idolatry

There are four reasons why it's so important to love the Lord, to give him all the credit, to love his word. Three of them are negative, and one is positive. The first negative reason is back in verse 7 in the warning, "...That you may not be mixed with these nations left here among you, or make mention of the names of their gods, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow down yourselves to them...." Always, with Israel historically, with the church of Christ, and with us personally, there is the danger of seduction from idolatry. It takes the form of external forces at work that want to provide alternative payoffs, if you will, for doing the work of ministry. Joshua is concerned that Israel not be infected by the wickedness of these Gentile nations living among them. In verse 7 he warns of a three-step process, a logical progression that will happen if they're not careful. First, the Israelites will associate with these nations on the basis of comfortable friendship with no concern for their salvation. They won't think about it or pray about it; they will have no such intent. Second,

they will start discussing the Canaanite religious practices. And third, because Canaanite culture and religion are much more sophisticated and attractive sensually and aesthetically than Israelite worship is, the Israelites will be drawn into and overwhelmed by them, and they will give in to the temptation to worship these other gods.

Most of us today don't practice pagan worship. We don't sacrifice to idols, have sex with temple prostitutes, or offer our children to Molech, the god of the underworld, as the Canaanites did. But idolatrous worship is always trying to creep into the very life of the Christian community.

Ed Woodhall gave every man on the board of elders the book *No God But God* by Os Guinness and John Seal. It's a collection of essays looking at modern culture and dangers to the church. Richard Keyes, the director of La Brie Fellowship in Farmington, Massachusetts, wrote a chapter entitled "The Idol Factory." He is concerned about the danger of idolatry to the church of Jesus Christ. He thoroughly covers the subject of what an idol is. The bottom line is that an idol is anything that we allow to take God's place. It can be a good, wonderful thing in itself. But if it pushes God out of his central place in our lives, it's destructive and idolatrous. He writes:

An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero—anything that can substitute for God.

By this definition, all the obvious candidates are potentially idolatrous—wealth, fame, pleasure, power, and so on. We can recognize ways in which we disobey God out of loyalty to them. But many nonobvious things can work as idols as well, causing us to ignore or distort God's commands to us. For example, work, a commandment of God, can become an idol if it is pursued so exclusively that responsibilities to one's family are ignored. Family, an institution of God Himself, can become an idol if one is so preoccupied with the family that no one outside of one's own family is cared for. Being well-like, a perfectly legitimate hope, becomes an idol if the attachment to it means that one never risks disapproval. Even evangelism, carrying out the Great Commission, can become an idol if people are misused—Christian or not Christian—in the zeal to do it.

To summarize, idols will inevitably involve self-centeredness, self-inflation, and self-deception. Idolatry begins with the counterfeiting of God, because only with a counterfeit of God can people remain the center of their lives and loyalties, autonomous architects of their futures. Something within creation will then be idolatrously inflated to fill the God-shaped hole in the individual's world. But a counterfeit is a lie, not the real thing. It must present itself through self-deception, often with images suggesting that the idol will fulfill promises for the good life.

In our context, these promises are that the idol will somehow make us more successful in the ministry calling that we've received.

The pitfall of fleshly insecurity

The second reason it's so important to love the Lord is internal. It's the danger of our own fleshly insecurities. Look at verse 12 again: "For if you turn back, and join the remnant of these nations left here among you, and make marriages with them, so that you marry their women and they yours...." The next verse talks about the frightening, uncomfortable consequences of making that sort of choice. That word "join" is the same word we saw back in verse 8, which exhorted us to "cleave" to the Lord. There is an important spiritual principle here. Either we're going to hold on to the Lord exclusively, and the result in our life and ministry is going to be security and stability and spiritual strength, or we're going to cling to anything else that we can get our arms around.

What is eventually going to drive the men of Israel into marriages with the resident Canaanite women is basically insecurity, in spite of all their history of God's faithfulness, and in spite of warnings about the consequences. The Canaanites are good farmers. They have been there for centuries. Their crops flourish and

their livestock are healthy. The Israelites aren't good at farming; they have spent four hundred years as a slave nation in Egypt, and then forty years living as nomads in the wilderness, eating manna provided by the Lord. All around them they see Canaanites who are better at living life than they are. So they marry the Canaanite women and insinuate their way into the Canaanite families, because they want more stability and security.

We're threatened with the same kind of spiritual insecurity, with our own fleshly desires for strength and stability on our terms. So we end up clutching ideas, institutions, religious strategies, or mentors we think are going to guarantee success in life and ministry. But we end up involved in spiritual immorality.

The apostle Paul was honest about himself and his struggles in this area. In Romans 7:24 he cried out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He was referring to himself, his own internal insecurities that drove him away from the Lord and into things that he shouldn't be involved with. Then Paul answered the question: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" The answer is turning to Christ, confessing the insecurity, working it through with him, asking him to be the strength that we need instead of hanging on to some program or person we think will give us success.

Remembering God's faithfulness

Third, verse 14 focuses on a wonderful positive motivation in ministry, the goodness and faithfulness of God: "...All of you [know]...that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the LORD your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed." Yes, there are still struggles in the land. Yes, there will be defeat and failure. There are still pockets of resistance from the Canaanites. Yet in the big picture, arching over all of that is the incomparable history of God's faithfulness and goodness to them as a nation.

God's faithfulness is especially motivational in ministry leadership. Pulling myself out of bed the morning after a particularly disastrous investment of my time and energy and resources, when things didn't work as I had hoped they would, or people didn't respond the way I had anticipated, I don't know how many times I've asked myself, Is God sovereign or not? Is Jesus Lord of this church or not? Is God not all that good? But the answer, Joshua says, is resoundingly, Yes! I need to lift my eyes from the immediate struggles and failures and look at the big picture again—the past history of God's faithfulness, and what God promises the future holds. And that's what encourages me over and over to try again, to reach out again, to love again, to keep making the effort.

The consequences of unfaithfulness

The final motivation in these last two verses is fairly harsh. It's a picture of the nation's being driven out of this good land if they transgress the covenant and violate this love relationship with the Lord. The final reason it's so important to love the Lord focuses on the consequences of unfaithfulness.

At first glance we might think it's pretty rotten news that we're going to get it if we violate God's faithfulness to us. But do you know why God drove his people into exile, first in Assyria and then in Babylon, and allowed them seventy years of suffering? Do you know why God allows discipline in our lives when we disobey him and ignore what we know to be true? The Bible says it's because he loves us so much.

In Deuteronomy 6 Moses tells the nation that God chose them out of love. He singled them out not because they deserved it, or because they were especially big or impressive, but because he just decided to love them. All the teaching about God's covenant love in the Pentateuch stresses its unbreakable nature. It talks about how God cleaves (this is the same word again) to the nation Israel. He will not let them go in spite of their rebellion and resistance to him. After this history of the conquest, there is the period of the judges, and it's a horrible history. Over and over again the nation does what it wants to do. But God still won't let them go. There is a wonderful verse in Isaiah just before the fall of the northern kingdom where God pleads with the nation (1:18):

**''Come now, and let us reason together,'
Says the LORD,**

**'Though your sins are as scarlet,
They will be as white as snow;
Though they are red like crimson,
They will be like wool.'**

God says, "It's not too late to be reasonable, to renew faithfulness to me in love. I don't want to discipline you."

The prophet Hosea also quotes the Lord. Even though they're finally driven into exile, God still can't quit loving them (14:4-5):

**"I will heal their apostasy,
I will love them freely,
For My anger has turned away from them.
I will be like the dew to Israel;
He will blossom like the lily."**

Even in the midst of God's discipline in our lives, his love is at work.

I experienced God's loving faithfulness in discipline many years ago. God disciplined me for ignoring spiritual principles, many of which we've summarized here in Joshua 23. I experienced failure in a marriage and disqualification from ministry. God put me on the shelf. There was direct confrontation and discipline from brothers in Christ who loved me and who were very hard on me because they saw what sin was doing to me. It was a period of isolation, a kind of wilderness experience. But I did learn through it that the love of God was at work in my life. God did heal, restore, and turn his chastening hand away from me. These last twenty years have been an amazing process of restoration to ministry in God's mercy and grace. But the time of discipline was painful and difficult. We don't like discipline, the writer of Hebrews says, although it's important and good for us. Joshua says that the reality of consequences ought to motivate us to love the Lord, be faithful to him, and obey his word.

The good news about hearing a message like this is that if any of these issues have made you uncomfortable, if God has told you you're drifting, if you don't have the courage and tenacity to remain faithful, all you have to do is pray and ask him to heal your heart. He will give you a heart of gratitude for his faithfulness, a heart of obedience to his word, a heart of trust in him and his resources exclusively, and a heart of love for him that is more intense than anything, even your love for ministry.

Think back through these principles again. If you want success in ministry, it's laid out here. Love God with everything you've got, and submit yourself to his word. He'll do amazing things in your life. You can trust him for that.

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Doug Goins
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[Back to Index Page](#)

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