

FAITH MOVES MOUNTAINS - DOUBT CREATES THEM



(A MANUAL OF HOPE)

The true path to Spiritual Growth must always start and end in realizing God within and expressing the perfection of God into your current experience.

This manual is designed for those who have never tried to prove God, those who think they have tried, those who have tried and failed, those who still have hope and for those who are daily proving Him. In essence, it is for everyone.

www.mcclainministries.org

©2008

TABLE OF CONTENTS (In Progress)

EXPRESSING GOD WITHIN	3
FEARLESS	9
YOUR FAITH WILL BE TESTED	11
RESTORATION	20
FLEECE OR FAITH	30
YOUR PAST DOES NOT HAVE TO DETERMINE YOUR FUTURE	40
WRESTLING WITH GOD	47
SNATCHING VICTORY FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT	54
HOW HESITANT FAITH CAN BIRTH GREAT LEADERS	61
STAY THE COURSE	69

CHAPTER 1

EXPRESSING GOD WITHIN

Today starts a new series. I would like to begin by reminding you of the most Glorious and Fundamental Truth of All. Everything we have, need or wish for must therefore start with this Truth.

The Truth is that we are expressions of The Divine Nature of God, with all the latent powers of that nature just waiting to be realized and applied for the greater good through Unconditional Love.

For many it is difficult to realize such a magnificent Truth. Lack of knowledge of this truth causes us to relinquish our power and give into our own life experiences, our Ego, money, false religion and conformance, and in so doing often live in misery. **For supernatural beings living in misery is not natural.**

Those who reject their Divine nature and thereby block themselves as an expression of God will be miserable and experience lack, because in blocking God they are blocking the true Source of all infinite health, abundance and love.

Some people think that believing that they are expressions of God is egotistical and even heretical. The very great tragedy with such bondage consciousness is that they refusal to accept who they are, while at the same time placing their faith in the hands of only the things they can see. And in so doing they are consciously blocking the Source of deliverance from their lives and experience cyclical frustration as a direct result. This refusal of a God Consciousness is the very reason that many religious people are not as happy as their non-religious counterparts.

The simple truth is this:

We are all, without exception, aspects and expressions of The Divine, Universal Life Energy of God.

The word "Faith" translated from the word in Ancient Greek was translated from the word "pistis" - which meanings include "conviction" or "assurance".

As channels of expression of The Source, The Prime Creator, God, we share the same unrestricted powers of creation - all we need to do as human beings is to realize those powers with "conviction" and "confidence" and the complete assurance of our true Divine Nature.

The opposite of Faith is "doubt." Doubt is very powerful, it is a negative emotion that effectively blocks and retards the creative process - opposing Faith.

On the other hand "Faith" is the Energy, the force behind attracting everything we ask for effortlessly - and make no mistake- God intended us to be effortless channels of creation as a part of Him.

The more we can accept God within our consciousness, the more we can facilitate His Divine Energy.

With God All things become possible – there is nothing impossible.

Achieving your goals and dreams must first start with realizing God within and then and only then can the visualization process and positive affirmations work. The path to Spiritual Growth must always start and end in realizing God within, and expressing the perfection of God into our current experience.

Until now, "expressing God within" may have sounded somewhat vague, simply because it is not a matter that can be discussed in sufficient detail in the context of a few messages or merely reading the Bible.

J. Lowrey Fendrich tells the story of a Chinese philosopher who once came to a missionary and offered to pay him to translate a portion of the New Testament for him each day. The missionary agreed, and for the first lesson opened the Bible and read aloud the words:

"After this manner therefore, pray ye: Our Father" —.

To the missionary's surprise the aged Chinese stopped him and said, "That will be enough for today."

A year later he returned and said he was ready for the second lesson.

"I thought," said the missionary, "that you employed me to read to you every day."

"I did," replied the old man, "but it took me a year to understand the first lesson. **The true meaning of Our Father.**" The words in the Bible are only a framework - the real substance of the lessons is contained between the lines. This means that you should mark, learn and inwardly digest them as you read. As Isaiah said, you will have to wait upon the Lord. Waiting implies conditioning your mind through meditation and contemplation. The more you meditate on the words in the Bible, the more light and understanding you will receive. "Mary kept all these things and **pondered** them in her heart."

It was Jesus who said:

"And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. **Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.** And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive, For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them". But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them. Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower. --Matthew 13:10-18

Now, for the first time for many of you "blessed are your eyes and ears, and you will finally understand from your Heart".

The messages that will follow in subsequent days are for those who have never tried to prove God, those who think they have tried, those who have tried and failed, those who still have hope and for those who are daily proving Him.

The messages will be designed:

- 1. To bring you into a true relationship with the Laws of God.**
- 2. To give you a tried and true remedy for human ills, problems and needs.**
- 3. To make real the things which you know but have not experienced.**
- 4. To give form and substance to your prayers and desires.**
- 5. To lead you to discover the "Real You".**

Perfect Faith is an inner feeling, certainty and knowing that you are part of God, with all of the same powers and as an infinitely powerful being all things are possible.

I know of several people who have experienced this situation, often impoverished and destitute, who completely capitulated to Universal Life, God, Divine Providence, and their lives have been "miraculously" transformed, almost overnight.

In any event, taking time to meditate and reach the realization that God is within you and you in God and that through you all things are possible - your life will be transformed to one of perfect health, abundance and happiness.

The Divine within you is always present to provide for your every need - whatever it might be. To the great architect and Creator of the Universe, the possibilities are unlimited.

Jesus taught this important principle time and again:

"Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise. For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew

him greater works than these, that ye may marvel". (John 5:19-20)

Here Jesus is saying that He can do nothing in and of Himself. He, as Jesus the physical person has no inherent abilities by virtue of who He is. He goes on to say that God "does things" through Jesus, in other words Jesus is a channel of experience and expression for God because God loves His Son as He does all of His children.

Plain and simple this means that as unconditionally loved children of God; we can have anything and everything through Him.

"Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it." -- John 14:10-14

Here Jesus sets out this truth unambiguously when He states the truth that "the father that dwelleth within me, He doeth the works".

We must always keep in mind that when He says "me" He means everyone as an equal aspect of God.

Jesus goes on to say that we must believe that God is within us, because this realization is the true Source of our power. Anyone not realizing God within will not realize their God powers within. This is the true meaning of "faith" - Faith in who we are and of our God-given "powers", and an absolute belief in our true reality and powers. He also says that we must "go to the Father" which means we must "realize God, The Source within". We can do nothing in and of ourselves without that connection with God.

When Jesus says "Father may be glorified in the Son" He speaks the powerful truth that we as the children of God are

those through whom God experiences, and expands, and thereby becoming "glorified".

It is a powerful truth that the extent to which we can realize our full potential and abilities, including the abilities to perform what most would regard as "miracles", is the same extent to which we can realize God within. Jesus was completely "God-realized" and this and this alone was The Source of His power and of His "miracles" as He says Himself over and over when He states the truth that "the Father within Him, He Doeth the works".

The "Father", God, The Source, The Creator in all of us doeth our works as well.

CHAPTER 2 FEARLESS

As you know on November 9th we launched this new series. The second installment is entitled 'Fearless.' So what are your fears! Fear of failure, fear of dying, fear of letting others down, fear of living alone, just to name a few.

As you read through the Bible, you see that fear is not unique to those of us in the 21st century. One phrase that reappears over and over throughout the Bible is the phrase, "Do not be afraid!" In fact, if you're looking for a good topic for a personal or small group Bible study, take the time to see just how often — and on what occasions — that phrase and related phrases are spoken.

There is one positive attribute which is strongly contrasted to fear in the Scriptures. Jesus told His apostles and others, "Do not be afraid, only believe." It is evident that growing in faith will cause us to have less fear, and that often fear is the direct result of a struggle with our faith.

If you are living in fear today, may these words of Jesus spoken to His apostles serve as a comfort to you: **"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27)**

May you know that peace He offers ... a peace that puts to rest our fears!

Once again we see that there is a choice to be made. In a real sense He is reminding us that our 'future' life, here on earth and in the hereafter, is determined by what we do — what we fear — in the Now.

Living a life that is controlled by fear is not recommended. If we allow the fear of financial ruin, or fear of terrorist, or the fear of what may or may not happen today or tomorrow dominate our thoughts and decisions, we will be miserable people. As Jesus said, "Take no thought of tomorrow, for it can take care of itself."

Our destiny should be placed in our relationship with the One who is in control of tomorrows.

CHAPTER 3

YOUR FAITH WILL BE TESTED

The third installment of our series is designed to illustrate the faithfulness of God. One of the best Biblical characters to illustrate God's faithfulness is Abraham.

Genesis 22 is the high point of Abraham's faith. If the progress of Abraham's faith could have been drawn on a piece of graph paper it would have looked like the Himalayas, with many staggering pinnacles of trust interspersed with deep valleys of doubt. But towering over the other incidents was Everest, or to put it more accurately Mt. Moriah! What took place there stands throughout human history as one of the great demonstrations of man's faith in a faithful God.

In this dramatic father-son story, we see the zenith of one man's trust in God. It also confronts us with the critical question of what we value most in our lives.

The Abraham-Isaac Story

God said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (22:1-2).

With significant understatement, the text says this was a "test" of Abraham. Test? It was to be the ultimate sounding of the depths of one man's faith. It was the exploration of Abraham's soul to see whether there was a single fiber of his being still reserved to himself rather than yielded to God. It was heaven's way of finding out what Abraham had learned from a lifetime of spiritual pilgrimage. Test? It was Abraham's final exam.

Abraham and Sarah had been childless throughout their long marriage. They had prayed and surely consulted the physicians of their time and place. They had even tried surrogate motherhood with Sarah's handmaid, Hagar. That was a disastrous mistake for the peace of his family – and for the subsequent peace of the world. Hadn't God promised Abraham

a son? Yes, but the son would be given by God in His own good time and through Sarah's womb.

About fifteen years after the birth of Ishmael to Hagar, Sarah thrilled her husband with the news that she was pregnant. "Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him" (Genesis 21:2-3). Mother's Day would mean something to Sarah now. And Abraham had a son to teach how to play, how to work and how to be a man – a godly man.

This was the "child of promise" God had given the couple in their old age. He was the son through whom the promises of descendants, land and a blessing to all nations would be fulfilled. How they must have doted on him. They took delight in his every word, every act. Abraham and Sarah loved him more than life itself.

Then came the baffling, incomprehensible and disconcerting command to Abraham that he should sacrifice his son and burn his body to ashes. How could this be? So much depends on Isaac. How could a Holy God command something of Abraham that sounds so typical of pagan gods and so foreign to the God of Scripture? My soul quakes at the prospect of trying to unravel the mystery of this juxtaposition of God's bright promise and God's dark command. Faith seems to be demanding too much of the man Abraham.

The only thing more incredible here than the command was Abraham's response to it. "Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about" (22:3). There is no hint of reluctance or hesitation. There is only faith-authenticating obedience. You see that his faith and his actions were working together, James later said of this event, "and his faith was made complete by what he did" (James 2:22).

So the father and son traveled together for three days. Did Abraham travel in the solemn silence of knowing of what lay ahead? Did he talk the whole way, wanting to spend every one of those precious, final moments speaking with his boy? Did he

ask countless leading questions, wanting to hear – in order to remember in exact detail – the sound of Isaac’s voice? And what about Isaac himself? Might he have pressed his father for details of this unscheduled trip they were taking? Only one thing is certain: Abraham could not tell Isaac the details of what lay ahead, for he did not know himself.

“On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, ‘Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. **We will worship and then we will come back to you’**” (22:4-5). The place the patriarch saw in the distance, Mount Moriah, is mentioned only one other time in the Bible. Unless there were two places with the same name, the place Abraham saw was the same one where Israel’s temple would later stand. “**Then Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah . . .**” (II Chronicles 3:1). On the same elevated spot where the temple altar would someday stand, Abraham would build an altar. Near the place where Jesus would be raised on His cross, Isaac would be prepared for his death.

Yet one who reads the text closely is struck with the pronouns Abraham used to his two servants when he and his beloved son left them. “**We** will worship and then **we** will come back to you,” he said. So did he not really expect to have to plunge his knife into Isaac?

Oh, he appears to have had no doubt that he would slay his incomparable, irreplaceable son. As he had tried to sort it all out in his mind over the previous three days of travel, he had come to the conclusion that God could do the unprecedented in raising Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19). At a level that went beyond the known and familiar, Abraham knew beyond any wisdom of his own that God would find a way to honor His word and bring life out of death.

As Abraham and Isaac went up the side of Mount Moriah together, the stronger, younger man carried the wood and his father carried fire and a knife. It was at this point that Isaac asked a specific question about the sacrifice. “**The fire and wood are here,**” he said, “**but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?**” (22:7). Then Abraham uttered a wonderful statement of faith that would be a great motto for all who seek the Light. “**Abraham answered, ‘God himself will provide the**

lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' And the two of them went on together" (Genesis 22:8). God will provide! What a marvelous way to summarize the faith perspective about all of existence.

Rushing now to the end of the story, Genesis tells us that Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood on it, bound his son (something he could not have done if Isaac had resisted or run!) and laid Isaac on the altar. There is no hint of hesitation in the narrative, and there appear to have been no petitions for new instructions. Abraham reached for the knife with which he would take Isaac's life. Then and only then did an angel of the Lord call his name and tell him not to harm him. "Now I know that you fear God," said the angel, "because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Genesis 22:9-12).

God had never wanted Isaac's life. What he wanted that day on Mount Moriah was Abraham's undivided and conspicuous allegiance. He tested Abraham to the ultimate limit. As awful a test as it was, perhaps we see the point of it in retrospect: In order for God to do a supreme work of grace in the life of Abraham, He first had to be sure there was nothing that Isaac's father loved or trusted more than the God of Creation.

Testing

The ultimate issue in every human life is trust. And it is testing – usually sudden and unexpected – that reveals our priorities both to God and ourselves. Sometimes we find out that we have been leaning our ladders against the wrong walls. Sometimes we are affirmed in a relationship with God that sees us through.

Testing comes to everyone. In our world of shallow theology and pat answers, we don't like to think of God's having created a planet that can stretch us to our physical, emotional and spiritual limits and test our faith. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. . . . Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:2-3, 12).

Faith is made strong through a variety of tests and challenges in much the same way a mind is made strong through disciplined study or a body is made strong through exhausting exercise. "No pain, no gain" is not just a body-builder's motto; it is the rule for faith-builders, too.

What God wants to happen in our times of testing is to see genuine faith on display. No more than God wanted Isaac's life that day but Abraham's demonstrated allegiance does He want to see you crushed by your job loss, marriage failure, or health crisis. In fact, though Satan rather than God is behind the distress in our lives, God is sovereign over all creation and will never allow anything to happen to you that is greater than you can bear. "No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it" (I Corinthians 10:13, The Message).

The Lord's biological half-brother makes a helpful distinction between the two different types of testing that come into people's lives. God tests us only to bring out the good in us, but Satan tempts us to seduce us to do evil. God brings tests and allows affliction to "discipline" His saints (Hebrews 12:7ff); Satan brings temptations to seduce and destroy God's people. Writing about such enticements to sin, James said: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone" (James 1:13).

The thing people of faith learn is that "God will provide." Returning to the father-son story at hand, recall that "God will provide" was the father's answer when his son asked about the absence of a sacrifice as they were climbing Mount Moriah. When the angel called Abraham's name and told him not to harm Isaac, "Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by his horns" (22:13a). True to Abraham's confident statement of faith, God supplied a ram as a substitute for Isaac. The God who tested Abraham from His sovereignty resolved the test by His grace. And in that act of substitution we see a foreshadowing of Calvary. What a moment of triumph that was! But faith always calls its pilgrim-exiles to trust our Creator's incredible timing and abundant provision.

Genesis 22:14 says Abraham named that place “Jehovah-jireh” (KJV) or “The Lord Will Provide” (NIV). The God who calls is the God who empowers. The Sovereign Lord who tests is the same One who provides. Both the testing and the providing are acts of His grace. We witness His provision and learn that He Is.

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (22:15-18).

What is Your Isaac?

Do you honestly think the point of the testing God allows to come to your life is essentially any different from Abraham’s on Mount Moriah? God wants your heart as you journey on your path. He wants you to pass the test by trusting Him at the critical junctures of your life. What was true with Abraham is therefore true with you or me: In order for God to do a supreme work of grace within us, He must be sure there is nothing in our hearts that we love more than Him.

This is the meaning of Jesus’ words:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:37-39).

It is not for the sake of God’s vanity that He makes such a demand on us. It is for the sake of our survival. Unless you can endure the turning of your most precious single treasure into ashes, God would be unfair to send you into an arena where every day will wrench your soul with choices between flesh and Spirit, this world and the one to come, your pleasure and God’s will. Once you have made the definitive choice between God and your Isaac, however, it will be safe for God to send you

wherever He needs a representative who can show the world His glory.

So what is your Isaac? What is the thing that means more to you right now than anything else in life? Could you give it up without cursing God and turning your back on him? Could you give it up without whining that He has asked too much of you?

Is it your career or present job? A position you waited years to get? Your house? Your car? Your investments? Your health? Someone you had planned to marry? Your mate? Your child? Please don't misunderstand the point here. I do not think for a minute that the God of Light is going to speak to you as he did to Abraham and ask you to do what he commanded him to do. But I do believe that faith is still tested and that only those who pass the test are entrusted with God's most significant tasks among men.

Testing can come from a variety of sources. Divine Discipline. Satanic Temptations. Achievements. Foolish Mistakes. Wealth. Awards. Unemployment. A New Job. Poverty. Education. Fame. Shame. The list is infinitely long.

When you are in the crucible of testing, your head whirs. You feel confusion and pain. The joy goes out of your existence. You are in the deep darkness of your soul's long night. You feel broken and empty. A sense of helplessness descends over you. You reach out to people, to things that were once important to you, perhaps to alcohol or drugs. Nothing helps. Nobody can rescue you.

Then, ever so slowly, God's love becomes visible in your suffering. You begin to realize that what you have been going through has taught you what no sermon or theology course ever could: God alone is ultimate and keeping faith with Him means everything.

Suddenly there is a point to what you have been experiencing. It has humbled you and made you sensitive. It has purified you and let you see God more clearly. It has changed your priorities about everything.

At precisely that point in your experience, God may do for you what He did for Abraham and give your Isaac back to you. Now

that you have it back, though, you see it differently. It isn't all-important and all-consuming anymore. Only God will ever again have first place in your life and your Isaac will have its meaning only in relation to His will. Your Isaac can now be useful without being an obstacle, important without being a preoccupation, pleasant without being unsafe.

Abraham appears to have had Isaac in proper perspective before he was put to the test. He breezed through. **“Acting in faith, he was as ready to return the promised son, his only son, as he had been to receive him”** (Hebrews 11:17b, *The Message*). Most of us seem to get clear perspectives and surrendered wills only at the end of a painful process. We stumble through. We hang on – but just barely. But it is wonderful when the test is over and the point of it has been fathomed.

At the end of your testing, wealth or poverty is no longer the issue. Nor getting the vice presidency or being squeezed out of the company. Nor being single or married. The point of reference for your total being is God, the Creator and your faith in Him. Your obedience to Him. Your surrender of everything in your life on His altar is your pathway to the ultimate Light.

Sculptors don't transform marble into beautiful pieces of visual poetry with nail files and tissues. They use unrelenting hammers and sharp chisels. Ugly piles of dust and stone chips accumulate where they have worked. Only when they are finished do we see the reason for such powerful tools and methods.

The person who has had his Isaac taken away entirely may be prepared for an altogether new role in life. The one who has had her Isaac taken away from the center of her heart but allowed still to keep it may be called to minister from that experience. From the former, some may be called to a mission field or to a career of full-time service or to minister to those who have gone through divorce, drug rehab, or the death of a child. From the latter, others are asked to bring healing to those who are barely hanging on to their jobs, their marriages, or their sanity.

If your moment of decision about what is most important in your life hasn't come already, it's on its way. Or perhaps you

are in the throes of it now. The tragedy is not that you are being tested; the tragedy would be if you should fail to keep faith with God and therefore miss finding out what He wants to use the tested-and-approved you to do for Him in this world and beyond.

Conclusion

There is no inherent power in faith itself. The value of faith is in its object. A strong faith in an unworthy object will disappoint, while a weak faith in a worthy object will bring triumph and joy. Abraham's faith was fixed on the God and it was Jehovah-jireh who saw him through that ordeal. That he appears to have been so serene in the process testifies to the strength of his faith – at this point in his life. There are times and situations in his pilgrimage when he could not have surmounted so great a test! The terrible ordeals he and Sarah had gone through long before had prepared him for the trial with Isaac.

A missionary to the Congo once told the story of how older men served as night sentries for Christian workers among them. They were very much the living telephone lines from house to house, compound to compound. One evening she went to the door to receive a note that had been brought by a man everyone called Papa John. There was neither moonlight nor street light at their station, and she could barely make out his form by the light from his six-inch kerosene lantern with its smoky chimney. Thinking what a pitiful light he had for such a dark tropical night, she said, "That lamp doesn't give you much light, does it, Papa John?" "No, it doesn't," came the reply, "but it shines as far as I can step."

Trust God for today, for the Now. He will give as much light for as far as you can step. So believe this much, obey all that you know and do what is right according to His will. Commit your way to Him and He will direct your path. Jehovah-jireh will provide.

CHAPTER 4 RESTORATION

The fourth installment of our new series centers on restoration. And what better Biblical character to illustrate this truth than King David. But first let's start with a parable. A parable is a figure of speech that illustrates some moral or spiritual truth from everyday experience. It is a short, simple story laid beside a more complex truth. It is an invitation into deeper insight by means of the familiar stairway of engaging narrative. The best teachers are skilled at using parables to take their students to new thresholds of discovery. Jesus was a master at using them, but He was not the first Hebrew prophet to do so. Take, for example, this one from the Old Testament.

There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him (II Samuel 12:1b-4).

Convicting story, isn't it? It is about abuse of power. It rebukes injustice. It exposes how calloused a human heart can be toward others and their rights. In the context in which it was told, it certainly had a powerful effect. The prophet Nathan was its narrator, and King David was the one who had listened to it. The powerful and good-hearted David was incensed that such a man lived under his rule – and bellowed his intention to do something about it. "David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, **"As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity' "** (II Samuel 12:5-6).

By means of a disarming story, a prophet had stirred a sense of the holy in the heart of his king. With the story told and the shepherd-king on record, Nathan said, "You are the man!" Only

four words in English. A mere two in Hebrew! And a man who had been fighting his conscience for months was exposed for a terrible thing he had done and then sought to conceal.

Now the real test came to King David. What would he do? We'll come back to that point of testing directly. For now we need to set the background for this episode.

The Sin of a King

At this point in his life, David was around fifty years old. He had killed Goliath some thirty years before. Saul immediately felt threatened by the young man – refusing at the time to keep the promises he had made to whomever in Israel could triumph over the Philistine champion (cf. 17:25). But it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it! And David retained his righteous heart and demeanor before the Lord.

Young David became a national celebrity after the Goliath victory and the people adored and cheered him – much to the chagrin of a rejected Saul. Saul probably figured it out pretty quickly that David was the one Samuel had foretold to replace him as King of Israel. Twice he tried to murder the young man with a spear. As one's stock rose and the other's fell, David eventually had to flee with Saul in hot pursuit. With God's protection over him, he was spared again and again.

King Saul finally died in battle against the Philistines – both he and his son Jonathan, who was David's closest friend. David mourned their deaths and then set about to fill the role the Creator had ordained for him. After uniting the nation in the aftermath of a civil war that lasted a couple of years, he moved the tabernacle and Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and made that city the center of Israel's political and spiritual life. Over the next decade, God gave him and his army's victory upon victory. David was secure as king over a vast area, admired by all, and favored by the Lord. **“David reigned over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people” (II Samuel 8:15).**

One of my favorite King David stories comes at this point. With his own position assured, he had time to think about other issues that could not be tended to very well during military campaigns. He had promised his dear friend Jonathan that he would look after his family (I Samuel 20:15, 42). So he asked,

"Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" He learned that Mephibosheth was alive – a mere child of five when Jonathan died but who now was grown and had a child of his own (cf. II Samuel 4:4; 9:12). Mephibosheth had been crippled from birth. For the sake of his vow to Jonathan, King David gave him the ancestral land of his grandfather Saul and treated him as a member of his own family (II Samuel 9:7). I love this account of tenderness from the life of a shepherd-become-warrior in Israel.

Although a righteous man with a good heart, David had weaknesses and was subject to sin. Specifically, he had the weakness so common to human males that we call lust or sensuality. One year he sent his army without him to prosecute a campaign against the Ammonites that had begun successfully the year before. "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem" (II Samuel 11:1).

Why did David decide to stay in Jerusalem? He would live to lament that decision. What if he stayed behind to write? To produce more of those psalms we still use from our Bibles? I certainly don't think for a minute that he stayed behind with the intention of being an idle mind that satan would make his workshop. To become a voyeur. To seduce a woman and become an adulterer. But that's precisely what did happen!

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (She had purified herself from her uncleanness.) Then she went back home. The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant" (11:2-5).

The Aftermath

David's action that night was out of character – and sent his life spinning out of control. It was a one-night stand he would rue for the remainder of his life. It brought heartache, death,

and national calamity. Innocent people had their lives destroyed. And the man after God's own heart got a blot on his record he could not remove with all the bitter tears he cried over it.

I know this much: David didn't get up that morning and tell himself he was going to do the most foolish, soul-destroying, and kingdom-blighting thing he could find to do. He didn't get out of bed that morning intending to commit adultery in that same room before the day ended. He didn't start that day with the purpose to offend God. But it happened!

In his book, *Temptation*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts his finger on the central issue of relevance here:

"In our members there is a slumbering inclination toward desire, which is both sudden and fierce. With irresistible power, desire seizes mastery of the flesh. All at once a secret, smoldering fire is kindled. The flesh burns and is in flames. It makes no difference whether it is a sexual desire, or ambition, or vanity, or desire for revenge, or love of fame and power, or greed for money. . .

At this moment God is quite unreal to us. He loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real. The only reality is the devil. Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God. . . . The lust thus aroused envelopes the mind and will of man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us. The questions present themselves as, "Is what the flesh desires really sin in this case?" And, "Is it really not permitted to me, yes, expected of me now, here in my particular situation to appease desire?" . . .

It is here that everything within me rises up against the Word of God. . . . Therefore the Bible teaches us in times of temptation in the flesh, there is one command: Flee! Flee fornication. Flee idolatry. Flee youthful lusts. Flee the lusts of the world. There is no resistance in lust other than flight. Every struggle against lust in one's own strength is doomed to failure.

And what was the effect of that episode on King David? He tried to go back to business as usual the next day. He meant for

it to be over. He meant for it never to be known. But a man with a heart and conscience such as his could not move past it. Guilt and loss of composure and sleepless nights came over him. He was miserable. This isn't my conjecture but his later commentary on the experience:

When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy upon me:
My strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer (Psalms 32:4-5a).

And how long did it continue? A night or two? Maybe a week? For about a year! Long enough for him to try to cover his sin by calling Uriah – a Hittite who had not only come to faith in God but who was one of King David's royal bodyguard (cf. II Samuel 23:39) – back home and trying to get him to spend a night or two in his own bed. Long enough for him to send word back to Uriah's commander to have him killed in battle. Long enough for the baby conceived by David to be born. We must be about a year out from the event itself. A man who started down this road with a heart less devoted to the Lord than David's might have been hardened to the point where repentance was impossible by now (cf. Hebrews 6:4-6).

Now you know the meaning of Nathan's parable! It is the story he told King David about a wealthy, powerful man who used his position to take another man's lamb. No, it was his masterful narrative illustration of something whose evil David had far surpassed by taking the wife of one of his most loyal soldiers and then having him killed. David broke at least three of the Ten Commandments in this shameful series of events – the sixth, seventh, and tenth!

Nathan told him the terrible consequences that would follow from what he had done:

Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise

the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'

"This is what the LORD says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel' " (12:7-12).

The Restoration

To his eternal credit, David did not respond to this rebuke the way King Saul had to a similar one Samuel had brought him from the Lord earlier. After his failure to obey God in destroying the Amalekites and all their possessions, Samuel was sent to call him to account. First, Saul claimed he had done nothing wrong. "But I did obey the Lord," he insisted. "I completely destroyed the Amalekites and (only?) brought back Agag their king" (I Samuel 15:20). Second, he denied personal guilt and said it was the soldiers who had done wrong. "The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal" (I Samuel 15:21). Third, he finally "confessed" his sin but blamed the people for forcing him to do what he had done. "I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instructions," he told Samuel. "I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them" (I Samuel 15:24).

Contrast vain Saul with penitent David. In response to Nathan's parable and its application to him, David said, "I have sinned against the Lord" (II Samuel 12:13). The disarming story was a test of the king's heart, and he passed the test.

He didn't blame Bathsheba for immodesty or carelessness. He didn't make excuses for himself. He didn't shift responsibility to God for making him the way he was. He simply came clean! He 'fessed up. He made a clean breast of the whole sorry episode.

Going back to one of the seven psalms of penitence David wrote about this episode, let's read the lines before and after the description of how awful it was for him to try to keep his sin secret, unacknowledged, and thus unpardoned.

Blessed is he
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man
whose sin the LORD does not count against him
and in whose spirit is no deceit. . . .

Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD"—
and you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you
while you may be found (Psalms 32:1-2, 5-6a).

Does that line about "everyone who is godly pray to you" offend your spiritual sensibilities? Wasn't David praying about his sin? So how could he be a "godly" man exhorting other "godly" worshippers to lay their sins before the Lord? Understand the term not to mean "God-like" but "God-seeking" or "God-trusting." Define it by Hebrews 11 – the context in which David's name is found among the heroes of faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6).

No, it isn't godly to sin, but it certainly is godly to know the one place where sin can be set right. It is godly to trust your Redeemer. When you have failed to flee from temptation and sin, it is godly to flee to the one safe place for sinners. And it is godly to pray as David did about your sin:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity

and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Surely you desire truth in the inner parts;
you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.
Cleans me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.
Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise (Psalms 52:1-17).

Conclusion

Isn't it tragic that the life of David forever bears the scar of this episode? In a capsule summary of his life at I Kings 15:5, it is the single "except" to a marvelous record: "For David had done what was right in the eyes of the LORD and had not failed to keep any of the LORD's commands all the days of his life — except in the case of Uriah the Hittite."

Isn't it tragic that Bathsheba enters the biblical narrative only because of the sinful abuse of power by an idle, voyeuristic man who seduces and overwhelms her?

But isn't it a testimony to the marvelous grace of God that David could not only be rescued from his sin and have his life spared (cf. Leviticus 20:10) but also could become both a physical and spiritual ancestor to the Lord Jesus Christ? Jesus is the Son of David who alone has the right to reign from David's throne forever (Luke 1:31-33; cf. II Samuel 7:13-14). He was authentically a man after God's heart in the sense that he could not sin and be other than tormented over it until he was at peace with God.

And isn't it a testimony to the marvelous grace of God that Bathsheba could not only be forgiven of any complicity or cowardice on her part in this affair and have her life spared but also could become so important to Israel's history as David's beloved wife, Solomon's mother, and one of only five women identified in the ancestry of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ (Matthews 1:6).

The point of Nathan's parable was not to expose, humiliate, or punish David; its sole purpose was to bring him to repentance and healing. The heart revealed by his response to the story made his salvation possible. And his faith in earnestly seeking after God was honored.

If you are David today, have sinned willfully, and have been feeling the heavy weight of your conscience, do with your sin what he did with his. Stop trying to hide it. Confess it to the Lord – and begin dealing with the consequences as best you can. Surrender yourself to the rebuilding of your life in Christ.

If you are Bathsheba today, have been exploited and abused by someone – yet bear a heavy weight of shame and judgment over what happened – pray the penitent prayer she prayed with David. Ask to be cleansed, to have the joy of your salvation restored, and to have the empowering of the Holy Spirit for what lies ahead in your healing.

Again, however, the hero in this story is neither of its human actors but a faithful God who acts from His mercy and loving-kindness. A relationship that never should have been was

sanctified to His Holy ends. Exploitation appears to have become true love. Adultery was forgiven, and partners in sin became partners in marriage. Two who should have been put to death under the demand of law were given lives of fruitfulness to the Lord under the gift that is grace. I repeat for emphasis: The hero of the story is a faithful God who treats us not as our sins deserve but by His grace.

For anyone whose life is a mess today, you would be well-served to believe in this God and to seek Him with your whole heart. And God will see, honor, and reward your faith in Him.

CHAPTER 5 FLEECE OR FAITH

As we continue our study on Faith, another Biblical character's story can be very instructive for us. His name is Gideon.

So how much do you know about him? Ever heard of him? Did you know that the Gideons International – the people who put King James Version Bibles in hotel rooms around the world – is named for him? On the day that society was founded by three men back in 1899, they were praying about an appropriate name. One of them rose from his knees and said, "We shall be called Gideons." He proceeded to make his case by reading the sixth and seventh chapters of Judges to his colleagues. Here is what Gideons International says on its web site about the decision to link the name of that Old Testament character to their group:

"Gideon was a man who was willing to do exactly what God wanted him to do, regardless of his own judgment as to the plans or results. Humility, faith, and obedience were his great elements of character. This is the standard that the Gideon association is trying to establish in all its members, each man to be ready to do God's will at any time, at any place and in any way that the Holy Spirit leads."

That's a pretty good summary of the man – but it leaves out some interesting background. Let me fill in some of it and explain what I see of value in his story for us.

Gideon: Fifth Judge of Israel

When Joshua died, Israel had no similar leader who could stand in the role he and Moses had filled before them. So the nation in its Promised Land went through a period of disintegration. That is, the one nation disintegrated (i.e., fell apart, crumbled) into a loose confederation of tribal units. Incursions and oppressions against the Israelites put different tribes and parts of the land under the Canaanites again. So they would have to fight repeated battles to reclaim pieces of the larger whole that had once been won under Joshua. The occasional heroic figures who led the people during these times of social chaos are called shophetim in the Hebrew text – a

term that hardly corresponds to our English term “judge” and which might better be thought of as military leaders or national deliverers raised up by the mighty hand of God.

The stories of the various judges come in cycles in the Book of Judges. There is a predictable pattern of watching the people turn from God, suffer for their apostasy, cry out for deliverance, receive help through a judge, and (briefly) return to the worship of God. This period of history covers about 300 years of Hebrew history, roughly from the death of Joshua to the time of Samuel.

Gideon is the fifth of these leaders in sequence. The Midianites were systematically raiding the Hebrew territory at harvest time (Judg. 6:1-6). These camel-riding nomads would swoop down, raid the Israelites of grain and animals, and return to their own lands. With their Amalekite allies, they brought such systematic ruin on the people that many of the Israelites fled to caves and remote places in the hill country to escape them.

An interesting philosophy of history emerges in this story and throughout the Book of Judges: the Sovereign Lord uses the twists and turns of human history to accomplish his redemptive purposes. When Israel sinned, the oppression of some enemy nation could be used to bring God’s people to repentance. The Midianites were not consciously serving or Creator, of course, for they did not even believe in Him. They were pursuing their own evil goals of plundering another nation. God certainly didn’t direct them to steal, plunder, and kill. In his great power and might, though, He used their evils deeds and overruled them to holy ends (cf. Romans 8:28).

When the people began to cry out to the Lord during the Midianite oppression, the first response of heaven was to send them a prophet whose name never appears in the text. His message was that, although God had graciously chosen and blessed Israel, the people were suffering because they had not acknowledged Him and listened to His voice (Judges 6:7-10).

Gideon appears to have found a relatively safe place of retreat where he had settled his people, planted crops, and was hoping to be spared the Midianite raids. Though he evidently had hidden well enough to escape detection by the Midianites, he could not hide from God. So the Lord went to him, and this is what happened:

The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where His son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."

"But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."

The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

"But Lord," Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me" (Judges 6:11-17).

The "angel of the Lord" here appears to be Yahweh himself in one of those occasional theophanies we witness in the Old Testament (cf. Judg. 6:22-23). And the rapid-fire sequence of events that follows on this call is fascinating.

First, do you hear the pathos, confusion, and doubt in Gideon? "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" He identified with his people and their situation of oppression. The turmoil in their economy, social life, and national security had him wondering aloud if God had turned His back on them.

Second, do you see his humility? "How can I save Israel?" he wanted to know. "My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." His humility was surely one of the reasons why he had been chosen and a key to the mighty things God would do through him. Mother Teresa used to say that true humility keeps one from being ruined either by praise or disgrace – and that the key to that sort of humility is knowing who you really are. Some people, of course, are so

aware of their humility that they become proud. But humility is never conscious of itself.

Third, I'm sure you noticed his appeal for a "sign" that God was really calling him to do this great thing. At that juncture in the story, Gideon offers to fix an offering for his guest.

Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you."

And the LORD said, "I will wait until you return."

Gideon went in, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.

The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so. With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared. When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"

But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."

So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace (Judges 6:18-24a).

Fourth, Gideon immediately set about to be obedient to God without reservation. The first and best proof of humility and faith will always be obedience! He was told to break down the Baal alter and Asherah pole beside it that his own father had built – and to which he may have been making concessions. "So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town, he did it at night rather than in the daytime" (Judges 6:27). The next morning, what he had done caused such outrage that the people were about to kill him. They came to his father, Joash, and demanded that he tell them where to find

Gideon. The response he made certainly reveals his love for his son and may even indicate that his boy's courage had rekindled his own faith.

But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar." So that day they called Gideon "Jerub-Baal," saying, "Let Baal contend with him," because he broke down Baal's altar (Judges 6:31-32).

Fifth, a wonderful thing happened that had never been witnessed by Gideon or his peers:

Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms, and also into Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, so that they too went up to meet them (Judges 6:33-35).

Gideon became a God-possessed, God-intoxicated man. I don't know what he sensed or felt at that moment. I have no idea whether the people around him saw or heard something from him that let them know he was now a Spirit-filled man. The text simply says that it happened. **Gideon turned from being a confused, frustrated, and compromised man to a confident, forward-looking, and God-following man! I think the proof that the Holy Spirit came upon him was not tongues or fire or dancing but transformation.**

Sixth, Gideon wasn't fixed or made flawless by the Spirit coming upon him. Before he would lead Israel against the Midianites, Amalekites, and their partners camped in Jezreel, he wanted another sign. This is the episode of Gideon's fleece – perhaps the one thing some of you knew about him before this message. But the fleece episode is hardly complimentary to him! In my reading of this text, it is a moment of faltering faith to which God responded with great gentleness.

Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised — look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the

ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew – a bowlful of water (Judges 6:36-38).

If you will do what you have promised! **If** you will do for Israel what you said you were about to do. **If?** This is doubt and testing, not faith! This is weakness rearing its ugly head in the setting of a beautiful act of grace! But we're not through. He still wanted another sign – just in case he had read the first one wrong!

Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew." That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew (Judges 6:39-40).

Seventh, the gracious God who called him and reassured him in his moments of weakness gave the people a mighty deliverance at Gideon's hand. Chapter seven tells how God then tested Gideon's newfound faith by having him whittle down the size of his army and rout the Midianites by a most unmilitary maneuver. When they started out the next day, God successively reduced the number of troops with Gideon from 32,000 to a mere 300 – to prove that God's power rather than Israel's might had won the victory (Judges 7:1-8). With clay jars, torches, and the shout "For the Lord and for Gideon!" the handful of God's chosen people put to flight the Midianites! (Judges 7:9-25).

Do You Need a Sign?

I hear people reference the Gideon story now and again, but I'm not sure they do so with the full awareness of all that is going on in it. That is why I have spent so much time developing the story with some degree of detail. I most often hear people tell of "putting a fleece before the Lord" in ways that smack of flakiness rather than faith, I'm afraid! "Lord, if you want us to buy that house we just saw, make the phone ring in the next ten minutes." "God, if you want me to ask that girl for a date, make her look up and see me while I'm staring at her." "Lord, if this is the car you want me to buy, let the next thing the salesman says to me be about the automobile's sound

system.”

In the real world, I understand insecurity. I know about wishing that I knew exactly what to do or say, just whose advice to heed, and what guaranteed approach will lead someone I love to accept Christ or return to him. I don't think the story of Gideon is meant to encourage me to seek for signs or to put God's patience to the test.

Gideon already knew what he was supposed to do. God had spoken – and spoken very clearly – on that point. Gideon's fleece showed his fear and lack of trust. Come to think of it, Gideon's fleece was more appropriate to someone who believed in Baal than someone who had heard from God. And I wouldn't be surprised at all if this superstitious test derived from the polluted and weakened faith of his family rather than from the Holy Spirit who had come upon Gideon. **So why did God “cooperate” with an unspiritual demand? He was more interested in rescuing his Chosen People than in arguing with and teaching Gideon in this crisis moment!**

So what, if anything, can we learn from Gideon? Let's go back to the process of his evolving relationship with God and see.

First, we should never be shocked at the spiritual chaos in our world. It isn't God's fault that the world is fallen and under a curse. He neither willed nor created war, tyrants, crime, divorce, lies, slander, or death. He is not the source of our human pain, but he does often use our anguish to turn our hearts to seek Him.

Second, humility before the Lord is certainly the only posture truly appropriate to any of us. Like Gideon, when we hear God speak into our confusion and distress, it is more appropriate to think “What are mortals that you would pay attention to our cries!” than “What took you so long?”

Third, we must be careful not to drag our feet in obeying God or to insist on this or that “sign” before we follow Christ. During His personal ministry, Jesus called those who demanded miraculous signs “a wicked and adulterous generation.”

Furthermore, he told them that His resurrection from the dead would be the only sign given to them (Matthew 12:39-40). At some point, your demand that God give you a sign beyond

Christ's death and resurrection for you is an unholy "putting God to the test" – something Scripture forbids (Deuteronomy 6:16) and Jesus refused to do (Luke 4:12). Jesus said his sheep would hear his voice and follow Him (John 10:27).

Fourth, the first positive step any human being takes toward God is repentance. We break down the heart-idols that have been keeping us from Him. That we have valued above Him. That have taken us down the path of disbelief and sin. "The kingdom of God is near," said John the Baptist. **"Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). Before the kingdom rule of God can become a reality in your life, before you can express God from within, you will have to repent and tear down the idols of money, sex, and power that have been your preoccupation.** If you'd prefer to hear it from an apostle of Jesus rather than his forerunner, Peter put it this way: **"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19).** Divine refreshment and the peace that surpasses understanding cannot come to a heart that is stony and impenitent.

Fifth, God's desire is to bless and empower His people by allowing us to walk in the strength of His Holy Spirit. With the same power and energy He projects. On the first Pentecost after Christ's resurrection, Peter preached the gospel and commanded those who had heard Him, **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).** I believe baptism is not only important but necessary. Do you know of any command of God that is unnecessary? But baptism is not the heart of the gospel. In fact, baptism is not part of the gospel at all by Paul's definition of the Good News (cf. I Corinthians 15:1-4). Baptism is part of the total life response to the gospel you and I are expected to make. It is important to us as an affirmation of the gospel – our trust in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as our only hope (Romans 6:1-4). It is important to us as an event of identification with Christ and as an initiation rite into His spiritual body, the church (Galatians 3:27).

The critical element in Christian baptism is not water, however, but the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that the birth "from above" that allowed one to participate in the kingdom rule of God was a

single birth event that involves two elements – water and the Spirit. Water is the easy part. Water is the part we fight over. Water is the part that can drench your body and leave your spirit untouched. The quickening and renewing power in Christian baptism is God the Holy Spirit. Every saved person possesses the Holy Spirit, but the real challenge of a life of faith is to be possessed by the Holy Spirit. To be controlled by the Spirit (Romans 8:9). To be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18b). God doesn't want churches that are insane asylums or cemeteries; he wants churches alive by the power of the Holy Spirit to welcome the undesirable, hurting, and bruised people with whom satan has filled this world – and which most churches won't touch!

Sixth, being a Spirit-filled believer in a Spirit-filled church no more means that you are above temptation or exempt from weakness than Gideon was in his new life after God called him. He still felt insecure at times; so will you. He wanted a fleece-sign before he would be willing to do what God had already told him to do; so might you. He was called and Spirit-filled but still messed up; so can you be.

Seventh, the life of faith means that you trust God to give victories and achieve His holy purposes through you. With your flawed, insecure faith. Through unlikely means. When you are in the minority. The great power of faith never was in Gideon but was in the God who had called him and in whom he had put his trust. **The power of faith in your life is not in your ability to live above discouragement and never fall short of the ideal but is in the God who loves you, delivered you, walks with you, and promises to complete the good work in you that He has begun!**

Conclusion

The call of God to your life is that you should walk by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7). To walk by sight is to do what you can figure out is right to do; to go the places you can make safe enough to go; to do the things you can do to applause and with immediately happy outcomes; never to look foolish. To walk by faith is to do what God tells you is right to do; to go to the risky places He sends you; to do things the people of this world will laugh at and that typically are not appreciated; to look absolutely foolish to people who are judging things by the criteria of this world.

Gideon got dangerously close to trying to force God to turn faith into sight for him! He got a call from God and a sign. Then he needed another. Then – if you won't get angry – just one more! God won't often be put to that sort of test and tolerate it. You and I have already had one and another and then more signs of God's grace! To wait any longer to follow Him just might cross the line with Him and harden our hearts beyond the point of being able ever to repent and be delivered. We don't really know where the line is, but let's not find ourselves crossing it. Act on His Word – NOW!

CHAPTER 6

YOUR PAST DOES NOT HAVE TO DETERMINE YOUR FUTURE

“By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient” (Hebrews 11:31).

Talk about an unlikely person for the preacher’s list! Do you know her story? Do you know her history – her “baggage”? Did you note the adjective still before her name in Hebrews 11:31? **“By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomes the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.” Even though there is a sense in which nobody can shake his or her past, the story of Rahab proves it doesn’t have to determine your future.**

The Spies in Jericho

At the death of Israel’s great lawgiver and leader, the people were still awaiting their Promised Land. So Moses’ leadership gave way to Joshua’s, and God gave him this oath: **“As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Joshua 1:5).** Emboldened by his faith in that oath, Joshua gave the command to prepare the people to cross the Jordan in order to take possession of the land that was being given to them. Not to “conquer” the land, mind you, but to **“take possession of the land the Lord your God is giving you for your own” (Joshua 1:11b).** Canaan was a grace-gift to Israel, not a reward for their faithfulness in the wilderness or a blessing to be attained by their hard work.

Joshua, surely remembering the experience of nearly forty years ago, did the prudent thing of sending spies to reconnoiter. But he didn’t send twelve. He didn’t want to risk a repeat of the whining unbelief that caused God to send the Israelites back into the desert so many years ago! So he sent only a couple – hand-picked, I suspect, not only for their competence to assess the land but also for their strong faith that God’s word was about to be fulfilled – to scout the area. **“Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. ‘Go, look over the land,’ he said, ‘especially Jericho.’ So they**

went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there" (Joshua 2:1).

How in the world did they wind up at the house of a prostitute? Was it totally by chance? Did her house happen to be strategically located on the wall of Jericho? Did these presumably righteous men of good reputation with Joshua go there for sordid reasons? Or did they wind up there by virtue of divine intervention and guidance? I can't say with certainty, but I have an opinion.

The people of Jericho and the surrounding territory had been hearing about the huge massing of people on the other side of Jordan for some time now. People were just as concerned about security and border protection in antiquity as we are today. And the Israelite spies entering Jericho had been spotted by some alert citizen!

The king of Jericho was told, "Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land" (Joshua 2:2-3).

I wish we had more information about Rahab at this point. It becomes clear very quickly that she has somehow been convinced that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is about to deliver her city to the people whose spies are in her house. Maybe the spies told her some things prophetically. Maybe they worked miraculous signs that turned her heart to the God who could give such power. From what we will read from a later part of the chapter, however, it appears that she was ready to cast her fate with the Israelites before the spies ever came to her house. But we'll come back to that point in just a minute.

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut (Joshua 2:4-7).

She lied to the Jericho militia about the whereabouts of the two men! Some people use this event to argue that it's all right for us to lie to protect innocent people or to prevent harm coming to ourselves or to someone for whom we are responsible. Others try to explain that her lie wasn't really a lie. Or perhaps there is no need to do either of these tricky things with the text. Maybe this is another case of God acting graciously to save someone in spite of her sin. I would remind you, after all, that she was also a prostitute.

What saved this woman was not her character but her faith. The thing that made this outsider who had no claim to the promise made to Abraham so long ago into an insider was divine grace. She was not destroyed "with those who were disobedient" because God showed mercy to her – and, for her sake, to her entire family.

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death."

"Our lives for your lives!" the men assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land."

So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. Now she had said to them, "Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way" (Josh. 2:8-16).

These verses seem to answer our earlier question about how Rahab decided to cast her lot with Israel. Did the spies preach to her? Did they perform signs? There is no evidence of it. The news reports she had been hearing about how Yahweh had dried up the Red Sea, given victory over the Amorites and perhaps other exploits from their ordeal had brought her to faith!

And what a marvelous confession of faith she made: **"The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."** Into her gloomy and unfortunate life had come hope that Israel's God was a God of kindness and compassion to foreigners and aliens. Her faith embraced the possibility that this being known as Yahweh would allow an outsider to everyone else become an insider with Him.

Rahab's Faith

Faith isn't sight. It seldom has miraculous confirmation. It is, instead, the forward-looking capacity of a person to move in a new direction – guided only by a word from God. It is a person's willingness to advance into an unseen future with more trust in God than in themselves. It is a woman's courage to receive the positive reorientation of her life by grounding it simply in the word of God's promise.

We can speculate about Rahab and probably not get too wide of the truth. Do you think she loved Jericho? Had been affirmed in her dignity and worth in that culture? Had been valued as a person? Had been given a positive self-image by the people who knew her? She was a prostitute – the ultimate outsider who was the butt of jokes, the punch-line to crude stories, a woman men treated with contempt in the very act of using her, and a woman other females snubbed and insulted for the threat she was to them!

The men said to her, **"This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. If anyone goes outside your house into the street, his blood will be on his own head; we will not be responsible. As for anyone who is in the house with you, his blood will be on our head if a hand is laid**

on him. But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear."

"Agreed," she replied. "Let it be as you say." So she sent them away and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window (Joshua 2:17-21).

Time passed. I have no idea if anyone noticed the scarlet rope dangling through a window in the outer wall of Jericho. Rahab did! It had become the "sign" she had asked of the spies. There was no miracle – just a piece of crimson cord from her window to a few feet off the ground below. Occasionally swaying in the wind. Marking a harlot's house for salvation. Signaling the rebirth of her life.

Fast-forwarding to the outcome of these events, Joshua came against Jericho in obedience to the orders of the Lord. It would not be taken by siege and assault but by miracle. The people were to march around the city once a day for seven days. Then, on the seventh, they were to encompass it seven times, seven priests were to blow trumpets of rams' horns, and the people were to shout. If everyone else in Jericho was mystified through those days, Rahab was living in hope. And she didn't lose hope through the strange tactics of the Israelites. The crimson rope stayed. She kept her family huddled. And she waited.

When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city. They devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her." So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into

the treasury of the LORD's house. But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho — and she lives among the Israelites to this day (Joshua 6:20-25).

But you still haven't heard the end of the story! Rahab didn't simply live in the cities and towns of the Israelites. She became one of them. She married a man named Salmon (Ruth 4:20-21). Some wonder if Salmon might not have been one of the two men she hid from the people of Jericho. Their son Boaz married Ruth, and so Rahab became the great-great-grandmother of King David. This means, of course, that a pagan prostitute from Jericho is in the lineage of Jesus of Nazareth! (Matthew 1:4-5).

In addition to the factual data I have just given you, Hebrew tradition makes Rahab one of the four most beautiful women in the world and says she was the ancestor of no less than eight prophets – including Jeremiah and the prophetess Huldah. The half-brother of Jesus knew his ancestor's story and said this of her: **"In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?" (James 2:25).**

God Loves Outcasts

Though it was surely faint and hardly understood at all, Rahab's heart heard and grasped the call of God in that ancient time. God's grace was offered to her in the midst of the general unbelief of Jericho and the particular sinfulness of her own life. The tiny opening of her faith allowed God to work great wonders around her and through her. Rahab's story is an unmistakable testimony to the truth that divine grace, forgiveness, and healing are extended to all – regardless of nationality or ethnic background or personal sinfulness.

If your sin is Rahab's sin, God's grace is offered to you. If you are a thief or liar or alcoholic or coke addict, the blood of Jesus Christ was shed for you.

In a sermon he once preached on this Bible character, the great preacher C.H. Spurgeon quoted Origen to make the point that Christ's gospel is not only a "sanctuary" for thieves, murderers, and prostitutes but a "hospital" where they all find healing.

God does not call us to continue our sins but to be delivered from them. The gospel takes root in the heart that is penitent over sin and then produces its fruit of joy, self-discipline, righteousness, and peace!

The cleansing fountain of the blood of Christ was opened for the nastiest of sins – as well as the ones like greed and self-righteousness that we have made socially respectable! The chief of sinners is welcome to come for cleansing. The one totally naked and humiliated by what she has done is offered the robe of Christ's grace. And the man who is utterly dead in sin's shame is called to be raised from the dead to newness of life in him.

Victor Hugo's brilliant *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was adapted by the Disney people a few years ago and supplied with a soundtrack. If you've ever watched it with your children, perhaps you remember one particular piece of music about outcasts. Esmerelda, the beautiful gypsy girl who befriends the misshapen bell-ringer Quasimodo, enters the cathedral and sees people at prayer. As she approaches one of the statues of Mary with the Christ-child, she begins to pray herself. As the congregation is praying for wealth, fame, and glory, she prays – both for Quasimodo and for herself – "acceptance." She sings, "Please help my people / The poor and downtrod / I thought we all were / The children of God / God help the outcast / Children of God."

It is the prayer God seeks to answer through the Body of Christ. It is the call God sends to your heart today.

Conclusion

Christian writers from generations past have pointed to the scarlet cord in Rahab's window as a sign of the blood of Christ. To paraphrase one: Rahab's sins had been as scarlet, but the scarlet cord that once had freed the spies had remained as a token of her salvation – and as a type of the blood of Jesus by which the worst of sinners can be forgiven.

In the Body of Christ, all those who have been outcasts are received and treated as the children of God. Healing happens. New life begins. And the Creator of the Universe shows Himself to be compassionate beyond all comprehension as another soul is delivered from sin.

CHAPTER 7

WRESTLING WITH GOD

(FROM BROKENNESS TO HEALING)

Do you ever dream? I think I understand just a little of the background for some dreams. A big presentation at work the next day may generate one of those bizarre dreams about forgetting everything you know or looking down only to discover you forgot to put on your skirt or trousers. A major surgery, a final exam, a tough decision – all these can trigger weird dreams. Sometimes there is no real dream – just restlessness. An unpleasant confrontation that just can't be put off any longer leaves you tossing on your bed, with all sorts of scenarios rushing through your head.

If you do have dreams, how much weight do you give them? Do you wake up and have trouble getting back to sleep? Do you adjust your appointment schedule for the next day or travel plans for the next week? Do you break off relationships based on dreams?

These questions about dreams are probably best left to others. But some dreams in Scripture proved to be prophetic. Job's counselor Elihu, for one, declared his confidence that God sometimes speaks through dreams: **"For God does speak — now one way, now another — though man may not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men as they slumber in their beds . . ."** (Job 33:14-15).

God spoke to Abimelech in a dream and warned him not to touch Sarah. Joseph often heard from the Lord through dreams (Genesis 37:5-10). Much later in the Old Testament, we meet Daniel and learn that God gave him the power to interpret dreams (Daniel 2:14ff). Even in the New Testament, God warned Joseph in a dream to take the infant Jesus into Egypt to save his life (Matthew 2:13-14). And Paul altered his preaching schedule at least once because of a vision he had in the dead of night (Acts 16:6-10). The patriarch Jacob had dreams too.

Jacob's Dreams

Jacob was a rascal from birth. He grabbed the heel of his twin brother Esau as the two boys were born. "[Jacob] came out,

with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob" – a name that literally means "he grasps the heel" or figuratively "he deceives." Esau became an outdoorsman and a hunter – his father's favorite; Jacob was favored by his mother, who kept him around the house, taught him to cook, and helped him perfect the art of treachery. In his adult life, Jacob made a career of reaching out to grasp the rights and possessions of others – his brother Esau's birthright (25:29-34), his father Isaac's blessing (27:1ff), and his father-in-law Laban's flocks and herds (30:25-43; 31:1).

In the course of his travels and adventures, two dreams of special importance came to Jacob. As he fled from Isaac's home because of the anger of Esau, he stopped for the night at Bethel. There he had the dream of the ladder or ramp or staircase reaching from earth to heaven and had the Abrahamic promise repeated to him – and was given a promise of personal protection by the Lord (28:10-15). He moved on from there to his Uncle Laban's, got his just deserts when he was tricked in a marriage contract, and eventually – with considerable wealth and a large family of his own now – started back to his original home by God's order (31:3).

On the way home to Canaan, God would humble Jacob significantly and teach him the importance of trusting the divine will over human schemes. What a dream at Bethel and twenty years with Laban had not taught him would finally become plain at Peniel.

Afraid for his life as he left Laban and turned toward Esau, he schemed as he traveled about a way to appease his angry brother. He sent messengers to him who were instructed to ask for "favor" in Esau's eyes (32:3-5). This language essentially amounts to an apology and a request to be forgiven. The messengers returned – evidently without making contact with Esau – and reported that Jacob's brother was coming toward him with 400 men (32:6). Terrorized now, Jacob's counter-measure was to divide his people and animals into two groups. The group in the lead would bear the brunt of any assault, and the one in the rear could try to escape (32:7-8). He prayed to the God of his father and grandfather to spare him, his wives, and his children; he based his prayer on the promise of future descendants that had been confirmed to him at Bethel (32:9-12).

He then instructed his servants who would be in front of him the next day to act as emissaries when they met Esau. They were to offer Jacob's animals to him as gifts by which he hoped to pacify his brother's anger (32:13-21). Now that he had done all that he knew to do in preparation for the imminent encounter with Esau, Jacob was alone with his fears and his God. And he had a dream.

Vulnerability

Jacob must have felt quite vulnerable at that moment. His possessions had been forfeited and sent ahead as gifts to Esau. His family was exposed to death. Wealth, family, personal safety – all were now dependant on the care of God. Step by step that night, he was moving toward complete self-surrender. The stage was set for the final event in that process. **Alone and afraid, people are likely open to God as they are at no other time in life.**

Suddenly a "man" appeared out of the darkness and began to wrestle with Jacob. In this dark night of his soul, it would gradually dawn on him that this was no mere man. God had come to him in human form, as to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre (32:30; cf. 18:1ff). What a struggle it must have been! In one corner was Jacob, the man of ingenuity and scheming who was used to coming out on top. In the other was God, the covenanting God who wanted Jacob to learn that only those who abandon self-reliance can be exalted by the Lord.

The wrestling match continued until the dawn was about to break (32:24). It might have been called a draw, except for what happened next. And if it had ended that way, what a tragedy it would have been for Jacob.

The conflict brought to a head the battling and groping of a lifetime, and Jacob's desperate embrace vividly expressed his ambivalent attitude to God, of love and enmity, defiance and dependence. It was against Him, not Esau or Laban, that he had been pitting his strength, as he now discovered; yet the initiative had been God's, as it was this night, to chasten his pride and challenge his tenacity.

The wrestling ended when the strange visitor "touched the socket of Jacob's hip" and dislocated it (32:25). Anyone who has had a shoulder or even a finger dislocated understands

why the struggle would end abruptly at that point. As the man determined to leave, Jacob's plea was this: "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (32:26).

What had surely begun to dawn on Jacob about this man's identity was now plain. If the mere touch of a hand could cripple Jacob, there had been some other point to the wrestling match that night than to find out who was stronger. This was God and no human force can defy Him or overpower Him.

The strong-willed, strong-armed Jacob was changed in an instant from a wrestler who could not be thrown into one who could not stand unaided. He quit fighting and began clinging . . . Here was a holy boldness, a holy determination. Here was Jacob at his best. Formerly he had deceived his father to get his human blessing. But he had long since been convinced of the inadequacy of that blessing obtained by those means. Now he wanted a blessing from God and he refused to go until it was given.

The blessing God gave Jacob was a name change that signified his new attitude toward the Lord. The name Jacob means "heel-grabber" or "deceiver," but it was replaced that day with Israel (32:27-28). Israel means "one who strives with God" or, perhaps, "one for whom God strives." Jacob had been broken before God, so now he could be Israel. The trickster had been transformed into one who depended on God. "So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.' The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip" (Genesis 32:30-31).

The Meeting With Esau

As the light dawned on a new day, Jacob limped back to his family. But the change in him was not so much the physical limp as the spiritual difference in his heart. He went before them to meet Esau in person and bowed to the ground seven times to affirm his supplicant status (33:1-3). Then comes a scene that resembles the reunion of the father and son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: "But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept" (33:4).

Jacob's wrestling with the Lord had not been in vain. The broken and humbled man effectively confessed his sin against his brother by approaching him bowed rather than erect, a penitent rather than a challenger. And what was implicit in that approach is made explicit at the end of their exchange that day when Jacob said, **"Just let me find favor in the eyes of my lord" (33:15).** He did the right thing that day and set an example that is too challenging for many who cannot admit having wronged others, who cannot find it in their hearts to ask pardon.

Many have described the meeting between Jacob and Esau as another wrestling match. Yet it is one in which the two brothers wrestle over who will forgive the other first. Jacob graciously offers Esau an expensive gift of livestock, and the older brother politely refuses. Jacob then "urges" him to accept it until he finally does (33:11). "Quite unlike the angel-wrestling scene, yet very much like it, what we see here are two men who look less like bitter enemies than old friends arguing over who's going to pick up the restaurant check!"

Although Jacob began his journey toward Canaan and Esau with a plan to pursue his wronged brother's favor through gifts and obeisance, he ended up being reconciled to him by sheer grace. With God as guide, the forgiveness that comes of grace is ultimately the means to reconciliation. **"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32).**

In this powerful scene, two men have had their best moment ever in relation to each other. One has apologized, and the other has accepted. A reconciliation has been effected – too late for their parents to witness and with much harm having fallen out to many persons. But the feud is over. A man on the run has become a man at peace, and a man once bent on murder has wept and kissed his intended victim.

Conclusion

It is the rule rather than the exception that God's servants walk with a limp. If a weak, dishonest, and sinful man such as Jacob could retain a place within the will of God in spite of his failings, there is a place for you and me with our sinfulness. Because of his experience in wrestling with God at Peniel, that

place's name has become synonymous among believers with an experience of spiritual crisis that radically transforms a soul.

So let me make a prediction about your spiritual life that is based on all this: You will have to wrestle with God about some things too! Now let me give you an insight about that struggle: If you win, it will be because you experience some degree of loss, pain, and brokenness.

The real problem in your life, and in mine is the human penchant for self-centeredness, success, self-will, stardom, and self-sufficiency. It is the Jacob-syndrome of thinking we know how things should run and that we have the right to manipulate everyone to that end. It is the heel-grabbing ugliness of needing to be a star that forces one to be a phony, a strutter, and a snake-oil salesperson.

So God sometimes allows failure to break us so that He can pick up the pieces. He calls us to be crucified with His Son so He can give us authentic spiritual life. He asks us to quit jockeying for what we want and to accept what He gives.

Isn't this story of wrestling with God an anticipation of the lesson Paul learned from his life experience?

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (II Corinthians 12:7-10).

Isn't this the experience into which Jesus invited His disciples who were jockeying for position and power in the kingdom of God? James and John asked to sit at His right and left in glory; He answered by talk of suffering and service (Mark 10:35-45).

Some of you are unhappy with God because He has allowed weakness, hardships, and difficulties into your life. Don't you suspect you will stay angry until you quit fighting for what you want and learn to trust God's ability to bring things to the end

He desires? Until you learn to minister, serve, and be reconciled to those around you? Until you stop seeing as an enemy everyone who seems to stand in the way of what you want?

God is wrestling with you for the sake of allowing you to sense your brokenness and to accept His healing, His sufficiency, and blessing.

CHAPTER 8

SNATCHING VICTORY FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT

The inscrutable workings of God in human lives to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat and to bring holy ends from the most unlikely of beginnings are summed up in the term divine providence. It is the outcome of God's sovereignty interacting with our freedom and there is very little I can tell you about how it works. It is genuinely mysterious. But there is no more emphatic Biblical study in God's providence than the life of Joseph.

A seventeen-year-old boy was snatched from his father's house, terrorized by his brothers, sold into slavery, carried off to Egypt, falsely accused of attempted rape, and sentenced to prison. Thirteen years after the horrible ordeal began; he was dramatically and abruptly elevated to the position of Grand Vizier of Egypt. Second only to the Pharaoh, Joseph effectively ran that country's internal affairs for at least the next fourteen years. He was God's instrument to save not only Egypt's economy and people but the covenant community God had begun with Abraham.

The experiences of Joseph make the following words from Paul meaningful: *"That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good"* (Romans 8:28, *The Message*). His story also gives hope to people who read it that the same God who rescued him from his situation can also rescue them from theirs.

From Prison To Palace

The turning point of Joseph's life came when he was thirty years old. Having spent the previous thirteen years in slavery and jail, he was elevated by a sovereign God to the position for which he had been groomed through adversity. It would be the one time in his life to date when the improvement of his personal circumstances did not end in tragedy. The dreams God had given him in his boyhood about a high position of authority in which even his own family would bow to him had come true on God's timetable and in a most roundabout way.

While Joseph was in jail, two of Pharaoh's household servants – his baker and his cupbearer – had been thrown into prison with him. They had dreams, and Joseph interpreted them. The baker was executed, and the cupbearer was returned to his master's favor. **"The chief cupbearer, however, did not remember Joseph; he forgot him" (40:23)**. Two full years after this happened; Pharaoh himself had a disturbing dream. Only then did the cupbearer think about Joseph and tell the king about him.

The interpretation given Pharaoh's dream through Joseph was that Egypt would experience seven years of great productivity and abundance followed immediately by seven exhausting years of famine (41:17-32). The Lord not only interpreted the dream through Joseph but also led him to advise the Egyptian ruler to **"look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt" (41:33)**. His duties would be to oversee the collection and storage of twenty percent of the abundant harvests during the seven years of plenty as preparation for the famine that would surely come (41:34-36).

Pharaoh accepted both the interpretation and counsel about how to get ready for what lay ahead. In a stroke of insight – likely tied as well to the superstition of the polytheistic monarch – he discerned that Joseph should be the man in charge of preparing Egypt for the famine that lay ahead. He saw him as **"one in whom is the spirit of God" (41:37-40)**. For the next seven years, Joseph was second in authority only to Pharaoh and oversaw the storage of huge amounts of grain against the coming famine.

In his personal life, two sons were born during that seven-year period (41:50). Each was given a name that reflected the sentiment of Joseph at the time of his birth. The first was Manasseh (i.e., forgetting); in his new role, Joseph could close the door on the painful part of his past – though not on his link with God's covenant promises (41:51). The second was Ephraim (i.e., fruitfulness); he acknowledged that the Lord had made him fruitful in his new environment (41:52).

Then the seven years of plenty ended, and Joseph was put in charge of all issues related to the distribution of the stored surplus (41:53-55). That the famine reached beyond Egypt to the surrounding countries (41:56-57) would set the stage for a dramatic reunion with his family.

"God Sent Me Ahead Of You"

The terrible famine brought Joseph's brothers into Egypt to purchase grain. Through a long series of intrigues, he recognized them and brought them into his presence. When Joseph told them his true identity, the brothers were speechless with fear (45:3). They must have quaked at the notions of what so powerful a man could do to them for their past sins against him. But Joseph immediately took the role of a supplicant himself and begged them not to fear him. Now that the pieces had come together for him as to what had been accomplished in the providence of God, he attempted to explain it to them. **"And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you"** (45:5).

In one of the great affirmations of the providence of God found anywhere, Joseph said, **"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God"** (45:8a). He didn't excuse what they had done. He didn't make God responsible for their sin. But he forgave them and echoed the faith that had sustained him all these years: God is going to use all these terrible things for some good purpose. I just know he will!

No person of faith can read the Joseph story without being struck by the grandeur of God's sovereign power to bring about His purposes from the most unpromising of circumstances. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

This text does not say that everything that happens in human experience is good. We know better! Neither does it say that everything that happens comes about because God wills it. Who would want to lay the jealousy, hatred, and evil deeds of Joseph's brothers at God's feet? To attribute their deeds to God's will would be to turn morality on its head (i.e., things the brothers did with evil intent were actually holy because God willed them) and to make our Holy God the source not only of good but of evil as well.

The biblical claim is that God uses all things – the bad ones as well as the good ones – to carry out His purposes. Some tragic events are the wicked deeds of violent, satan-serving humans (cf. Luke 13:1-2). Other tragedies have no explanation, for they

are simply incidents in nature (cf. Luke 13:4). Thus there are muggings and rapes, murders and wars; there are also traffic accidents and hurricanes, construction accidents and crib deaths. **Regardless of what happens in the life of anyone who is a believer, God has the power to overrule it to some end that achieves His purpose.**

And that is perhaps the final thing that people fail to notice in Romans 8:28. The grand promise of the providence of God is not operative in the life of everyone. It applies to "those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In other words, this is a covenant promise to Christians. It is an affirmation of God's ability to create light in the darkness of our confusion, sin, and disarray.

Our Present Crisis

Our nation and world face a critical set of circumstances today that no one under the sound of my voice would have chosen. We didn't set them in motion. But they are upon us, and we must decide what to do with this time given to us. With soldiers still fighting in the Middle East, what shall we do?

First, let's pray continually. Pray for America. Pray for our President, Secretary of State, and our other national leaders. Pray for other nations. Pray for soldiers and their families. Pray for civilians in harm's way. Pray for God to show a path to authentic global peace in a time that heralds war.

Here is a prayer I am already praying, and you are welcome to join it or to adapt it for yourself: **Heavenly Father, deliver our world from war, bloodshed, and terror! Turn hearts ruled by hatred from their evil intentions and let justice roll down like waters. Bless our president, his advisors, and the leaders of other nations to find a path to peace in part of our world. If there can be no peace except by the defeat of evil powers, grant courage, strength, and swift victory. We plead for compassion to aid the suffering, to rescue the refugees, and to find a way to peace with people who today are our enemies. We beseech you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Second, let's do something concrete, useful, and sacrificial for people we know whose lives have been interrupted during this 'financial crisis.'

Many of these needs are as practical as housing, groceries, clothes and medicine. I haven't heard as clear a call for national and personal sacrifice from Washington as I would have liked, so it time for people in the 'Body of Christ' to step up to the plate.

God Meant This for Good

Joseph could look at the terrible ordeal through which he had come and say, "I know you guys weren't trying to do me any favor that day thirteen years ago when you sold me to slave traders! But God is bigger than your intentions, surpasses my most painful hours and utterly brilliant in His power to turn suffering into joy. He turned all these terrible things on their heads for the sake of doing good to us all." Joseph believed that about his life. And I believe that about your life. My life. This tense time in history.

Don't ask me to explain how some painful event in your life today will lead to a higher end, how a war can serve the ends of peace, or how you can rise above some tragedy that will hit your family. Do you think Joseph knew where his ordeals were headed? Faith does not mean having all the answers in times of crisis; rather, it means continuing in obedience to God when answers are not forthcoming.

Perhaps I can illustrate this wonderful text by reminding you of your last trip by airplane. Every part of a 727 is subject to gravity and will fall to the earth if left to itself. The heavy jet engines, the wings, your seat – all will plummet straight to the ground if dropped from 35,000 feet. But when all those parts are fitted together and pointed toward the sky under a skilled captain's hand, they fly! And they take passengers to their desired destinations! The same thing may be said of the events of my life. Some have been painful and many more have been happy. But when God fits them all together and guides the course of my life, I soar! And God has promised me a happy landing at my desired destination!

God Works in Human Lives

I believe with my whole heart that the same God who tracked the events of Joseph's life to bring him to the place where he would serve nobly in Egypt is at work in my life today. And I believe the same thing about your life too.

It is easy enough for me to read Joseph's story and feel no panic when his brothers plot against him and Potiphar's wife lies about him. I know it's going to turn out all right because I know the end of the story. But Joseph didn't know how all these things would be overruled to serve God's purpose. He didn't know the end from the beginning. Only God knew and the virtue of Joseph during the ordeal is that he trusted the Lord in circumstances he did not choose but in which he did not curse and abandon Him.

In the meanwhile, Joseph tried to make the best possible use of each situation. If he could not be a son in Jacob's house, he would be a trustworthy slave in Potiphar's. When he could no longer be a slave in an important man's house, he would be a model prisoner in Pharaoh's jail. He seems to have accepted each confusing turn in his life path without murmuring. His goal was simply to honor his God and be faithful in every situation. **"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10).**

John Wesley was traveling to a preaching appointment one day, and his carriage got stuck in the mud following a rain. The delay disturbed him greatly because he had a commitment to preach in the town ahead. While he and some helpers were trying to get the vehicle moving again, a man happened by the scene. Wesley spoke with him for only a moment but perceived that he was deeply troubled about something. Daring to ask about his anguished appearance, Wesley learned that the farmer was practically destitute and in danger of losing his home because of crop failure. "The landlord is ready to turn us out," he said, "and I don't know where to go with my wife and children."

"How much do you owe?" asked Wesley. When told that twenty shillings would clear his debt, the preacher pulled that amount from his wallet. "Well," he said, "I believe we can handle that. The Lord evidently wanted me to meet you today." Turning to the people who had been helping him with his carriage stuck in the mud, he exclaimed, "Now I see why our carriage had to get stuck in the mud. Our steps were halted so that we might help that needy family."

Conclusion

When an artist begins a new canvas, he may first put down several broad strokes of basic colors. Someone watching him with an untrained eye might be confused and see no meaning at all to such a beginning. He might even walk away, convinced that nothing of beauty could come of so awkward a start. As the artist works carefully to blend the colors and to introduce an occasional new one from his palette, however, what had originally seemed to be meaningless confusion begins to emerge into a beautiful painting.

The workings of our God are sometimes of the same order. He does this and allows that in His world. It might appear that in a given instance there is no possible good that could come from a situation. Then, as a skillful artist, he brings first this and then another influence to bear until something purposeful begins to emerge and some good work is done to His glory. This is the biblical doctrine of the providence of God.

God is at work on the canvas of human history. We must not presume to know what He is attempting to achieve in particular cases. Neither are we wise enough to be critical of His methods. His workings in our lives are beyond our ability to discern, and we may not understand them until we look back from eternity.

Beauty from chaos, victory from defeat, and life from death! God has a track record of doing it time and again. So don't despair that you cannot see His resolution to your present crisis. Just continue to be trustworthy in whatever situation you find yourself. Make the best possible use you can of it.

Trust God to put all the pieces together in His own good time for His holy purposes. He has proved Himself faithful again and again in the lives of His people. You can be sure that He will not fail you.

CHAPTER 9

HOW HESITANT FAITH CAN BIRTH GREAT LEADERS

I certainly don't know how to reduce leadership to a formula. The profiles, life experiences and strengths of certain leaders I have studied, known, or followed are by no means uniform. Too often I have seen people filling positions who aren't really leaders and who resort to trying to coerce others into following them. That's coercion and manipulation, not leadership. The subject is far more complex than most realize.

People aren't leaders because they are in key posts. In fact, most of the fatal obstruction to good ideas comes from non-leaders who are in positions from which they "gum up the works" by their failures of vision and insight! I have serious doubts that people are "born leaders" either. Leadership is more likely among people with certain natural gifts, but gifts such as intelligence and personal charisma don't guarantee the people with them can become effective leaders. Neither is someone who has the proven ability to do a thing well automatically capable of inspiring, teaching, and leading others to do that same thing. Yes, those people are the primary pool from which we would expect leaders to arise; but we are often surprised not only by a person's inability to share what she knows but also by the occasional soul who steps into a new arena for him and immediately takes a mantle of leadership and wears it well. That brings us to the Biblical character of Moses.

Two Texts Involving Moses

The primary leader in the Old Testament narrative is Moses. He was, to be sure, a "hesitant" leader – but a leader nonetheless. And he is among the exemplars of faith offered to Christians in Hebrews.

"By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because

he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel" (Hebrews 11:24-28).

This text from Hebrews requires a good deal of background from the Old Testament in order to be appreciated adequately. Here is one of the key sections of Exodus related to his career. It is the episode of his calling by the Lord to be the one who would go to Egypt, confront Pharaoh, and lead some two million descendants of Abraham from slavery to freedom.

"Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight — why the bush does not burn up."

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey — the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation" (Exodus 3:1-15).

Why So Hesitant?

The first thing that strikes most people when reading this text is Moses' initial reluctance. Why is this man hesitant? If God has appeared to him, why doesn't he feel bold and confident about his task? If God has called him to be his agent, why doesn't he take off running toward Egypt? I certainly can't read his mind, but at least three possibilities come to mind. Perhaps it was one of these – or all of them taken together – that made him ask three of four questions whose combined effect is this: "God, are you sure you're talking to the right person for the job?"

First, there is a very good chance that Moses was hesitant to accept God's call because he was filled with self-doubt born of past failures. The Book of Genesis closes with about seventy-five descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob moving to Egypt as free people to settle in a favored part of the country. Jacob's son Joseph had been used by the Lord to save Egypt from a terrible famine, so he and his descendants were treated with extreme kindness and favor.

The Book of Exodus opens with ominous words about a new king or dynasty coming to power. And the new rulers were

hostile to the offspring of Jacob (i.e., the Israelites) and enslaved them. Slave masters worked them ruthlessly and made their lives miserable. In a fascinating story that anticipates the peril of Jesus at his birth, the infant Moses is not only spared death at his birth to a Jewish slave family but brought into the Egyptian royal family by a daughter of Pharaoh. He was, to use the movie title, a young “prince of Egypt” who could have kept a low profile, concealed his Semitic genes, and turned a blind eye to the Jews.

The Hebrews 11 account reckons Moses a man of faith precisely because he would not look out for himself alone and let his fellow-Israelites suffer. His birth mother had told him his heritage. As he grew up and as the situation of his people grew worse, he must have agonized about doing something for them. Assuming he knew the Joseph story of a boy yanked from his family and put through an ordeal in Egypt, he may have dared to believe that he was being positioned by divine providence to save his people. When he saw a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian one day, he intervened and killed the slave master. Maybe it was just his anger out of control. Maybe it was his naïve notion of acting to rally the Jews against the Egyptians. Whatever it was, it was ill-fated and led to his having to flee to Midian – where he was humbled and disciplined by a long career of herding sheep for a man named Jethro.

He had so thoroughly misread the situation and opportunity of forty years ago that Moses must have doubted himself now. He had sinned by committing a murder back then. He had run ahead of God. Forty, thirty-eight, thirty-five years ago – maybe back then Moses was still expecting to do something heroic. But now? Forty years later? After making such a mess of things?

Second, Moses was painfully aware of his lack of credentials for such a task. If he were to go back to Egypt, why should Pharaoh give him the time of day? For that matter, why should the Israelites? How was he going to convince anyone that they should see him as a “leader” – God’s agent for delivering His oppressed people? If he had lived the life of a prince in Egypt, established himself in the house of Pharaoh, been revealed to Egyptian and Jew alike as God’s anointed – maybe then he would have credibility. But we’re talking about a man coming in from keeping sheep in the desert to challenge the leader of the

most powerful nation in the world? To organize two million slaves into a nation? Where are the credentials for such a task?

Third, there was the sheer size of the project. Who in his right mind wouldn't be reluctant about attempting such a staggering feat?

How Moses' Reservations Were Overcome

How in the world can Moses get past these obstacles? Forget his past? Find confidence without impressive qualifications? Face so daunting a challenge? There was no time for a course either in self-esteem building or in theology! He couldn't change his past. He couldn't foresee the future. So the God who took the initiative to call him for this work also took the initiative to deal with his anxieties. Here is the key section: **"But Moses said to God, 'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' And God said, 'I will be with you.' "**

The lesson [God-called] leaders learn is that "salvation comes from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). However legitimate their concerns may be, they are in the final analysis irrelevant. God is greater than their inadequacies, lack of experience, or talent. In fact, He surprises the ill-prepared and calls them out of unlikely settings precisely to leave no doubt that it is His power and might that is at work. "I will be with you" is a refrain, either explicit or implicit, that dominates all these call narratives. Salvation and Deliverance are in God's hands; He will work His might through whomever He chooses.

The same God whose sovereignty, power, and grace calls people also equips them for His purposes.

In the context of this call to Moses, there were already signs being given him of the Lord's great power to work through unexpected means to spectacular outcomes. Moses had just seen the "strange sight" of a bush on fire that was not consumed. Was that normal and ordinary? Of course not! (It was an event pointing beyond itself). It should have indicated to Moses that the ordinary things of nature can do the supernatural things of the Almighty when He wills it. God got his attention by having a bush burn but not burn up. In the next chapter, as Moses continues his protest, the Lord turns the

man's ordinary staff into a snake and back again (4:1-5). Then He makes Moses' hand leprous and whole again (4:6-7). And he tells his hesitant leader that there are no limits to this sort of thing. He will turn the Nile into blood, if need be (4:8-9). All these initial indicators establish the Lord's ability to make all of nature do His bidding. If He can do it with bushes and staffs, hands and rivers, why not with human beings?

The more significant thing in the exchange is not the miraculous signs, however, but the self-disclosure of God to Moses. "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you." ' God also said to Moses, 'Say to the Israelites, "The LORD, the God of your fathers — the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob — has sent me to you." **This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.**' "

Names are important in Holy Scripture. There is something in a name. It stands for the person. It reveals the person. It anticipates all that is possible for that person. Thus Abram and Sarai have already become Abraham and Sarah in the Torah. Jacob has become Israel. Now Moses is to understand that he is being confronted by the same God who earlier had issued a call to faith for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he is being challenged to know that same God not only by His power to create, His faithfulness to His promises, and His greatness over all His creation but by His abiding gracious presence.

Moses was asked to believe more than the truth that God had been there long ago for Abraham but that He was present now for him. He was commanded to tell the Israelites with authority and confidence that the God who had once acted on behalf of Isaac and Jacob was moving now to act on their behalf. This is not a new deity offering himself to Moses. It is the same God whose stories he knew in relation to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stepping in to bring relief to their enslaved descendants. The faith call that had come to Israel's patriarchs was coming now to Moses. Through him it would be sounded to the whole company of Israel.

While there is a wealth of theology to unpack from this "I Am" text – theology reaching all the way to Jesus' identification of Himself as "I Am" in John 8 – here is one way of summing all of

it up for this message. In response to the “Who am I?” of a hesitant Moses, the God of Heaven and Earth replies, “Moses, this isn’t about you. But if you will believe that I am with you, we can do wonderful things together!” And they did.

Conclusion

My message to you today is that God has not only been active in dusty ancient history but that He is active today. The God of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Moses, is also the Eternal Gracious Presence of your world. He is not only the “I Was” of the Bible and the “I Will Be” of Christ’s return, He offers to be the “I Am” of your present struggles, challenges, and opportunities.

Some of you are feeling alone in crisis moments of financial crisis. Others of you are agonizing over family members already in or on their way to Iraq. Some of you are in desperate relationships, unholy relationships, failing relationships. Others of you are battling sickness, wrestling with grief, trying to find your way. And many of you are being called by the Lord to represent Him in a morally bankrupt workplace, to maintain your spiritual integrity in the face of some strong temptation, or to share the gospel with someone in your sphere of acquaintance. Someone needs a word of hope, forgiveness, and God; you are beginning to sense that you are the one God is calling to deliver it.

But you are reluctant. Hesitant. Afraid! Who are you to do such a thing? You have such a poor track record in spiritual things that you couldn’t possibly be the one for this task. You have no credentials or training for it. You don’t know how to speak from God into the life of anyone else. So it is someone else’s job, right? Wrong!

God’s word to you today is the same as it was to Moses at Horeb long ago. “I know you aren’t able to get through this ordeal, stand up under this temptation, survive that grief or maintain your faith against such pressures. But I Am! I’m not asking you to do something you can’t. I’m only asking you to be a willing, surrendered partner with me in responding to it. I need some human feet, hands and lips to do it. Oh, I can find someone else. But I’d like for it to be you. And if you will accept

the partnership I am offering, we'll get the job done – together.”

And thus many a self-doubting, untrained, inexperienced, and overwhelmed soul has become heroic. By faith!

CHAPTER 10

STAY THE COURSE

My, how much we can learn from the examples of those who have traveled the faith-path before us! Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, David, Jacob – the list just goes on and on. There's not a perfect person in the lot. But we are not saved by our perfection but by our direction. And these people all chose the right direction – in spite of their manifest imperfections. Their lapses of faith. Their personal immoralities. Their sins that hurt their families. We take heart from their stories because they are so like our own.

The Danger of Falling Away

I'm not unmindful of my own spiritual weaknesses and failures. Neither am I defensive of them – in my better moments, at least! I'm certainly not pleased about them. And sometimes I've been so discouraged by my lack of understanding, so embarrassed by having to admit how wrong I've been about this or that, or so humiliated by still having to struggle with some temptation or other that surely I ought to have defeated by now that I would ask aloud, "What's the use? For every one step forward, I seem doomed to take three backward!"

You see, I tend to be hard on myself. Sometimes I'm nearly as hard on myself as some of you are on yourselves! But people like us tend to be our own worst enemies. We struggle, backslide, and give way to despair. We sometimes even quit. We forfeit the destination of our faith-journey by stopping on the side of the road to nurse our pride that will not let us fail at anything. In those cases, the besetting sin is not the alcoholism or divorce or time in prison. It is the pride that grants others' susceptibility to sin but arrogantly refuses to admit that we are no better, no stronger, no more unwavering in righteousness than the weaker and far-more-human "they" are!

Others fall away because they let this fleeting world of shadowy things distract them from the world to come and its spiritual realities. The "unholy trinity" seduces them from eternity with the Holy Trinity; money, sex, and power mean more to them than Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then their hearts become hard, and it is impossible for them to repent and

believe the gospel (cf. 6:4-6). Still others have turned back from paying the price of being persecuted for the sake of their faith. Their fears conquered their faith and caused them to abandon Christ. They renounced or even cursed His name rather than be thrown in jail, fed to lions in the arena, or shot. **And many more have retreated from the faith-path because they interpreted their poverty, their disease, their handicap, or their grinding life circumstance as God's doing – His decision about them, His punishment of them, His divine will for them.**

The audience for our Hebrew preacher/teacher certainly had the customary issues of sickness, pain, and death (transition). It had financial stress, poverty, and hardship. His hearers-readers were subject to temptation, all of them had sinned and some of them were overwhelmed with shame over their blunders. In addition to all these – will you allow me to call them normal and customary? – issues to face, this preacher/teacher and his charges were having to face persecution for their faith. And things were going to get much worse before they would begin to get better. Some of them would be forced either to abandon their faith or to die as martyrs for the sake of the gospel! The stakes were high.

The Force of the Witnesses

So I have taken you through the lives of many on the Honor Roll of the Faithful in chapter 11. You were asked to recall their trust, perseverance and hope in the face of a variety of trials. You have been reminded that God's estimation of those holy people – even the ones whose names have been lost to human history – was that "the world was not worthy of them" (11:38a). Even though they died without receiving either vindication or reward in this world, they died in hope even yet to be verified (11:39).

The example of these saints constitutes a powerful witness to us. Their courage should embolden us. The recounting of their faithfulness under a variety of conditions should encourage us: **"We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved" (10:39).** But the personal example of Jesus is more import still. "If you wish to be disappointed, look to others. If you wish to be downhearted, look to yourself," said Erich Sauer. "If you wish to be encouraged, look upon Jesus Christ."

That is precisely our author's message at this crescendo point in the argument he has been unfolding from the first word of Hebrews:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (12:1-3)

The supreme and best witness to faith is not Abraham, Moses, or Joshua. It is Jesus Christ Himself! Who was completely **God Realized**. God entered the ranks of mortal flesh. *"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil" (2:14)*. He not only entered flesh, however, he entered into struggle and temptation as well. *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin" (4:15)*.

Our author uses athletic imagery that has Christians running a race along a course that has been "marked out" for us. The path is predetermined and marked, though our experience along the way is not programmed in advance. The path has us learning obedience and reaching our destination through a course that sometimes involves suffering. And while we can look to and be inspired by others who have run the same course (cf. 11:1ff), the "author and perfecter of our faith" is Jesus. Indeed, we have already been told that *"although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (5:8)*.

Smart runners, I am told, fix their gaze on a pacesetter for running long courses. Here we are told to "fix our eyes on Christ" for our race. Calling Him the "author" (or "pioneer") stresses the image of Jesus as the one who is running out front. By watching Him, we are sure of staying on course. And referring to Him as the "perfecter" of faith could mean either that He has perfected the faith we have seen only partially in other runners on this course or that He brings to perfect

completion the victory for which we are trusting Him in our own struggle. Either reading is possible, and both are true insights into His role.

Jesus did not live to please the people watching and criticizing Him. He did not try to get His peers to applaud Him. He didn't run polls or call focus groups together. He ran His race with heart, mind, and faith fixed on "the joy set before him" in a post-opposition, post-shame, post-crucifixion world. Why, if He had done otherwise, He would have grown weary and lost heart! In just the same way, we must not take today's Wall Street numbers, pink slip, humiliating divorce, painful illness, or distressing criticism as the final word. We must not even take it too seriously at all. Nothing here has the last word about us, our relationship with God, or our eternal destiny. That final word comes from God Himself, and our task is to keep looking far enough ahead and to hear His promise of personal evolution on our path.

The View We Take of Things

The Christian religion is utterly realistic and honest about the issue of human suffering. We are told from the beginning that faith does not exempt people from it. In fact, we are warned that "persecution for righteousness sake" may well come to those who choose to run the faith-course (Matthews 5:10). The original readers of Hebrews were specifically told to prepare for things to get worse for them with these words:

"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (12:4-6).

God was not the source of negative of what lay ahead. As was the case with Jesus, the source of their persecution would be "opposition from sinful men" (v.3). But the original and current readers of Hebrews could choose to take either of two views of their struggle. One option was to focus on their opponents and tormentors – trying to appease them, appealing to a sense of

decency they didn't have, getting frustrated and worn down by the hopelessness of it all. A second and better option was to believe that God would use what even their wicked opponents were doing to discipline them, purify them, strengthen them.

There is nothing new about this perspective on suffering, but it is one that needs to be named and held to in our times of greatest struggle. Paul, for example, wrote this: **"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28)**. Is everything that happens to you in this life "good"? Are temptation and harm designed to weaken your faith "God's will"? Of course not! **But God has a will for you in everything that comes over the course of your lifetime: Stay on course with me, trust me, and let me work that event to an outcome that defeats any evil design Satan may have had for it.** What a promise for Him to make us! And I have lived long enough to witness His faithful fulfillment of it in my own life and in the lives of other believers.

And while I certainly leave open the possibility that God Himself may initiate certain events in our lives that require struggle, I am very quick to caution you against assigning everything in your life to "God's will" or thinking that "God has a purpose" in this or that terrible thing – a child's tragic death, painful suffering, etc. That sort of thinking has led some people to unbelief, anger and blasphemy.

God didn't make Job suffer. Satan did! God allowed it only because He cannot ensconce us in ivory-tower worlds that make faith a release from troubles – otherwise we'd all be "believers" for the wrong reason. God didn't will the beating, vilification, and murder of Jesus and other martyrs. Evil men did those things! God allowed it only because it served His purpose to redeem the rest of the human race through Jesus' death.

In the cases of both Job and Jesus, however, God had a will. He willed that they look beyond the immediate circumstances to His long-term promise. He willed them to trust Him to keep them from being destroyed by the things they were experiencing. He willed that they should continue to believe Him rather than their critics, their doubts, or their pain. The same things constitute God's will for us in our times of crisis.

“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (12:7-11).

Students sometimes question ever enrolling in a university. The root of education is bitter, but the fruit is sweet! Mothers giving birth have been horrified at ever having another sexual thought or wanting another baby. However, after the baby is put into her arms it makes her forget those thoughts – or her plan to murder her husband during labor!

Believers have questioned the legitimacy of their faith in prison or with a death threat at hand – Joseph, Paul, Martin Luther King. I wasn’t with them and can’t tell you the thoughts they had. But I cannot believe there were not conflicted and uncertain moments for them. The promise of God to be with His people is more powerful than cell doors, ropes, or graves! And these people had to have believed some form of a saying that I’ve heard attributed to President Woodrow Wilson: “I would rather fail in a cause that someday will triumph than to win in a cause that I know someday will fail.”

Suffering for one’s faith is not pleasant while it is going on, but it yields an outcome that puts it in perspective. Hear Paul again: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). And hear James as well: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials [troubles, tests, RS] of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. . . . When tempted [to sin, RS], no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone” (James1:3-4,13).

Just as there are many things that have happened in the lives of children that parents did not cause but have nonetheless used to teach and mold their offspring, so God is able to use things He would never will or cause in our lives to train and sculpt us. But there is far more on this complex question than I understand or know how to explain. "Perhaps to be able to explain suffering is the clearest indication of never having suffered," wrote the late Oswald Chambers. "Sin, suffering, and sanctification are not problems of the mind, but facts of life – mysteries that awaken all other mysteries until the heart rests in God."

One thing is certain: The point of God's discipline in our lives is to salvage, restore, and strengthen, not to shatter and destroy. And the make-or-break factor in turning satanic assault, a random heartache of the sort life brings to everyone, or an attention-getting act of God in a human life is faith. Trusting God for the fulfillment of His promises brings hope into our dark places and enables us to endure what otherwise would overwhelm us. Failing to trust God, we will surely turn to our own devices that center everything on ourselves and – because of our insufficiency in a sometimes hostile world – die in our helplessness.

Conclusion

So our Hebrews writer-preacher closes with a double exhortation based on Scripture. First, for your own sake, take a positive rather than negative attitude toward what is happening in your life: "Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees" (12:12). Believe what God has said. Fix your eyes on Christ. Stay on course. Second, for the sake of others whose faith you will surely influence by your own attitude and behavior, " 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed" (12:13). Be concerned that others are yet to come on the path marked out for faith. Smooth out any rough spots you can for their sakes. Help people even more vulnerable than yourself (i.e., the lame) to complete their journey.

Everything that hinders – most specifically, the sin of apostasy – must be thrown aside for the sake of faith (cf. 12:1b). People who have put their hands to the plow must not turn back. People who have started their wilderness journey must not

give up and die in the desert before reaching the Promised Land. Athletes who have already endured so much in training and conditioning must not quit now that the game is being played. And those who have started walking with Jesus Christ must not turn back when the hills are steep and the enemy appears to have the upper hand – nor fail to give support to those who are weaker even than ourselves. As we draw strength from the author and perfecter of our faith, let us huddle together and strengthen one another. So stay the course, this marked-out course is destined to end where we all want to be!