

Overturing Tables

*Hab_2:2 And the LORD answered me, and said,
"Write the vision, make it clear and display it upon the
tables, that he may run that reads it".*

*Mat 21:12 Jesus ... overturning tables said, "It is
written, ' house is a house of prayer; but you are
hijacking it as a cave for robbers'"*

*2Co_3:3 As you are epistles of Christ..., written not
with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not on
tables of stone, but in tables of the heart.*

To Anne,

My Wife and Life-Long travelling companion.



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Forward

Forward

I envy those with a good imagination. I guess envy is a sin but what else can you do if you desire a good imagination? You can't steal it. If you could, that also would be a sin. Of course there are dangers that come with imagination, so perhaps I should be grateful I don't have too much of it.

Psychologists tell us every human being possesses imagination. But like those possessing money, some are richer than others. Theologians are more inclined to warn us of imagination's dangers. The King James version of the Bible references at least fourteen verses to the imagination of the heart. Most of these are referred to as wicked. One in Luke 1:15 reminds us that Jesus came to scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts. But for all this, the imagination of the heart is a link into the spiritual world and, provided the heart is pure it is a beneficial attribute for seeing God.

Of course Jesus came in the flesh to dispel the false imagination encouraged by the teachers of the law. But it has been a long time since Jesus came and we are inclined to use our imaginations to visualise Jesus and his character. So once again we need to look to a pure and

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accurate imagination so that we interpret Jesus aright.

This is only the forward so, enough of the discussion around Imagination. Except to say this book is a record of a lifetime of questioning that has forced me to examine time and again the difference between what I have been taught as doctrine, what others have tried to tell me Jesus is like and what I have experienced for myself about God.

The Christian life is a journey and in it imagination gets modified by experience and expectation. As the prophets remind us, imagination is close to the longings of heart and is not always accurate. It picks and chooses what it wants to hear and can be dangerous. But it is necessary in a journey of faith because we would not start this journey if we had no picture of what we thought might come at the end.

So, as you can see from the contents list, this is a book of little insights I have accumulated on my journey of faith. It questions the heart more than the imagination. It is dangerous to shape imagination just through culture, education, or peer pressure. It has to be based on a relationship with God Himself. The best way I know of doing that is to examine how biblical characters related to God and test my relationship around that.

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Introduction

Did you know the Egyptians had more than two-thousand gods?

The most High of all these gods was Amun. Amun's right hand god was Ra - the god of fire. Whenever the Egyptian army went to war. Amun and Ra teamed up to ensure victory. The Egyptian army called this team Amun-Ra. Amun-Ra was a ruthless combination, destroying anything in the way, the army would help the work of Ra by torching everything in its path.

Ra was believed to visit the sky in his chariot each morning and pass through the realms of the underworld each night. If the weather became cloudy while an army was at war, the soldiers would presume Ra was no longer on their side. That may be why they panicked when the Hebrew slaves, shielded by a cloud, crossed the red sea.

The god of the Nile was named Hapi¹. Hapi was the fertility god and very popular throughout ancient Egypt. According to myth, Hapi set out from his home in the heavens, travelled through the land of the dead, emerging in an unknown cave in upper Egypt before taking a journey down the Nile every year. For more than three-

1 *Or hap or hep*

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thousand years people have tried to pin-point the source of the Nile and it is still in dispute today. So the assumption he emerged from a cave in the hills was as good as any other explanation to them.

The "Arrival of Hapi" coincided with the season of floods each year. To appease Hapi and ensure he did not destroy the mud huts along the river's edge, and, of course, to ensure the increase in population, they were required to throw a firstborn male into the Nile as a sacrifice. One year, during a period when the Egyptian population was in decline and the Hebrew population was on the increase there came a devastating flood. A decree went out that they should use Hebrew firstborn sons to sacrifice to Hapi. Now this ties nicely into the story of Moses in the bulrushes of course. It also adds credibility to a young Egyptian princess believing Hapi had brought her a present of a baby in a basket when he arrived that year.

Moses would have been taught all about the Egyptian gods once he started school in Egypt. But, before he got there, he was raised by his Hebrew mother. You know the story. When the princess found Moses in the bulrushes his sister Miriam, who was watching discreetly, ran to get their mother to act as wet-nurse. The Princess then paid his mother to bring up Moses until he reached school age. During these days, Moses' mother would have sung

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the Hebrew nursery rhymes to him in the tradition of all Hebrew mothers. Many of these have been found by Archaeologists on clay tablets. Besides the ancient songs about Father Abraham and Isaac's exploits, how Jacob went down to Egypt and God restored his son Joseph to him, there was also one about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It went something like this:

The sun was rising over the earth when Lot came to Zoar.

*Yahweh came out of the heavens
He rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah*

*He overthrew those cities,
and all through the valley,
the inhabitants cried out from the ground.*

So Moses learned from an early age that the God of the Hebrews also played with fire.

After the incident with the Egyptian soldier who ill treated a Hebrew slave, (you will remember Moses slew the Egyptian and ran into the desert), Moses lived with his father-in-law who was a Midian Priest. That part of the Fertile Crescent was under the rule of a Babylonian king at the time. The Babylonians also had a God who played with Fire. He had two names. If you were a Pagan you

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would call him Nusku; If you were a Zoroastrian you would call him Ahura-Mazda the God of the sun. Zoroastrians believed God made the sun before he created life in order to aid life. Moses' father-in-law, being a priest and quite close to Ur of the Chaldeans, would have very likely been influenced by the Zoroastrian branch of Babylon, So fire from Ahura-Mazda was loving and creative not cruel like god Nusku.

All that is the background. So when God commissioned Moses for a task, he first had to release him from all this clutter of theology in his mind. When God saw Moses turn aside to see the burning bush phenomenon, He saw a chance to move Moses from an intellectual assent by a personal introduction. It was small wonder Moses pondered which god was behind the burning bush. In his mind Moses was asking.'Who are you'?

Are you Ra? If you are then I am dead meat!

Are you Yahweh? If you are I must hide myself lest you punish my sins.

Are you Ahura-Mazda? That might not be so bad - but then, what if you are Nusku?

Fortunately God reads minds and clarified :

"I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." So Moses covered his face, because he was afraid to look at God."

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Once announced as Yahweh, Moses tries to hide his face in case he was punished for his sins. But he still had a question that needed answering, God's answer didn't resolve Moses' question. It did exclude the gods of other people groups leaving Moses with a narrower choice. But which Hebrew God was speaking? Remember, the Hebrews had been slaves to the Egyptians for four-hundred years and had learned to think as the Egyptians thought. The Hebrews would not automatically know which God Moses was talking about.

God continued the conversation:

Then the LORD said, "I have seen how cruelly my people are being treated in Egypt;... now I am sending you to the king of Egypt so that you can lead my people out of his country."

Moses is half listening while still pondering his next question which he rephrases:

And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and they say 'What is his name'? What shall I say unto them?

Are you:

EL-YON, (Gen_14:22), the Most High God.

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The God in charge of everything!

EL-SHADDAI, (the supreme Magistrate) who watched over them daily (Gen_17:1).

EL-OHIM, (Team God)²;

The name for God when El-Yon teamed up with roo'-akh (the Spirit) and aw-mar' (the word) for creation purposes for example ³

JEHOVAH (Covenant God) ;

The God who gave his promise to Abraham

But there were two other names the Hebrews used

ADONAI, (Father God,) ;

He who leads and trains those he loves that is mainly translated as 'Lord' in our English translations

2 *The translation Elohim is plural and a clear introduction to the trinity, but is it exclusively so? 'Team God' is my loose interpretation of Elohim [Elohym]*

3 *in the creation account of Genesis ch 1 : roo'-akh (translated spirit), and aw-mar' (translated' word' or' said' or 'commanded'), - the word translated God is El-OHYM (which is plural in the Hebrew), is born out in the repeated phrase 'let us...'; Other examples can be found in Exodus 21 ff when judges are called 'team God' or Elohym. In other places angels are referred to' Team God'- Such as when Jacob wrestled with 'Team god'*

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EL-OAH, (The great and fearful God);

This is the God of Uncle Laban; He and Jacob invoked El-oah when they parted company in Gen 31:42. Later on in history EL-oah became 'Aalah " or Allah - The great, all powerful and fearful God" of Muslim understanding.

As good Christians, we are taught that Hebrews were distinct because they believed in only one God. It is true that Abraham came out from Ur of the Chaldeans because he believed in one God rather than the multiple gods of Zoroastrianism, but being under the Egyptians for four-hundred years, Hebrew people had learned to think differently. They had once again picked up the culture around them and saw one God as a number of different personalities.

*Increasingly
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Moses was firstly a very intellectual man. Having been to Egyptian University he was equipped to understand life. He had not only learned about politics, languages and economics, but also comparative religions which reinterpreted the expressions of his Hebrew ancestry for the eyes of the Egyptian race. Adding to his dilemma, intellect and learning were getting in the way of his understanding of the nature of the one true God of the

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Hebrews. This God did not communicate through intellect but by relationship. The instigator of this strange burning bush phenomenon told Moses that He was the God of his ancestors. This not only narrowed the choices, but it immediately gave him a picture of the relationship between Abraham and his God. In that relationship God was not equal to Abraham or Isaac, but very much one in charge :

And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: say unto the children of Israel, I AM has sent me unto you. ⁴

It was not until later in his spiritual journey that Moses twigged:

Hear O Israel - Elohim (your team god) is in fact one God – Jehovah – the covenant God⁵

Between these two points Moses had to learn to trust this God who hid behind an elusive and unhelpful statement 'I am who I am'. It took a step of faith to act upon a request from a God he could not name. This was different to the relationship of an Egyptian leader, for them naming something or someone gave control over him, her or it.

4 Exo 3:14

5 Deut ch. 6:4 In Today's English, we say Father, Son and Spirit are one God.

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Less and less today Christians see God as '*I Am*'. Increasingly today Christians want to name God in order to limit his Character. Increasingly I hear Christians, (thinking like the Egyptians), talking of the God of the *Old Testament* and the God of the *New*. Oh, they say, I prefer the loving, forgiving, long-suffering God of the New Testament to the judging, punishing God of the old. In fact, I can count on one hand the number of sermons I have heard based on the Old Testament this past year. We down-grade sin, judgement and God's standards by emphasising only a loving-God. It allows many churches to abolish Hell from the pulpit. Universalism⁶ is finding its way back into the church again, and in doing so it is weakening repentance, sin and such-like doctrines. After all, God loves everyone doesn't he? By *our* logic and understanding of love God will not punish anyone will he? Our society has banned chastisement so God will accept you no matter how you regard him won't he?

I AM what I am - tells a different story. It reminds us that God has attributes or characteristics built into his personality. When we acknowledge God is patient we do not mean his patience never runs out. Ask Noah.⁷ Ask the

6 *Universalism first appears at Babel then in Noah's time when everyone did as the counselled in their own heart. It raised its head again in the late 1800's in the guise of Unitarianism.*

7 *Gen ch. 6*

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people of Babel.⁸ Ask Lot and his wife.⁹ Ask Pharaoh.¹⁰ Ask Belshazzar.¹¹ Ask a rich man named Dives or a poor man named Lazarus.¹² Check out the book of Revelation. God is not limited by love but by '*I AM!*'

If there is one lesson we must quickly learn from this passage it must be to take God seriously. If the recorded age of Moses is correct, it took some seventy years for Moses to finally get to meet the real God of his ancestor Abraham. Like so many today, his intellect had caused him to fit God to his ideas through mental gymnastics and analysis rather than accepting a simple personal encounter. He had assented to God. He had acknowledged him with a tipping of the hat -so to speak. He had heard of the exploits his ancestors had attributed to God and respected their right to believe in him. But now he was faced with a God outside of his preconceived understanding. A God who was not prepared to conform to the concepts of a human mind.

To Moses this was a revelation. He had been comfortable living a quiet life in a small town, doing what most people have done for thousands of years, raising a family and

8 *Gen ch. 11*

9 *Gen 19 : Lk 17:32*

10 *Ex ch. 7 to 12*

11 *Daniel ch. 5*

12 *Lk 16 26-31*

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tending home interests. The shock when God regarded it as His right to want more from Moses was rather disturbing to him. Moses had been nurtured and shaped by God from bulrushes to burning bush.

In the world of the six-month old baby, all is love. Parents feed, clear up, provide, choose and so on. The baby knows nothing of the fuller character of its parents, until it reaches the terrible-twos when it discovers different parental attitudes. Now parents say No! Parents gang up saying, *'Clean up your own toys'*; Parents say *'Bed Time'* when the child disagrees. Parents say *'Don't Touch -it will hurt'*.

What has Happened? The parent has not changed – well just a bit perhaps. The Parent sees the future of the child through experience. The parent has an aim and responsibility to the whole of the child's development. The child is now old enough to understand love includes discipline, purpose, direction, intention and many other spiritual characteristics essential to growth. At the burning bush Moses has to face the fact that his past was only preparation for his future. God was no longer in the background looking to his need but now required co-operation in future tasks. God had timed his training to meet this precise point in history. What he had learned and how his character had developed over time had to

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change direction here because this was the time of his calling. His character and skills were not perfected as we shall see in his later life, but it was time for his ministry to begin.

I am always surprised when small children draw a picture of a train. Even in this day and age it is usually a steam train. Is it not drawn from life experience? No! Rather it comes from the imaginary world of Thomas the tank engine. It bears no relationship to a real overcrowded commuter world of

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adults on the underground in the rush hour. Unfortunately, when we first meet God we meet him with the similar naivety. Moses was happy to see God as a distant non-interfering god, or even Yahweh-Jira - a loving providing god. After all, his last forty-years had been good for him. He lived comfortably with his family and little harassment in his daily routine. But his encounter at the burning bush put pay to this. He now had to face a different reality. The Christian who stays within his early preconceived ideas of God has trouble relating to God or finding his purpose for being alive. There comes a time in any relationship where we have to ask two questions if that relationship is to mature. Asking the first question Moses asked, '*Who are you?*', lead quickly to Moses' second

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question '*Who am I?*'¹³

We cannot understand the whole impact that this encounter made upon Moses until we understand the culture of his time. By asking God his name, Moses was doing very much more than asking for a handle. The Hebrew culture had a totally different concept of a name to culture today. The Hebrew word for '*name*' is *shem*. Like so many other words it does not just translate as name but often describes character. Moses was asking, 'What is your character?' What is your essential nature? For example, when Adam named the animals and rivers it was to capture their character. '*The shem [name] of the first river is Dispersive [Pison]: because it divides and waters the whole Land.*'¹⁴ Noah called his three sons 'Famous' [*Shem*], 'Good-Looking' [*Ham*] and 'Warm-hearted' [*Japheth*]. *Shem* here does not mean Noah named him '*name*' but '*Famous*' or '*man of Stature*'. We learn that when God said of David :

*The fame [shem] of David went out into all lands; and the LORD brought the fear of him upon all nations.*¹⁵

When Abigail spoke to David about the behaviour of her husband towards him, she said, '*Surely his name [shem] fits him to a tee*'. She was referring to his character

13 Exodus 3:11

14 Gen 2:11

15 1Ch 14:17

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because his name was Nabal translated as '*stupid*'.¹⁶

Well known is Esau, so named because he was hard and hairy. Well known also is Isaac, named at first because his parents laughed at the idea of his birth, Jacob [*Supplanter*], who started life competing with his brother was later renamed Israel What then is in a name? If the character and the personality are captured like a snapshot in the name, then the level of authority is implied by the name plus. Moses was an intellectual not easily convinced. After all, time and time again names were changed in scripture. The name given at birth was not always fulfilled in later life. So we have Abram (who is Ab – [*father or source*] ram [*exulted or head*]), renamed in Faith as Abraham [*Father or source of multitudes*].

We have Jacob [*underminer or supplanter*] becoming Israel (Ish [*man or Issue*] + Ra [*disagree or oppose*] + El [*God*]). Together this equals '*man in an argument with God*'. Fortunately Israel lost, but not before he had secured both a blessing and a wound from God to remind him of his surrender for the rest of his life.

So it is that, determining a person's character starts with a name as a starting point. Added to which are marked actions of that person. Moses' intellect needed more to

¹⁶ 1Sa 25:25

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satisfy his curiosity about this God. He had seen the action but needed a name to pin this God down to his intellectual concept. The personality is not limited by a name – that only gives a starting point. When Moses took off his shoes he was recognising he was on another's territory. This was Hebrew custom whenever a person stepped into a dwelling place. This burning bush marked the boundary to an area 'set aside' [*qôdesh*–in the Hebrew]. Qôdesh, later translated as holy. The strength of this holiness is governed by Hebrew grammar not by the word itself. In the same way we might denote a degree of intensity by using good, better or best, to mark degrees of excellence, so Hebrew grammar adds weight by repeating the word. Any king might be qôdesh but God is qôdesh-qôdesh-qôdesh, [*Holy,Holy,Holy*], the ultimate in Holiness. The act of taking off his shoes was the starting place of normal respect followed by an intention to find out more. The intention was to find out which God was responsible for this burning bush. When Moses discovered that this place was occupied by the God of his fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob it brought a further progressive reaction.

When the LORD saw Moses coming near the bush, he called him by name, and Moses answered, "Here I am." God replied, "Don't come any closer. Take off your sandals—the ground where you are standing is holy. I am the God who was worshipped by your

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ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Moses was afraid to look at God, and so he hid his face.¹⁷

Discovering which god was responsible, brought a demonstration of humiliation. A reverence for his Father's God required a demonstration of humiliation. No wonder he covered his face as soon as God said he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is the God who created everything. This was the God who held mankind accountable for sin.

So now we can move on.

¹⁷ Exo 3:4-6

Chapter 1: Aligning Forces

Chapter 1: Aligning Forces

The issue '*Who am I*' cannot be solved until the question '*Who are you*' is fully answered. God's answer to Moses, '*I am who I am*', carries the very strong emphasis that '*I cannot be other than I am*' in the original language. Unfortunately, modern English does not carry an equivalent, so the translators settled for the basic translation.

1: Getting in line

My grandchildren discovered magnets when they were small. In true Blue Peter¹⁸ style they sticky-taped them to the end of sticks, then cut out and stuck ballerinas to other magnets. By moving the magnets under a painted piece of cardboard they could make the ballerinas dance on top. They would make the ballerinas move, pirouette and fall over- which became the main objective with much giggling. Then came the bright idea. Suppose we cut the magnets in half and separate the north and south poles we could make two football teams. We could have a football match with north poles verses south poles. Alas, No matter where the magnet were cut, it still had a north and

18 *I am old enough to remember this TV Program for children with its arty crafty emphasis and' Blue Peter badges.*

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south pole on each piece. The magnets got smaller and smaller but it made no difference. A magnet by its nature has to have two poles or it ceases to be a magnet.

As a creating God, our God has to be who he is or we could not be who we are. If God is not Life we could not have life. If God is not Love we could not know love. If God is not Righteousness then we cannot become righteous. Moses learned that day, it is better by far that we creatures change and let God be who he is, rather than expect God to change to suit us.

*In the
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conflict of two
wills.*

In the encounter of Moses and God, we meet the conflict of two wills. Moses was comfortable with who he was. Living in father-in-law's territory, quietly looking after sheep until God interfered. From his conversation with God, we see Moses arguing mentally that he was content being who he was and did not want the task God wanted to set him. Like the two-year-old we met in the introduction, Moses would rather God continued relationship in the way he had started, Moses wanted to return to his quiet life with God quietly picking up the toys and providing the food. But God thought it time for Moses to move on. Someone had to change if this relationship was to grow. Clearly it was

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not God who would change. To be fair, it was not that easy for Moses either. Remember, Moses had found himself in this quiet place only after running for his life. Fear and trauma limited his life and he had no desire to return to the tensions of leadership. Certainly there was no desire to return to Egypt – would you? Fortunately, our callings are usually less daunting, though no less important in God's scheme.

2: Dealing with the status quo

Modern Psychology will of course, excuse Moses' desire to remain in the status quo as the result of a traumatic childhood. Many who have had to move from one culture to another in their childhood as Moses had, have come to terms with it by isolating themselves as much as they can. Moses was not the first or the last to experience trauma and fear as a young man. Lot, compelled to make a decision about the conflict between his family and Abraham's, opted for a quiet life of material benefits and comfort in Sodom. The quiet life is a short-sighted way of escaping issues and often has the bi-product of blinding us to sin. Sin creeps up around us while we are absorbed in quiet daily living. We know there is a wicked world out there and want to shield ourselves from it. Lot woke up to the destructive nature of sin only when he had to run for his life.

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Elijah, for different reasons, also found himself running from the world's pressure. Under pressure of the role of leadership, he was so worn down and tired that one stupid comment from Jezebel finally broke him and made him run into the desert for fear of his life. Out of compassion, God provided ravens to bring him bits of food and plenty of time to sleep. But time came when Elijah wanted to stay there, until God said enough is enough. The time came to set Elijah back into service, albeit with a task more suited to his age and stamina. Jesus was fully aware of the stresses and strains of being in his father's service. He was often telling his disciples to take time out for a while.¹⁹

While it is impossible for God to change, it is incumbent upon his creation to change. Because we change, God relates differently to suit that change. Don't expect Him to treat you like a newborn when you get to teenage years in your spiritual life. It is a strange notion that our journey is intended for us to grow more like God because He never changes or gets weary²⁰ one of the chief evidences of ageing in human-beings is increased weariness. In fact it is recorded that Jesus said, *'let the weary come to me to be refreshed'*.²¹

19 *Matt 14:23 ; Mark 6:31 for starters*

20 *Isaiah 40: 28 see also Isaiah 50: 4*

21 *Matt 11: 28*

Chapter 1: Aligning Forces

3: Discerning the soul from the spirit

Why do humans get weary? Because it is built into humanity. Jesus knew what it was to be weary because he took on Human form. In fact he inflicted weariness on himself with a forty-day fast in a wilderness. It was his intention to test the limit of strength. In his physical wearisomeness his spiritual resolve and clarity held fast and the strong connection between physical and spiritual well-being was demonstrated in this act of fasting. A recognition of the war between Spirit and Body was firmly placed on the agenda for any Christian's journey. To be sure, Satan has a knack of attacking when we are physically weary. With this firmly in mind we must examine the life of Jesus in greater depth. Jesus had a genetic link in a physical life which he found restricting. How he dealt with these restrictions is key to our spiritual journey and we will come take a look at this in a future chapter. For the moment we are only looking at our first reactions when we encounter God. If there is to be any form of alignment of forces between God and human-kind we must consider the issue of surrender on the part of Human-kind because God cannot change. To this end we must examine the question '*Why the need for Jesus?*'

There was a man who had two sons. The younger son

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said to his father, 'Give me now The inheritance set for me'. A while later the younger son gathered up all that he had and left home. He travelled far away to another country, and there he wasted his money living like a fool. After he spent everything he had, there was a terrible famine throughout the country. He was hungry and needed money. So he went and got a job with one of the people who lived there. The man sent him into the fields to feed pigs. He was so hungry that he wanted to eat the food the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

The son realized that he had been very foolish. He thought, 'All my father's hired workers have plenty of food. But here I am, almost dead because I have nothing to eat. I will leave and go to my father. I will say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But let me be like one of your hired workers.' So he left and went to his father. While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him coming and felt sorry for him. So he ran to him and hugged and kissed him The son said, 'Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, 'Hurry! Bring the best clothes and put them on him. Also, put a ring on his finger and good sandals on his feet. And bring our best calf and kill it so that we can celebrate with plenty

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*to eat. My son was dead, but now he is alive again!
He was lost, but now he is found!"*²²

If God, by His very nature must be who he is, and must remain true to that nature, then God must deal with two things in his nature before He can relate to his creation.

1. First, the apparent opposites in his own nature, (which confuse us), must be clearly displayed and
2. second, the opposing tendencies in our nature must be re-aligned with Him.

*...Like a magnet,
God appears to
have many
opposites in his
being...*

Let us take a look at the complicated subject of God's apparent contradictions. God has several characteristics which to us are like north and south poles of a magnet. Justice and Mercy, Love and Hate,²³ Judgement and Grace, Omnipotence and Impotence,²⁴ Holiness and

²² *Luke 15:11 ff*

²³ *Ex 20: 5 for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;*

Amos 5: 15 Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgement in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.

²⁴ *A term coined by Arch-Bishop Desmond Tu-Tu when referring to God non-interference and associated with the free will of man.*

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forgiveness, Patience and Anger. Like a magnet, God appears to have many opposites in his being. But we have a false picture of God if we say these are all his essential nature. This confusion leads to the human mind attempting to appease the better nature of God by our behaviour and theology. We might appeal for God's Justice against somebody when we have been wronged but His mercy when it is me who is doing wrong.

Here we must distinguish between nature, and Attribute. There is no end of discussion among English Scholars around these two terms. So, for the purposes of this book I must offer the following three definitions.

- I will call the Character of God: *That quality or essence embedded in God's very nature, essential to who God is by being.*
- I will call a Characteristic of God: *an attribute derived from His very nature in order to maintain a consistency to who he is by very essence.*
- I will call the Charisma of God: *those qualities that attract us to, or repel us from God.*

Now that is a mouthful and confuses my brain more than yours, so I must try to explain in more concrete terms

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before we move on.

- When electrons in a piece of steel are aligned toward one direction the character of the steel can be said to be magnetic. The nature or character of this steel is magnetic.
- The attributes or Characteristics of this steel is that, because it is magnetic it emits forces that attracts or repel.
- The charisma of our magnet is the effect it has on anything that comes within its magnetic force. We are attracted or repelled by it according to our nature.

So then, if mercy is part of the character of God, (because it is part of the very nature of God); justice is a Characteristic of God, because it emanates from God's mercy. The effect it has on his creation is that it attracts the merciful and repels the heartless. As Jesus himself said, 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy'.²⁵ Or, as the psalmist said, 'Deep calls to deep'.²⁶

²⁵ *Matt 5:7 or as a challenge to character change he says 'Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful' Lk 6:36.*

²⁶ *Ps 42:7*

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By Nature God is Righteous. By nature God is pure. By nature God is Holy. By nature God is Love. I have heard it said on many occasions 'God is unconditional Love'. The character of God may be love but the characteristic of God's love is not unconditional. Think for a moment what that would mean. Certainly it would mean that no matter what I have done or what I am doing, God, (like the father in the parable of the prodigal son), constantly looks out of window to see if I am coming home. This is the motivation of his embedded love. It does not mean that I can carry on with my life just as I please and still expect to go home. It means I have to come to my senses, change direction, swallow my pride and then go home. The character of God does not change but it requires change in us to access it.

If it was the case that anyone born could turn up at the gates of heaven and walk in without any change to their life attitudes and behaviour, then heaven would be no different to earth as it is now. Without change, heaven would be no better than earth. If I could go to heaven without shedding my greed and pride Heaven would be full of greed, lust, contention, poverty and people who want to do their own thing at the expense of others. It would also mean God by nature had an imbalance of Love and Justice, an imbalance of judgement and mercy.

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So, God in essence would have to change – which he cannot. God's love might be unlimited in character but not in characteristic, in characteristic he must demonstrate judgement for the sake of those he loves. As Jesus said, '*except your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven*'. In order to be true to himself God must balance his character through his characteristics.

Have you ever read John 3:16 as a turmoil in the heart of God. If love and righteousness must both be satisfied. The only way it can be done while remaining true to His nature is if both can meet at a point. When God wants to associate with unrighteousness, (such as he finds in us), we must change direction to align with him. Otherwise our approach toward him would in fact repel us away. 'God *loved* the world so much that he sacrificed his *righteous* son to *come along side us* so that the unrighteousness in us ceases to be. If God surrenders love then we are all lost.

To satisfy both Character and characteristic, the cross is the solution. Jesus came alongside us at the cross. At the cross we tried to change the nature of God to align with us. We put Him to death in order that he might conform to our plans. But he demonstrated his greater power by

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remaining faithful to the end. So, we can either spin round under his power, (*Repentance*), or be repelled by that same power, (this we call *Judgement*). The prodigal's father could not demonstrate unconditional love for his son by sending out a press gang to drag the son home because that would not align the son to the father. The son would return home with his rebellious nature still in tack. The son of his own free will must recognise his state, repent, and then return. God by nature cannot look upon sin without repelling it to hell. this is not so much a decision of God or a judgement of God, it is a result of our true nature meeting the force of his true nature.

Have you seen the moment a reconciliation takes place? The natural reaction of a reconciliation results in an embrace. The embrace is almost the seal of the reconciliation. There is something in the relief of a burden lifted that ends in drawing close in a hug. But how can that be with God and man? We have already seen that God's righteousness and man's sin repel each other. When pride entered the heart of Satan he refused to deal with it. He thought he was as good as God. By his stubbornness, he was repelled by God's righteousness all the way from heaven to earth²⁷. God did not physically shove Satan down to the earth, it was a natural reaction when these two characters came close. There is such a place as hell

27 *Isaiah 14:12*

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only because God's nature repels sin at such an alarming rate that it ends the other end of the universe and beyond. Satan was cast down to the earth by the sheer powerful reaction of the repelling energy between God's character and Satan's rebellion. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit they ran away from God and hid. There became an active barrier set between God and man that has to be overcome before God and man-kind can embrace. The children of Israel refused to meet with God for fear his righteousness would kill them.

See here the sheer genius of God's Plan. He came along side us in the nature of Jesus. Try it with those magnets we talked about. It really works. If the poles are the wrong way round the stronger, heavier magnet spins the weaker one into line. This act of turning to align by the weaker, (or repenting as we call it in the jargon), is the only way to get repelling forces to embrace. It was done by coming along side.

God sent his son, 'in whom dwelt the fullness of God bodily' to come along side. My, what a strong bond those two magnets form when they come along side! Once aligned these two will never let go and the two become one aligned force.

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Newton's third law states :

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

This is not just true in the Physical realm but also in the spiritual realm. When God created out of nothing he disturbed nothing. Light and darkness in its original state equals nothing. To create light God separated out light from darkness²⁸. The very act of creating one thing leaves an opposite force. Creating Life forces out death. Choosing righteousness leaves sin. Love challenges hate – the list goes on. Thus, in the beginning God created a law for Newton to discover many years later. The Christian's journey is about choosing to side with God and his values which we call Kingdom values. Inevitably, this means rejecting the opposites which have come to be called worldly values in the jargon. The problem is made the greater when the opposites won't accept defeat without a good fight.

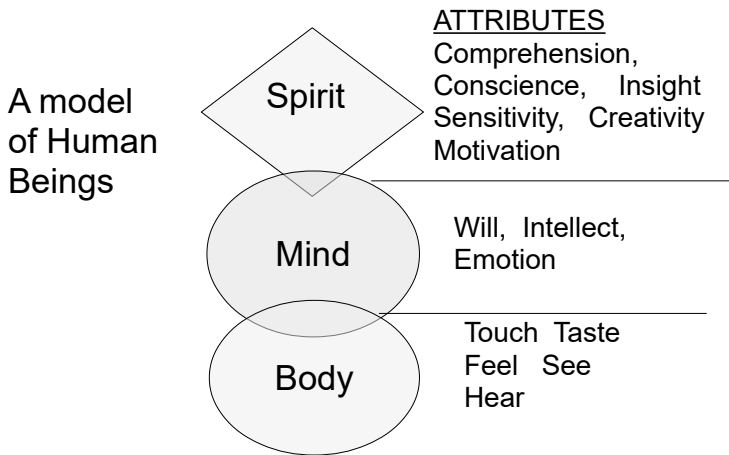
Before we continue, look at this well known diagram and check out the attributes given to each part of human make-up. This will help visualise where attacks come from as

28 Gen 1:3-4

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temptation tries to bring us down.

When God created human beings he made them a trinity, (body, mind and spirit). We look something like this:



We were designed to communicate with God via our spirit, because God is spirit. We are designed to work out His wishes into our nature by the application of our mind because we recognise his right to create us as we are. We are designed to then put into practice His wishes through our body skills because we are his creation. Mostly, sin reverses that order.

What we see, hear, touch, taste and smell becomes the

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prime drive of our motivation. Our minds work out how to get what the body desires. And our spirit's senses are dulled making it harder to communicate with God. We will examine different examples of this and try to learn the principles to help us avoid these traps.

1: You Choose

When you went across the Jordan River to the city of Jericho. The people in Jericho fought against you. Also, the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites, and Jebusites fought against you. But I allowed you to defeat them all. As your army went forward, I sent the Hornet ahead of them and made the people leave the land, as I did to the two Amorite kings. It was not your swords and bows that brought you victory! 'I, the Lord, gave that land to you. You didn't work for that land—I gave it to you. You did not build those cities—I gave them to you. And now you live in that land and in those cities. You have vineyards and olive trees, but you did not have to plant those gardens.'" Then Joshua said to the people, "Now you have heard the Lord's words. So you must respect the LORD and sincerely serve him. Throw away the false gods that your ancestors worshiped. That was something that happened a long time ago on the other side of the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Now you

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must serve only the LORD.

But maybe you don't want to serve the LORD. You must choose for yourselves today. Today you must decide who you will serve. Will you serve the gods that your ancestors worshiped when they lived on the other side of the Euphrates River? Or will you serve the gods of the Amorites who lived in this land? You must choose for yourselves. But as for me and my family, we will serve the LORD." Then the people answered, "We will never stop following the LORD. We will never serve other gods! We know that it was the LORD God who brought our people out of Egypt. We were slaves in that land, but he did great things for us there. He brought us out of that land and protected us while we traveled through other lands"²⁹

Freud tried to make it simple. It is a conflict of the id and the ego, he said. Eric Berne in his book '*Games people play*', describes it as '*the parent child conflict within us*'. Our adult says 'debate and decide but keep emotion out of it', our child just says 'I want, I want, I want, so there!'

There can be little doubt we have experienced inner conflict at some time or another. Usually, our will presides as judge over a conflict between emotion and intellect.

²⁹ Joshua 24 11-16

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Joshua, however, presented a three way choice, '*Choose you this day whom you will serve*', was a choice between the primitive food and sex gods of Mesopotamia (child or emotion according to Berne)³⁰, the Amorite gods of ridged obedience and fear (adult obedience to laws of the mind according to Berne)³¹, or the third-way, the way of God Jehovah, spiritual communication with God (according to Joshua).

There can be little doubt we have experienced inner conflict at some time or another. Usually, our will presides as judge over a conflict between emotion and intellect. Emotion calls on feelings, primitive needs, wants and desires that come through our five senses. These are temptations of the body. In this category also is the imagination of our heart. Intellect calls on us to decide via experience, learning, social norms and our ability to predict an outcome- these are functions of our mind. As God's people, we are called to give our spirit the greater weight because the spirit is where we communicate with God.

What are the attributes of the spirit? Insight, Conscience, creativity, comprehension, sensitivity, motivation, etc.

30 *Read about the constant harping back to Egypt by the Israelites in Exodus*

31 *The Pharisees chose this route*

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The spiritual conflict therefore, is about protecting these attributes from harmful influence of emotion and Intellect. The spirit can of course be corrupted. The Bible talks of this as spiritual death. It is not instant but a gradual separation from God by giving other voices greater preference. These put our inner conflicts into perspective because they have eternal consequences.

Meditate again on the Adam and Eve story and see how emotion and intellect downgraded the spirit (insight, conscience and motivation etc.). Think about the eternal consequences of entertaining a simple question like '*Has God said?*' The conscience was designed to be a tape recording of what God has said. Tampering with the conscience with questions like that downgrades its ability to play it back accurately.

2: The spirit and the law

One set of opposing forces we need to consider is the conflict of 'spirit verses the law'.

My brothers and sisters, God chose you to be free. But don't use your freedom as an excuse to do what pleases your sinful selves. Instead, serve each other with love. The whole law is made complete in this one command: "Love your neighbor the same as you love

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yourself." If you continue hurting each other and tearing each other apart, be careful, or you will completely destroy each other. Keep in Step with the Spirit.

So I tell you, live the way the Spirit leads you. Then you will not do the evil things your sinful self wants. The sinful self wants what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit wants what is against the sinful self. They are always fighting against each other, so that you don't do what you really want to do. But if you let the Spirit lead you, you are not under law. The wrong things the sinful self does are clear: committing sexual sin, being morally bad, doing all kinds of shameful things, worshiping false gods, taking part in witchcraft, hating people, causing trouble, being jealous, angry or selfish, causing people to argue and divide into separate groups, being filled with envy, getting drunk, having wild parties, and doing other things like this. I warn you now as I warned you before: The people who do these things will not have a part in God's kingdom.

But the fruit that the Spirit produces in a person's life is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these kinds of things. ³²

If there was one thing that got Jesus' goat, it was legalism.

32 Gal 5:13 ff

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Legalism is a spiritual condition that binds people up in mental twine. Did you know you could be dragged before the magistrate if you ate a mince pie last Christmas? Or pushed a pram on the pavement when you last went shopping?³³ All it would take is an accuser and you would be in court. Common sense would not protect you once you have been accused because once written, the law only has to make the decision did you or did you not do it. It is not subject to common sense – whatever that might be.

No wonder Jesus fell out with the Pharisees, they not only thought up petty laws, they also went about with the pointing finger of accusers. Jesus said of them they were '*shutting people out of heaven*'³⁴, and were 'sons of the devil' – (the accuser).³⁵ When Jesus said, '*if you are led by the spirit you are not under the law*', he was not saying you are above the law,

The spirit of the law is something you would do even if there was no written law.

nor was he saying you can ignore the law, he was saying the spirit of the law supersedes the letter of the law because it is in the heart and the heart wants to do it. The spirit of the law is something you would do even if there

33 *Both these are examples of laws that are still on the statute book and have never been repealed*

34 *Matt. 23:13*

35 *John. 8:44*

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was no written law. Be very careful, many modern Christians confuse the spirit of the law with a free spirit to do what I like. We are never free to do what our spirit fancies but we are redeemed to live in the spirit of the law – there is a difference!

The letter of the law is always hungry. When its boundaries are breached it enlarges its territory. If something is declared as 'grey' under the law, the letter of the law calls on reinforcement laws to try to make it black and white. It never succeeds because someone will always find another argument to make it grey again. Eventually, (if Pharisees get their way), the law traps itself so you cannot keep one law without breaking another.

When Jesus said, 'I have come to fulfil the law not to break it', he was not referring to the Pharisaic law. He smashed that law and its legalism into smithereens. He did it by demonstrating the spiritual law of God which he fulfilled to the last full stop. His action set us free from the law to live under the spirit

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.³⁶

36 Gal 5:22

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3: Where are you from

Another consideration of opposing forces is the conflict between mind and spirit. If we allow a false impression of who we are to take over our imagination we are due for a downfall.

The people from the city of Gibeon heard about the way Joshua had defeated Jericho and Ai. So they decided to try to trick the Israelites. This was their plan: They gathered together old wineskins that were cracked and broken. They put these old wineskins on the backs of their animals. They put old pieces of cloth on their animals to look as if they had traveled from far away.

The men put old sandals on their feet and wore old clothes. They found some old bread that was dry and moldy. Then they went to the camp of the Israelites. This camp was near Gilgal. The men went to Joshua and said to him, "We have traveled from a faraway country. We want to make a peace agreement with you." The men of Israel said to these Hivite men, "Maybe you are trying to trick us. Maybe you live near us. We cannot make a peace agreement with you until we know where you are from." The Hivite men said to Joshua, "We are your servants." But Joshua asked, "Who are you? Where do you come from?" The men answered, "We are your servants. We have come

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from a faraway country. We came because we heard of the great power of the LORD your God. We heard about what he has done and about everything he did in Egypt. And we heard that he defeated the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan River. This was King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan in the land of Ashtaroth. So our elders and our people said to us, 'Take enough food for your journey. Go and meet with the Israelites.' Tell them, 'We are your servants. Make a peace agreement with us.' "Look at our bread.

When we left home, it was warm and fresh. But now you can see that it is dry and old. Look at our wineskins. When we left home, they were new and filled with wine. But now you can see that they are cracked and old. Look at our clothes and sandals. You can see that the long journey has almost destroyed the things we wear." The men of Israel wanted to know if these men were telling the truth. So they tasted the bread—but they did not ask the LORD what they should do. Joshua agreed to make peace with them. He agreed to let them live. The leaders of Israel agreed with this promise of Joshua. Three days later the Israelites learned that these men lived very near their camp. So the Israelites went to the place where they lived. On the third day the Israelites came to the cities of Gibeon, Kephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath Jearim. But the army of Israel did not try to fight against those cities. They had made a peace agreement with them. They had made a promise to

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them before the LORD, the God of Israel. All the people complained against the leaders who made the agreement. But the leaders answered, "We have given our promise. We promised before the LORD, the God of Israel. We cannot fight against them now. This is what we must do. We must let them live. We cannot hurt them or God will be angry with us because we broke the promise we made to them. So let them live, but they will be our servants. They will cut wood for us and carry water for all our people." So the leaders did not break their promise of peace to them. Joshua called the Gibeonites together. He said, "Why did you lie to us? Your land was near our camp. But you told us you were from a faraway country. Now, your people will have many troubles. All of your people will be slaves—they will have to cut wood and carry water for the house of God."³⁷

Ever been snookered? You know what you want to do but can't because you are hemmed in by strategically placed obstacles.

Joshua was not a man to be easily taken in. He was by nature a quick thinker, a man of integrity and a strategist. But by this point in his career he had reached the 'self-confident stage' - and he had become prone to a little flattery. When the deceivers came to him with a simple proposal he decided to go for it. He didn't need to consult

37 Jos 9:3 ff

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God now, He was experienced -or so he thought. This was a straight forward political decision, just tick the boxes. Its easily done. We do it every day. Did Joshua get the highlight in this story because the world saw him make a wrong political judgement? No. Joshua is highlighted here because of what he did not do in his heart. He did not seek God's view on the subject.

You see, in the Kingdom world, we are not fighting a moral battle, or a political one nor is it a social one. Its not a case of improving society by our skill or cunning. No, we fight a spiritual battle all the time. The problem here is we do not see our battles with spiritual eyes. The only one who has the spiritual battle fully under his sight is God. By not consulting with God all day long we are in danger of finding ourselves with difficult consequences. Joshua found his mistake three days later and was snookered. How was he to clear the land as God had told him after he had given his word to these people.

*Ever been
snookered?
You know what
you want to do
but can't
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hemmed in by
strategically
placed
obstacles.*

You see a Christian cannot go back on an agreement or reinterpret it. There is no cheating permitted in the

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kingdom. If there was, God could have found an easy way of dealing with our sin. He declared 'If you sin you will die' and so it must stand. Character stands eternal because it is what we are. Our decisions are made on behalf of God because the world judges our God by them. The purpose of having the Holy Spirit is to help us get things right from the beginning - by consulting God. Never be so bold as to think it is by skill and knowledge that we carry out the will of God. This has been the downfall of so many saints. As we are about to see in our next character, what seems logical to the mind may not be logical to the spirit.

4: An Angel told me

The LORD commanded a prophet of God from Judah to go to the city of Bethel. King Jeroboam was standing at the altar offering incense when he arrived. The LORD had commanded the man of God to speak against the altar. He said, "Altar, the LORD says to you: 'David's family will have a son. His name will be Josiah. The priests of the high places are now burning incense on you, but Josiah will offer the priests on you and burn human bones on you, so you can never be used again!'" The man of God gave proof to the people that this would happen. He said, "This is the proof that the LORD told me about. He said, 'This altar will break apart, and the ashes on it will fall onto the

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ground." When King Jeroboam heard the message from the man of God about the altar in Bethel, he took his hand off the altar and pointed at the man. He said, "Arrest that man!" But when the king said this, his arm became paralyzed. He could not move it. Then the altar broke into pieces, and all its ashes fell onto the ground. This proved that what the man of God had said came from the LORD.

Then King Jeroboam said to the man of God, "Please pray to the LORD your God for me. Ask him to heal my arm." So the man of God prayed to the LORD, and the king's arm was healed, as it was before. Then the king said to the man of God, "Please come home with me. Come and eat with me. I will give you a gift." But the man of God said to the king, "I will not go home with you, even if you give me half of your kingdom! I will not eat or drink anything in this place. The LORD commanded me not to eat or drink anything here. He also commanded me not to go back the same way I came." So he took a different road home. He did not go back the same way he came to Bethel.

There was an old prophet living in Bethel. His sons came and told him what the man of God did in Bethel and what he said to King Jeroboam. The old prophet said, "Which way did he go when he left?" So the sons showed their father which road the man of God from Judah had taken. The old prophet told his sons to saddle his donkey. They put the saddle on the donkey,

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and the prophet left. The old prophet went after the man of God. He found him sitting under an oak tree and asked him, "Are you the man of God who just came from Judah?" The man of God answered, "Yes, I am." So the old prophet said, "Please come home and eat with me." But the man of God said, "I cannot go home with you. I cannot eat or drink anything in this place. The LORD said to me, 'You must not eat or drink anything in that place, and you must go back on a different road.'" The old prophet lied to him and said, "But I am a prophet like you. And an angel from the LORD came to me and told me to bring you home and give you something to eat and drink." So the man of God went to the old prophet's house and ate and drank with him.

While they were sitting at the table, the LORD spoke to the old prophet, and the old prophet spoke to the man of God from Judah. He said, "The LORD said that you did not obey him! You did not do what he commanded. He told you not to eat or drink anything in this place, but you came back here and ate and drank. So your body will not be buried in your family grave." The man of God finished eating and drinking. Then the old prophet saddled the man's donkey for him and the man left. On the way home, a lion attacked and killed the man of God. His body was lying on the road while the lion stood next to it. The donkey stood nearby. Some people came walking by and saw the body and the lion standing by it. They went into the

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city where the old prophet lived and told people what they had seen on the road. The old prophet heard the story and said, "This is the man of God who did not obey the LORD'S command, so the LORD sent a lion to attack him. The lion has killed him, just as the LORD said would happen." ³⁸

That's a bit below the belt isn't it? If one prophet can be deceived by another what chance do you and I have –'who then can we believe'? 'Don't be afraid' as the angels said to.. well, most people actually.' God will not test you beyond your maturity', as says Paul³⁹. This was a prophet's test. A prophet by definition was expected to be able to discern hearts of men and determine the voice of God.

There are two clues in the conversation the younger prophet did not pick up. First the old prophet had to claim the status of prophet. *'I am a prophet like yourself'*. Beware of anyone who is quick to claim status for him/herself, (especially older folk who love to tell you what they used to be). Scripture is very clear that any position in the church should be recognised not claimed. Beware of people who put themselves forward, they may be acting out of self-confidence and self-ability. Office in the church must depend upon the Holy-Spirit and much prayer. Paul is very hot on making sure you prove the

38 *1Ki 13:1 ff*

39 *1 Cor. 10: 13 (paraphrased)*

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character before trusting the person of office. That is why he listed the qualities necessary in a leader's character.

Second, Never believe anyone who says they have a special super spiritual revelation for you. Mary told Joseph an angel appeared to her to tell her about the baby, she did not tell Joseph the angel said he had to marry her. Joseph knew that in his heart and it was confirmed by the angel that visited him. If an angel wants to tell you something it will tell you personally. Principle here is simple, God did away with the need for third party conversations at the cross. The priesthood was discharged once Jesus fulfilled its purpose. Turn the third party cookies off in your spiritual life. Third party conversations are valid only after you have heard from the Holy Spirit direct. Listen to others for confirmation, witness or recognition of what God is already telling you in your heart, never presume third-party are correct without first-party revelation. Elizabeth and Mary only confirmed each other's special pregnancy when they met. The stranger on the road to Emmaus only stirred the spirit within the disciples to confirm what they had been told already by Jesus before.

Why do we need to heed this passage?

In Britain today, when Christianity is being marginalised and people are searching for spiritual meaning, there are

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many political, devious or smooth talking people looking to control church. There are many assuming they have a monopoly of understanding on Jesus. Be very, very cautious that you are not deceived.

Let Matt 24 : 23 – 26 have the last word.

"Someone might say to you at that time, 'Look, there is the Messiah!' Or someone else might say, 'There he is!' But don't believe them. False messiahs and false prophets will come and do great miracles and wonders, trying to fool the people God has chosen, if that is possible. Now I have warned you about this before it happens." Someone might tell you, 'The Messiah is there in the desert!' But don't go into the desert to look for him. Someone else might say, 'There is the Messiah in that room!' But don't believe it.

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Chapter 3: Imputing Righteousness

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1: Bar-Mitsva Boy

Every year the parents of Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When Jesus was twelve years old, they went to the festival as usual. When the festival was over, they started back home, but the boy Jesus stayed in Jerusalem. His parents did not know this; they thought that he was with the group, so they travelled a whole day and then started looking for him among their relatives and friends. They did not find him, so they went back to Jerusalem looking for him. On the third day they found him in the Temple, sitting with the Jewish teachers, listening to them and asking questions. All who heard him were amazed at his intelligent answers. His parents were astonished when they saw him, and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been terribly worried trying to find you." He answered them, "Why did you have to look for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand his answer. So Jesus went back with them to Nazareth, where he was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. Jesus grew both in body and in wisdom, gaining

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favour with God and people. ⁴⁰

Theologians have a jargon phrase for this, it is called '*imputed Righteousness*'. In bible times, a Jewish boy would have rote learned the Pentateuch⁴¹ by the time he was twelve. During his twelfth year he would go to the synagogue for his 'Bar-Mitsva'. During this ceremony he would be asked questions by the Rabbis to see if he understood the principles of what he had been taught. Once he had shown his understanding was up to scratch, he was declared by the rabbi to be a man and could take his place among the men of the synagogue under a sponsor. Now, there is no way we would rightly say this boy had changed from boy to man in this instant declaration, nor even by this ceremony. Rather it is imputed to him to be a man. The unwritten contract was for society to treat him as a man from that point - but to allow leeway for his learning and mistakes while he translates from one to the other. From this point on our Bar-Mitsva lad is guided by his sponsor (usually an elder) into manhood. Imputation gives the statement, conditions and the space for a change to take place. It is a statement of intent of what the child will become.

40 *Luke 2: 42-52.*

41 *The first five books of the bible*

Chapter 3: Imputing Righteousness

God's love is fulfilled when we come to the cross recognising we are not able to make it to eternal life. Recognising we are sinful, God imputes us to be righteous. It is a statement of intent based on an understanding of co-operation with the Holy Spirit that we *will be righteous*. Jesus stands as surety (and elder brother) to ensure we become what He has said we will become. The practicality of our conversion is not that we instantly change into righteous beings but that our journey has begun. But we can be absolutely certain of this one thing, your sponsor - '*He who has begun this good work in you, will complete it*'.⁴²

Paul enlarges on this process in one Corinthians chapter thirteen. We might be excused for missing his point because it is so often narrowed down to an isolated chapter on love. But Paul has no intention that this should be read out of context. Its context is a letter about growing up in the faith – an imputation of moving from what we are - to what we will be.

When perfection is complete, the things that are transient will end. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, and I made plans like a child.

When I became a man, I stopped those childish ways. It is the same with us. Now we see God as if we are

42 Phil 1: 6

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looking at a reflection in polished steel. But then, in the future, we will see the genuine person right before our eyes. But for now I know only a part, but at that time I will know, as fully as God has known me. ⁴³

One day, Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus. Andrew introduced him to Jesus as 'Simon my brother'. The very first thing Jesus did was to give him a new surname. 'I shall call you Peter' said Jesus, meaning 'I impute you with the character of a rock'. Of course you and I know that for the next three years, the mixed characters of Simon and Peter were in conflict. Sometimes Simon would say impulsive things like '*I am willing to die for you Jesus*', so Jesus would call him Simon. It cut Peter to the core, on times when Jesus reverted to his old name as he did when he asked him three times if Simon loved him⁴⁴. At other times Peter could show real insight, such as the time he said '*You are the Christ*'. Then Jesus would encourage him, pointing out to him as Peter implying, '*Blessed are you Peter for it was not your Simon character that revealed this*'.

So it is when we come to Jesus, He imputes to us a new character wrapped up in a new name. '*Christ-ones*⁴⁵', God

43 1 Cor 13:11

44 John 21:15

45 Acts 11:26

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calls us. '*Sons and daughters*⁴⁶', He calls us. '*A new creature*⁴⁷', He calls us. '*Friends*⁴⁸'. Along the way we may struggle with our two characters - old and new, but be sure of this, what has been imputed by God is what you will become, you can't help changing because it has been imputed.

2: Joining a new Family

If I were to ask you about adoption I expect you would picture perhaps a couple who perhaps can't have their own children adopting a baby, or maybe someone is moved by compassion for a small child in a war torn country, or even a related child that has lost its parents.

Under the Roman power that thought would have been a very strange idea indeed. Romans didn't adopt children. In fact it was forbidden in several provinces. Romans adopted adults. Roman politicians would adopt someone to make sure their political views were perpetuated. A wealthy person might be adopted to make sure his estates stayed together.

46 *John 1: 12*

47 *2 Cor 2: 17*

48 *John 15: 15*

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This was not a new idea, Abraham knew of it. When God promised him he would be a great nation, the couple tried to work it out between themselves. The growth of their faith went through three stages. Abraham's first thoughts was to adopt his servant.

You have not given me any children, and this servant of mine will inherit everything.⁴⁹

However, the Lord clarified His promise to give Abraham a true son, sired from his own body.

"This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir"⁵⁰.

Sarah also had to work this promise through in her mind. Her solution, prompted by her deep desire to mother a child from birth, was also by adoption.

Sarai was Abram's wife, but she did not have any children. She had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. Sarai told Abram The LORD has not allowed me to have children, so sleep with my slave. Maybe she can have a son, and I will adopt him as my own.⁵¹

49 Gen 15:3

50 Gen 15:4

51 Gen 16:1-2

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God's solution was by promise not by compromise.

"My covenant I will establish with laughter. Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year"⁵²

To adopt under the Roman law you have to go through a three part procedure.

1. You had to declare your intent to adopt.
2. Then the college of pontiffs would examine the parties.
3. Only then could you have a ceremony of adoption.

Listen to this summary of Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life.

The actual procedure of adoption required that the subjects involved submit to an investigation by a college of pontiffs. Questions about health, age and motive were to be expected. Once this had been done and the necessary approval had been granted for the adoption to continue, it was only then that a ceremony could take place... In the ceremony witnesses were to be present to affirm the procedure. During the ceremony, vows were taken to affirm the willingness of both parties and then the final proclamation erased the

52 Gen 17:21

Overturing Tables

*whole of the adoptees past as he took a new name.*⁵³

Some commentators add the tradition that there had to be seven witnesses present. Now listen to this version of Galatians 4:1 – 6 :

*Before the time appointed, the heir differs nothing from a servant, Rather, he is under the house-keeper's training until the appointed time. So it is with us, we were serving under the house-keepers of worldly ways. But at the time appointed, God sent his son to be born under the law, to redeem us who were under the law: God declared this time for us to become adopted heirs. God sent the Spirit as witnesses. So that we no longer call Him Ab (respected father) - but instead declare Abba, (my Father).*⁵⁴

Paul describes first, God declared his intention to Adopt. Second, he makes it clear that God's procedure complied fully with the law and third, he describes the ceremony in which made our adoption permanent and irrevocable.

But there is something here which every Jewish reader would recognise but you and I skip over because we miss it. Every Jewish family would have a Manarah in their

53 *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* by : Jane Gardner
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998

54 *Galatians 4:1 – 6*

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home. Every Jewish family would have been taught how Moses had designed the Manorah. In Exodus 25:31 - Moses, commanded a seven branches should be set as one lamp. It was to stand in the temple and was never to be allowed to be extinguished. it was to represent the seven-fold spirit of God. The books of prophets make reference to this symbol but John more than any other expands on a theme that was very popular in this age, The seven-fold spirit of God in the book of God.

From John to the seven churches in Asia. I pray that you will be blessed with kindness and peace from God, who is and was and is coming. May you receive kindness and peace from the seven spirits before the throne of God. This is what you must write to the angel of the church in Sardis: I have the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Listen to what I say. I know what you are doing. Everyone may think you are alive, but you are dead. Flashes of lightning and roars of thunder came out from the throne in the centre of the circle. Seven torches, which are the seven spirits of God, were burning in front of the throne.

Then I looked and saw a Lamb standing in the centre of the throne that was surrounded by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb looked as if it had once been killed. It had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God, sent out to all the

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*earth.*⁵⁵

So, who, then are these seven witnesses who are so important in this adoption? Come with me through the ceremony and let's find out.

The first witness stands up to say I am the Spirit of Promise from Ephesians 1:13

In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the promise of truth, the gospel of your salvation... ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise

The **first Spirit** says your adoption was planned and promised before you were born. God declared his intention to adopt through the scripture. God promised to fulfilled his part through Jesus Christ.

The **Second Spirit** witness stands up to say I am the Spirit of love power and discipline from 2 Timothy 1:7:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but the spirit of love, of power, and self-discipline.

God's motivation was not in order to perpetuate a world

⁵⁵ Rev_1:4 ff

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order but out of love he called you to an eternal kingdom. The spirit confirmed this in your heart when you faced up to the cross. From then on he started training and guiding in a walk of faith. The spirit helped you embrace kingdom values. The spirit increased power and authority in you as you increased in faith.

The **Third Spirit** stands up to say I am the Spirit of truth from John 15:26 (NLT) and John 14:17

“But I will send you the Counsellor -the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will tell you all about me. The spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows him. But you shall know him; because he shall abide with you and shall be in you.

The spirit of truth is in you because now He *'abides in you'*. The truth become a *'a lamp to guide you along straight paths'* Every time the scriptures come alive in your life it is a witness of your adoption.

The **forth Spirit** stands up to say I am the Spirit of grace from Zechariah 12:10 and Hebrews 10:29

'I pour on your house and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication, and they

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will look to me whom they pierced, and they shall mourn over him, as one wails over an only child, and they will grieve bitterly over him as one grieves bitterly over a firstborn.

How much more do we deserve worse punishments, who has trodden under foot the Son of God and has esteemed the blood of the testament unclean, by which he was sanctified, and has offered an affront to the Spirit of grace?

You cannot earn adoption- it has been granted by the grace of God. You cannot train yourself in kingdom values the spirit of grace teaches this as you submit to the disciplines of the new kingdom.

The **fifth Spirit** stands up to say I am the Spirit of wisdom first from Isaiah 11:2 and Proverbs 1:23

the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness shall rest upon him: Come here and listen to me! I'll pour out the spirit of wisdom upon you and make you wise. For the spirit of wisdom is benevolent, and will not acquit the evil speaker from his lips: for God is witness of his reins, and he is a true searcher of his heart, and a hearer of his tongue.

Your wisdom is changed by the spirit, it no longer transient, selfish or worldly but eternal. You no longer

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want to chase worldly treasures for yourself but share eternal treasures with others.

All this refers to the first of the three parts. Next, the second part of adoption - the examination takes place.

The **sixth Spirit** stands up to say I am the Spirit of Judgment from Isaiah 4:4 and Isaiah 28:6

If the Lord shall wash away your sin by the spirit of judgment, they shall be gone as if they were burned up in a strong fire. ... The spirit of justice abides in the one who sits in judgment, and strength.

You have been examined and '*though your sins were as scarlet they are now as white as snow*'. Your heart has been tested by trials and temptations and you have become stronger. Your past debts have been paid in full by Jesus Christ on the cross. The sixth witness declares '*I witness there is nothing of the past that has not been erased, you have been judged and are now free to claim inheritance*'.

And finally the ceremony can take place

The **seventh Spirit** stands up to say I am the Spirit of life from Romans 8:2, Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15

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For the law of the spirit of life, in Christ Jesus, has delivered me from the law of sin and of death.

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying: Abba, Father.

For you have not received the spirit of bondage again in fear: but you have received the spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry: Abba (Father).

Finally the declaration is made. The law has been fully followed and there is no hindrance to your adoption. The ceremony is complete you are legally adopted and can begin your new life. The seven-fold witness says you now have the right no longer to address God as Ab - Great and respected one but Abba - My Father.

3: I, Being on the road

Imputed righteousness is brought to fruition by a journey. But the object of the journey must be a focus of the mind. When God calls he maps the journey to our change from unrighteousness to righteousness. The map does not constitute the end product, it is the journey that does that. God's object is that we become like him- as Abraham's trusted servant discovered.

Abraham lived to be a very old man. Abraham's oldest servant was in charge of everything he owned. Abraham called that servant to him and said, Go back

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to my country, to my own people, to find a wife for my son Isaac. Bring her here to him." The LORD, the God of heaven, brought me from my homeland to this place. That place was the home of my father and the home of my family, but he promised that this new land would belong to my family. May he send his angel before you so that you can choose a wife for my son.

The servant took ten of Abraham's camels and left that place. He went to Mesopotamia, to Nahor's city. In the evening, when the women come out to get water, he went to the water well outside the city. He made the camels kneel down at the well. The servant said, "LORD, you are the God of my master Abraham. Please show your kindness to my master by helping me find a wife for his son Isaac. Here I am, standing by this well of water, and the young women from the city are coming out to get water. I will say to one of them, 'Please put your jar down so that I can drink.' Let her answer show whether she is the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. If she says, 'Drink, and I will also give water to your camels, ' I will know that she is the right one. It will be proof that you have shown kindness to my master."

Before the servant finished praying, a young woman named Rebekah came to the well. She was very pretty. She went down to the well and filled her jar. Then the servant ran to her and said, "Please give me a little water to drink from your jar." Rebekah quickly lowered

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the jar from her shoulder and gave him a drink. She said, "Drink this, sir." As soon as she finished giving him something to drink, Rebekah said, "I will also pour some water for your camels." So Rebekah quickly poured all the water from her jar into the drinking trough for the camels. The servant quietly watched her. He wanted to be sure that the LORD had given him an answer and had made his trip successful. After the camels finished drinking, he gave Rebekah a gold ring and two gold arm bracelets. The servant asked, "Who is your father? And is there a place in your father's house for me and my men to sleep?" Rebekah answered, "My father is Bethuel, the son of Milcah and Nahor." The servant bowed and worshipped the LORD. He said, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of my master Abraham. The LORD has been kind and loyal to him by leading me to his own people."⁵⁶

An illustration of imputed faith can be seen in the transfer of Abraham's faith in the life of his servant. Guidance is essential in the process of imputation. Beside the obvious issue of the importance of prayer, (which is taken as understood), we look deeper at the attitude of this servant. Guidance rarely comes to the proud or self sufficient. We have already declared that the process of imputation is based on what the sponsor knows and expects to see at the end of the process of change. As Paul put it

56 Genesis 24 : 1 ff

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But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image by a process of glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.⁵⁷

This servant is a man charged with a clear task. The task was a God given one, but it was being discharged through the authority of his master. Often guidance comes that way. (Incidentally that is why prayer for those in authority is so important). First, it was the servant's job to make sure he had heard clearly the limits and expectations of the task. While God is not adverse to questions like, '*what if*', human-beings very often haven't thought so deeply and need answers to make sure. Casual listening can lead to unfinished tasks.

Second, Christians often confuse guidance with an elevation of importance. Satan was the first to think that. Being created by God as 'the angel of light', (God's nature is

many like Simon the sorcerer who might want to join the church because of their interest in green issues or fair trade, or even because they want the church to do something for them.

57 2Cor 3:18

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Light), he assumed he was good enough to do God's job. Abraham's servant rightly remained in his servant-hood mode throughout the whole story. The greatest task was given to one King Jesus who was renowned for remaining both obedient and servant-like through his life.

Third, Christians, very often so pleased to be called to service by God, assume God has called them because of their skills and abilities. Rubbish! God designed guidance as a 'master / disciple' relationship. His objective is not to get you to do something for him but for you to learn how he does things. All the way along his journey our unnamed servant was asking, 'How would my master handle this situation'?

'I know, ' said he, 'I will pray to the God of my master for guidance - just as my master would!'

In emulating his master while remaining servant-like, righteousness was imputed to him also by his faith. His motive was set by what was to be. The will of his master was held by him as the objective of his journey. But the objective of God for the servant was to present him with righteousness at the end of his journey.

Imputed righteousness should also effect our motivation when relating with others:

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My dear brothers and sisters, you are believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. So don't treat some people better than others.... Listen, my dear brothers and sisters. God chose the poor people in the world to be rich in faith. He chose them to receive the kingdom God promised to those who love him. But you show no respect to those who are poor. You know that the rich try to control your lives. And they are the ones who take you to court. The rich are the ones who insult the wonderful name of Christ One law for the rich and one for the poor. They judge by the letter of the law but require grace for themselves.

My brothers and sisters, if a person claims to have faith but does nothing, that faith is worth nothing. Faith like that cannot save anyone. If a brother or sister needs clothes or something to eat. And you say to them, "God be with you! I hope you stay warm and get plenty to eat," but you don't give them the things they need. That is not faith that is complacency. If it is just faith and nothing more than that it is dead....

You fool! Faith that does nothing is worth nothing. ... "Abraham believed God, and because of this faith he was accepted as one who is right with God." Abraham was called "God's friend." because he acted on his belief he seen by God as righteousness. ⁵⁸

58 James 2: 1 ff

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Motivation is an attribute of our spirit. It goes wherever we go. In fact it is the driving force behind what we do or say. But, what we do or say does not always clearly declare our motivating force. For the increasing numbers of persecuted churches in our prayers this is particularly poignant. If you had been a disciple for three years with Jesus, would you have spotted the motivation of Judas or would you have picked up on the driving force motivating the Zealot brothers? If you had, what would you have done? The sons of thunder repented of their terrorist ideas under the leadership of Jesus recognising his was the way of God. Judas did not repent, he succumbed to his motivation of greed when he realized he could not make Jesus conform to his ideas for success.

I read of a pastor of a persecuted church who welcomed the infiltration of Political Plants into his congregation because the infiltrator heard and saw the gospel - perhaps in the only way that was possible for him to do so. Paul had the same attitude.

The church is a vulnerable place to be because God is in the business of changing motivation. Whatever the motivation that brought you to church, Jesus wants to transform it with imputed righteousness. He does this because his motivation is love. He not only defined love in detail, he demonstrated it in nature. Jesus did not choose his disciples on the grounds of sound motivation-

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if he had, he would not have had any disciples. Take a look at any church and you will find it being buffeted by many differing motivations at the moment. There are people outside and inside the church who want to mould it. Simon the sorcerer wanted to join the church because he wanted the secret of the disciples power to heal. He soon found the Healer and repented of his motivation.

James argues that an action can be carried out by many motives. The action is not the goal of church – motivation is. The action is temporal the motivation is eternal. That is why Jesus could say, *'many will say we have done this in your name but I will say depart I never knew you'*. What He is saying is you did you did out of the wrong motivation. There are many like Simon the Sorcerer who might want to join the church because of their interest in green issues or fair trade, or even because they want the church to do something for them. or maybe they are attracted to work in one of the church's outreach programs. Some may be attracted out of a conscience towards the poor. Like Peter, it is our part to make sure they see the motivation in the driving seat. In the jargon its called discernment. People only meet Jesus and come into His kingdom when they realise the motivation of the church is to become righteous by the imputation of Jesus' righteousness and not out of good intentions. Beware, if the church is not clear on its motivation it may well be taken over by false motivation and, like the church of

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Laodacea, be spat out of God's mouth.

The Zealot brothers joined the disciples by invitation but they had their own agenda. That had to change to receive imputed righteousness. In my teenage years this was taught under two headings, Justification and Sanctification. 'I,' said the preacher, '*I am justified but I am being sanctified*'. But I was none the wiser for hearing such words.

Some people there with Jesus at that time told him about what had happened to some worshippers from Galilee. Pilate had them killed. Their blood was mixed with the blood of the animals they had brought for sacrificing. Jesus answered, "Do you think this happened to those people because they were more sinful than all other people from Galilee? No, they were not. But if you don't decide now to change your lives, you will all be destroyed like those people! And what about those 18 people who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were more sinful than everyone else in Jerusalem? They were not. But I tell you if you don't decide now to change your lives, you will all be destroyed too!"

Jesus told this story: "A man had a fig tree. He planted it in his garden. He came looking for some fruit on it, but he found none.

He had a servant who took care of his garden. So he

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said to his servant, 'I have been looking for fruit on this tree for three years, but I never find any. Cut it down! Why should it waste the ground?' But the servant answered, 'Master, let the tree have one more year to produce fruit. Let me dig up the dirt around it and fertilize it. Maybe the tree will have fruit on it next year. If it still does not produce, then you can cut it down.'"⁵⁹

The Galileans referred to here, were a minority of seditious people who challenged the Roman authority. They opposed paying tribute to Caesar and submitting to the Roman government. A party of them came to Jerusalem during one of the great festivals, and presenting their sacrifices at the temple, Pilate treacherously sent a company of soldiers, who slew them, and mingled their blood with their sacrifices. This news reached Jesus, Jesus did not comment on the news but used the news as a springboard to describe a tough and pointed issue about the kingdom of God.

When you and I enter the kingdom of God we are like a fig tree planted in a vineyard⁶⁰. The vineyard is not wasteland it is cultivated and fertile land. The vineyard also has a Dresser to shape the tree for the best way to produce fruit. Despite these advantages, this particular fig

59 Luke 13:1-9

60 Luke 13:6

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tree chose rather to sap the goodness for its own greed than to produce fruit. The fruit we are to produce is the fruit of the Spirit : love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, humility etc., but if we are motivated by self we can sap the fertile ground to satisfy pride, self ambition, strife heresy, envy, jealousy, and the such like. Which we produce is decided in our motivation. Maybe you can take time out to examine your motivation.

The way to check out motivation is to look on all the four branches of our lives. What evidence of spiritual fruit are you producing in Character, Conduct, Conversation and Contribution? Fruits demonstrated by these four sections of our lives can mark you out as belonging to the Kingdom of God or the kingdoms of this world?

But let a man examine himself, ... For he who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks condemnation to himself,⁶¹

61 *Corinthians 11:28*

Chapter 4 : Principles of Testing

Chapter 4 : Principles of Testing

There are more than sixty references to tests in the bible. This gives us ample opportunity to lay down some principles that God uses when he tests. Overall, none of these tests are about ability, all are about character. Why? Because ability is temporal while character is eternal.

That is not to say we won't be doing anything in eternity, we will. Gifts and abilities will be incorporated into our new bodies just as they were incorporated into angels. Angels were first made to help God with creation. But God had to expel one third of the angel population out of heaven not because they did not do their jobs properly, nor because their skills did not come up to scratch but because they cultivated a competitive and self sufficient nature, a dislike of God's authoritative structure, and a self serving, puffed up attitude that we now call pride.

We who live on this planet can see the results of these natures and attitudes in a selfish world, and our hearts cry out for something better. So we examine next, seven tests common to us all. Try to see them from God's point of view.

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1: Testing improves character

Jesus is about to be betrayed, handed over to the authorities and killed. But first he gathers his friends around him for a supper.

Let Luke take up the story

Later, the apostles began to argue about which one of them was the most important. But Jesus said to them, "The kings of the world rule over their people, and those who have authority over others want to be called 'the great providers for the people.' But you must not be like that. The one with the most authority among you should act as if he is the least important. The one who leads should be like one who serves. Who is more important: the one serving or the one sitting at the table being served? Everyone thinks it's the one being served, right? But I have been with you as the one who serves. "You men have stayed with me through many struggles.

So I give you authority to rule with me in the kingdom the Father has given me. You will eat and drink at my table in that kingdom. You will sit on thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel "Satan has asked to test you men like a farmer tests his wheat. O Simon, Simon, I have prayed that you will not lose your faith! Help your brothers be stronger when you come back to me."But Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, I am ready to go to

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*jail with you. I will even die with you!" But Jesus said, "Peter, before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will say you don't know me. You will say this three times."*⁶²

This passage used to frighten me. We have seen, from this chapter's introduction, that a major issue in heaven was a power struggle. In it God had banished Lucifer and a third of the angels to prevent Heaven from becoming tainted. Now in this passage we have twelve potential leaders of Heaven's representation on earth (church), locked in a power struggle. Its no good Jesus going round the room and appointing a pecking order from one to twelve, because as soon as His back is turned they will be at it again. Its no good leaving them like family siblings to fight it out among themselves, because the strongest will emerge as controller, not the most suitable person as leader. Although Peter is the one spoken to here, all twelve are about to be separated for individual sifting.

When Jesus is taken they all scatter. Three days later, when they come back together in the upper room they are different people - no one wanted to lead now. Even Peter wanted to go back to fishing. As a group under Jesus, they had developed a false sense of importance. It is a nature seen everywhere that followers want to be the most

62 Lk 22: 24-30

Overturing Tables

signifiant. Jesus had a way of making each feel exclusive but they had misinterpreted this exclusivity for importance. They all felt special being selected for training under Jesus. They had assumed themselves to be the privileged few - They were to be leaders in the Kingdom!

Scattered and alone, each had to face up to character weakness and vulnerability. Each had to face himself in the light of what was about to be entrusted into his hands – the church. You see Jesus knows who we are. The trouble is we don't. Grasp your testing in its intended spirit – Heaven is a place for sinners who have learned their vulnerability. Heaven will be a different place because everyone who enters will know they are not there on their merit but by the grace of God. The openness of each of the disciples failings is a reminder to everyone that there is none but one special in the kingdom. That is the other side of 'the grace of God' coin.

2: Testing is not for comparison but transformation

Don't let Paul's analogy of running a race confuse you here.

When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to him. He said, "I am God All-Powerful. Obey me and live the right way. If you do this, I will prepare an

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agreement between us. I will promise to make your people a great nation." Then Abram bowed down before God. God said to him, "This is my part of our agreement: I will make you the father of many nations. I will change your name from Abram to Abraham, because I am making you the father of many nations. I will give you many descendants. New nations and kings will come from you. And I will prepare an agreement between me and you. This agreement will also be for all your descendants. It will continue forever. I will be your God and the God of all your descendants. And I will give this land to you and to all your descendants. I will give you the land you are travelling through—the land of Canaan. I will give you this land forever, and I will be your God." Then God said to Abraham, "Now, this is your part of the agreement: You and all your descendants will obey my agreement. This is my agreement that all of you must obey. This is the agreement between me and you and all your descendants. Every male must be circumcised."⁶³

Of course, Abraham was special. I don't think I know anyone who has had five or six visitations of an angel- let alone the top angel, do you?

63 Gen 17: 1-10 ERV

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It takes something a good deal more convincing than 'normal' guidance to agree to sacrifice your only son. But look at this test. Principle two teaches us that God does not test in competition but specifically to prepare for the purpose of your calling. Equally, God will not test you beyond your calling because he has designed the test for you and also knows your limits. 1 Cor 10: 13 tells us that.⁶⁴ Society tests for comparison. Society uses competition to choose the best. God tests for eternal purpose. That's why Peter says we should *eagerly look forward to testing*⁶⁵ (and he should know).

When God looked at Abram he saw his spiritual qualities. On these spiritual qualities God wanted to build His family. That's why he changed his name from Abram to Abraham- father of many nations. If you want to know what qualities God is looking for in your life, start with a study on the life of Abraham.

During the two world wars, the nation had a big test. Would parents sacrifice their own sons for the sake of the

64 1Co 10:13 *The only temptations that you have are the same temptations that all people have. But you can trust God. He will not let you be tempted more than you can bear. But when you are tempted, God will also give you a way to escape that temptation. Then you will be able to endure it.*

65 1 Peter 4: 12-13

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country? Historians have not dealt fairly with the turmoil in each parent's heart when faced with this dilemma. A bigger reality weighed in their minds. Was it better for the nation's future to live as slaves and die hopelessly under a ruthless regime or ask the nation's children to take the fight to the enemy? God knew his own heart on the matter of sin. He had already a plan to send His one and only Son to release a world under slavery to sin and Satan. Abraham's test was, would this father of faith and father of nations, think the same way as God did? Abraham did see it God's way and God used him to become the father of all who live by faith. Which leads us onto principle Three.

3: Testing is the walk not the fate' accompli.

After these things God decided to test Abraham's faith. God said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Yes!" Then God said, "Take your son to the land of Moriah and kill your son there as a sacrifice for me. This must be Isaac, your only son, the one you love. Use him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains there. I will tell you which mountain." In the morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took Isaac and two servants with him. He cut the wood for the sacrifice. Then they went to the place where God told them to go. After they travelled three days, Abraham looked up, and in the distance he saw the

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place where they were going. Then he said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go to that place and worship. Then we will come back to you later." Abraham took the wood for the sacrifice and put it on his son's shoulder. Abraham took the special knife and fire. Then both he and his son went together to the place for worship. ⁶⁶

Abraham was in Philistine territory where it was common practice to offer the first-born to a god called Moloch. Abraham had been walking with God for a number of years and had discounted a God like that. None the less, a direct command from the chief archangel is not easy to refuse. To Abraham it looked like a test of obedience. Abraham was determined not to fail this test. He had sailed close to the wind on a couple of occasions before when he was told to go down to Egypt. On those occasions he had guarded himself by telling Pharaoh a white lie to protect his own skin. But was that the test I wonder?

Christians often have the idea that when God gives a task, God packs a bag and sends us off to complete it. While God is still describing to us a task, our imaginations often race away and we start planning the fine details of how we will accomplish it. Truth is, God is more interested in

66 Genesis 22: 1-6

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the walk than the outcome. *'More than three days journey'* meant sitting round the camp fire at night, bonding with Isaac. It also meant a lot of heart searching questions of God. Did He really mean to go through with this? In his mind I have no doubt he was hoping the angel appear again tonight and say *'Its off'*? I am sure there was a good deal of wrestling in prayer over those three days and nights. Not much sleep either I should bet. On the forth morning, the wrestling was over and the issue was resolved in his heart, he knew what the outcome would be. From here on in, faith took over from obedience. He said to his servants, *'You camp here and we will return'*. Hebrews 11:19 says Abraham reckoned that God was able to raise Isaac from death.

Consider then another, Jesus prayed desperately *'if it is possible, take this cup from me'*. God did not supply a substitute for Him. He was the substitute for us. This was a similar test but this time it required obedience to the last. But it was based on a sure foundation that had been tested and demonstrated already. First he left heaven to come to earth in obedience. Then he had demonstrated over thirty-years, his devotion without wavering. Now the time was upon him absolute Faith and a close walk with his father carried the day. He, like Abraham, also believed his father could raise him from the dead. And He Did!

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4: Testing is for our eternal improvement.

Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" Abraham answered, "Yes, son?" Isaac said, "I see the wood and the fire. But where is the lamb we will burn as a sacrifice?" Abraham answered, "God himself is providing the lamb for the sacrifice, my son." So both Abraham and his son went together to that place.

When they came to the place where God told them to go, Abraham built an altar. He carefully laid the wood on the altar. Then he tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached for his knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD stopped him. The angel called from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham" Abraham answered, "Yes?"

The angel said, "Don't kill your son or hurt him in any way. Now I can see that you do respect and obey God. I see that you are ready to kill your son, your only son, for me." Then Abraham noticed a ram whose horns were caught in a bush. So Abraham went and took the ram. He offered it, instead of his son, as a sacrifice to God. So Abraham gave that place a name, "The LORD Provides." Even today people say, "On the mountain of the LORD, he will give us what we need."

⁶⁷

Around many home camp fires, Isaac would have heard

67 Genesis 22: 7-14

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his father's stories. He would have noted his father was a man of great faith. He would have heard how Abraham came out of Ur to walk his life of faith. Basically, Ur worshipped anything and everything. Ur's philosophy was 'a god for everything and everything is god'. Recognising one true exclusive God, Maker of heaven and earth caused offence so, Abraham came out of Ur, '*not knowing where he was going*' but following the lead of God. He came to Palestine accepting by faith it was to be his. By faith, he believed the angel that he would have a son and become the father of many nations. That is an awfully long way to come in your spiritual journey. Isaac would have heard the story and seen faith as an essential and first demand of his father's God.

But he would also have heard his father explaining his present actions on the basis of past failures. Notice now the smaller tests Abraham had along the way. When Abraham thought he was going to lose the wells he dug, he used his wit not faith. He gave away seven lambs in a contract with Abimaleck, (who later reneged). When he thought he was going to lose his wife in Egypt, he lied, and God had to intervene with a pagan king to sort the situation out. When he thought God had relented on his promise of an heir, he compromised his integrity and his faith by laying with Hagar. None of these things disqualified him, because he learned, repented and begin

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again. Isaac, puzzled though he was, saw in his father a man determined to grow spiritual qualities over emotional and intellectual ones. Soul qualities are temporal, spiritual qualities are eternal. All Abraham's tests in life were to build him into a man of faith. He sometimes failed the tests but he would pick himself up, dust himself down and watch more carefully the next time. Faith can take us past the point of failure onto the mountain of success.

5: Testing improves the eyesight.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad had many cattle. These people looked at the land near Jazer and Gilead. They saw that this land was good for their cattle. So the people from the tribes of Reuben and Gad came to Moses. They spoke to Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the leaders of the people. They said, "We, your servants, have many cattle. And the land that the LORD let the people of Israel capture is good land for cattle. This land includes the area around Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sibmah, Nebo, and Beon. If it pleases you, we would like this land to be given to us. Don't take us to the other side of the Jordan River." Moses told the people from the tribes of Reuben and Gad, "Will you let your brothers

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go and fight while you settle here? ⁶⁸

Wysiwyg! That's what they called it.

In the days of early computers, what you saw printed on the screen bore no resemblance to what was printed out on the printer. This was most frustrating to hard working secretaries who would spend five minutes typing and twenty-five formatting a letter for the printer. So they invented What-you-see-is-what-you-get. What you see on the screen is what you get on the printed page.

Abraham and Lot Wysiwyg-ed! Abraham said to his nephew, *'You choose the land and take your people into it'*. Abraham as the older man could have had first choice but the soul that has seen God as its portion can afford to be generous! Lot saw only the best lush land and went toward Sodom and Gomorrah, on his screen he could see lush pastures and all mod cons but the printout gave a very different page. In a very short time that lush land degenerated into the downfall of Sodom & Gomorrah.

Gad and Reuben wysiwyg-ed on the way to the promised land. They saw lush land before they actually got into the land called Palestine. It was on the edge of it but the other side of Jordan. None-the-less they decided to settle there. They almost entered the promised land but decided to give

68 *Numbers 32: 1-6*

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up at the last hurdle. What they saw they got. What they did not get was what God had in mind- a protected border within Palestine on the other side of Jordan. A short time later when hostile nations attacked, Gad and Reuben were defeated first because they were on the wrong side of Jordan.

Tests like these are to find out what you see. Do you see with the human eye, or the eye of faith? Abraham's eye saw Isaac but his faith's eye saw nations.'... *your father Abraham... I gave him offspring great in number, and gave him Isaac*'.⁶⁹ The eye of faith was replaced by the eye of sight in the garden of Eden when Eve disregarded what God said in favour of what she saw. Remember the third principle? It is the walk that is important. The eye of faith belongs to our spirit, it starts living again when we are 'born anew' in the Spirit, it grows by daily walking with God. Expect many tests on this one as you walk a Christian life – eternal life is based on it!

6: Testing needs a good hard inward look.

You must obey all the commands that I give you today, because then you will live and grow to become a great nation. You will get the land that the LORD promised

69 Jos 24:3

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to your ancestors. And you must remember the entire trip that the LORD your God has led you through these 40 years in the desert. He was testing you. He wanted to make you humble. He wanted to know what is in your heart. He wanted to know if you would obey his commands. He humbled you and let you be hungry. Then he fed you with manna—something you did not know about before. It was something your ancestors had never seen. Why did the Lord do this? Because he wanted you to know that it is not just bread that keeps people alive. People's lives depend on what the LORD says.

These past 40 years, your clothes did not wear out, and your feet did not swell. You must remember that the LORD your God teaches and corrects you as a father teaches and corrects his son. "You must obey the commands of the LORD your God. Follow him and respect him. The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with rivers and pools of water. Water flows out of the ground in the valleys and hills. It is a land with wheat and barley, grapevines, fig trees, and pomegranates. It is a land with olive oil and honey. There you will have plenty of food and everything you need. It is a land where the rocks are iron. You can dig copper out of the hills. You will have all you want to eat. Then you will praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. "Be careful. Don't forget the LORD your God! Be careful to obey the commands, laws, and rules that I

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give you today. Then you will have plenty to eat, and you will build good houses and live in them. Your cattle, sheep, and goats will grow large. You will get plenty of gold and silver. You will have plenty of everything. When that happens, you must be careful not to become proud. You must not forget the LORD your God.

You were slaves in Egypt, but he made you free and brought you out of that land. He led you through that great and terrible desert where there were poisonous snakes and scorpions. The ground was dry, and there was no water anywhere. But he gave you water out of a solid rock. In the desert he fed you manna—something your ancestors had never seen. He tested you to make you humble so that everything would go well for you in the end Don't ever say to yourself, 'I got all this wealth by my own power and ability.' Remember the LORD your God is the one who gives you power to do these things. He does this because he wants to keep the agreement that he made with your ancestors, as he is doing today! "Don't ever forget the LORD your God. Don't ever follow other gods or worship and serve them. If you do that, I warn you today: You will surely be destroyed! The LORD is destroying other nations for you. But if you stop listening to the LORD your God, you will be destroyed just like them!"⁷⁰

70 Deuteronomy 8: 1-20.

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I blame the government! If you get hold of a copy of the Desert Times dated 2000 BC, what would you read?

'Moses brought us into the desert but he didn't plan ahead, he should have built better roads, a few more food stops and invested more in the infrastructure. We shouldn't have to go without our Egyptian food - what a Wally we have in charge!'

Wait a minute people, who is in charge? Moses? No! Yahweh!

And why has He led us into this situation? To change us from what we are – slaves, into what we will be - Free people. The old clechë applies here. *'It took two days to take the Hebrews out of Egypt and forty-years to take Egypt out of the Hebrew people'*. It does not matter if we are a nation, a church, a family or an individual, the transition from Egypt to Palestine necessitates a desert journey. The lesson of the desert is found in the change of heart not in the endurance of legwork over distance.

We say, *'My manna is mouldy'*; God says, 'I gave you enough and I gave it to you fresh; your greed makes it mouldy'.

We say, *'My cloths need ironing'*; God says, 'But they are not worn out and the serve their purpose. It is your vanity that requires more'.

We say, *'I am bored wandering in this desert'*; God says, 'But your feet never get tired or swollen. It is your

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hardness of heart that keeps you here'.

We say, *'What wonderful times we had in Egypt'*; But God asks, *'Didn't I responded to your cries for mercy and didn't you asked me to look at your burdens and afflictions'?*

We say, *'I could do with a drink down at the Pharaoh Arms pub right now in this baking sun'*; God says, *'Here, is cool clear water from under a rock. Drink and be refreshed'*.

Lessons we are meant to learn :

- Remember the lessons of desert journey, these will bring prosperity in Character not goods.
- Remember who is Boss – it is not Moses or any other people you might like to see as in charge ; It is Yahweh!
- Remember God treats his people as a father would ; He intends the best for his children even when we don't think that is so!
- Remember not to forget ; because if you do you will have to go through it all again.

7: Testing enhances and empowers

Then Moses said to God, "But the Israelites will not believe me when I tell them that you sent me. They

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will say, "The LORD did not appear to you." But the LORD said to Moses, "What is that you have in your hand?" Moses answered, "It is my walking stick." Then God said, "Throw your walking stick on the ground." So Moses threw his walking stick on the ground, and it became a snake. Moses ran from it, but the LORD said to him, "Reach out and grab the snake by its tail." When Moses reached out and caught the snake's tail, the snake became a walking stick again. Then God said, "Use your stick in this way, and the people will believe that you saw the LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will give you another proof. Put your hand under your robe." So Moses opened his robe and put his hand inside. Then he brought his hand out of the robe and it was changed. His hand was covered with spots that were white like snow. Then God said, "Now put your hand into your robe again." So Moses put his hand into his robe again. Then he brought his hand out, and his hand was changed. Now his hand was good again, as it was before. Then God said, "If the people don't believe you when you use your walking stick, then they will believe you when you show them this sign. If they still refuse to believe after you show them both of these signs, then take some

Linus Van Pelt of the peanuts cartoon fame has a genuine character. He cannot go anywhere without his security blanket.

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water from the Nile River.

Pour the water on the ground, and as soon as it touches the ground, it will become blood." Then Moses said to the LORD, "But, Lord, I am telling you, I am not a good speaker. I have never been able to speak well. And that hasn't changed since you started talking to me. I am still not a good speaker. You know that I speak slowly and don't use the best words." Then the LORD said to him, "Who made a person's mouth? And who can make someone deaf or not able to speak? Who can make a person blind? Who can make a person able to see? I am the one.

I am the LORD. So go. I will be with you when you speak. I will give you the words to say." But Moses said, "My Lord, I beg you to send someone else, not me." Then the LORD became angry with Moses and said, "All right! I'll give you someone to help you. Aaron the Levite is your brother, isn't he? He is a good speaker. In fact, Aaron is already coming to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. I will tell you what to say. Then you will tell Aaron, and I will help him say it well. I will tell both of you what to do. speak to him, and he will tell the people what you say. So go and carry your walking stick with you. Use it and the other miracles to show the people that I am with you."⁷¹

71 Exodus 4: 1-17

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Linus is aptly named. Charlie Brown is an ordinary lad, average but not as 'know it all' confident as Lucy. But Linus Van Pelt of the Peanuts cartoon fame has a genuine character. He cannot go anywhere without his security blanket. Without it he falls to pieces in panic, but with it he is invincible.

I don't know what your security blanket is, but chances are you have one. Moses had a stick. It had probably been with him some forty years. It was comfortable in his hand, it helped him walk, it hooked straying sheep or warded off wolves and snakes. Moses would stick it into the sand to hold his cloak as shelter from the hot sun or hook down dates that were out of his reach on a tree when he was hungry. It was very useful for dividing his sheep from passing herds and it acted as a banner when the sheep congregated. It was indeed tried and tested.

But now it was Moses' turn to be tried and tested. Have you noticed God's approach? First he asks the obvious, like a grown up asks a child, '*What have you got there?*' It draws attention to the object and starts a conversation. God did not wrench the rod from his hands. In fact when God first spoke I suspect Moses grasped his support a little tighter while he took off his shoes. God asked him to throw down his rod. Now came an inner tussle. Can I

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trust God enough to shed my security? If I throw it on the ground will the fire consume it? My sheep might not respond to me without it.

But here is the point. When he did throw it down it became something else. It became a snake, the very thing he needed his rod to defend him against. He had to deal with the snake without his staff. He had to pick it up directly by the most vulnerable point, the tail. And when he did? It became a rod again! But Listen! From that point on it was no longer Moses' rod. From now on it was to be known as God's rod, the rod of Moses was no longer Moses' rod. From now on he could do miracles with it.

Surrender your security blanket to God and see what he does with it!

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Have you ever been in one of those halls of mirrors? The reason we can laugh so much at ourselves is that we know there is a distortion of the truth. *'I am not really that short and stumpy it is a distortion of my image'*, we say. But suppose you had only ever seen yourself in that particular mirror.

The mind has its own mirror. It forms distorted images, not only from experience, first reactions or relationships, but also from negatives like gossip, watching Soaps or imaginative media. Our view of God is distorted, not least because He is too big for our minds to comprehend. Having a distorted image of God effects us in our daily lives. It can lead to confused guidance, false security, wrong priorities and much more. Further it distorts the view I have of myself. And again, not only myself but also those around me. Human expectations of others are very much dependent upon how I perceive myself. In the last chapter we saw how our view of God can be changed by a journey of learning and experience. But now we narrow it a little to see how the process of ageing itself affects our journey of faith.

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1: Youthful energy

And the students of the prophets said unto Elisha, the place where we dwell is getting too small for us. Let us go, to Jordan, and every man cut a tree, to build another house where we may dwell. And he answered, Go. And the student said, please come with us. And he answered, I will. So he went with them to the Jordan forest where they cut down wood. But as one was cutting down a tree, the axe head into the water: and he panicked, he went to Elisha and said, Alas, master! It was borrowed. And the man of God said, Where did it fall? So he showed him the place. And Elisha cut down a stick, and cast it in there; and it made iron float. fish it out and restore it to its owner Elisha told him. So he put out his hand, and took it up.⁷²

So, what's the problem? From today's standpoint there is none. If the problem is a lost axe head then pop to the hardware shop and get another! The writer is not talking about an axe. He is talking about an inner conflict. To understand that inner conflict we need to go back to the event.

72 2 kings 6

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This account takes place in the early iron age. Politically, Syria was top dog nation. It had discovered the art of making iron which made it the equivalent to today's nation holding the nuclear bomb. For military purposes Syria kept the process of making iron secret just as USA might try to stop Iran from producing nuclear warheads today. Syria tried hard to keep this technology from Israel because Syrian expertises had developed spoked wheels wrapped in an Iron tyre. This made their chariots light and strong so they could swoop down on their enemies in their chariots before they knew what had happened. Israel still had wooden wagon wheels cut from slices of tree which made their wagons slow and cumbersome. Syria also had iron spear heads which not only made their spears much more accurate but also penetrate much deeper. Syrian iron swords could shatter the old Israeli bronze ones in pieces. Syrians also had axes on their banned export list.

The Syrians government did allow exports of hoes and ploughs because this was good for the economy. Nothing has changed in the relationship of countries since eight-hundred BC. Its still '*the economy -stupid!*' We get a fascinating insight into that from 1Sa 13:19

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There were no blacksmiths in Israel. The Philistines would not allow them because they were afraid the Israelites would make iron swords and spears. Only the Philistines could sharpen iron tools. So if the Israelites needed to sharpen their ploughs, hoes, axes, or sickles, they had to go to the Philistines. The Philistine blacksmiths charged one silver coin for sharpening ploughs and hoes and half a silver coin for sharpening picks, axes, and the iron tip on ox goads. So on the day of battle, none of the Israelite soldiers with Saul had iron swords or spears. Only Saul and his son Jonathan had such weapons.

There are a couple of other things about this story we need to consider. When the translators translated the story into English they made it sound like this student had just gone to his mate and said, '*Let me borrow your axe*' and his obliging mate had answered, '*Sure-man!*' But first, his mate wouldn't want to publicise the fact that he had an iron axe because he might be labelled as terrorist by the Assyrian secret police. Second, in the original Hebrew language, it says he begged to borrow the axe. This phrase carries the same sort of intensity as the story of the prodigal son begging his father for his inheritance. Can you imagine the prodigal saying, '*can I have my inheritance now dad?*'. I don't think the father would reply.'*OK son, I'll pop down to the bank this afternoon*'. It would take a few days or even months of pestering for

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the son to wear his father down while the father would hope this was just a silly teenage phase his son was going through.

There is another consideration. These students were intelligent lads of university level. These were the Etonians of the time who were majoring in the Hebrew law studies under the teachings of Professors in prophesy. They would have certainly had to learn the first five books of the bible by heart. This lad would certainly have studied the passage in Deuteronomy that describes how the borrower who loses or damages what he borrows must pay for it in full and he could not afford that on a student grant.

Now consider this lad's inner conflict. Besides this lad's good name and besides the good name of the college, there was an issue of breaking the law. Besides trying to live by God's laws, (which were clearly dear to him), he had his future moral and ethical example to consider. Once he had graduated, he would be expecting to take up a leadership position in the country as a Lawyer, Priest or Prophet. On top of all those considerations he would have felt a failure because he could see absolutely no way to rectify the situation.

So Now we can tell the story slightly differently.

Out of the necessity of a growing college, the

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enthusiastic students came up with a plan. They thought they had covered everything. They had probably prayed about it and presumed they had God's blessing. They had held their obligatory committee meetings, prayed some more and checked to see they had Elisha's approval. Finally the day came. They went as a group to fulfil a vision they had all agreed was God's will. If they were anything like my grandchildren when they get together, the banter was thick and fast flowing. Things went well until the axe head flew off and landed in muddy Jordan.

There are so many things about this story, but here are three principles to learn.

Lesson one is, faith takes over when your skills reach their limit. You always know how well your Christian life is doing when your skills run out. This lad knew he had met his skills limit. He was out of his depth and he panicked. There was nothing to do but to swallow his pride. As an engineer I have had a few hammer heads fly off in my time. I can say with authority they always come off at the most inconvenient moment for your pride. The remedy to restoring faith lay in losing his excessive self-confidence, and asking for help. Ever been there? I have times a plenty!

Faith usually comes person shaped. This lad's first lesson for the day was, he needed to go to someone he could trust with his predicament. Elisha had earned the trust of

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this lad by his lifestyle so, faith for this lad came in the shape of Elisha. Hopefully our faith comes to us in the shape of Jesus, the better we know him the more we know we can trust him.

The second lesson is, tell your story warts and all. In religious terms, we call that confession. This lad had to tell Elisha and Elisha was not a man to put up with hype. Before Elisha could do anything for him he wanted to hear the full story. That meant the lad had to admit he was out of his depth. He had to admit he had been a bit too self confident, maybe a bit cocky with it. He also had to admit that he had not foreseen all the circumstances; his plans were not invincible.

Notice this story does not say he was guilt ridden, though I guess he was remorseful. The writer does not say he was burdened because he had pressurised his mate to lend the axe, though he may have been. The writer just says he relayed the story to Elijah as it was. That is what God looks for in repentance because the act of telling our story means we review the situation. Reviewing is an essential part of any learning process, that is why we need both confession and repentance.

So why does God require confession and repentance? Because it means revisiting the scene. It means

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answering the question, '*Where did the fall occur*'? It means getting help from the Spirit of God to put things right. That is all confession is really.

Lesson three is about being reunited. Our religious term for this is reconciliation. If the axe head had not been redeemed from the water it could not be returned to its rightful owner. Of course the iron could not float on its own, it had to yoked to a wooden handle to make it float. Only then it could be taken up and returned to its owner.

I can see the gospel in that iron age story? In a Nutshell, you and I were designed to be yoked to God just as an axe is designed to be yoked to a handle. The handle is essential to guide the axe in reaching its full potential and purpose. But you and I have constantly weakened the bond with God just where steel and wood join. Because of our constant pestering in trying to go our own way we have worn the connection out until we wriggled our way out and flew off in our own direction. Broken, lost and helpless we have all '*gone in our own direction*'.⁷³

Scripture tells us even though we as mankind got out of our depth, God loved us. God shaped a branch from the tree of Jesse, (scripture says Jesus was that branch).⁷⁴

73 *Isaiah 53: 6.*

74 *Isaiah 11: 1 ff*

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Jesus came down into the depths to find us and rescue us, You and I don't have the capacity to float on our own, but yoked to Jesus we can float again. All it takes from us is for us to swallow our pride, go to the wooden cross, lay down the weight of our pride and independence, tell our story - just as it is – warts and all.

The rest is up to Jesus who has promised to lift you up out of the deep mire. Rejoined to Jesus we are once again a useful tool. We can be returned to God the father our rightful owner.

It really is as simple as that!!

2: Finding your Calling.

One day, God called Jeremiah and asks him to go on a mission:

The LORD said: "Jeremiah, I am your Creator, and before you were born, I chose you to speak for me to the nations."

I replied, "I'm not a good speaker, LORD, and I'm too young."

"Don't say you're too young," the LORD answered.

"If I tell you to go and speak to someone, then go!

I promise to be with you and preserve you, so don't be

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afraid." ⁷⁵

Well, Jeremiah did go and preach but by chapter-twenty, Jeremiah is in stocks. Understandably, Jeremiah was pretty peeved at that:

*You tricked me, LORD, and I was really fooled. You are stronger than I am, and you have defeated me. People never stop sneering and insulting me. ... Your message has brought me nothing but insults and trouble. Sometimes I tell myself not to think about you, LORD, or even mention your name. But your message burns in my heart and bones, and I cannot keep silent.*⁷⁶

God had actually said to Jeremiah it would be a battle:

*My power will make you strong like a fortress ... You will oppose all of Judah, including its kings and leaders, its priests and people.*⁷⁷

But because Jeremiah had not listened properly he did not read the small print, he had assumed it would be a smooth run.

I can remember many years ago being called into

⁷⁵ Jer 1: 1ff

⁷⁶ Jer 20:7

⁷⁷ Jer 1:18

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Christian work. I was a young Christian I thought that Christian work sounded exciting. I thought being a Christian meant God would make life run smooth, especially working with other Christians. I quickly learned that when God calls there is usually a battle around somewhere. I also remember a good friend of mine, Ted Behan told me:

'When God told me to become a hospital chaplain he didn't tell me the half of it. But I am glad he didn't because I would have told him "tough, go look for someone else".'

I think Jonah was quite an old hand with God. When God called him to go to Nineveh he went the other way. Eventually, by foul means or fair, he was cornered. And ended up where God wanted him to preach. His message was :

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"⁷⁸

But forty-days passed and God did not destroy the city at all. In actual fact God did destroy Nineveh, but it was one-hundred years later in six-hundred-and-twelve BC. The repentance of Nineveh secured one-hundred years of grace. But during that one-hundred years people misread God's grace for God's weakness.

78 *Jonah 3:4.*

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Jonah was really upset and angry with God. So he prayed:

LORD, I knew from the very beginning that you wouldn't destroy Nineveh. That's why I left my own country and headed for Spain. You are a kind and merciful God, and you are very patient. You always show love, and you don't like to punish anyone, not even foreigners.⁷⁹

Both Jonah and the people of Nineveh got it wrong again. They thought that God is so loving that he will turn a blind eye on sin forever. He won't punish really will He! Many in the church think like that today. But God's grace did run out one-hundred years later when He completely flattened Nineveh.

Remember Moses? At forty years old, he thought he could retire from the hassle of Egypt to a comfortable life looking after his father-in-laws sheep. He got used to the idea of living in God's grace. Rescued in bulrushes, brought up with the best of everything, he sneaked off into the desert to keep his father-in-laws sheep. True, he had good cause but he soon got used to the quiet life.

When God did call him - He doubted God would deliver Israel from Pharaoh. He argued with God and raised all

⁷⁹ Jon 4:1-2

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sorts of obstacles, but in the end Moses took on the hassle. Not only did he agree to free his brethren but he also took on the added burden of training them. Moses thought he would march the people through the promised land in a few days but he ended up mothering them for forty-years. Moses misunderstood that this grace time was God's training period for a big event.

Remember Nelson Mandela? Do you know what he prayed as a young man? He thanked God politely for his grace to all men then reminded God that some people were more downtrodden than others. Then he prayed:

'It sometimes seemed that you God are not paying attention to this injustice. And, If you God don't show a little more initiative the black man will have to take things into his own hands AMEN!

God's grace had to put him in jail for twenty-seven years until the time was fulfilled for Nelson to start his real work of leadership. Nelson's impatience might have spoiled God's timing and his plans. God had pencilled in a date but it was not to be for another twenty-seven years.

Remember what Peter said once?

*One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day*⁸⁰

80 2 Peter 3:8

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Why did he say this? Peter was addressing Christians who were perplexed by the seeming inactivity of God. When these people first became Christians, they were under the impression Jesus was to come again, in a few months. They imagined they would be alive to share in the triumph of His coming again. They still thought that Jesus was meant to deliver them from the Roman oppression. But now the months had lengthened into years. But Jesus still had not come back They were ready to cry as Jeremiah cried, *"O Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived."*

The task of Peter was to comfort them and to show them the meaning of that apparent slackness. Peter was writing about faith, grace and promises, these are Spiritual issues. Sometimes we think these are instant material issues and Jesus will just return to deliver us from our short term problems. Because Jesus delayed his return people became disinterested. They thought they could carry on as they pleased because God was going to do nothing. But behind the delay is grace. God has a timing and to hurry that timing is to spoil the plan. God's plan is to create a new heaven and earth. This new heaven and earth will be founded on new values. In the mean time we are living in a time of grace. This grace time is a learning time.

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You have heard the saying '*You can't take it with you!*'

Well you can! Faith, grace, patience and hope are all formed in time but the results pass through death in the form of personality. You can take all these spiritual values with you because they were around before the foundation of the earth. I don't know about you but I sometimes despair at the injustice in the world. I sometimes wish I could get hold of God and give Him a good shaking because He seems to just stand by and let big injustices go on and on. God has to remind me every so often that I am missing the point. Abraham was given 3 main promises:

- 1 You shall inherit all the land you can walk
- 2 And I will make you a father of many nations.
- 3 Out of your seed the Messiah will come

Abraham went to his grave having never seen his grandchildren, and he certainly never saw the fruition of the promised land. He was buried in land belonging to Hittite tribe. But looking back, we can see one of his two children became the head of the nation of Israel, the other the head of the Arab nations. Both of these people groups are still around today and both have their own land.

The promise of God seemed of little use for Abraham unless he could see it all happen. After all it was to be four-hundred years before Israel walked into the promised land and God began to fulfil his promise – then another

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one-thousand years before the promised Messiah came to earth. But, according to Jesus:

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.⁸¹

This is how grace Faith and promise work together. Grace is the time it takes to bring us to a point where we learn to believe and trust God. Faith enables us to see the promises of God in advance of completion. Promise delivers the final outcome; It is the substance coming to pass. None of this is in our timing or to our plan. Abraham did see the day of the Messiah in the promised land⁸². Moses and Elijah also saw the day of Jesus. Three disciples witnessed them talking to Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. Faith can see the new heaven and new earth because it passes through time into eternity.

The moral of this story is if God promises something, back it with everything you value - it's a dead cert and cannot fail. If God promises eternal life for those that believe – that's a pretty safe bet. Back it! But Never ever bet on someone who says he knows God's timing - that's a losers bet.

81 *John 8:56*

82 *John 8: 56.*

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3: Learning teamwork

Can I introduce to you Eleazar-ben-Dodo.

Eleazar the son of Dodo, was with David at Pas-dammim, and there the Philistines gathered to do battle⁸³

Eleazar grew up on the wrong side of the street. Now, I don't know if Dodo was a good dad or not. Dodo actually comes from the root *doting* so he sounds like a doting dad. That is not uncommon. Isaac doted on Jacob - remember the coat of many colours? Remember how that obnoxious little fellow upset his family with dreams? Remember how Joseph would go around saying, '*You will bow down to me*' There are two ways to pronounce the name Dodo, neither are very flattering. I can only imagine what high school must have been like for young Eleazar. "Hey, daddies' dodo head!"

I knew a doting dad who was already thinking about his child's employment chances before he was born. He talked about how he must get his birth certificate right because a future employer would look at it. Where it said Parents, he hummed and haa-ed as to if he should he put university lecturer, (because he had once delivered a talk

83 1Ch 11:12-13

Overturing Tables

at local technical college), or Doctor, (which he eventually became, but only when his when his son was very much older). Then there was name of the child. Should he Christen his first name as 'Lord', that would give class, or should it be more distinguishable like Horatio as in Nelson, that would stand out on the job application form.

So, What of our hero Eleazar-ben-Dodo? What is his story? One morning, the sun broke over a field barley, ready for harvest. But this field was surrounded by David's trainee solders. They were there because Philistines used to swoop down in chariots and steal their crops. But somehow the Philistine-Intelligence got wind that David's army were there so they sent ten garrisons of an army to wipe them out. David's men fled. When the dust settled it left two men standing back to back in the midst of the field. Swords drawn and eyes flashing, ready for war, David and Eleazar-ben-Dodo stood back to back.

What happened next is one of those amazing stories from the Bible. These two men, fought valiantly that day against the Philistines and the Philistines went away empty handed. The Bible says:

“ Eleazar's hand was weary, yet cleaved unto the sword.” Eleazar didn't stop until the job was done, and the Lord brought a great victory through his efforts, together with David.

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Eleazar may not have lived up to his surname Dodo but certainly lived up to his first name Eleazar. Eleazar means '*God-my help*'. Living up to a name is not easy in the world. That is why we are called by a new name when we team up with God. He says:

And all people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the LORD; and they shall be afraid of thee.⁸⁴

Did you notice how even David took second place in this statement?

Eleazar didn't stop until the job was done, and the Lord brought a great victory through his efforts,

But the question is bigger than that. Why should these two stand back to back in the middle of this field even though the rest of the army had run away? Surely the odds are totally against them? The answer comes in 1Chron. 11:3

"... we have come to ask you to be king." So David made an agreement with the leaders and asked the LORD to be their witness.

84 Deu_28:10

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David had entered into a covenant with these people. Fed up with having their corn stolen by the philistines the people entered a covenant with David. Will you be our king? Will you protect us they asked. David kept his side of the bargain even though the odds were stacked against him, even though his trainees forsook him he stood by his duty as king.

I know another king who stood his ground to the last for the sake of his people. He also grew up on the wrong side of the street. Born in Bethlehem which was regarded as the worst town in Judea. One writer said of Bethlehem: *'only outcasts of society make a living keeping other people's sheep'*. Raised in Nazareth a small backward industrial town where another writer quotes Nathaniel *'can any good come out of Nazareth'*? Jesus did not have a very good birth certificate either. The Pharisees made snide remarks saying *'we know who our father is'*. But Jesus entered an agreement with God His father and kept his side of the bargain to the last. God himself called out from heaven saying Hey you guys, *"This is my son – you had better listen to Him!"*

Jesus stood his ground taking all that the enemy could throw at him. His trainees ran out on him but he would not compromise his side of the new Covenant. The enemy crucified him thinking they had won but three days later

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he arose and now the enemy is running scared.

4: The daily grind

Kish's Father Abiel started the Haulage business. When he retired, he handed the business over to Kish. Living at beginning of the Egypt to Jerusalem section of the main Silk Road, Kish quickly realised he could make a good deal more money by expanding the self drive side of the business. Of course they did not have forty-ton diesel lorries or even white vans three-thousand years ago. They hauled goods about by ass or donkey. Kish negotiated with inns at intervals along the Silk Road to become staging posts for his asses. Merchants would hire an ass or donkey load them and drop them off at points along the route.

Kish always assumed that one day his son, Saul was going to take over the business, but, as so often happens in the third generation, Saul did not have the business bent of his father. Saul grew up preferring home comforts to hard work. Saul's family were not religious, they had little time for anything outside business. If you asked them who the religious leader of the land was they probably wouldn't know.

At the other end of this section of the Silk Road, in

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Jerusalem, lived Samuel. Not only was he a prophet – he was also High Court Judge of the land. By nature he was the complete opposite in character to Saul. Saul had learned how important he was, (he had servants to do everything for him.), Samuel did everything for himself. He was the independent sort. Samuel was a worker and self motivated. Every year Samuel would travel the Silk Road, scheduling a stop at each village and town on the way. Each morning he would set up an assizes court, sit in judgement on all the local legal matters then, at sun down he would put on his priest's hat and perform a sacrifice ceremony. After this he would go for an evening meal in town centre to catch up on the latest concerns of local leaders. Although Saul and Samuel used the same road their paths never crossed.

One day at stock taking, Kish noticed three asses unaccounted for. Saul was sent along the Silk Road to find them and bring them back. Saul checked in at each staging post, which were one about one day's journey apart. But by the third day Saul was getting fed up and longing for home comforts. He said effectively, '*Blow the donkeys I'm going home*'. Saul's servant was not only a bit more conscientious, he was also a bit more knowledgable. He knew Samuel's itinerary from the other end of the road. He knew Samuel's schedule meant he should be in the next village along the road, he knew that Samuel, coming

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from the opposite direction, was bound to have noticed three tradesmen with asses were on the road because they always travelled in groups for safety. Sure enough Samuel had seen them one was loaded with bread, one with wine and one driving sheep.

Now we pick up the story as these two meet for the first time:

Saul and the servant started walking up the hill to town. Just as they came into town, they saw Samuel By the gate, walking toward them. He was on his way to the place for worship. The day before, the LORD had told Samuel, "At this time tomorrow The man you asked for will arrive."⁸⁵

By the way -- the first clue is in the name
Saul means "asked for or prayed for".

The man you asked for is from the tribe of Benjamin. You must anoint him and make him the new leader over my people Israel. This man will save my people from the Philistines. I have seen my people suffering, and I have heard their cries for help."

When Samuel saw Saul, the LORD confirmed this in his spirit, "This is the man I told you about. He will rule my people." Saul went up to the man at the gate

85 1Sa 9:14

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who just happened to be Samuel. Saul said, "Excuse me my man. Could you tell me where the seer's house is?" he asked Samuel answered, "I am the seer. Go ahead of me to the place for worship.

Then You and your servant will eat with me. I will let you go home tomorrow morning – and don't worry about the donkeys that you lost three days ago. They have been seen along the road. Right now there is something that everyone in Israel is looking for and that something is you and your family."

Saul answered, "But I am a member of the tribe of Benjamin. It is the smallest tribe in Israel. And my family is small in number. Why do you say Israel wants me?" Then Samuel took Saul and his servant to the banquet.

About 30 people had been invited to eat together and share the sacrifice. Samuel gave Saul and his servant the most important place at the table. Samuel said to the cook, "Bring the meat I gave you. It is the share I told you to save." The cook brought out the thigh and put it on the table in front of Saul. Samuel said, "Eat, this was saved just for you for this special time." So Saul and his servant ate with Samuel that day. After they finished eating, ... Samuel made a bed for Saul on the roof, and Saul went to sleep. Early the next morning, Samuel shouted to Saul on the roof and said, "Get up. I will send you on your way." Saul got up and went out of the house with Samuel.

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Now I could stop off here and talk about the first great king of Israel, who, when he was not making his reputation, he was trying to defend it. Non-the-less he was the right person to deliver Israel from being slaughtered by the Philistine. I could stop off here and tell you about a very humble prophet, a man to whom God seemed to want to tell everything in the finest detail. But both these have plenty of glory. Everyone who picks up a history book can read of their exploits. They don't need any more fame.

Instead I want to tell you about someone a bit more like you and me. This man got up in the morning and went to work. He was employed by Kish as a servant. The writer doesn't even consider him significant enough to mention his name. That morning he turned up at work he was told to go with Saul and attend to his needs. When Saul lost interest and wanted to go home, he simply used his skills and knowledge to make the suggestion *“You could go a little further and ask a seer.”*

That man's simple, every day suggestion changed the whole course of history. What came naturally to him was the link God needed to fulfil his purposes, and the servant didn't even know it. If this man had not been going about his ordinary business of making a living, history would be different today. Israel as a fledgling nation would have

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been swallowed up by the philistines because Saul would not have become king. You would certainly have never heard of Saul, and Samuel might still be praying for a king to deliver Israel to this day. Worse, the chosen genetic line of Jesus would have disappeared. At the end of that week, that servant went home with his wages. He had absolutely no idea of the consequences of his actions. He was just living his life as he knew how.

I don't know if you aspired to be great when you were young. I don't know if you think your life has been ordinary or insignificant, but I do know, the bible describes a time when one day you will walk through a very special set of city gates and into a very special city. And when you do there will be someone very special waiting - a Prophet Priest and King! He will say, '*I Have been expecting you, come with me --The table is set for you. Sit at the place prepared on the high table laid for you, ' He will say, 'A special portion has been set aside for you'.*

While you are sitting there you may see clearly for the first time how that seemingly insignificant daily routine you held for all those years of service, that seemingly insignificant conversation, that typically characteristic action you performed one day, changed the direction of someone's life and brought them into line with God's

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Kingdom plans.

5: Mid-life Crisis

David, said a very strange thing:

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of his house. From there he saw a woman bathing. She was very beautiful, so David made enquiries as to who she was. An officer answered, "That is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah the Hittite." David sent messengers to go and bring Bathsheba to him. She went to David, he had sexual relations with her, and then she went back to her house. Later, Bathsheba sent word to him saying, "I am pregnant."

David sent a message to Joab. "Send Uriah the Hittite to me." When Uriah came, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go home and relax." So Uriah left the king's palace. The king also sent a gift to Uriah. But Uriah did not go home. He slept outside the door of the king's palace, as the rest of the king's servants did. The servants told David, so David tried again. "You came from a long trip. Why did you not go home?" Uriah said to David, "The Holy Box and the soldiers of Israel and

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Judah are staying in tents. My lord Joab and my lord's officers are camping out in the field. So it is not right for me to go home to eat and drink and sleep with my wife. As surely as you live, I will not do this."

David quickly thought up plan B. "Stay here today. Tomorrow I will send you back to the battle." David got him drunk, but Uriah still did not go home. So David had to go with plan C.

The next morning David wrote a letter to Joab and made Uriah carry the letter. "Put Uriah on the front lines where the fighting is the hardest. Then leave him there alone, and let him be killed in battle." Joab ordered Uriah into an impossible battle where most of the men were killed, Uriah the Hittite was one of them.⁸⁶

Why David stayed at home is more often speculation than fact. Such speculation says David should have been out leading the fighting because it was the *'time when Kings were supposed to go to war.'* So, the argument goes, David's sin began because he chose the luxury of his home instead of being out fighting! I take such a conclusion with a pinch of salt. If David was born in one-thousand-and-thirty-five BC, and this event occurred in nine-eighty BC, that makes David around fifty-five years of age. Far

86 2 Sam 11:2 ff

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more likely in my book the incident with Ishbibenob occurred before David stayed home:

*A giant named Ishbibenob, who was carrying a spear that weighed about seven and a half pounds and who was wearing a new sword, thought he could kill David. But Abishai son of Zeruiah came to David's help, attacked the giant, and killed him. Then David's men made David promise that he would never again go out with them to battle. "You are the hope of Israel, and we don't want to lose you," they said.*⁸⁷

None-the-less, I have to accept the seed of sin started here but not for the reasons speculated. David was middle aged now and had to face the fact his vitality was slipping away. To have it reinforced by younger soldiers is an ego blow. Ego blows are always easy targets for sin. David had always had an eye for the girls and his sense of self-worth certainly played a part in his decision to enquire after Bathsheba. I am sure he justified his decision on the grounds she might be single and it was perfectly in order for him as king to add another concubine to his Harem. The norms of those days allowed that sort of thing, and anyway, Sovereigns always regarded themselves to be Popes under God. Indeed the power of life and death was theirs to command as they chose, and many used such powers without a whiff of conscience.

87 2 Sa m 21:16

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As I see it, David sinned against Bathsheba, sinned against Uriah, sinned against Joab, sinned against the solders that were sent on a suicide mission, sinned against Samuel and sinned against his country by trying to cover the event up. Strange then that in his confession to God he says:

*I have sinned against you O God, only against you have I done what you consider evil.*⁸⁸

David, how can you say that? You took another man's wife, committed adultery, lied, plotted evil, and then killed. David's act of repentance came out in his remorse at the death of the child. The realization that this child was to die for his transgression, (just as Nathan the prophet had said he would), devastated him. He admitted he was the one who deserved to die not the child. He pleaded in vain for God to intervene. Sense the utter devastation in David's heart when he realises that it was his sin that caused the death of several men and a child.

Sins that can be shrugged off in a young person are not so easily dealt with in middle age, middle age brings with it a deeper realization of the consequences of sin than youth does. Whether it is the indulgences of a misspent youth catching up, or middle-age ailments transpiring from

88 *Psa 51:4*

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youthful neglect I cannot say, but somehow sin becomes more serious in the middle-aged mind. Flashbacks to youthful pranks and near misses make middle-age people shudder on recollection. With a grateful heart that God should have spared us from the results of sins past comes a better understanding of how sins consequences affect others. Understand how God needed to lay all our sin on Jesus and why his death is the result of our sin. Read again the psalm of a middle aged man in Psalm 51:

God, be merciful to me because of your faithful love. Because of your great compassion, erase all the wrongs I have done. Scrub away my guilt. Wash me clean from my sin. I know I have done wrong. I constantly regurgitate my sin all the time. I did what you said is wrong. You are the one I have sinned against. I say this so that people will know that I am wrong and you are right. What you decided is fair. I was born to do wrong, a sinner before I left my mother's womb. Remove my sin and make me pure. Wash me until I am whiter than snow! Let me hear sounds of joy and happiness again. Let the bones you crushed be happy again. Don't look at my sins. Erase them all. God, create a pure heart in me, and make my spirit strong again. Don't push me away or take your Holy Spirit from me. Your help made me so happy. Give me that joy again. Make my spirit strong and ready to obey you. I will teach the guilty how you want them to live, and

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the sinners will come back to you. God, spare me from the punishment of death. My God, you are the one who saves me! Let me sing about all the good things you do for me! My Lord, I will open my mouth and sing your praises! You don't really want sacrifices, or I would give them to you The sacrifice that God wants is a humble spirit. God, you will not turn away someone who comes with a humble heart and is willing to obey you.

6: Take Time Out

The daughter of Herodias came to the party and danced. When she danced, Herod and the people eating with him were very pleased. So King Herod said to the girl, "I will give you anything you want." He promised her, "Anything you ask for I will give to you—even half of my kingdom." The girl went to her mother and asked, "What should I ask King Herod to give me?" Her mother answered, "Ask for the head of John the Baptizer." So right then the girl went back in to the king. She said to him, "Please give me the head of John the Baptizer. Bring it to me now on a plate." King Herod was very sad, but he didn't want to break the promise he had made to her in front of his guests. So he sent a soldier to cut off John's head and bring it to him. The soldier went and cut off John's head in the prison. He brought the head back on a plate and gave

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it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. John's followers heard about what happened, so they came and got John's body and put it in a tomb.

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

The apostles Jesus had sent out came back to him. They gathered around him and told him about all they had done and taught. Jesus and his followers were in a very busy place. There were so many people that he and his followers did not even have time to eat. He said to them, "Come with me. We will go to a quiet place to be alone. There we will get some rest." So Jesus and his followers went away alone. They went in a boat to a place where no one lived.⁸⁹

Jesus, in telling his disciples to 'come apart for a while', is implying that, if they didn't, they would come apart permanently. Although Jesus seems to have a very much higher level of tolerance before he reached his human limits, he still had limits. But his spiritual senses also had a concern for the limits of his disciples. He stretched them to their limit but never beyond.

In normal circumstances guidance is common sense. Please note, there is no grand visitation of the angel Michael to tell Jesus to call his disciples aside. Jesus, noticing his disciples were tired and in need of rest and called them aside to a quiet place to rest. Indeed, Jesus

89 *Mark 6:22 ff*

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himself must have felt the pressure having just heard the news of the beheading of his cousin John. Immediately afterwards he preached to the crowd and then, at his first opportunity, pushed out on the lake for some seclusion.

In a brief scan through the gospels we can see Jesus took action again and again, sometimes out of compassion for others, (as when he fed the crowds), sometimes when he felt pressure to behave within cultural expectation. These subtle pressures were just the same in Jesus as they are in us. Even going to the synagogue and keeping feasts are a pressure when you have a clear calling to set up a kingdom and only three years to do it. Jesus lived fully aware of political, peer and social pressure. We know these went through his mind from comments he made about avoiding Jerusalem or taking a different route on his preaching tours. He clearly had these concerns running round in his head because he knew the authorities were planning his death. Surely that played on his mind.

Then there were personal needs requiring him to get away from crowds. He knew his mission would fail without prayer, he certainly needed to read his scriptures. Have you noticed how often his teaching can be traced back to an Old Testament passage of scripture. Maybe its just me but it seems that the subjects Jesus preached on during the day started in a passage of scripture he meditated on that

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morning. Preparation for teaching does not just come out of the head by desperation it comes out of preparation and meditation. Time to prepare was scarce when there is always someone waiting for your attention. As Scripture has it, *'he was tempted in all manner as we are -yet he sinned not'*

Jesus was called to the work of saving the whole world. He only had three years of ministry to do it. So, what sort of strategic sense is it to avoid crowds and cities when you are building a world wide church? That's not how the world does it! If you want to be the greatest leader you go where the crowds are and shout your propaganda. Today, you get yourself photographed with a crowd of smiling supporters and claim credit for things you have had no hand in. Today you publicise where you have been and ensure the press gets a copy. Jesus had a strategy based on getting away to pray then spend a large part of the day walking from one village to another with his closest followers. Relatively few moments of his day were used for preaching and teaching crowds .

How does Jesus' method compare with your small goals or mission? Truth tells us then, we see ourselves through our own ego- whereas, Jesus saw himself in his Father's eyes. We see success as shouting loudest in the crowd to get our interests heard. We have to get 'them' to see how important our priorities and values are. We have to work

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harder, strategize better and argue louder if we see our mission through the eyes of our own ego.

Jesus saw an eternal plan in which quietness and confidence is essential. He knew it would not be finalised in his life time of thirty-three years. I am not sure I could follow a Messiah who ended his ministry as a burned out wreck, that would make me think the salvation of the world depended on my human effort. Better to see salvation's plan through the eyes of eternity in which I play my part. Better to see my small part in a picture of an eternal plan. Never see your calling as a three year mission that you only you must accomplish, you will burn out before your time is up.

7: Retirement

Elijah reached the pinnacle of his mission when he challenged the priests of Baal to a contest. Uncharacteristically, we see him on a high trip, mocking the priests as they cut themselves to pieces trying to get a wooden god to respond. After this climax came the low. Let 1 Kings chapter 19 tell the story.

Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah and said, "I swear that by this time tomorrow, you will be just as dead as those prophets. When Elijah heard this, he was afraid

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and ran away to save his life. When he was exhausted he sat down under a bush and asked to die. He said, "I have had enough, LORD! Take my life.

Then Elijah lay down under the bush and went to sleep. For several days he ate and drank and then went back to sleep until he was fit enough to travel the long journey to Mount Horeb.

Once there, Elijah went into a cave and spent his nights. Each night he was woken by the LORD saying, "Elijah, why are you here?" ... one night the LORD said to Elijah, "Go, stand in front of me on the mountain. I, the LORD, will pass by you." Then a very strong wind blew. It broke large rocks in front of the cave. After that wind, came an earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire. And after the fire, God spoke in a quiet, gentle voice asking again "Elijah, why are you here?" ... "Go back, anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Then anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel. Next, anoint Elisha son of Shaphat, he will be be your successor" ⁹⁰

Someone once defined democracy as '*government by the loudest voice*'. Small wonder then, it is so hard to hold on to the guidance of God when the voices of media, politics, or sales shout so loud. Like loud mouthed Jezebel they take the stage screaming threats at the top of

90 1Ki 19:1 ff

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their voices. Jezebel's shouts put fear into the heart of this seasoned prophet.

The prime duty of a Christian is to hear what God wants to say, not to hear what other people think God wants to say. Scripture is full of people who have mistakenly thought they were doing what God wanted. The two exorcists took it upon themselves to call out evil spirits in the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches. Imagine their surprise when the spirits answered back '*Jesus we know and Paul we know but who are you?*'⁹¹

Elijah in our passage, Elijah is frustrated by the thought that his zealous efforts have been rejected by God only because of Jezebel's loud threats at him. He is not the only one in scripture to be deceived, Martha boiled inside because no one noticed her efforts in the kitchen. Eleven brothers mistook God's plan for Joseph as just being their father's favouritism, so they sold him to some Egyptians. Eleven others, called disciples, completely missed what God was doing when their leader was captured by soldiers in the garden of Gethsemane before he was led away to a trial and a cross.

Truth is, God whispers more than he shouts. People usually shout loudest when they are themselves most

91 *Acts 19 :15 ff*

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afraid. My first-aid teacher had it right; At a disaster scene, those shouting the loudest are the least hurt, go first to those who lie still and can only whisper. In a world made out of material, the five senses shout louder to us than the spirit's whisper, that makes the spirit harder to hear. In Elijah's case, Jezebel had shouted revenge so loud it reverberated round Elijah's mind for a fortnight. It caused him to lose sleep, to feel exhausted, to run away, He meditated on fear until he was exhausted, ever had times like that?

The only way God could get Elijah's attention again was to take him aside, slow him down, minimise the five senses by putting him in a cave, quieten his emotions and mind by restoring his sleep pattern and give him sensible eating habits. Once he was quietened within himself, surprise, surprise, he could hear the still small voice again.

When we get run down and fearful, we can guarantee peace will go out of the window. Neglecting the physical side of human needs is the easiest way to destroy the peace of God in your life. But there are other causes too. One thing is certain, if you loose your peace you loose guidance with it.

I am sure you have all heard of it. Duck syndrome I think it is called. The duck glides across a pond seemingly effortless while underneath its feet are paddling madly.

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Freud popularised the phrase, '*all behaviour is caused*'. Our inner conflicts are certainly a major cause of behavioural manifestation. Martha's outburst from the kitchen erupted because she was paddling madly while others sat listening to Jesus, nobody seem to notice her need. The prodigal's brother had an outburst was because he had worked faithfully for his father without being noticed or commended. After all he also had an ego and his brother's return was the action that brought it to a head. He thought that rebellion was being rewarded over faithfulness. If we are confident of our call from God, we take our commendation from Him. If our ego relies on praise from fellow beings we will become insecure as this is rarely sufficient to satisfy. Knowing our place in God's heart gives the confidence we need to maintain inner peace, seeking our own ego demands destroys our peace because it is always seeking higher praise.

Peace is active not passive. I walk into my garage and there lies my car snug from the snow outside under a blanket and I say, 'It is at peace"! Not a bit of it! When the engine is running, oil is flowing freely, the plugs are sparking and I can put my foot on the accelerator and it pulls away smoothly- then it is at peace.

What has this to do with hearing the voice of God? Inner conflicts get between our calling and ego to prevent us

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from hearing the still small voice. Our inner ears are tuned to our peers and society norms, they are not listening to our spirit. One story always amazes me. Jesus appears to require little sleep and little food to sustain his physical energy. He is always up first, and when his disciples are hungry he is still cool. And yet, when Jesus was being squashed by a crowd and his disciples were getting up tight, a woman who wanting healing touched Him. Pandemonium reigned all around but a still small voice reigned in the heart of Jesus. He had tuned into the spirit not the crowd. The voice said, 'someone needs your attention'. The disciples were amazed saying 'Master, look at the crowd and you ask a stupid question like that'? If there had been an ounce of ego conflict in Jesus, he would have missed not only the still small voice, but also His calling. Tiredness, hunger and pressures of all sorts could not take away from that spiritual priority built into Jesus. Can this really be learned? Or is it something unique to Jesus?

Jesus knew his limits and lived within them.

I can hear someone say, 'but He was God, he had no limits'. Sorry but He did.

Jesus knew his limits and lived within them. I can hear someone say, 'but He was God, he had no limits'. Sorry but He did. When he was asked, '*when will the kingdom*

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be restored?' he replied, *'That is for the father only to know.*⁹² When he was asked to perform miracles in his own town he replied he could not because a prophet has no honour in his own town⁹³ The physical limited even Jesus. Fully aware of this Jesus would often see the disciples over stretching themselves. He would say, *'Come apart for a while'*.

8: Barzillai's Lament

A few years ago, or at least I like to think it was just a few years ago, my wife Anne and I realized we were approached retirement. Being pro-active we thought a bit of research and a forward looking plan might be useful. At first we thought a helpful hint about a few courses on the subject might be something to follow up. Discounting those with ridiculously off-putting phrases such as *'third age'* and *'Silver age'*, we settled for a conference for the over sixties called *'The best is yet to come'*.

As soon as we arrived we realised our mistake. Both the main speakers were in their early thirties, both spoke as though this was their third cycle round in life! Both had the mistaken idea that all pensioners needed was a pep talk to revive their teenage dreams. Both were looking for

92 *Matt 24:6*

93 *Lk 4: 23-24*

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pioneer missionaries to go to the far end of the earth now the children were off their hands. Without any thought to declining energy levels or creeping aches and pains, the first speaker kicked off with a thundering sermon on Caleb.

Remember Caleb? The spy who came back from Israel with big bundles of giant dates and Pomegranates He was one of the two annoying loud-mouths with the, “*the bigger they are the harder they fall*” attitude. At the age of eighty when Joshua was allocating territory he hadn't changed *'Give me the mountains I'll kick the enemy out!'*

Well, I for one had no inclination to climb mountains with a sword in my hand chopping legs off giants to bring them down to size. Don't hear me wrong - I do get quite jealous of people like that, but people like that don't need to go to conferences, they just get on with it. I sometimes imagine if everyone in Israel had been built with the same attitude, Israel would have descended into civil war trying to obtain this prime piece of land. They would have fought each other for it leaving Hebron's inhabitation to finish off the remaining exhausted tribe.

After coffee break we came back for a second pensioner bashing session. This time it was about Moses! Moses the eighty year old who became prime minister. I suppose I can think of a few eighty-year-old Presidents around the

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world. They have been in power for years and built a power base and loyal army to keep them in power. How many eighty year old prime ministers can you name? Besides, I had just had thirty-five years in minor leadership rolls, I was tired of doing leadership, its nothing but hassle believe you me! In this day and age, churches are looking for a young vicar with a guitar, a spouse (and perhaps two well behaved under fives in tow), to lead the church. Whatever, one thing they must have is plenty of energy and vision! I certainly did not relish that sort of retirement.

Some time after that conference, once I had stopped licking my wounds, I was introduced to Barzillai. Hands up if you have ever heard a sermon about Barzillai!

Barzillai comes on the scene in two-Samuel, around chapter seventeen. Barzillai had been the village blacksmith most of his life. He had worked hard and put a bit aside for his retirement. He lived in a little village the other side of the Jordan river on the edge of the desert. I remember from a few years back when we went to Israel, we saw the rickety iron bridge over the river Jordan. It was just wide enough to take one small car at a time so long as there were no pedestrians. On the other side you could see the narrow lane leading to a village on the edge of the desert. Barzillai retired somewhere just there,

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to a small holding with a couple of sheep, some goats and some vegetables.

Alexander Whyte's commentary says Barzillai was:

'a ripe old saint's whose qualities were all character, venerable, loyal, courteous, hospitable and with passionate love for the place and people where he lived.

Now I might aspire to something like that. He was the sort of person we would know nothing about had King David not been exiled.

You may remember David's son Absalom led a coup for the throne of Israel. He persuaded the hawks in the army that his father should retire and he should be king. So David and his followers had to leave the country a bit quick. It was clear that Absalom was a mean man and would spare no one who was loyal to his father and for sure he would have killed his own father also. So David and his small army left Jerusalem, crossed over Jordan into the desert.

After David had crossed the Jordan, his men hid in the caves of the desert. Barzillai, noticed them one day on his way back to the village. The writer of Samuel tells us that for no other reason than he saw *"The people were*

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hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness." ⁹⁴ he went back to his village, turned out his sheds, found some old cooking pots and camp beds, then persuaded two of his village neighbours to do the same.

The three neighbours filled a cart containing beds, basins, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans, lentils, honey and curds, and took it to David. While they were there, Barzillai also arranged for a regular supply of sheep and cheese. David never forgot Barzillai's kindness and the two became great friends.

Well, when the coup was squashed and Absalom had been killed, The people of Israel asked David to come back home. On his way back, he called in on Barzillai who happened to be celebrating his eightieth birthday. In case you think I exaggerate, we pick up the story in 2 Samuel 19:

"Now Barzillai the Gileadite had come down from Rogelim; and he went on with the king to the Jordan, to escort David to the Jordan. Barzillai celebrated his eightieth birthday; and he had provided the king with food while he stayed at in the desert; for he was a prudent man. And the king said to Barzillai, "Come over with me, and I will provide for you with me in Jerusalem." "But Barzillai replied to the king, come

94 2 Samuel 17:26-29

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now my king, "How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I and my walking stick will slow you down. I am this day eighty years old; can I accompany the king in his pleasantries? Can I taste or chew what I eat these days?

Can I still hear the voice of singing men let alone the top notes of singing temple women? Can your servant keep late nights these days? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. But why should the king recompense me with such a reward for doing what he was brought up to do?

Pray let your servant return, that I may encourage those that pass by until I die in my own village, near the grave of my father and my mother and my friends and neighbours. "Then all the people went over the Jordan, and the king went over; and the king kissed Barzillai and blessed him, and he returned to his own home." ⁹⁵

You know you don't keep much in your old age. you don't keep your energy. you don't keep your agility. you don't always keep your own teeth. But you do get to keep your character.

95 2 Samuel 19:31-39

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You know you don't keep much in your old age. you don't keep your energy. you don't keep your agility. you don't always keep your own teeth. But you do get to keep your character. Barzillai was not one for the front line battle but he could clearly be helpful. I think I might be able to aspire to something like that. Barzillai had been brought up on the more simple verses of scripture like :

*He has shown you what you should do and what is required of you - love mercy and walk humbly before his God.*⁹⁶

So, lets face it, it looks like the choice is stark. If I am not going to run for President of the denomination or perhaps Archbishop, I will have to conform to the modern idea that the 'grey hairs' of the congregation sit in the back row, smile at the children, pray a little about things which they are ill informed and say nothing about the changes going on in the church. There seems to be little in between.

But there is a twist

When King David came to the end of his life he called for the young whipper-snapper prince named Solomon to come to his bed side. Solomon was in his early thirties at the time. David made him sit down and listen to one final

96 Mic 6:8

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sermon.

“Show kindness to the family of Barzillai the Gileadite ...

Why should you show kindness to the Barzillai's of your congregation?

... because if it had not been for Barzillai and his neighbours Solomon, you would not have had a throne to sit on”⁹⁷

97 1 Kings 2:7

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"Who can understand the human heart? There is nothing else so deceitful"⁹⁸

We cannot look at human frailty without looking within ourselves. We may not be able to do much with the physical characteristics we inherit but God does appear to hold us responsible for the way we handle our behaviour.

*And now, please let your healing power be great as you promised, saying, 'The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, re-visiting the sins of the fathers past to the children, even to the third and the fourth generation.'*⁹⁹

1: Blessings and curses

Take Moses as a case study. He certainly appears to have inherited a strong healthy body; to be so active at eighty would suggest that. As a baby he was attractive; the

98 Jer 17:9

99 Num 14: 18 The people remind God of His promise in Exodus 20 :5

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princess' desire to adopt him suggests that. But he also inherited an impulsive nature and a bad temper which plagued him for most of his life.

He could do nothing about his good looks, nothing about his ancestral nationality, colour of eyes, colour of skin and also nothing about his heathy disposition. But God did hold him responsible for his inherited impulsiveness and quick temper. Moses wrestled with these defects when he was young because they seemed to direct his life direction. The incident with the Egyptian soldier is an example of this. When he saw the soldier beating an Israelite slave the conflict within him resulted in an impulsive action for the defence of the Israelite slave. But his temper drove him too far and he killed the Egyptian. The outcome was to make him a recluse by way of escape. But where did this impulsive temper come from?

Moses was a Levite. If we return to Genesis and the final blessing of Jacob before he died we see the genetic predictions given by Jacob to his children. Maybe you will remember the time just before Jacob died. Jacob was old and knew his time was coming. So he did what the patriarchs did in those days, he lined his family up and in a ceremony, he pronounced a blessing over each. When Jacob arrived at his second and third sons he linked them together with in one prophetic blessing :

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"Simeon and Levi are brothers. They use their weapons to commit violence. I will not join in their secret talks, Nor will I take part in their meetings, For they killed people in anger And they crippled bulls for sport. A curse be on their anger, because it is so fierce¹⁰⁰.

Thus Moses, being a Levite, inherited a short temper and impulsive nature with which he struggled all his life. For the most part he seemed to have brought it under control. I am sure the rebellious people under his charge would have broken many leaders of perfect temperament. There were signs of temper raising its head during the wilderness period, such as the time he smashed the tablets on the way down from the mountain or, the time he made the Israelites drink the crushed up golden idols in some water. But Generally we see him good natured and compassionate.

One incident stands out though, remember the incident when he struck the rock in anger?

Since the community was without water, they came together to confront Moses and Aaron. The people complained to Moses and said, "If only we had died

100 Gen 49:5ff

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when the other Israelites died in the LORD'S presence! Did you bring the LORD'S assembly into this desert just to have us and our animals die here? Why did you make us leave Egypt and bring us into this terrible place? This is no place to plant crops. Even figs, grapes, and pomegranates won't grow here. And there's no water to drink!" Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting. Immediately, they bowed with their faces touching the ground, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them.

The LORD said to Moses, "Take your staff, then you and your brother Aaron gather the community. Right before their eyes, tell the rock to give up its water. In this way you will give the community water from the rock for them and their animals to drink." Moses took his staff out of the tent in the LORD'S presence as he had been commanded. Then Moses and Aaron assembled the community in front of the rock and said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring water out of this rock for you?" Moses raised his hand and hit the rock twice with the staff. Water came pouring out, and all the people and their animals drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "You didn't trust me! You didn't show the Israelites how holy I am! So you will not bring this congregation into the land I'm giving them." ¹⁰¹

101 Num 20:3 ff

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Personally, I thought this most unfair given the circumstances. But no matter what my opinion, I must draw the conclusion that God holds us responsible for our actions whether they are genetically provoked or not. The punishment was not quite as harsh as it sounded though. The next part of journey into the promised land did call for a younger leader and Moses' reluctance to delegate or play second fiddle would have been a much harsher punishment to endure. In any case, if Jesus' words about Abraham in John 8:56 are an example to go by, Moses had a ringside seat to view the triumphal entry.

father Abraham was pleased to see that my day was coming. He saw it and was happy."

I also seem to remember Moses, Elijah and Jesus made a threesome on the mountain top in Jesus' day,¹⁰² so he was still around to see what was going on.

2: Welcome Home

God said to Jacob, "Go to the town of Bethel. That is where I appeared to you when you were running away from your brother Esau. Live there and make an altar to honor me as El, the God who appeared to you." So Jacob told his family and all the other people with

102 Matt 17:4

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him, "Destroy all these foreign gods that you have. Make yourselves pure. Put on clean clothes. We will leave here and go to Bethel. There I will build an altar to the God who has always helped me during times of trouble. He has been with me wherever I have gone."

So the people gave Jacob all the foreign gods they had, and they gave him all the rings they were wearing in their ears. He buried everything under an oak tree near the town called Shechem. Then Jacob and his sons left that place. The people in the surrounding cities wanted to follow and kill them, but God filled them with such great fear that they did not go after them. So Jacob and his people went to Luz, which is now called Bethel. It is in the land of Canaan. Jacob built an altar there. He named the place "El Bethel." Jacob chose this name because that is the place where God first appeared to him when he was running from his brother. Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died there. They buried her under the oak tree at Bethel. They named that place Allon Bacuth. When Jacob came back from Paddan Aram, God appeared to him again. God blessed Jacob and said to him, "Your name is Jacob, but I will change that name. You will no longer be called Jacob. Your new name will be Israel." So God named him Israel. God said to him, "I am God All-Powerful, and I give you this blessing: Have many children and grow into a great nation. Other nations and other kings will come out of you. I gave Abraham and Isaac some special land. Now I give the land to

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you and to all your people who will live after you." Then God left that place. Jacob set up a memorial stone there. He made the rock holy by pouring wine and oil on it. This was a special place because God spoke to Jacob there, and Jacob named the place Bethel. The Deaths of Rachel and Isaac

Jacob and his group left Bethel. Before they came to Ephrath, Rachel began giving birth to her baby. She was having a lot of trouble with this birth. She was in great pain. When her nurse saw this, she said, "Don't be afraid, Rachel. You are giving birth to another son." Rachel died while giving birth to the son. Before dying, she named the boy Benoni. But Jacob called him Benjamin. Rachel was buried on the road to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).¹⁰³

At least twenty-one years before this passage, Jacob met God for the first time. He wrestled Him, refusing to submit to him at Bethel. But none-the-less, God had been with him all that time and blessed him. Uncle Laban witnessed to that¹⁰⁴. Jacob was born with an inner compulsion to deceive and grab, that's what his name meant. He had no reason to give up his ways, uncle Laban

103 Gen 35 1-19

104 Gen 30:27 "I have learned by divination that Yahweh has blessed me because of you."

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was more devious than Jacob. Indeed Jacob had inherited the genes from the same ancestor. His grandfather was Nahor¹⁰⁵. All Nahor's children had grown up learning and living deception and competition.

What Jacob could not see in his uncle or himself he saw in his children. Middle age does that in a person. On his journey to his uncle, he passed Bethel, Jacob had been grasping his treasured birthright tight in his hands and wrestled with God to keep it. Now, on his way back to Bethel he purifies himself before the journey. He jettisoned idols, put on clean clothes – no more wrestling, this time he was ready to surrender. You know, I think Jesus had read this passage the morning he taught the parable of the prodigal son. Leaving home in self confidence, squandering his birth right, recognising the folly of life, then returning home in humility a changed person.

Our conversion is the start of a journey that takes a lifetime to travel. We quickly learn that we cannot travel our new road while carrying a knapsack of the old world with us. Like Christian of Pilgrims Progress fame, the knapsack has to be jettisoned at the cross.

The further I travel the way the more I see the need to

¹⁰⁵ Nahor was Abraham's brother and very much the source of grasping and deceit Jacob inherited.

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change. Notice that there comes a time in our lives when we need to return to the cross to see our progress and re-evaluate our values. Pilgrim had to. Jacob had to. The Prodigal son had to. Is it time for you to travel back to Bethel? Bethel actually means 'the home of God'. It may take a bit of humiliation and even a bit of trauma but there is always a great big smile and 'Welcome Home' when you arrive at your Bethel.

3: Line of Judah

Acts 3:25 ... And he said to Abraham “ All nations on earth will be blessed by one of your descendent”

One thing I notice from scripture is God does not have too much respect for the culture of any age. In Abraham's day there was a strong custom that the firstborn male carried the line of blessing. This tradition has raised its head many times in history. In the twentieth-century it has been necessary to amend laws allowing the ascent of the crown to include female descendants, but it has not altered the assumption that it is the eldest sibling of the family by tradition that carries the privilege. The eldest has not always been the most suitable person to carry the line as history has shown. Non-the-less the tradition was so important in Abraham's day the midwife would have a piece of scarlet thread in her tool box, to tie around the

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first limb to appear.

Tama had a difficult birth. Perez put his hand out first then took it in

The time came for Tamar to give birth. She was going to have twins. While she was giving birth, one baby put his hand out. The nurse tied a red string on the hand and said, "This baby was born first." But that baby pulled his hand back in, so the other baby was born first. So the nurse said, "You were able to break out first!" So they named him Perez. After this, the other baby was born. This was the baby with the red string on his hand. They named him Zerah. ¹⁰⁶

Zarah, (which means breach), came out first. But Perez was said to be the firstborn. Perez was five-greats grandson of David. As far as God was concerned, Isaac carried the line from Abraham but he was second-born, Ishmael was first. When Isaac had twins, he tried very hard to make sure that Esau the eldest carried the line, but by the hand of God and a little bit of wifely trickery, Jacob the second-born carried the promised line. God does not follow convention. Neither does God choose by merit. Jacob inherited a deceitful trait while Esau had a wife in every port and he worshipped each of their god's in turn. Neither qualified by their own merit.

106 Gen 38:28

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If God did not follow a convention and did not choose by quality, what then was God looking for in the promised line? Well things get a bit more complicated in the next generation because Jacob had twelve sons to choose from. Quiet honestly, his fatherly skills left the whole family in a mess. Two competing wives produced twelve independent minded brothers. Each fought for attention which made for one very unhappy home. One Jewish rabbi wrote, '*Jewish people are like everybody else only more so!*' That is what is so amazing about God's plan for redemption. We are all the sort of people God intended to redeem through this line, yet not one is worthy of such a deed. It is just as well the covenant was made with Abraham and could not be rescinded until Messiah comes.

Just before his death, Jacob lined up all twelve boys, not only to pass on a blessing to each but to appoint the son through which Messiah would come. The eldest was the first to hear the bad news:

Jacob may have been party to a bit of selfish scheming himself in his younger days, but violence and viciousness were most certainly a bridge to far for even him.

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"Reuben, you're my first born of my strength, and the first fruit of my vitality.

You excel in rank and excel in power. But you're as undisciplined as a roaring river, so you won't succeed, you have no self control, you got in your father's bed, defiled it,¹⁰⁷

So it looks like the second born carries the line again doesn't it? Simeon the second-born and Levi the third-born had formed a mutual support group within this chaotic family. They were as thick as thieves and as callous as yobs, they were plotters and schemers. What did Jacob have to say about them?

"Simeon and Levi are brothers. They are violent with their swords. I will not join their secret meetings. I will not take part in their evil plans. They have killed people out of anger and crippled animals for fun. Their anger is so strong that it is a curse. They are too cruel when they are angry. They will not get their own land in the land of Jacob. They will be spread throughout Israel."¹⁰⁸

Jacob may have been party to a bit of selfish scheming himself in his younger days, but violence and viciousness

107 Gen 49:3 ff

108 Gen 49:5 ff

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were most certainly a bridge to far for even him. Once Jacob had prophesied '*they will be spread throughout Israel*', it was left to the wisdom of Moses to see this came about. First, when Moses split the nation up into four groups for travelling through the desert, he separated these two into different sections.¹⁰⁹ Then he looked for creative ways to divert their cruel streak. Tribe-Levi was given most of the hard manual tasks to divert their energy - they were to pack and carry the tabernacle. He gave Levi the job of slaughtering the animals for sacrifice under a strict code of conduct. Then, in the promised land, he gave them no land but spread them over its length and breadth to perform as officials just as had been prophesied.

Simeon's tribe declined in numbers over a short period of time and played no further significant role in history.¹¹⁰ Levi was later given the priestly line, becoming the ancestors of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Imagine if Jesus had come down through this line. What a different Jesus he would have been. These were the people that Jesus had to speak against so often. So then, it looks like the second and third sons disqualified themselves.

Well what about Joseph then? Now this sounds more

109 *Best to read the whole of Numbers chapters 1 and 2 for clarification on this.*

110 *Decline in population from Numbers ch 1 :23 (59,000) to Numbers ch. 26: 14 (22,200)*

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promising doesn't it. The more the story unfolds the more you think it could be Joseph. Joseph was the favourite son. Joseph had the dreams that he would one day be big and powerful. No matter in what circumstances he found himself he rose to the top of the tree. He had experience of ruling the most powerful nation in the world. This man had far more experience and power than Moses. When Jacob's wheel chair was pushed along to Joseph I am sure he smiled. Then, with a twinkle in his eye he took the double portion due to first-born Reuben and bestowed it upon Joseph. *'Ephraim and Manasseh will have equal blessing'* he said, as he swapped his hands over and laid them on their head to the protest of Joseph. *'No This is the first-born'* said he. But Jacob knew what he was doing. Ephraim did produce a king from his line, his name was Jeroboam. Jeroboam was a king who lead Israel deep into Idolatry. Manasseh on the other hand, became so obsessed with wealth and comfort that he was the first tribe to be swept away into Syria. So Joseph's line could not produce the Messiah.

Jacob was pushed on down the line until he came to Judah. When he stopped in front of Judah The first thing he did was to take Joseph's dreams and applied them to Judah:

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Gen 49:8 "Your brothers will praise you and bow down to you, Judah. Your hand will be at the throat of your enemies, and your father's children will bow down to you. ... The sceptre will never depart from Judah, nor a ruler's staff from between his feet, until the One comes, who owns them both, and to him will belong the allegiance of nations.

Seriously? This guy Judah is as bad as the rest. When Judah got a wife for his son he entered a covenant with both her and her family. Tamar would leave her family and he Judah would take care of her for the rest of her life. That's how it was in those days, it is how society organised itself then. The covenant should never be broken because it was the fabric of society. but Judah broke that covenant without a thought when his son died. Judah sent her back to her family to fend for herself which was a mark of disgrace. Surely that would disqualify him from the promised line?

Tamar however, knew Judah's weakness for prostitutes and hatched a plan to redeem her rights. When Judah was away from home he was vulnerable. So, disguising herself as a prostitute she solicited him on his sheep shearing trip at Timnah.

Tamar always wore clothes that showed that she was a widow. But at sheep shearing time she knew Judah

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would come, putting on some different clothes and covering her face with a veil she sat on the roadside and waited for him. Judah saw her, but he thought that she was a prostitute. So he went to her and said, "Let me have sex with you." She said, "How much will you give me?" Judah answered, "I will send you a young goat from my flock." She answered, "I agree to that. But first you must give me something to keep until you send me the goat. Give me your seal and its string and your walking stick." Judah gave these things to her. ... Later, Judah sent his friend Hirah to Enaim to give the prostitute the goat he promised, but Hirah could not find her. When he asked for her, the men answered, "There has never been a prostitute here." So Judah's friend went back to Judah and said, "I could not find the woman. The men who live in that place said that there was never a prostitute there." Judah said, "Let her keep the things. I don't want people to laugh at us. I tried to give her the goat, but we could not find her. That is enough."

About three months later, someone told Judah, "Your daughter-in-law Tamar sinned like a prostitute, and now she is pregnant." Then Judah said, "Take her out and burn her." The men went to Tamar to kill her, but she sent a message to her father-in-law that said, "The man who made me pregnant is the man who owns these things. Look at them. Whose are they? Whose special seal and string is this? Whose walking stick is this?"

Chapter 6: Nurtured Nature

Judah repented and said, "She is right. I was wrong. She is far more honourable than I ¹¹¹

Two things happened after this. The first was when Jacob received an insight into the required character and purpose of the Messiah. It happened when he went on a retreat to the Well-of-Oaths at Beer-Sheba. The Well-of-Oaths had been dug on the boundary of Abraham's land by Abraham. It was there that Abraham sacrificed seven lambs as an oath-covenant between Abimeleck and himself. He would not attack Abimeleck and Abimeleck would never cross this boundary line. The Well-of-Oaths was also where God provided water for Ishmael. On that occasion God promised Ishmael also would live to be the father of many nations. Close by this well, Isaac was given that famous promise, '*My son, God will provide for himself the lamb of sacrifice*' while on his way to be sacrificed. On this particular retreat Jacob himself met with God at the Well-of-Oaths.

God spoke to, "Jacob! Jacob!" "Here I am!" Jacob replied. "I'm God, of your ancestors. Don't be afraid to go down to Egypt, because I'm going to turn you into a mighty nation there.

I Am going down with you to Egypt, and I Am most certainly going to bring you back here again..¹¹²

111 Gen 38:13 ff

112 Gen 46:2 ff

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Jacob could not fail to understand that this God was a God prepared to stand as surety for his people. So a little later, when his sons came to him to lay out this scenario he was ready to surrender to the circumstances:

“Look, if we don't go to Egypt to buy grain we will die of starvation. If we do go down to Egypt without Benjamin Joseph says he will treat us as spies and we will die.”

Jacob said, “you are not taking Benjamin”. Judah stood up and said “Send the young man with me, otherwise not only we brothers will die with our families but you also. I offer myself as the lad's guarantee. If I don't bring him back and present him to you, I personally will bear the consequences forever.”

They did go down, when they got there Judah was tested on that promise.

Joseph said take the grain and return home but the youngest will remain here with me. Judah immediately stepped up to the mark and said, “Sir I pledged my own life as a guarantor of the lad. I told my father, 'If I don't bring him back to you, you can blame me forever. Therefore, please allow me to remain as a slave to your Excellency, but let the young man go

Chapter 6: Nurtured Nature

*freely home*¹¹³

There you have it! Surely this was a Messianic trait. Surely Messiah must come from this line. Surely Messiah will be willing to lay down his life so others might be free. This is the line that produced the one who would willingly lay down his life. This line had seen the wonder of a ram substituted sacrificed. Now Judah was showing that same quality as he pledged his life to save another. The line of Judah has to be the right line.

The sceptre will never depart from Judah, nor a ruler's staff from between his feet, until One comes, who owns them both, and to him will belong the allegiance of nations.

113 Gen 44:30

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Sometimes we think of church as a doing word- 'Churching'! See, even my spelling checker didn't query that!

Going to church means a rota, a Sunday School lesson, a reading, a prayer, a mission, an outreach event etc. Of course, that has always been part of church since the days when Moses set up teams to raise and dismantle the tabernacle in the wilderness. But what is God looking for in his Church? If I read my Bible right it is not churching but Church – the congregating of His family. After all it is His party, even if the culture is ours.

What we sometimes forget is God created music, so He does not choose your taste or mine. God is ageless and so he is not fixed in the authorised version of the middle-ages nor the latest modern translation of the Bible. As the hackneyed joke has it, 'If the authorised version was good enough for Paul it is good enough for me'. God is not class or language or culture limited, so he is not bound by a litany or language any more than slang or 'happy clappy' congregations. No, all these things are cultural, we are comfortable in them, God is above them.

What God wants to give us is worship. No, that is not the

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wrong way round, what He wants to give us is worship. We get more benefits from worship than God does. His presence, His attention His revelation and His love, all come from Him to us when we worship. There is much more besides, but you get the picture.

What God wants from us is based on what He wants to give us. By conforming to what he asks, we gain so much more because God only requires our co-operation in order to bless us. That is the difference between works and faith. Those that try to be what God requires in order to please him are under works. Those that see that God only requires the best for us live under grace and faith. Take a look at some qualities God wants to grow in us and see why.

1: Motivation

There was a man named Ananias. His wife's name was Sapphira. Ananias sold some land he had, but he gave only part of the money to the apostles. He secretly kept some of the money for himself. His wife knew this, and she agreed with it. Peter said, "Ananias, why did you let Satan fill your mind with such an idea? You kept part of the money for yourself and lied about it to the Holy Spirit! Before you sold the field, it belonged to you, right? And even after you sold it, you could have used the money any way you

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wanted. How could you even think of doing such a thing? You lied to God, not to us!" When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. Some young men came and wrapped his body. They carried it out and buried it. And everyone who heard about this was filled with fear. ¹¹⁴

Motivation is the key in this passage. It's not about money. Peter makes it clear the property was theirs to dispose of as they wished. It is not about deception of the church. It is not about lying. Peter himself would have been disqualified if this was the criteria.

Peter defines their crime as, '*Conspiring together against the spirit of The Lord*', and, '*Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit*'. The words 'filled' and 'conspired' infer Satan had been in residence for some time. This was the final straw that 'netted' or captured the whole heart. Temptation is seldom instant. Sin creeps like the incoming tide on the sea shore; a little at a time.

Temptation is seldom instant. Sin creeps like the incoming tide on the sea shore; a little at a time.

2: Tenacity

114 Acts 5: 1-5

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And so, brothers and sisters, we are completely free to enter the Most Holy Place. We can do this without fear because of the blood sacrifice of Jesus. We enter through a new way that Jesus opened for us. It is a living way that leads through the curtain—Christ's body. And we have a great priest who rules the house of God. Sprinkled with the blood of Christ, our hearts have been made free from a guilty conscience, and our bodies have been washed with pure water. So come near to God with a sincere heart, full of confidence because of our faith in Christ. We must hold on to the hope we have, never hesitating to tell people about it. We can trust God to do what he promised. We should think about each other to see how we can encourage each other to show love and do good works. We must not quit meeting together, as some are doing. No, we need to keep on encouraging each other. This becomes more and more important as you see the Day getting closer. If we decide to continue sinning after we have learned the truth, then there is no other sacrifice that will take away sins. ¹¹⁵

You know, the phrase 'not give up' in the Greek actually means, '*do not leave in the lurch*'. It is a nautical term that describes a sailing boat heading into wind - which, of course, it cannot do. To keep the wind in the sails the boat has to sail as close to the wind as is possible. To do this it has to zig-zag, (called tacking). As the boat changes from

115 Hebrews 10 : 22- 25

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zig to zag the sails catch the wind on the reverse side, it makes the boat lurch. Lurching is necessary when a destination has a headwind. It needs tenacity to keep your eye on the destination and not want to set sails for an easier harbour. Consider then our boat named 'Church' heading into wind, bound for its targeted harbour. Why would some not want to leave the boat when it seems to be continually lurching?

Some of the crew might prefer plain sailing - a close hauled boat shifting through the waves with the wind at its side. This may give thrills as the boat speeds '*gunnel's under*' into the waves, that sort of church is exiting. However, that means changing the goal and putting into a different harbour from the given destination.

Some might prefer the wind at their back where the boat stays upright and smooth running. Plain sailing has no rocking in the boat and the wind is always at your back. However, that would mean a U-turn, never to reach your goal, it means going back to start.

Some might not see the importance of the harbour as the goal. Surely it makes no difference which harbour, any harbour will do. Such people view zig-zagging as pointless or just too difficult to achieve, so they choose another boat with an easier harbour.

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Some might see the harbour as a good aim, but do not take full account of the cost in a head wind. By not recognising a headwind, tacking just seems like a waste of time. Moses could have taken the people straight to the promised land but they would not be ready to inherit it. It took forty-years of tacking to prepare them for the right harbour.

So then, says Paul, in these verses from Hebrews are bullet points:

- 'Make sure everyone can see the Harbour goal' and owns it. (v22)
- 'Make sure everyone can see the wind direction' and is prepared to accommodate it.(v23)
- 'Encourage everyone even more as you get closer to your goal'.(v24)
- Above all, Stick at it – together!'(v25)

That is tenacity!

3: First Love

To the Church in Ephesus

"Write this to the angel of the church in Ephesus:

"Here is a message from the one who holds the seven

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stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. "I know what you do, how hard you work and never give up. I know that you don't accept evil people. You have tested those who say they are apostles but are not. You found that they are liars. You never stop trying. You have endured troubles for my name and have not given up. "But I have this against you: You have left the love you had in the beginning. So remember where you were before you fell. Change your hearts and do what you did at first. If you don't change, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But there is something you do that is right—you hate the things that the Nicolaitans do. I also hate what they do. "Everyone who hears this should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To those who win the victory I will give the right to eat the fruit from the tree of life, which is in God's paradise."¹¹⁶

Young fiery preachers love these verses. Usually with one eye on an ageing congregation and one hand on a Greek lexicon.

'Where is your passion', they say. 'Agape love', they say!

Not a bit of it. The clue comes in the context and history of the passage. The church at Ephesus started out as a

116 Revelation 2: 1-5

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network of homogeneous house-groups, because Christians were forbidden by local law to rent or own buildings in which to meet. When this law was rescinded, they brought the coin mint factory in the middle of the rough part of town. They doubled its size and converted it into a church.

Putting all these diverse house-groups together under one roof, (which held several thousand members together), caused many problems. From the first time the Church met it found problems with a mixture of class, habit, intellectual understanding and Christian maturity. It realized there was a great deal of work to be done to build a loving Christian unity.

As with any growing church, it tried to solve the problem by introducing a constitution to safeguard against the many attempts of infiltration by false teachers and false apostles. Unfortunately, influenced by the famous debating chambers close by that Paul frequented, the constitution became very detailed with dotted I's, crossed T's and lots of dots. Once drawn up, the constitution became the focus by which members held each other to account. They forgot the spirit of grace and love which birthed them and judged each other by the letter of the constitution. Sadly, the church later split, many decided to build a superb high class, high cost building in the suburbs

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and took their constitution with them. That left the rest, (mainly the lower classes), in the old building in the decaying town centre. Fortunately, this church returned to the basics of mercy, love and grace ditching the constitution.

John the apostle stayed with the 'Mint' church. Tradition records that John, as an old man, was carried to the church each week. He always gave the same blessing at the end of each service - *“Brothers and sisters – you must love one another”*. One of the new elders was reported to have asked him, 'Why do you always end with the words *“Brothers and sisters – you must love one another”*. To which John replied, *“Because you must love one another”*.

No wonder this branch of the church held such a prominent part in early church history. No wonder the high class church in the suburbs became ruins, long before the fame and influence of Ephesus ended!

4: Judgement

One day Ruth said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields to gather the grain that the harvest workers leave. I

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am sure to find someone who will let me work with him."

Naomi answered, "Go ahead, daughter." So Ruth Got up before day break, went out to the fields and walked behind the workers, picking up the heads of grain which they left.

Now it so happened that she was in a field that belonged to Boaz and some time later Boaz himself arrived and greeted the workers.

"The LORD be with you!" he said.

"The LORD bless you!" they answered.

Boaz asked the man in charge, "Who is that young woman?" The man answered, "She is the foreigner who came back from Moab with Naomi.

She asked me to let her follow the workers and gather grain. She has been working since early morning and has only just now stopped to rest for a while under the shelter."¹¹⁷

Now isn't that absolutely typical? It always happens that way! You had been working since daybreak and had only briefly stopped for a drink of water, but that's the moment the boss walks in.

Now there are two main people in this story Ruth and Boaz. One is rich the other is poor. Both are trying to live a godly life within their circumstances. The camera

117 Ruth Chapter 2

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snapped at the moment of their meeting when Ruth stops working and Boaz is about to make an instant judgement. Actually they both make a judgement about each other at that moment of time. We are all prone to make instant judgements that later need modifying.

Do you know why motorists hate speed cameras? It is because they do not give an accurate picture of your driving. You can drive perfectly all the way of your journey but the moment you do something wrong is the moment you pass the camera. When you come to court you are judged on that precise second, and in that precise fifty yards of space.

Average speed cameras give a better picture. These discourage the people who, knowing where the spot cameras are, speed up as soon as they are past the camera itself. Average speeding zones allow for a little discrepancy. Slightly over or a little under the speed limit average out. These make a judgement about the whole of this section of your journey. Some people think God judges like the average speed camera. You might go a bit wrong now and again but as long as your average is OK you can get into heaven. Other people, (the more legalistic thinkers of society), think God will judge you like the speed camera - One strike and your out, one instant click of the camera and your eternity is determined.

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There are a lots of people in the world who love to do God's job of judging for him. You have heard them, you might be tired, worried, in a hurry or accidentally let the door close on someone. Click –'Call yourself a Christian', they say. I am not very gracious in my reply I am afraid. "I am glad my God is more merciful than you" I say, which probably gets me another black mark.

But you know this story is about something else. This story is about two people who are trying to live by God's Kingdom values- they are trying to live God's way. You see God's kingdom values are heart values. Now what does that mean? The Law of the land said the poor could glean in the fields behind the workers but in most fields the workers would resent that law. They would be quick to shout abuse at the poor and perhaps even man-handle them - especially foreigners.

But Ruth was simply trying her best to live within her circumstances. She was trying to live a righteous life within the law. While Boaz was simply trying to live a godly life with the land God had given him. In doing so, his heart values were different to other land owners. This attitude changed the people around him in his domain.

Listen

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And Boaz said to Ruth, 'Do not go to glean in another field, neither go away from here, but stay here close by my workers. My young men won't touch you or shout abuse at you. And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink of that which the young men have drawn.' Then she fell on her face and bowed herself to the ground, and said to him, Why have I found grace in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?' ¹¹⁸

You see Boaz had not judged on a moment in time. He had judged on an inner life attitude, a life experience that revealed itself through his character, actions and words. Most people judge in line with their inner prejudices and values. When God judges He says, I know your circumstances, I know your struggles, I know how you are trying day by day to live by kingdom values.

So then, the commission He gives you is within your circumstances. Keep your eyes on the field in which you live and harvest, work only in that field and glean what you can with a pure heart'.

You see Kingdom values are first of all about changed heart values. Heart values demonstrate themselves in the sort of people we are, not the sort of people we think we

118 *Ruth 2:8*

Overturing Tables

are. Heart values affect the way we think. Heart values affect the way we speak. Heart values comes out in our character. Heart values effect the way we work. But heart values also affect those around us. Notice how the gang working for Boaz had picked up his values. Before Boaz had arrived they had been working well. They didn't need him looking over their shoulder in case he was watching. There was no verbal or discriminating behaviour. Before Boaz had arrived they already had given permission to Ruth the foreigner to glean. They knew Boaz would honour the law in form and attitude.

That's how God Judges. He looks at the heart and the character. Our hearts and values become changed when we see Jesus' values at the cross and we catch them from Jesus.

5: Purity

Bear One Another's Burdens

Brothers and sisters, someone in your group might do something wrong. You who are following the Spirit should go to the one who is sinning. Help make that person right again, and do it in a gentle way. But be careful, because you might be tempted to sin too. Help each other with your troubles. When you do this, you are obeying the law of Christ. If you think you are too

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important to do this, you are only fooling yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Just look at your own work to see if you have done anything to be proud of. You must each accept the responsibilities that are yours. Whoever is being taught God's word should share the good things they have with the one who is teaching them. If you think you can fool God, you are only fooling yourselves. You will harvest what you plant. If you live to satisfy your sinful self, the harvest you will get from that will be eternal death. But if you live to please the Spirit, your harvest from the Spirit will be eternal life. ¹¹⁹

When I sow pure cabbage seed I reap cabbage and weed. I used to think Paul was talking as a tent maker without much farming experience. Then I re-read the context. Don't overlooked verses one to six. The church is provided with weeding implements to keep itself pure in heart, the trouble is she has lost the skills in using them.

*you think you
can fool God,
you are only
fooling
yourselves.*

*You will harvest
what you plant.*

Here are some of those tools mentioned in this passage see if you can find them:

(1) Keep an eye on yourself.

119 Gal 6: 1-8

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- (2) If you see someone else stray, gently bring them back.
- (3) Share with others in need in a practical way to keep them from needing to break the law.
- (4) Take a good look at your motives especially pride because pride comes before a fall.
- (5) Judge yourself on a regular basis in line with God's standard, not how you compare with others,
- (6) Take good note of sermons, check them out with God's word first, only then with your own life.

Purity is easier at the black and white ends of its definition. In between any right and wrong argument there will be a grey area. Beaver away at those grey spots and the standard will always fall, never rise. That's what the media does every day; It persists on the grey areas until it reaches the lowest common denominator and blurs the principle. Adam and Eve faced this tactic in the garden. 'Has God expressly forbidden or loosely advised'? [Implied], asked Satan.

As all nations of the world have discovered, guarding a borderline seems an impossible task. The question is, how do you welcome the genuine and refuse the hostile? After all, the genuine will not find an illegal way in because their heart is right, but corruption will persist until it

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weakens the line enough to enter.

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus, Jesus went straight to his heart, '*Go sell..come follow*'. Jesus said, '*it is hard to get into the kingdom like a camel getting through the eye of the needle*'. Jesus' critics tried to blur the issue by accusing him of eating with sinners. When the disciples asked Jesus how they should manage living in a world where values are different to Kingdom values he took them straight back to the six principle tools we listed earlier. Live in the world but constantly watch your own heart. As Jesus said in Matt 13: 30,

'Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.'

6: Watchfulness

Elisha's servant got up early that morning. When he went outside, he saw an army with horses and chariots all around the city. The servant said to Elisha, "Oh, my master, what can we do?" Elisha said, "Don't be afraid. The army that fights for us is larger than the army that fights for Aram." Then Elisha prayed and

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said, "LORD, I ask you, open my servant's eyes so that he can see." The LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and the servant saw the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire. They were all around Elisha. These horses and chariots of fire came down to Elisha. He prayed to the LORD and said, "I pray that you will cause these people to become blind." So God did what Elisha asked. He caused the Aramean army to become blind. Elisha said to the Aramean army, "This is not the right way. This is not the right city. Follow me. I will lead you to the man you are looking for." Then Elisha led them to Samaria. When they arrived at Samaria, Elisha said, "LORD, open the eyes of these men so that they can see." Then the LORD opened their eyes, and the Aramean army saw they were in the city of Samaria! The king of Israel saw the Aramean army and said to Elisha, "My father, should I kill them? Should I kill them?" Elisha answered, "No, don't kill them. They are not soldiers you captured in battle. Give them some bread and water. Let them eat and drink. Then let them go home to their leader." So the king prepared a big meal for the Aramean army. After they ate and drank, he sent them back home to their leader. The Arameans did not send any more soldiers into the land of Israel to make raids.¹²⁰

We continue with the challenge of cultural pressures as

1202 kings 6: 15-23

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we look at watchfulness.

'I have more power than superman', joked my friend, *'See I can stop all this traffic with my thumb',* said he, as he pressed the pedestrian button and walked smartly across the crossing.

In scripture, watching is not the same as watching television. The biblical word for watch carries three things the English does not, (1) a power, (2) an authority and (3) a responsibility. When a lowly soldier manned the city wall on watch duty, he had the authority to call to order a full legion of soldiers. His responsibility was the safety of the city. His power was in his ram's horn and his authority was in his position as watchman.

Elisha's servant, watched with his fleshly eyes. He saw horses and chariots of an enemy which made him panic and become afraid. Once he looked again with his spiritual eyes, (insight), he saw the captain of the hosts of the Lord and he rested with peace in his heart. How I would love to develop insight enough to see the spiritual as clearly as that.

Of the eighty or so references to 'watching' in scripture, most are coupled with prayer, why? Because biblical watching is coupled with insight and responsibility.

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Insight demands communication. Peter was not given oversight of the church until he was given insight.

'Blessed are you Peter for flesh and blood has not revealed this'.

Peter later demonstrated insight in his dealing with Ananias, with Simon the magician, and many others. But he was not entitled to oversight until he had that insight. Here is a heart searching question for anyone seeking to be in leadership of the church. Your watch is for the safety of the Church. Before Jesus gives anyone leadership authority He requires insight. Once a commission is given Jesus requires watchfulness, not a casual watch but as Elisha's servant saw the hosts with insight. When a church leader loses insight the church loses its spiritual emphasis. When the church loses its spirituality it loses its tools for spiritual gifts. Insight leads to discernment. Discernment leads to pure conscience. Conscience leads to integrity, and so on.

Forests are very competitive places. Each tree fights vigorously to get its head above the surrounding trees.

The church without leadership insight is sleeping while on watch duty. The purpose of connecting 'watch' with

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'pray' is to see the enemy approaching and to sound the alarm calling the church to prayer before the enemy gets there. The Christian who has learned to watch and discern with insight has more power than Superman. His or her prayer can sound the alarm and summons a host of the Lord's army instantly. Before the enemy gets his boots on.

7: Openness

We heard the true teaching from God. Now we tell it to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness. So if we say that we share in life with God, but we continue living in darkness, we are liars, who don't follow the truth. We should live in the light, where God is. If we live in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood sacrifice of Jesus, God's Son, washes away every sin and makes us clean. If we say that we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God will forgive us. We can trust God to do this. He always does what is right. He will make us clean from all the wrong things we have done. If we say that we have not sinned, we are saying that God is a liar and that we don't accept his true teaching.¹²¹

121 | John 1: 7-9

Overturing Tables

Perhaps John can throw a little more light on this subject. By nature we would rather hide our sin in the dark than declare it to another. 'But', says John, three things:

- *'God is light in Him is no darkness at all'*. That equals pure light.
- *'We have been brought into the light by His love'*. That equals insight light.
- *'If we walk in the light we have fellowship'*. That equals open light.

'If we don't walk in light we don't have fellowship'. Why? Because sin prefers to hide. Adam and Eve hid – being physically naked was their excuse, but then they had always been physically naked and unashamed. Being spiritually naked in the presence of pure light was the real reason their conscience pricked them.

Forests are very competitive places. Each tree fights vigorously to get its head above the surrounding trees. The more they compete the more darkness they produce. Each tree says I must get to the light – even at the expense of my fellow trees. In doing so it destroys open light at the base. But it is at the base in the ground where new growth can begin. When the tree drops its seed, the sapling says if only I had a little more open light I could grow tall. But it is so dark I cannot grow at all. There is no space for me here I will die.

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Walking in fellowship light, means we grow together not alone, it means we are not in competition, it means we first look out for each others growth, only then our own. It means we allowing each other space and light. This lets the light in for planting new seeds. This is the distinguishing mark of a healthy fellowship over society with its emphasis on self interest. That's why we use the word fellowship in church and not society, gathering or community. Fellowship is not a place for *me* to develop *my* gifts and skills it is a place for a body of God's people to take note of other members and attend their needs.

8: Worship

How Shall We Sing the Lord's Song?

We sat by the rivers in Babylon and cried as we remembered Zion. We hung our harps nearby, there on the willow trees. There in Babylon, those who captured us told us to sing. Our enemies told us to entertain them. They said, "Sing us one of your songs about Zion." But we cannot sing the LORD'S songs in a foreign country! Jerusalem, if I ever forget you, may I never play a song again. If I fail to remember you, may I never sing again. I will always remember Jerusalem as my greatest joy! LORD, be sure to punish the Edomites for what they did when Jerusalem was

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*captured. They shouted, "Destroy its buildings! Pull them down to the ground!" Babylon, you will be destroyed! Bless the one who pays you back for what you did to us. Bless the one who grabs your babies and smashes them against a rock.*¹²²

As I read this passage, I don't so much see the words they sing - as the heart of the writer. What do you hear in these words of Jesus?

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets, you stone the messengers God sent you! How many times I just wanted to put my arms around you, how I just wanted to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!"*¹²³

Worship is not a ritual, it is a cry from the heart. If the Church today is in Babylon it is because Her heart is in Babylon. She has lost sight of the fact that Her home is in another kingdom. Those of this world want to use the church as an object of art or history, to strengthen ideas of culture, or even as a volunteer service for social compassion. Politicians fight for Her political allegiances and propagate their ideals from Her pulpit. Many poke fun at Her but still ask her to perform from Her great

122 *Psalm 137: 1 – 9*

123 *Luke 13:34*

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musical heritage. They say Her days are gone and she is dead, but they revive Her for great state occasions. Babylon exhausted the Israelites' energies. Babylon demanded the church dance to her tune. The church's times and services were subject to Babylon's demands. Treated like a slave but still expected to sing. So what does the church do? She does what She knows, She sings!

When David was sent into exile – he sang! When Saul threw a spear at David to kill him- David was singing! On the night Jesus was betrayed the disciples sang! After Paul and Barnabas had received thirty-nine lashes they were thrown into a prison and they sang! What a song that was. Barnabas sang tenor and Paul sang bass – because Paul got wrecked on the high 'C's'.¹²⁴

What song do saints sing?

' Heaven is my home and

no! No! No! **NO!**

they can't take that away from me!

124 Sorry for the corny joke (High seas).

Overturning Tables

Chapter 8: Dealing with spiritual distraction

Chapter 8: Dealing with spiritual distraction

1: Let us make three tents

Then Jesus said, "Believe me when I say that some of you people standing here will see God's kingdom come with power before you die."

Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John and went up on a high mountain. They were all alone there. While these followers watched him, Jesus was changed. His clothes became shining white—whiter than anyone on earth could make them. Then two men were there talking with Jesus. They were Elijah and Moses. Peter said to Jesus, "Teacher, it is good that we are here. We will put three tents here—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Peter did not know what to say, because he and the other two followers were so afraid. Then a cloud came and covered them. A voice came from the cloud and said, "This is my Son, the one I love. Obey him!" The followers looked, but they saw only Jesus there alone with them. As Jesus and the followers were walking back down the mountain, he gave them these instructions: "Don't tell anyone about what you saw on the mountain. Wait until after the Son of Man rises from death. Then you can tell people what you saw." So the followers waited to say anything about what they saw. But they discussed among themselves what Jesus meant about

Overturning Tables

*rising from death.*¹²⁵

Beware of brilliant ideas. They are often sparked from an emotional high, not guidance. These three witnessed something amazing. Moses, (representing law) Elijah, (representing prophets), in conference with Jesus the King. He was prophet, priest and king for evermore. Wow!

This was a conference where major revelations were shown. Jesus, Moses and Elijah, conferring about what must be fulfilled. The disciples, were not caught up by the substance of the conference but by the emotional high. I for one would far rather have the gospels tell me what was said than what the disciples did. But I suspect they couldn't recall that. Had they succeeded in this plan to build three booths, hordes of pilgrims might still ascend this mountain today to sit in a tent in vain hope of a repeat performance.

Many seed thoughts are planted at high moments of our Christian life. Most are seeded in an impulsive moment. In the jargon this is called 'Mission creep'. Mission creep is the most common cause of spiritual distraction of all time past and present, and it usually disguises itself as

125 *Mark 9: 1-9*

Chapter 8: Dealing with spiritual distraction

guidance¹²⁶. Guidance is not emotion. Guidance is recognition by our spirit that that the Holy Spirit has given direction directly in line with the mission of Jesus to save souls. It has to be processed by our intellect and our will before it becomes a viable guidance plan. It is at this stage it is often watered down to focus on a secondary aim. Biblical rule of thumb says it should also be tested and confirmed by others only after the call and the vision are sure in our own heart.

I used to visit a wonderful lady of prayer. One day she went to a local missionary conference and, in the high of the conference, decided she was to be a missionary. I asked what the empty South African peach tin was doing on her mantelpiece? she replied, 'When I brought it I knew that is where I am to go as a missionary'. The next time I visited, the tin was Chinese Mandarin. I don't doubt for one moment that God could call a lonely sixty-two year old to the mission field, but I sometimes wonder if her call to a prayer ministry had been hijacked by the emotion of a conference and a desire to be other than herself.

126 *'Mission Creep' could fill a book by itself. The bible is full of examples which it often calls hardness of heart or diversion of heart values. Please do research on this subject and confirm for yourself that this is the most common cause of mission failure today as it has been in the past.*

Overturing Tables

2: Jesus rose early

Jesus healed many of those who had different kinds of sicknesses. He also forced many demons out of people. But he would not allow the demons to speak, because they knew who he was.

The next morning Jesus woke up very early. He left the house while it was still dark and went to a place where he could be alone and pray. Later, Simon and his friends went to look for Jesus. They found him and said, "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus answered, "We should go to another place. We can go to other towns around here, and I can tell God's message to those people too. That is why I came." So Jesus travelled everywhere in Galilee. He spoke in the synagogues, and he forced demons out of people.¹²⁷

The best place to hear a quiet voice is in a quiet place. Ambient noise drowns out a whisper.

'Boring!' I hear you say, 'You're going to talk about the quiet time aren't you'. 'I used to read the bible and pray every day but God did not speak to me very often in them', you say.

I have a personal radio. At night, when I can't sleep, I listen to it. Guess the first thing I do every morning once

127 Mark 1 : 35-38

Chapter 8: Dealing with spiritual distraction

I'm up and dressed? I put the radio on charge. Strange, I can't hear anything while it's charging. God does not always speak when we put ourselves on charge, but on the other hand he cannot speak at all if our batteries are run flat.

Did you know the louder you play music the quicker the batteries go flat? Did you also know, when a battery is running low the sound gets distorted? The act of recharging is not the most thing exiting but it is most essential.

Life's school in spiritual guidance starts with the discipline of bible reading and prayer it takes quite a while to get much further down the line into the realms of dreams and visiting angels. The most important practical planning strategy for Jesus was to make sure he was never out of range of a power point to charge His batteries. When they were low, we find Him in a desert place, a quiet place, somewhere alone, always listening to that still small voice.

Why?

Because a Christian's life, or even a church's life, is built on no other plan. If we do not hear our Father's plan we are doomed to fail. If we don't hear directly we only get second hand gossip, our ideas or someone else's guidance.

Overturning Tables

There are many warnings in scripture about second hand guidance. People who give fake guidance are called false prophets in scripture and God has some harsh words to say to them.

3: What if the fleece is wet

The Sign of the Fleece
Then Gideon said to God, "You said that you would help me save the Israelites. Give me proof. I will put a sheepskin on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the sheepskin, while all the ground is dry, I will know that you will use me to save Israel, as you said." And that is exactly what happened. Gideon got up early the next morning and squeezed the sheepskin. He was able to drain a bowl full of water from it. Then Gideon said to God, "Don't be angry with me. Let me ask just one more thing. Let me test you one more time with the sheepskin. This time let the sheepskin be dry, while the ground around it gets wet with dew." That night God did that very thing. Just the sheepskin was dry, but the ground around it was wet with dew. ¹²⁸

God is not
adversed to a
fleece or two.
In fact, I have
a sneaking
suspicion he
rather enjoys
them.

128 Judges 6: 36-40.

Chapter 8: Dealing with spiritual distraction

Be especially careful of guidance when you take others with you on your journey. If you come to church with a good idea and church doesn't follow, don't blame church, checkout your guidance. Guidance is not the same as a good idea. Good ideas cost the church too much time and energy. A wise friend once remarked, '*better to test the theory than the deed*'. In engineering terms we say '*measure twice cut once*'.

God is not adversed to a fleece or two. In fact, I have a sneaking suspicion he rather enjoys them. God recognises our dilemma as humans. There are three types of fleece Christian's give. The enthusiast's fleece, 'If the sun rises tomorrow I will know', The doubters fleece, 'If five people ring me in the next ten minutes I will still question if it is coincidence'. Or Thirdly, there is Gideon's fleece.

Gideon laid out the fleece in the presence of people it would affect. They were in this together. The people needed to be sure of God's will as much as Gideon. But, being a thinking man, Gideon was not challenging God's ability to act but his own hearing ability. Gideon realized that he was prone to hear many different voices in the course of a day and wanted to be sure this bit of advice was the voice of God.

Overturing Tables

Gideon was also a realist. Having asked God to make the fleece wet he realised that he had risen from his bed a bit later that day. The sun had dried the ground but the fleece held the dew. But then, the second fleece might have been caused because the dew had formed later the next morning and did not have time to wet the dense fleece wool. If we look simply at the wet or dry fleece we miss Gideon's challenge.

The sign was not in the fleece it was in the agreement between Gideon and God. When Gideon asked for the fleece to be dry it was dry. When Gideon asked for it to wet it was wet. We will not have too much guidance if we spend our time analysing the science behind the sign.

In Old Testament times, if you went to the early priests for guidance he would put his hand in a sort of scrabble bag and bring out one of two stones- a white one or a black one. It was not a case that white is yes and black is no, It was a case of if the stone confirmed your thoughts you would go with it. If it did not, best leave the idea alone and wait for another day. Guidance is in what we agree with God in faith before the test and not in the supernatural sign itself.

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