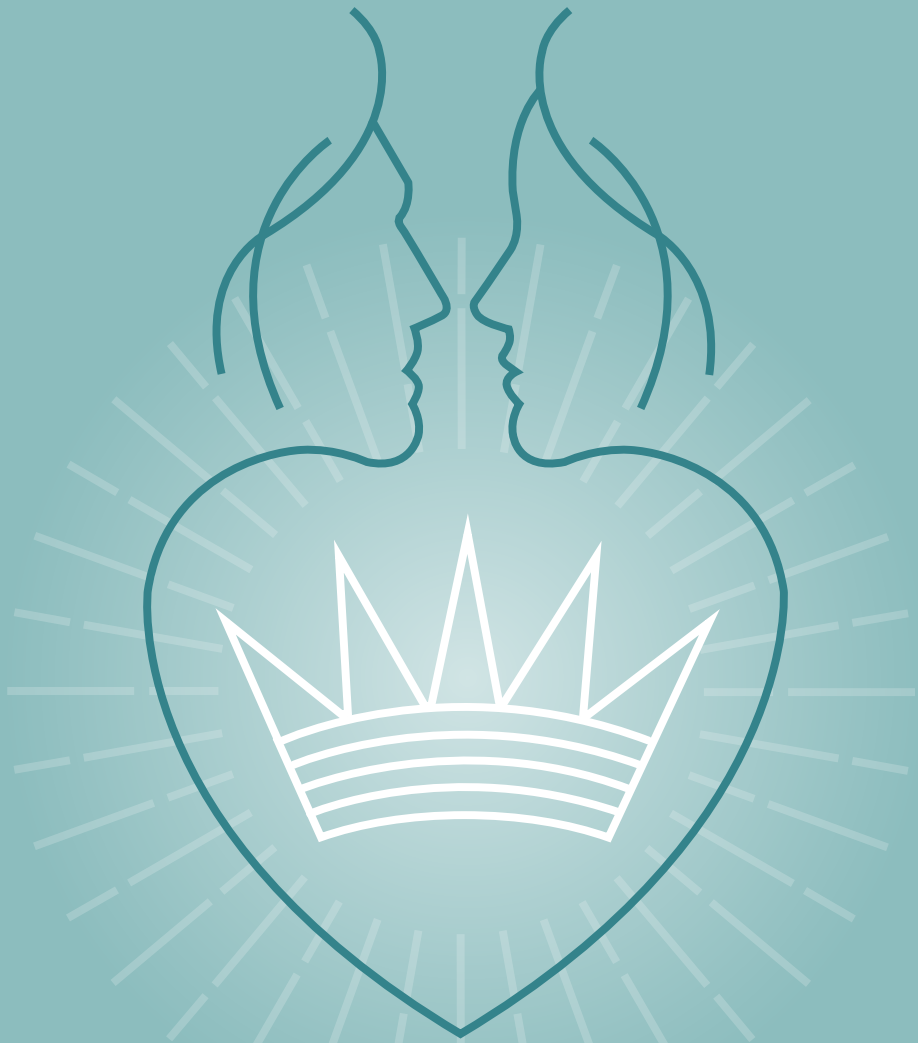


COLIN NEILL



*Inside Holy*  
HEADS & HEARTS

INSIDE HOLY HEADS & HEARTS

2023

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that Colin Neill be recognised as the author of the work;  
and that quotations at length be appropriately referenced.

The reflections in the book could be used as monologues in performative settings and readers are welcome to make adaptations as they see fit in such circumstances.

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# Foreword

## *Steve Stockman*

**B**ACK IN THE 1990s a Scottish band called Lies Damned Lies recorded a rock record called *Lamentations*. It was a musical and artistic take on that Old Testament book that can sometimes seem difficult to penetrate. The soundscapes and songs of the record took me into the book in ways that I hadn't felt before.

It made me wonder. Why are theologians opening up literature to us? We have laid the poetry, prose, proverbs songs, prophecies and stories of the Bible at the mercy of scientific and mathematical interpretation. I began to long for artists who could go under and over and imagine what went on round the corner of the text. I wanted my sermons to be higher, wider and deeper.

Those who know me will know that I am a fan of the Irish band U2. I have spent an awful lot of time reading everything about the band and their work, particularly the theology within. I know so much about them that on the one occasion that I met their singer Bono he had nothing to tell me that I didn't know. I could have finished his sentences. I was sharing this with a friend who said, "Ah, you know all the facts Steve but do you know how he feels".

Could that be said of our Bible knowledge. We've read it all. We know it. Well, we know the facts. We have systematised a theology. We've laid down a code of behaviour. That is all good but it can be a little cold and calculated. All those characters in the



variety of vignettes of brokenness and redemption strewn across the canon. Do we know how they feel? Do we know how God feels? How Jesus feels? Do we know how those feelings might engage with our own emotions - our holy hearts as well as heads!

Colin Neill has a passion to help us engage with the Scriptures in fresh ways. He brings to that a pastoral heart. He has taken time, an incredible amount of time, to get inside the Bible stories, stay true to the text but imagine more and get into the psyche of the main players. Colin then takes his research and uses his fertile imagination and creative writing skills to set us down gently into the lives of no less than 75 stories. He unpacks not only what is written about the characters but also what isn't. We talk a lot about Bible characters but I wonder if we actually know their character.

*Inside Holy Heads and Hearts* is an incredible gift to all of us who are seeking to engage with the Scriptures, whether in our personal spiritual development or attempting to teach and preach it to others. This is a book in which an artist opens up the art of the Bible. I will use it in my own personal devotions. I am already finding it a rich resource to crack the codes of texts and contexts as I prepare to preach every week.

Thank you so much my friend.

**Steve Stockman**  
**Belfast, July 2023**

# Introduction

## *Colin Neill*

**A** NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, I undertook a preaching course run by the Irish evangelical denomination to which I belong. There was an element of ‘preaching by numbers’ to the way that I was taught, with a formula for every passage that we might approach, but it gave me a great grounding in how to handle God’s Word, and in time I was able to progress and develop my own distinct preaching style.

My own experience – along with conversations with friends over the years – leads me to observe that much of the preaching that occurs in many churches focuses, for obvious reasons, on issues of belief. Three to four lessons are drawn from the text about God’s character, what it is correct to believe about him, what ‘truth’ looks like as drawn from this particular passage, and how this should be responded to in adjustments of faith and behaviour on the congregation’s part. All of this is useful and clearly has its place.

But the more that I have preached over the past decade, the more convinced I have become that many passages – particularly the stories of key Bible characters – also have at their heart emotions and personality traits, which also need to be drawn out and explored if the full power of Scripture is to be realised.

As the congregation sits before me when I preach, there is a story in every pew, in both the families and the individuals that are represented. Those are stories of hurt and healing, of discord

and reconciliation, of despair and hope, of disappointments and acceptance, and numerous other opposing forces that I could list.

In the words of Adam McHugh: “People are complex, layered, multifaceted, beautiful, wounded, contradictory, beloved image-bearers of the Creator. They are minds, hearts, souls and bodies, spilling over with dreams, passions, hurts, regrets and fears.”<sup>1</sup>

The feelings that emerge from the text won’t universally overlap with the feelings of those people before me in the pews, but there is a strong probability that the same themes that recur on a given Sunday in the life of Moses or Miriam, or Bartimaeus or Mary Magdalene, are also prevailing in the lives of at least some of those in front of me. (I should say that this awareness has become only a part of how I engage with Scripture in preparation to preach, and belief and doctrine obviously remains extremely important also).

What I have sought to do in these reflections – these efforts to get ‘inside holy heads and hearts’ – is to imagine the experiences and perspectives of Biblical personalities at key moments in their lives, and look at how their character traits and emotions interweave with how God was working through them – or despite them – at that time.

Jacob was consumed with fear the night before he was to see his brother Esau again for the first time in 20 years, whilst Naomi was left bitter and humiliated by the experience of widowhood

and how she would be seen as she returned to her homeland. David was deeply cynical as his affair with Bathsheba and murder of her husband played out, whilst we meet Bathsheba later in life, but with those events casting a permanent shadow over her. The Rich Young Ruler had an avaricious plan for his life that he couldn't bear to be blown off course, whilst The Woman at the Well was so ostracised and marked by shame that she fetched water alone at the hottest part of the day.

There are a host of opportunities in trying to tap into the thoughts and feelings of these people and their Biblical peers we meet in these pages. There is the encouragement of knowing that we are not alone in the times we have responded in similarly despairing or wondrous ways ourselves, and the permission that these characters' words give us to voice similar feelings of our own. As H Jackson Brown states, everyone we meet, whether in this world or in the pages of the Bible, "is afraid of something, loves something, and has lost something."<sup>2</sup>

It should spur us on too that despite so many flaws and weaknesses, there are numerous grace notes and God's plan and purposes continue to unfold. But as we consider those flaws and weaknesses, there is also much to challenge us, many pitfalls and risks that we need to honestly confront and address – with God's help – in our own lives.

It should, as such, be made abundantly clear – were it not already obvious – that these are primarily reflections for devotional use, and are in no sense an attempt at commentary. There is clearly a sense of subjectivity to the interpretation that has been made in places, and readers are warmly welcome to disagree if they do so on the basis of their own imagination and Spirit-led engagement with the text. By God’s hand, the same passage can say different things to different people at the same time on the same day.

And it’s also worth observing that the way Scripture is written seems to afford an invitation for us to use our imaginations. The pages are filled with stories and teachings that are – end-to-end – full of truth, and yet most of this is written in a way that is remarkably concise and also free of emotion, allowing us to let our own feelings shape our reading of the text – or alternatively – have our feelings shaped by the text. As Yair Zakovitch writes, its stories generally represent “a theater production in which the inner worlds of the Bible’s heroes are hidden from us, as is that of the narrator(s), whose opinions are almost never expressed overtly.”<sup>3</sup>

Some will notice a number of somewhat unlikely characters in those chosen for reflection, such as surrogate mother Hagar, angry brother Esau, David’s scorned wife Michal, and engaging with Saul rather than Paul. I can’t entirely explain why I’m drawn to some of these marginalised and misunderstood figures, other than to say that they show some of the darker sides of life and human

nature that cannot be avoided. Perhaps a strong sense of being personally misunderstood myself over the years has also informed those choices.

Readers will note also that some characters talk about other people as much as themselves. Abigail rails against Nabal, Vashti eviscerates Xerxes and Barnabas is deeply hurt about the fracture of his partnership with Paul. It could be argued that these people are written in a way whereby they have let themselves be defined by others, but I think it's simply true to life that this is sometimes the way things are, that we cannot neatly untangle our own stories from the significant others in our lives.

Another issue that cannot be avoided is that the experiences of women in these pages are notably less diverse than those of men. A number of themes recur, most obviously those of childlessness, shame at bad choices or sexual exploitation, or the brokenness of mothers dismayed at the sickness of their children. There needs to be acknowledgement that similar life events and circumstances continue to mark the lives of many women today, and perhaps their voices particularly need to be heard.

There are numerous people I could thank for their support and encouragement but I'll name just four that stand out in particular. David Thompson believed in me at a difficult time in my faith journey, and showed that in part by asking me to write five

devotionals for the Presbyterian Church in Ireland that were the seeds of this project. Dr Alan Wilson read some early drafts and showed a constant interest that kept me keeping on. And Breige O'Hare did more than she can realise to open up for me a greater boldness and curiosity in bringing imagination into my reading of the Bible. And last of all, there is my wife Claire, who was so patient and supportive of her husband in the seeming madness of attempting another book.

So, as you move beyond these pages into the minds and feelings of the characters that follow on, please see that not as a learning exercise but as an invitation, and not as a 'reading' but as a 'stepping into'. And as you do so may your imagination be fired, your spirit consoled, and your soul stretched, ever onwards to a deeper knowing of yourself and the God who made you and loves and longs himself to know you more.

**Colin Neill**  
**Waringstown, July 2023**

# 1

## Noah

*Genesis*  
*9:1–17*





# Noah

## *Genesis 9:1–17*

‘Mr Noah built an ark,  
the people thought it was a lark,  
Mr Noah pleaded so,  
into the ark they would not go.’

Those lyrics are embedded in my memory, but read his actual story in Scripture and there’s no evidence that anyone other than Noah’s family ever had a chance of being saved, or that Noah pleaded with them. And as for ‘lark’, well let’s be frank: there is nothing about this story that could be described as carefree or amusing.

In terms of how it might speak to us today, it strikes me that the Biblical account of Noah is not just a story of judgement but also of much waiting. It’s not waiting on the scale of 40 years in a desert, but floating was surely as hard as wandering, particularly in such a confined space. That waiting is just one aspect of how – from God’s first command to build the ark, through to the post-flood act of sacrifice – Noah was a man who lived by faith.

# Noah

## *Genesis 9:1–17*

**I**T WAS A RISING TIDE but there was only one boat lifted. All around us, springs welled up and rain poured down, floodwater drowning out the sound of Abel's blood, as it cried from the ground about enmity and violence, washing away its crimson stain.

From the upper deck I gazed upon a near-reversal of creation, the grey and blue of water and sky almost merging into one again, with barely perceptible shades of light separating grey day from black night. It was the return of a vista that was formless and empty, the only presence of God in this chaos his Spirit hovering, hanging in there, remaining over even those death filled waters.

Villages disappeared, homes vanished, and the peaks of mountains dissolved. But above it all, the Creator's troubled heart continued to beat.

It is impossible to erase the memory of those last hours, the sensation that comes from floating on a tide of grace above a sea of wrath. As the ark floated ever higher, so the noise increased with it, a cacophony of cries for mercy and heartrending distress as the sons of God and daughters of humans drowned. No giants or heroes could swim against those tides, lungs that give life filling up with water and the screaming reaching a crescendo before the few short hours where everything faded away, the last forlorn arms and heads disappearing beneath the water, despair giving way to eerie

# Noah

## *Genesis 9:1–17*

silence. I wondered if it was the tears of our Maker, more in sorrow than anger that humanity's waywardness had come to this.

The keeping of creation's good; and the damning of its very good. It's a grave and irreversible etching that imprints such images on the mind.

Against the backdrop of decadence and depravity, I'd done what I could to stand apart, to be as blameless as anyone can in such an environment. But despite all the mockery I came to realise that I was never unseen, never unheard, as is nobody from God's vantage point. For walking as best as I could, I was called to build and chosen to sail.

The ark itself was a menagerie of sight, smell and sound, but for the first few days I was deaf and blind to it all, too shocked and stunned to eat or move or contemplate anything but a divine hand and arm that can fall to earth and sweep everything away with one action.

Two of every kind of animal and small creature were drawn to come by some instinct given by their Creator, male and female huddled together, some seeming to look each other up and down and realise that together they're the future of their species. And seven pairs each of those birds and animals that are clean and separate, their presence a sign that we *will* come out the other side of this, that one day there'll be worship again.

# Noah

## *Genesis 9:1–17*

I held on to that hope for forty days and nights, followed by five months of colourless water as far as the eye can see, the scene before me changing daily, if only by the finest of margins. And when I went back inside, only three floors to pace. The same walls, the same noises, the same faces, the same food, the same overpowering smell: shut in; locked down; peace and privacy impossible.

And yet I never once thought that God had taken his love and power and moved on to some other planet. I hung in there, knowing that for the sake of faith and the care of every command kept, he *would* come through: realising that all I could do was wait; and that such waiting is elemental to following – is for me and will be for countless generations to come.

And God remembered. First the sight of Ararat, and two and a half months on other mountain peaks emerge, not just one green hill far away, but many. Forty days later and out went the raven, only to return. Seven days more and out went the dove, only to come back again. But seven days after that the dove brought back an olive leaf, the tiniest pinprick of creation restored, maybe not from the Garden itself but a sign enough of what's to come. Seven days later it departs again and why would it return this time when there's a whole earth to seek a home in?

At God's instruction my family and all animal-kind step out to freedom, craving land and space and scattering in every direction,

# Noah

## *Genesis 9:1–17*

the joy of exploration and the beauty of silence. It's time now to sacrifice, the stench of decay superseded by an aroma pleasing to the Lord.

This happened once: it will not occur again, and nor need anything like it. It was a once-only and final act. It's time for our family to imitate Adam and Eve: our hearts still marred and yet our maker wants more of us; time for us to be fruitful, to multiply and increase. We were very good then and - even just the eight of us - he still sees us as very good now.

The covenant that starts with a command is sealed with a sign, the rainbow telling us – and reminding God too – that he's setting down his bow and arrow, for what creator wants to fire weapons again at his creation? There may always be cloud and rain but there will always – also – be the sun that shines on the good and the bad, and mercy that can wash away pain.

**Is there anything significant in your life you feel God is asking you to wait for? How hard do you find that waiting?**

# 2

## Hagar

*Genesis*  
*21:8–21*



# Hagar

## *Genesis 21:8–21*

I have vague recollections - from when I was growing up - of a cartoon strip, syndicated in some newspaper or other, called Hagar the Horrible. This Hagar was a Viking who was fat and scruffy, and participated in raids on other lands, because, well, that's what Vikings do. He was horrible more in the sense that he was slovenly and unhygienic, rather than there being anything objectionable about his personality, but as far as his family was concerned, Hagar the Horrible was the name that stuck.

The Bible's Hagar was an Egyptian slave who belonged to Sarah, who became the surrogate mother of Abraham's son Ishmael. The idea was Sarah's own when she failed to conceive – as she put it, “Sleep with my slave girl; perhaps I can build a family through her.” When the plan started to unravel, the slave girl became to Sarah her very own Hagar the Horrible, partly because the feisty Hagar resented her mistress so much, but perhaps also because the slave girl became a living-walking-talking sign of Sarah's lack of trust. Every time she saw Hagar, Sarah saw her own faithless failure, and because that was so hard to deal with, she did what humans all too often do and lashed out in anger and blame. It is Hagar – the victim of the story – whose voice we hear.

# Hagar

## *Genesis 21:8–21*

**A**BRAM'S WIFE WAS what I was called, but it was clear from the off there'd only ever be room for one wife in this household. A walking womb is all I was to them, a little higher than a heifer or ewe, but indisputably lower than their class and tribe. My body was an asset like a plough or press, its foremost purpose to be productive. A kind of covenant collateral. Seed in, baby out, and – just to be clear – leave your thoughts and feelings at the entrance to the tent.

It was Sarai's idea, not a plan I wanted to say yes to, but one I'd no ability to say no to either, even if she was kinder at that time.

'It would be such a special thing.'

'You'd never have to cook or fetch or scrub again. We'd get other girls to do that for you.'

'You'd be making an old man and woman *so* happy.'

'You'd be able to see the child whenever you want. Imagine having two mums to love you.'

I reckon all that patter was about trying to persuade herself more than me: say it often enough and it might make sense. So, there was nothing this girl could do but lie back and think of Canaan.



# Hagar

## *Genesis 21:8–21*

And when I say that, *don't* get me wrong. I wasn't naïve. I always got that pumping out a child was priced in for what I was in life. But you always imagine it happening to other slave girls, and think it somehow won't happen to you.

But for all her soft soap manipulation, and her thinking that *this* would be the key to unlock her contentment, Sarai was a woman who didn't know how to be happy, the sort who could row with her own shadow. In all the years I knew her, I never saw her smile or crack a joke - humour in her presence only made others look foolish. This was the lady that only an angel could get to laugh.

Ishmael had barely started to show when everything inside her started to come to the surface too. The bitterness and the spite: the lashing out and recriminations; the slaps and the shoves; scrub those sheets harder and stir that stew longer; and Abram weak as water and nowhere to be seen.

When I fled, they didn't come after me, and why would they? Hagar absent without leave: how convenient; how too good to be true. It was the angel of the Lord that sought me out. "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

'Go back and do the hard thing', the angel says, 'for in the long run, I'll do a good thing. Walk into the pain and not away from it, for

# Hagar

## *Genesis 21:8–21*

walking into the pain will be your hard road to blessing. Promises aren't only for the great and the good, the elevated and acclaimed, the ones who see stars light up the night sky. You are seen and heard and not invisible Hagar. Slave girls can have promises too.'

13 years later and they got the child they wanted all along, and Ishmael laughs because, let's face it, it *is* absurd, two oldsters with a youngster. Great Grandpa and Granny ambling about and the punch line is the child's their own. But she still can't be happy, vitriol her meat and drink, and ever and always Abraham doing whatever it takes for a quiet life. Whatever will make the hassle go away. The blessed patriarch who's an absent dad, present for the visions of fathering a nation, but rarely there for the child himself.

As much food and water as my shoulders will bear, and a frightened boy: that's what I got in return for giving them 15 years of my life. A few days later, I lie down under a bush to die. I'd always been a fighter but there's neither food nor fire in my belly, Ishmael far enough away that I could see him, but not so close that I'd let him hear my sobs.

He cries but I can't move. I carried him inside me, I've carried him from baby to boy to young man. I've carried all the crap and pain attached to holy people making an unholy mess of me, and then discarding me like trash. It's time for him to own his own problems, start being

# Hagar

## *Genesis 21:8–21*

a man, stop being so self-pitying like good old Father Abraham. It's time to be the warrior the angel said he would become. Just once in my life, I want to be present to my own pain, not someone else's. But this time it's his tears that are heard, not mine.

“What is the matter Hagar? Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”

And when I opened my eyes, there was a well of water. I drank long and many thirsts were slaked. Sarai got to stay at home and heard from God once. I ran away, and then was sent away, and got to hear his promises twice. I wonder if she knows that? I wonder if she'd care? I wonder if she thinks the promises to me count the way that her's do.

I get Ishmael a wife from Egypt, a girl who'll take the same journey I took, yet a girl I pray who'll never walk in my shoes. If there truly is a thing called redemption, and such a thing as hope, maybe she can live the life that was denied me. Maybe she can have a husband who'll love and stand by her.

And if Ishmael's learnt anything from what he's seen thus far, well whatever becomes of him, I pray at least that he'll understand that the mark of a good man is to treat the little people well.

# Hagar

## *Genesis 21:8-21*

**How would you answer God – the one who sees and the one who hears – if he asked you where have you come from and where are you going?**

# 3

## Abraham

*Genesis*

*22:1–19*



# Abraham

## *Genesis 22:1–19*

The story of God’s test of Abraham in Genesis 22 raises some profound questions. What sort of God tests a man in that way, and what sort of man obeys so unquestionably? But God is no ordinary god, and Abraham was no ordinary man.

Historical leaders have talked of ‘the hand of history’ upon them, and of their sense of destiny, but none had received the promise that Abraham did: the promise that his name would be great and his lineage would be great, and that through him all nations on earth would be blessed. In many ways, Abraham was a flawed man – like many Old Testament heroes, he’s an often-unattractive figure – but when the ultimate test came, he showed an unswerving and inspiring trust in God. Whatever his other flaws, in this episode, he models remarkable faith and obedience.

# Abraham

## *Genesis 22:1–19*

**O**N THE MOUNTAIN of the Lord it will be provided – that’s what he’s *always* done, however long you might have to wait, however hard your loss may be to bear – yet and all, God *will* provide.

We walked three days, and rested three nights, me having told Sarah that we were off on a boys’ trip. Some trading, some hunting and some worshipping, a chance for Dad-to-son time, to get a sense of how the boy is growing. How he’s shaping up on the inside: the place that matters most. A small lie, I’ll grant you, to enable the true God’s will to be done. But it wasn’t hard. She trusted me with Isaac.

As the boys slept through dead of night, I lay awake and stared at the stars. With my hand resting on the handle of my knife, I tried to count them, partly for inspiration and partly for distraction. But what eye can trace such a twinkling vista? “So shall your offspring be” he said. “So shall your offspring be...”

I was briefly roused by the distraction of Isaac turning in his slumber beside me, before snuffling, then sighing and settling again. The journey was ok for our servants but a lot of walking for a young boy and an old man. Yet he didn’t complain once. Can you tell me if there’s anything more beautiful than watching your child sleep?

My head that night was a waterfall of memories. Leaving at 75 with *no idea* of what the future looked like. Sarah and Pharaoh. Sarah

# Abraham

## *Genesis 22:1–19*

and Abimelech. Then Sarah and Hagar, and Hagar and Ishmael. Three visitors. Sodom and Gomorrah. And Sarah and Isaac, and love and laughter. She worships the Lord but she idolises that boy.

“Is anything too hard for the LORD?” he said. “Is anything too hard for the LORD?”

Isaac startled and supped, before drifting over again, pulling covers right up to his chin. He never was a great sleeper, but that’s no surprise, given Sarah was *such* a fusser. He’s all she’s got but he’s all I’ve got too, because Ishmael is gone.

Gone to a foreign land, gone to God knows where. Gone on account of Sarah’s spite and my weakness.

What’s this all about? This one true God said he was doing a new thing in me, but this feels like an old thing. Am I to be just another angry man sacrificing his son to appease another angry deity? Yet I can’t refuse. His word is an offer, not an invitation.

It wasn’t just a covenant he gave me. It wasn’t just a land as my possession. He said it was an *everlasting* covenant, an *everlasting* possession. I know I heard him say that. Doesn’t that mean forever? A covenant confirmed in flesh, but flesh, I know, like all things must eventually turn to dust.

It takes an age for me to haul my creaking body from the hard



# Abraham

## *Genesis 22:1–19*

ground, but I get up and start to gather together the camp. Moriah's only an hour's walk now. You can't delay dread forever. We ought to be on our way.

I wake the boys and we step out with the donkey. Isaac and the servant boys talk. Chatter the way boys do: talk about everything and talk about nothing. They pull loose branches from trees and there's horseplay as sticks briefly become swords or tripwires, and then I snap at them to be quiet, for I'm mad enough with what's crashing round my head, never mind them making noise as well. Then I'm *so* cross with myself, and make an excuse about bad sleep last night and old men being grumpy. And all the time his words go through my mind...

“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.”

Sacrifice Isaac for what? To satisfy *your* anger? Prove *my* faith? Sacrifice my boy to worship *you*? You showed yourself strong enough and kind enough by making me a father at one hundred. Killing this child and giving me another at one hundred and ten can't make me believe in you anymore!

At a hillside clearing at Moriah, we leave the servants behind. I unload the wood on to Isaac, take the flint and knife, and turn to the young servants.

## Abraham

### *Genesis 22:1–19*

“We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

“Father” Isaac says. “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

“God himself will provide the lamb” I reply. Not that he ever told me *that*, but by then I trusted he would.

There are no more words. I do what my Father tells me and Isaac does what his father tells him. We both know this script of child sacrifice. I bind the boy with not a peep of resistance, for what can he barter with when we both know the Lord permits no negotiation. I close my eyes and hold the knife above my head, gripping it with both hands to alleviate the shaking, praying I’ll be fast and clean, positioning it and then turning away my face and closing my eyes so I don’t see the act itself.

He doesn’t cry because he thinks he should be strong, I don’t cry because it would seem to be hypocrisy: even though it’s breaking me in two, any tears look like crocodile tears if I’m actually prepared to do this. It’s either all-in or total retreat for there are no fractions of atonement. You can’t make half a sacrifice.

There’s still not a hair on his body. There’s still no depth to his voice. There’s little tone to his frame. He’s flushed but he doesn’t perspire. Not pure in his last moments, but still a child’s innocence, not yet

# Abraham

## *Genesis 22:1–19*

stained by proper and wilful and downright adult sin, and now he never will be. And then I heard the voice speak out, calling me by name, almost panicking as I'm taken right up to the line...

“Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

I fall to my knees both battered by exhaustion and bowed in worship, and as my head lifts my eyes meet those of a snared ram. I unbind my boy, helping him off the altar and into my arms – his body shaking, his lips quivering and teeth chattering – before taking the animal from the thickets. And then we worship together, the blood of the ram spattering, the meaty fire blazing and spitting and warming us up, and the everlasting covenant affirmed.

The cycle is broken; this God doesn't need my son. This is a new thing starting.

And that was the day we both went to worship, and the day we both came back.

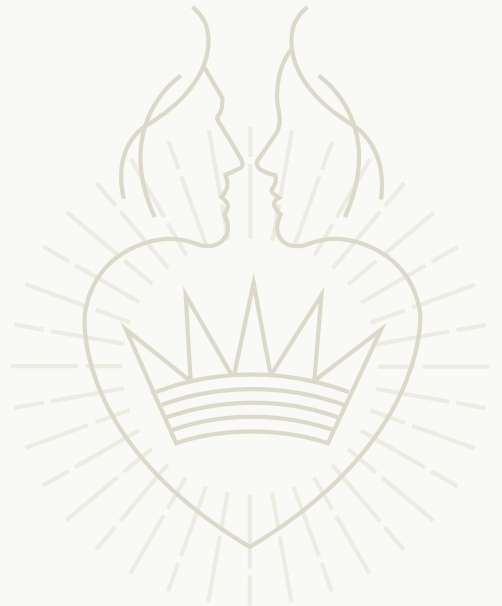
**How much could you sacrifice for God, if he commanded you to do so?**

# 4

## Isaac

*Genesis*

*27:1–46*



# Isaac

## *Genesis 27:1–46*

This is not a story where the telling can be rounded off with the line ‘and they all lived happily ever after’. As modern people, it’s hard for us to relate to what goes on here, the idea that one child gets everything in the form of blessing and inheritance, and the other nothing. It also seems (and I write this respectfully) to have aspects akin to a spell cast in a fairy-tale, as the blessing – even when spoken mistakenly over Jacob, who gains it through blasphemy and deception – can’t be taken back. Maybe we’re right to see injustice in this story, but perhaps also we overreact to that aspect of the narrative because we can – today – have a too casual relationship with words and promises.

And yet all is not as it appears. However unattractive much of the human behaviour in these events are, is it less a story about Jacob thwarting Esau, and more a story about the foolishness of Isaac somehow thinking that he could thwart God, as he seemingly dismissed the earlier promises that Rebekah said she’d heard?

# Isaac

## *Genesis 27:1-46*

**D** ID TWO WORDS EVER rhyme more aptly than double and trouble? The boys were spoken of as a double portion of blessing at their birth, yet they were fraught and fractious even before they were born. We only needed – we only wanted – one nation secured in the womb. Why the complexity and heartache of giving us two?

They fought like rats in a sack even in their mother's womb, Jacob holding on to Esau's heel as he came out of her body and took his first breath. A hand held out and grasping: he started as he meant to go on. I never set out to favour one over the other – come on now, who plans their family dynamics in advance? – but the midwife placed Esau in my arms and Jacob in Rebekah's, and from there the ragged division of our family seemed to take on a force of its own.

I guess she wanted that more than me, because God spoke words to her that I never heard for myself. Two nations within her womb that would be separated: one people stronger than the other; and the older will serve the younger. She always told me she trusted the Lord, yet she seemed to think he needed her help at every turn to make those words come true. I used to warn her that 'they'll not have a chance to grow up two peoples, if they grow up Cain and Abel', but you couldn't speak to her.

She's the heedless sort, and her new obsession is Esau's marriages to his two Hittite fishwives - what is it with pairs in this family? - and

# Isaac

## *Genesis 27:1-46*

how they're endlessly sticking their oars into water that's already too stirred up and stagnant. I think they're no good myself, but Rebekah's latest axe to grind is that Judith and Basemath have her 'disgusted with living' - she enjoys scores so much she'd be lost if she settled them.

And I guess they did grow up Cain and Abel, in lots of ways. Esau loved to be out in the fields, wandering and exploring, and eating what he killed. Jacob wanted it all handed to him on a plate. Maybe the eye only sees what the heart desires, but I could see Esau leading a nation from his early years. He had the decisiveness and the strength to do that, the broad shoulders to carry such a burden.

Jacob couldn't lead two lambs to a brook for water, and when he failed, he'd run home to Mummy, who'd tell him it was the lambs' fault. It's as well *he* wasn't tied to an altar as a boy at Moriah: he'd never have left the house again. He was always wet and whining. 'Esau took my piece of cake'. 'Esau scabbed me'. 'Esau wouldn't give me back my catapult'. At least Esau would know what to do with it.

Where Esau could wrestle with a bear and overcome it, Jacob couldn't wrestle with a kitten and come out on top. But then he probably wouldn't have to, because his waters run deep but goodness, they run silent. What he lacks in brawn he has in brains, so I guess there'll always be someone to manipulate, some minion to do the heavy lifting for him.

# Isaac

## *Genesis 27:1–46*

We papered over their row about the stew, the guile in the one and the rashness in the other, but maybe that should have given me more pause for thought. Maybe I should have believed the two nations stuff, but as the years passed, the more I resented Rebekah and her endless petty favouritism, and the more I didn't want that to be true. And then strength fades, hearing starts to fail, and sharp vision deteriorates to blurry shapes and outlines. I'm so weak and dependent, but I can still do this one thing: can still exert *my* will; can still bless *my* boy in the presence of the Lord.

I want freshly cooked game the way I like it, and only Esau understands that exactly, because he gets me and I him. But my eyesight provides too many shadows for deception to eavesdrop and hatch a plan.

Time drags when you're old, so much of it empty, filled with bored and weary waiting. But not that day, as I sit in expectation, fine-tuning the words I'll speak over my best boy. And yet Esau seems to return so soon. Perhaps the Lord has quickened his hand. He says little, but maybe he's as tense in anticipation of the moment as I am. It's Jacob's voice but Esau's hands, so I trust my touch: they say that's the last thing to go. When he draws near, the smell of his clothes is a sweeter aroma than the food itself.

“May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.



# Isaac

## *Genesis 27:1-46*

May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed.”

It is said. It is done. It is secured. I can no longer see the stars in the heavens but I know they shine myriad numbers. And then in a moment, Esau’s world and mine crash down around us as he walks through the door. I thought I envisioned the future better than God, thought I heard him clearer than anything spoken to Rebekah 40 years earlier. She’s a curse upon all of us, and now we’re broken beyond repair. But it seems she was right. Now the taste in my mouth makes me want to wretch.

Big boys don’t cry, and Esau was big – a proper bruiser – from his birth, but now he squeals like a trapped hare. I’m spared from seeing my hero crushed, but what is given in delight can’t be taken back, whatever sorrow follows after it. ‘I blessed him’ – I can’t even say his name – ‘and indeed he will be blessed!’

Jacob’s blessing was formed in my mind over decades, but Esau’s must be formed in a heartbeat. There are no words, but I say what I can. It is what it is and soft sentiment can’t wish away hard truth. “But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.” I don’t know if that’s any kind of consolation, but I pray all night long that those words will become true.

# Isaac

## *Genesis 27:1-46*

**Whether your own family, or that of a friend, bring before God a family situation of dysfunction or loss, and pray to God that he will work goodness and redemption.**

# 5

## Jacob

### *Genesis*

### *32:22–32*



# Jacob

## *Genesis 32:22–32*

To receive a blessing is a remarkable and beautiful experience: to have someone speak good into your life in a prayerful manner that makes their words more than poetry; that suffuses them with power and promise. Jacob received not one but five blessings in his life. There was the blessing from his father, Isaac – stolen as a result of a plan conceived by his mother, Rebekah, quickly followed by a second blessing just before he departs for Paddan Aram. And then there were three blessings from God: the first at Bethel (Genesis 28) when Jacob is on the run from his brother Esau; the second (Genesis 32) as he is consumed by fear at the thought of seeing Esau again; and a third (Genesis 35) when he returns to Bethel.

One blessing spoken by God would seem more than enough for anyone's life, yet Jacob got three. We know from Jacob's life that he was mistrustful and wary of people, and I wonder if that personality trait carried into Jacob's relationship with God, and that God knew that and responded to it. God's willingness to repeatedly bless Jacob shows that his goodness isn't a one-time thing. He is patient and flexible, bearing with us and willing to speak hope and promise into our lives as many times as our personalities require.

## Jacob

### *Genesis 32:22–32*

**I T WAS THE NIGHT** before the day of reckoning. The time had come to go home, because twenty years is way too long, and who of us – in the end, and when hard times come – doesn't want to go home? Which is all well and good but then not everyone's home requires seeing Esau again, and where there's Esau, there's slim probability of 'they all lived happily ever after'.

I argued best with my mouth and ideas but he argued best with his arms and anger. Brains or brawn: whichever way you measured us; we were never evenly matched. "They're twins, you say?" other women would comment to our Mum – she dressed us in the same monochrome robes, no brightly coloured coat for me – "You'd never know that to look at them, but they're two lovely boys. I'm sure they keep your hands full."

Esau was always too ready to jump in both feet first, a great man to point and fire, but not someone you'd choose to lead an army. Look at how I got the birthright from him. That wasn't crafty: it was *easy*. I can spot weaknesses in other people a mile off, and make them work for me. Is there anything wrong with that? The way Mum and I saw it, getting the blessing was simply attaining the cloth that the Lord had cut for me. There can only be one top dog in even a litter of two, and I'd challenge anyone to dispute my standing, given the words the Lord has spoken to me since.

"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."

## Jacob

### *Genesis 32:22–32*

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I promised you.”

And yet two decades on the run is plenty of time for anyone to think, and when you’ve been on the receiving end of Laban’s tricks, always playing with me – first with wives and then with wages – so you never quite know where you stand, well I’d be lying if I said there weren’t times it had crossed my mind that ‘this is what it must have been like to be Esau.’ Even as we left there was yet another pile of nonsense, him paranoid with some weird notion that a man blessed by the Lord would be interested in his tinpot household gods. Reflecting on how he’s dealt with me, I think it amazing how a little self-pity can help you pity others.

And when there’s only one of Jacob but four of Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah, well that would make any man pine for a change of scene. The days we spent in the fields as boys, running and hunting, I always felt that I was holding on to his coat tails, being allowed into my big brother’s world, yet it’s simpler being a boy than a man, and the Lord alone knows how I’ve longed for some simplicity these last few years. There’s more that binds us than should ever have separated us – unlike most of my boys, the bonds of one father and one mother – and now I want to find favour in his eyes again.

He’s on his way but there are four hundred with him, Esau the

# Jacob

## *Genesis 32:22–32*

sledgehammer, Jacob his nut. I feel the dread flow over my body in waves, running from the bottom up, over and over again. My wives and children may one day be as numerous as dust on the earth, but not if they're literally trampled on. I divide them into two and pray with all my might, speak truthfully for perhaps the first time in my life the words 'I am unworthy', tell back to God the things he has told me, for fear he'll otherwise forget.

Then I prepare some gifts and devise a plan, briefing my men on our tactics, send my wives and children across the ford at Jabbok, along with my possessions, the many sheep and goats making wonderful sights across the landscape as they moved as a blessed and blurred mass of speckles, spots and stripes. And then I settle down to try to get whatever sleep is possible before tomorrow.

And it's then that a mysterious man appears, and without saying a word arm locks me and pulls me to the ground. When we were boys, Esau could always wipe the floor with me, but I'm more determined now, and for what seems like hours we wrestle, this way and that, him on top of me, me on top of him, elbows flailing, knees pressing, hands grasping, wrists burning, grunts and groans but no words spoken. Glimpses of his face catch my eye in the light of the moon. My resilience seems a match for him, but his stamina knows no end.

All my life I've buried conflict and run from battles. For days before I've been plotting avoidance of the biggest fight of all. I've come

## Jacob

### *Genesis 32:22–32*

out on top by schemes and strategy, and yet when I'm forced to get dirty and physical, I'm surprised at the power I've been given. It's all so alien, yet feels so vital. Finally, as the sun is starting to rise, he doesn't pull a genius move on me, but rather gives my hip a deliberate touch that leaves searing pain ripping through it, as if he knows me so well that that will make me stop. I guess he could have done that right at the start of the night, but maybe the struggle was necessary for both of us. It's him that says the first words. "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But I haven't been through *this* for nothing. "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

He won't tell me his name but asks me mine. "Jacob" I answer.

"Your name will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

I've gained a limp but also a blessing. I'm covered in cuts and bruises but have seen God's face and lived. The way of faith demands that these things must go together. I walked into the night but hobble into the day, and as I do so know that nobody can fear Esau when they've looked into the eyes of the Lord.



# Jacob

## *Genesis 32:22–32*

**Do you feel that it's time in your life to receive a fresh blessing from God? How hard are you prepared to wrestle to achieve that?**

# 6

## Esau

*Genesis*  
*33:1–20*



## Esau

### *Genesis 33:1–20*

I've always felt both sympathy and some unexplainable draw towards Esau. He's a character I suspect many of us know best from Sunday School lessons, where – in my experience at least – he was caricatured as a kind of caveman-type brute, the big ignorant fella that sold his birth-right for a plate of stew. But even as a child something stirred in me that sensed the terrible injustice dealt to Esau when his mother and twin brother colluded to rob him of his blessing, an experience that must – emotionally and psychologically – have marked him terribly.

And it also seems unfair to me that nobody in Sunday School taught Genesis 33 and the grace and forgiveness shown by Esau when he meets Jacob years after the event. It's that particular part of the story – a story whose central image of Esau running, kissing and weeping over Jacob that Jesus appropriated for his Parable of the Prodigal Son – that I've chosen to reflect on.

# Esau

## Genesis 33:1–20

**I NEVER CLAIMED** to be our ancient world’s paragon of virtue, but life throws things at some of us that are hard to overcome. Things like Jacob, smooth of skin and slippery of character, pulling on me with tiny grasping hands, even as I left the womb, and carrying on the same way ever since. I could take you back to the day of deception as if it was yesterday. It sums him up that it would have been too original for Jacob to seek his own blessing; he wanted mine instead.

“How did you find the game so quickly?” Dad told me – years later – he’d asked him. “The Lord your God gave me success,” Jacob replied. It’s a brazen soul that sanctifies chicanery but that’s my little brother. That’s how all our family ties were smashed like debris to the ground. Dad weeping, me weeping, Mum very noticeably *not* weeping: what an unholy mess for a family that’s meant to be holy.

We were different as brothers but they were different as parents. I can never shake off the memory that Dad would say he loved me for my game, the food that I could kill and prepare for him to eat, whereas Mum loved Jacob for nothing in return.<sup>4</sup> Her love for him was unconditional, Dad’s for me always based in some way on what I could give him, and so as the years went by, we all became both more knotted yet unravelled all at the same time. Comforts are cold when your greatest consolation is the thought of your twin dead by your own hand.

# Esau

## *Genesis 33:1–20*

Jacob's greatest invasion was into the territory of my headspace. Twenty years of ruminations spinning like a haywire sheepdog rounding up a flock. The one body of material, the one set of events, stretched in the imagination ad infinitum. Oh, the speed that a mind can run at when fuelled by fantasies of getting even.

And the speeches in my head, practiced to perfection but never perfected, always another flourish added in the triumph of the flawless latest version. Sometimes yelled with force, other times in a menacing whisper, but never a word out of place. Funny that for all the simple and easy ways people think I work, I thought so much more about what I wanted to *say* to him rather what I'd *do* to him.

The day of our reunion, I seemed to catch him off guard. He looked up and there I was. You could see the 'what do I now?' thought bubble etched across his face. I wonder too what he made of Esau scrubbed up, the young farmer no longer in the field but robed in the best an Eastern tailor can stitch. I know he likes bright colours himself, mixed together in elaborate patterns, not just enough to be wealthy but having to flaunt it as well with bling. My eyes are almost blinded by the sun hitting the gold he's got on his wives.

He knows what he has to do, but isn't sure how exactly to do it, and is equally unsure how I'll react. We'd imagined that neither of us had changed, fixed one another's characters as if pillars of salt like Lot's wife, me wary of his shiftiness, he scared of my anger.

# Esau

## *Genesis 33:1–20*

But time can do things to the hearts of men.

And when I finally meet Jacob, I see not only him but also myself. The grey and thinning hair, the lines around his eyes, the slight paunch, though not the limp, wherever it is he got that from. The locusts have eaten both our years and robbed us of the strength of youth. I couldn't chase him and he couldn't flee.<sup>5</sup>

And then something happens that I'd never imagined. Energy erupts from some chamber inside me and I run to Jacob, and as I do so feel freer than I've ever done in my life before. There are times to stand still and times to move forward, events to run away from and events to run into. Times when dignity is discarded and the heart squashes any calculation in the mind. Times when hugs, kisses and sobs are the *only* adequate languages.

'Your servant'; Jacob called me 'your servant'. I still can't get over that. Daddy's words had oppressed me for decades. "You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother." But my how the tables turn. As long as the God of Abraham lives there is no valley in this life that can't be filled, no mountain that can't be levelled.

Flocks and herds are held out before me but, as I say, I already have plenty. Who needs reparation when lost love rediscovered has carried the debt away like the wind? But when someone says, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God" – how would he even know

## Esau

### *Genesis 33:1–20*

what that looks like? – well what can you answer but “Yes”? His parting words to me: “just let me find favour in the eyes of my lord.”

Dad’s other words, that have rung in my ears for too many years now, are the last memory of that day. “You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck.”

The Lord can’t be my Master as long as Jacob rules over me.<sup>6</sup> I had to throw off the yoke. No one else could do that for me. Fury and failure to forgive could make me a prisoner, but the Lord placed the key to free me in my very own heart.

**How much do you think Esau’s forgiveness was an act done for Jacob, and how much was it an act done for himself?**

# 7

## Tamar

*Genesis*  
*38:1–30*





# Tamar

## *Genesis 38:1–30*

The Old Testament contains not one but two Tamars, both of whom are female characters in stories of lust and family dysfunctionality. The second Tamar appears in 2 Samuel 13, where we read of a horrendous episode where her brother Amnon is so infatuated with her that he plans and carries out her rape. Whilst the Genesis story is one of a flawed father-in-law (Judah), the 2 Samuel story is one of a flawed father (David).

The first Tamar shows fight and guile to gain some advantage in a pretty awful situation, whilst the second Tamar is unambiguously a victim. But the Genesis events are still, by any standard, shocking: feeling you have no option but to disguise yourself as a prostitute to get the recognition you believe is your due within a family. That there is not one but two Tamars in the Bible shows the repetitive depths of human depravity, and also men's innate capacity to abuse women, both stories illustrating the consequences of lack of family leadership, and the sinful potential of unchecked human hearts and minds.

# Tamar

## *Genesis 38:1–30*

**W**AS IT REALLY ANY SURPRISE that Judah should run from his responsibilities? That's what he does when the going gets tough. He seemed to run from something to find his way here in the first place, this mystery man so secretive about his family story, so evasively and unconvincingly modest when it comes to talking about himself and his past. Rumours abounded but he's always been tight as a drum in terms of what he gives away about himself, a man so strangely detached he let his wife give his sons their names.

Er was a bad one but the marriage wasn't a matter that I had any choice in. 'Judah got a wife for Er' the annals of history record, because that's what a wife is, isn't it? Something you get, like you get a field, or a plough, or a goat.

"To err is human" he used to say with a crafty smile on his face, the man whose shadow both preceded and followed him, yet never so much that his paw prints were left at the scene of any mischief. Nobody could ever explain exactly what happened to him in the field that day. They say it was God that took him out, but God would have had no shortage of people queuing up to help him.

And then there was Onan, another chip off the old block, not wanting to follow through on duty and responsibility, but why front up and talk about in daylight what you can evade in the darkness of a bedchamber? Draw close to me, kiss and caress me, take me right to

# Tamar

## *Genesis 38:1–30*

the line but not across it. Have your cake but don't eat it such a way that you're left with responsibility for your dead brother's slice.

When he lay beside me afterwards, him snoring in self-satisfaction and me wide-awake in the middle of the night, I'd wonder why any sane woman would want to perpetuate this family, play her part in bringing another generation of deceivers into the world. Then I'd realise that if not this, then there's nothing, that all there would be was invisibility: pitied in the brief moments when my name comes up; then put back in the least significant drawer of family history. At which point I'd tell myself that if I had a child, I'd have a chance, could raise it better, could determine to make it more like me than one of them.

Onan died in another accident-that-wasn't-an-accident, and what was left but to live as a widow and wait for Shelah, hope for third time lucky against the grain of this rogues' gallery? But of course, the years passed, and Judah forgets me, and Shelah's hardly going to put his hand up and ask for the old-maid-hand-me-down, the one that some in the family say must be cursed, who burns through husbands like they're cheap market stall candles.

And so, the time comes to take matters into my own hands, and even though I'd become faceless anyhow, I'd only to cover my face and everything after that was as easy as could be, the seal, cord and staff handed over in a moment. How careless a man can be for the

# Tamar

## *Genesis 38:1–30*

sake of anonymous sex in the there-and-then, and how antsy must he have been about getting those items back?

But I had what he wanted and being a man, he wanted it now, the best buy-one-get-one-free deal of the ancient world: pleasure for the body and a goat for the shrine, for the promise of greener pastures for the sheep he was heading to shear. It only takes a few minutes, planned or impulsive, to change a trajectory for a lifetime.

I heard later he got a friend to bring the goat to me. Why do for yourself what others will do for you? And it was no shock either that my promiscuity required death in the open – and by fire rather than stones, no trace of me to be left but ashes barely distinguishable from the ground – but as for him and his shrine prostitute, what happens in Enaim stays in Enaim.

Men can be men and widows must be widows, but you can't argue with your own seal, cord and staff. It's just when you think the scorpion has slithered away that it unleashes the sting in its tail. Yet credit to him: he climbed down when he could have dug in. "She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah."

Perez emerges through the agony and howling that is necessary for new life, and I call him what he is, a breaking out of family, despite all the odds of their mistreatment stacked against me. They tried to stop me having one child, but God gave back to me, two of Judah's

# Tamar

## *Genesis 38:1–30*

sons as payback for all my loss. And now we're even. Like children from the womb, blessings come both single and double.

Someday the sons of Jacob will get to inherit the earth. Sometimes the daughters of Hagar will get to inherit justice.

**Thinking of a dark event that has occurred in your life, or your family's life, what steps can you take as a follower of Jesus to ensure those same patterns aren't repeated in the future?**

8

Joseph  
*Genesis*  
*45:1–29*



## Joseph

### *Genesis 45:1–29*

Much of Joseph's life was lived in Egypt, but as a child he was formed in Canaan, and as with all of us, experiences of family were highly significant. Jacob showed the same favouritism to this son born in his old age that Rebekah had shown to him, and it was hardly surprising that the combination of a father's preference for one son over the others, along with Joseph's inability to mask his awareness that he was special in a way his siblings weren't, sowed so many seeds of discord and dysfunction. (None of which justifies the brothers' awful treatment of Joseph.)

And yet out of this brokenness and mess, God worked redemption, not just for Joseph, but for the entire family. It took decades for healing to come, and when it did arrive, Joseph was able to articulate to his brothers – on the spot – the bigger picture of God's purposes. He was deeply wounded – his pain bottled up to a point where, at the start of this chapter, we're told he can control it no longer – and yet he became convinced that God would come through for him and use him, and understood his experiences in the light of the promises and potential God revealed to him as a teenager.

# Joseph

## *Genesis 45:1–29*

**I**T'S A STRANGE ADOLESCENCE that forms you to know you're better than your brothers, and a strange growing up that also tells you you're utterly dispensable.

I can mine one set of memories, the dreams God sent to my sleeping consciousness, my sheaf standing upright and my brothers' sheaves falling down, and then way more than that, the sun and moon and eleven stars bowing down as well. Those revelations came to me in just two nights of my life, but the Lord alone knows the times they returned to me, kept me hanging in there, gave me strength to go again. You must believe me when I say that I never set out to be arrogant. It's just that every family has its natural hierarchy: look at the pyramids; they narrow as they get higher and there can only be one single stone at the top.

But I've other memories too, the ones that take me back to the cistern. To the smiles on their faces and spite in their eyes. To sticks and stones on the body and plenty of harsh words as well. Trying on my robe and prancing about like peacocks, each one having their turn, my gait and mannerisms hammed up more and more each time. Sold to the Ishmaelites and hearing Judah justify that to the rest of them, like it was some twisted act of mercy. Begging and pleading for my life and not proud in that moment. No daddy to look out for me now.

Most days the boy with the dreams rules Egypt. He's a man of



## Joseph

### *Genesis 45:1–29*

destiny, blessed with poise and calm under pressure. He knows how to ask the right questions and make the right decisions, and can read a room as well as he reads his paperwork. He doesn't need to belittle or show off, or dress down with either shouts or the silent treatment. Commanding a room takes nothing out of me, and difficult decisions rarely tax me, for my gravitas is nature that never needed to be nurtured. And *all* my clothes are finely coloured now.

But very occasionally the boy left to rot in the cistern – and then forgotten in the prison – is who rules Egypt. He can lash out unexpectedly. He can be all too aware that he's not one of them, an outsider. He can be paranoid, covering his tracks, knowing that the time may come – maybe even when this famine is over – when he's served his purpose and is no longer needed. Fearful of another Potiphar's wife, wary of another cupbearer with amnesia. Some of his instructions are only spoken, some of his documents are never signed.

The boy with the dreams never knows when the boy in the cistern is going to show up. The boy with the dreams throws a feast for foreign families, but the boy in the cistern weeps in his private quarters, washes his face, regathers himself, digs his nails like claws into the palm of his hands, then goes back to serve the food. We tell ourselves that so much is ok that really isn't. Both boys are there – one sitting on each shoulder – on the day I make myself known.

I didn't plan the big reveal at that precise moment, but it's one

## Joseph

### *Genesis 45:1–29*

of those times when everything suddenly speeds up and goes steeply downhill. The head is hardly saddled up but the heart has bolted out of the stable and raced halfway from here to Canaan. Some would call it my emotions getting the better of me. I would call it my emotions revealing the essence of me. I can curtain off all the hurt and pain, put it in its box and lose myself in being the best administrator that God made me to be, but most things buried eventually come to light. It's all got to come out some way. You can't choose when your opportunities come along, and it's the same with reckoning with the past.

When the sun and moon and eleven stars bowed down to me, I don't remember shaking or tears rolling down my face. But I guess dreams are a kind of painting in the mind, rendered the way the artist best sees fit, sketching the picture the subject needs. If I'd cried in those dreams the way I sob today, they couldn't have given me the strength they did. I thank God for images so incomplete.

There is one question first and foremost on my mind, and it's not the one you'd expect. It's not 'why?' 'Why did you do it?' 'Why did you despise me so much to sell me but not so much to kill me?' What's the point of raking over that now, all these years later? God is for me and with me and has used me. I can shift the whole machinery of Egypt with one word. There's no need for more talk of spies or silver cups in sacks of grain. I don't need to pull wings off flies to feel strong.

## Joseph

### *Genesis 45:1–29*

But I want to know about daddy. Is he still alive? He was old enough when I saw him last and time only moves in one direction. Is he well enough to travel here? I need to see his face again, hold his shoulders, and hear his voice. I speak peace to them also, explain the things that they can't see. It's not just *our* actions that have consequences. There is a wiser mind, a stronger power, a longer arm, a greater hand.

“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. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no ploughing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

It is good to hear my tongue speak Hebrew. That part of me was silent for too long. There is much embracing, much kissing and much weeping, like one Jacob meeting eleven uncle Esaus in a line. Or is it one uncle Esau meeting eleven Jacobs? I remember seeing that scene as a boy. I didn't understand that relationship then, but Dad's brother is no pariah to me now.

So, there is this visceral kind of holy hugging, and *only then* is there conversation. And listen my friend: that is the proper order of things. If we flipped that around, perhaps we'd all say and think too much but never do the intimate-physical-vulnerable things

# Joseph

## *Genesis 45:1–29*

that matter most.

It has been a long day but tonight I will rest well. For by the grace of God, the orphan who lay awake in a cistern became the son who sleeps in a palace.

**What are your fondest memories of childhood and adolescence, and what are your hardest? Are the good recollections more dominant than the bad or vice versa, and how can you hand those memories over to God for healing?**

# 9

## Moses

*Exodus*

*13:17–14:31*



# Moses

## *Exodus 13:17–14:31*

The story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt – from the ten plagues to the Passover and the parting of the Red Sea – is not seamless or without setbacks. In the middle of this epic high point in Israel's history, these events they would look back to again and again as a display of the Lord's power and a release from oppression, Moses misreads the situation, urging the people to stand still when God would have them move.

Moses instructs the people without praying or consulting God: the Red Sea is before him and he can see the water but not the possibility that it could part. It's the type of mistake that, in other places in Scripture – or with other leaders – might have been more calamitous, or resulted in a holy dressing down. But not on this occasion. There may be a wobble in leadership, a wrinkle in the story, but it's only one step back, and the people soon take many steps forward (with Moses' vindicated in his conviction that the Lord would deliver). We make missteps but there is always grace, and there are also – it seems – events in history or in our lives, where the momentum of God is such that nothing will stop him in his tracks.

## Moses

### *Exodus 13:17–14:31*

**S**O, WHAT DO WE NOW?' I recall someone saying, when they heard the news that Pharaoh had relented. 'Is there not a danger that we're the proverbial dog chasing a chariot, running and barking with fury, snapping at its wheels to get it to stop, but with no idea what we'd actually do if it does stop?'

What do we do now? We do what we've done all along, all the time since this started. We listen. We trust. We obey. Which, I know, is easier said than done. Standing before the people, I can say that now, but before Yahweh<sup>7</sup> alone, before the bush that burned but didn't wither, I wasn't so sure myself. 'Suppose I go to the people, and they ask who this God is that's sent me? What do I say?' 'Suppose I go in front of Pharaoh and he refuses to let the people go? Then what do I do?'

I didn't know then but I do now. Sometimes you've no choice but to put one foot in front of the other, step out, explore, believe that Yahweh has it all in hand and his power, his purposes, his plan, will weave together into something stronger than we can imagine. That even in the midst of a cruel empire, all is somehow – inexplicably – well, and all manner of things will be well.<sup>8</sup> You can always hold on when you hold on to that. And that fire still burns, holy presence displayed every night at the centre of the sky, and all around it, twinkling as if in worship, the millions of stars that are the descendants of Abraham.

## Moses

### *Exodus 13:17–14:31*

I was 40 when I fled Egypt the first time, and now I leave again, 80 years old, and – I’m convinced – more than twice the man I was back then. At 40 a fugitive, at 80 a leader. At 40 a Hebrew, at 80 an Israelite. At 40 fearful, at 80 expectant. And as we go it’s with the sound of all of Egypt wailing in our ears. I thank Yahweh that he heard his own people’s cries, but I wonder who’ll hear theirs. We didn’t deserve Pharaoh, but I don’t believe that they do either.

The same Pharaoh thought that he could beat the Lord in his mad race to the bottom, and now he’s got what he bargained for – isn’t hell, they say, getting what you want? It sure was that for him. After blood and boils, flies and locusts, hail and darkness, it seems that all he has left is his pride and altered reality, which is maybe no surprise, because that’s what he had most of to begin with.

You can’t turn slaves into an army overnight, can’t transition in a heartbeat from baking bricks to fighting Philistines, and so God leads us the long way round. Heavily laden as we are with the silver and gold and the best of clothing that ordinary Egyptians gave us, what’s most precious to us is the casket of Joseph’s bones - he’d known Egypt wouldn’t end well for our people - one man once sold, one people now redeemed.

Sometimes we walk by day and camp by night: other times we camp by day and walk by night; and there’s always cloud or fire to keep us right. The people of God should be on the move, but shouldn’t be



## Moses

### *Exodus 13:17–14:31*

predictable. We must travel upon his impulses, not our own. And sometimes Yahweh must lead his people by the unobvious route, and so those destined for a promised land head for the sea, that the Lord will gain glory for himself, that the Egyptians will know who he is.

But Pharaoh is the king of second thoughts as much as the ruler of Egypt, and soon he's coming after us. It's no triumph of espionage to track us down because 600,000 men – never mind our women, children and livestock – can hardly be discrete. When the people see them coming, panic seeds and grows and harvests in split seconds. They cry out again.

The body can be set free from slavery but the mind and heart remain captive. They don't stop drinking fear and start drinking freedom overnight, stop taking orders and start thinking for themselves. New life isn't a hop, skip and jump away, it often requires a journey through a desert. It's one thing to leave Egypt, another for Egypt to leave them. But leave they must.

“Do not be afraid,” I tell them. “Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Which is wonderful, isn't it? Yet it wasn't exactly right. Instead, we must move, but to where? We can't run away, can't fly away, and

# Moses

## *Exodus 13:17–14:31*

can't swim away. Am I losing my nerve too? Are there traces of false ideas, wooden gods, trinkets of mistruth and mixed messages inside my head? Is it any wonder they're not sure if I can't be sure myself?

It's not them that's to be still, it's me. Slow enough to hear, silent enough to listen. And so, at his command, I raise the staff and stretch out my hand, the instrument he gave me right at the outset of all of this. It's my arm that rises but the long arm of the Lord that reaches out, me that says 'Go' but the voice of the Lord that speaks.

The angel of God glides through the sky to take up our rear, passing over once again, whilst the Lord's cloud stays in front of us. It remains day for us, but becomes night for the Egyptians, and as the waters part, we advance. The waves become as walls to the left and the right of us, blues and greens that gleam and glisten, light dancing and fish darting through the water, and dry ground beneath us, hard as Pharaoh's heart which is trampled as the people of God are led by the hand of God. For hour after hour the tens of thousands that make a tribe, the tribes that make a nation, all pass through.

As the Egyptians follow after us, the firm ground starts to become soft and their wheels gum up, some skidding, some sticking. I stretch out my hand again, and as the new day dawns the waters fold over the Egyptians. As in the days of Noah, the giants become grasshoppers, Pharaoh and his self-styled Nephilim swallowed up

# Moses

## *Exodus 13:17–14:31*

by the sea. Even in deserts, rainbows rise. As the waters settle and the rush and roar subside to become wave and shore and beach again, we see the best of Egypt laid low, its dead scattered as if victims of some eleventh plague.

Egypt is behind us, Yahweh is with us and before us, and forward we must go.

**Is it time to camp or time to move? Time to stay still or time to step out? What are the voices you're going to hear loudest and trust most?**

# 10

## Jethro

*Exodus*

*18:1–27*



# Jethro

## *Exodus 18:1–27*

For reasons that I can't explain well, I've always been drawn – particularly in relationships in my local church – to people older than me. Among those who have influenced me most, who I'd most readily call friends, are around half a dozen men and women who are anything from 15 to 30 years older than I am. Part of that, I suspect, is that I'm resolutely uncool and perhaps seen as overly serious by peers or those that are younger, but part of it also is that I love conversation, I'm ready to listen, and it's good to hear the things the generation above us have to say. We all need Jethros in our lives.

Another aspect of this story we should pay attention to is the power of in-laws. Popular culture – particularly comedy – is quick to portray in-laws as the butt of jokes, as interfering or ogres, with mothers-in-law notably subject to such treatment. But in God's hands these can be transformational relationships. You reach early adulthood and suddenly you get the blessing of a second mum and dad, with these presences in a young person's life having particular potential for good for individuals whose birth parents are dead or absent or maybe even unknown, or a source of pain through disconnected or strained relationships.

# Jethro

## *Exodus 18:1–27*

I 'VE NEVER FORGOTTEN their words that day. “An Egyptian has rescued us from the shepherds.” Well, he’s not an Egyptian now, and he’s rescued rather more than seven sisters at the hands of coarse men driving their sheep around.

Moses was a mixed bag of a man when we found him, spiky with righteous indignation and a passion to stand up for the underdog. But with a spoilt quality too. I guess that’s unavoidable if you spend 40 years in a palace. Little wonder he’d thought himself untouchable. That’s why he needed 40 years in the open tending my sheep, understanding how to build bridges and repair fences, make deals, think on his feet, pay and get paid, grow a flock.

Zipporah is light but heavy when she comes to me. How could she not be filled with joy and wonder for the things that she’s seen the Lord do, his people Israel brought out of Egypt, and her husband at their head. A man once lost, a man once guilty, ethnically Hebrew, culturally Egyptian, on the run with not a notion of who he was or where he was heading. You had to give him time when he spoke to you, let the stammer pass, not interrupt or finish the phrase for him. Let the sentence be fully formed, however long it took to be expressed. You had to give him time to be heard, just as you must with all young men.

But as much as she’s glad for what the Lord has done, something is missing. Or rather: *someone*. Israel has its hero but she has

# Jethro

## *Exodus 18:1–27*

no husband. The nation has a father but her boys have no dad. God's plan has come together but this family is apart. 'I'm home with my boys,' she says. 'My boys.' Not 'our boys'. The smallest words can speak the largest truths, the things that don't bode well.

I can be proud of him and pleased for him but my daughter will always be my daughter. My loyalty will always go, first and foremost, in only one direction. She's always stood by him; he's got to stand with them. He can't blow in and out and then expect those boys to heed him when it's crucial that they do. Just because he didn't know his father and things worked out for him, doesn't mean he should take it for granted that God will repeat himself with his own relationship with Gershom and Eliezer. It all works out well in the end, until we find it doesn't...

We travel for days and he's genuinely pleased to see me, and me him, walks out to meet me and bows down. So much of his life has been adventure of late, breaking new ground for the Lord, and it seems he's relieved to be with someone familiar, someone with whom he can be nostalgic about simpler times, share some old stories, along with the marvellous new ones, the things that happen when a strong hand at the end of a long arm moves. And so, we worship, me looking him full-on in the face as I do so:

"Praise be to the LORD, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand

# Jethro

## *Exodus 18:1-27*

of the Egyptians. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly.”

The next day is altogether different, not one to dwell on the majesty of God working beyond the limits of our imaginations, but rather watching the madness of one man who can't imagine his limitations, who believes he has to take the whole load on his shoulders. The old, old story: it won't be done right unless it's done by him. He's got a dose of saviour-complex, thinks he alone can make justice flow, whilst he sits there as its bottleneck, but if he's not strong enough to hold up his own arms without Aaron and Hur supporting him, how does he think he can hold all this?

There's no reflecting pool in the middle of a wilderness for Moses to see himself the way others do. And so, I have to speak.

“What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?”

The answer is what I expect. ‘The people come to *me*.’ ‘The disputes are brought to *me*.’ ‘I decide between the parties.’ For every plague that cuts down Pharaoh, there's a hundred petty squabbles to arbitrate. For one walk through one Red Sea by one nation, there's a thousand variations on how to fall out with each other. These are the hard yards. Nobody will write Psalms about days like this.



# Jethro

## *Exodus 18:1–27*

I know Moses loves the Lord and seeks his face at all times, but this isn't sustainable. He's leading a nation now, not a movement. It's not unfaithful to say there's got to be a structure. It's not diluting God's mystery to say this needn't be so mysterious. There needs to be less of this one revealed decision at a time, and more teaching: decrees and instructions that show them how to live rather than constantly reacting when they live the wrong way. He needs to be able to stand the strain. He's got to be able to run the whole race.

My authority to say this comes from none other than the lines on my face, the wrinkles round my eyes, the much less strength in my voice than the day we first met in Midian. It's not enough to be able to listen to the Lord. He's got to be able to listen to men like me.

**When you feel like Moses, who's your Jethro? As the years pass and make you more like Jethro, who are the Moses whose lives you might input into?**

# 11

## Aaron

*Leviticus*  
*8:1–9:21*



# Aaron

## *Leviticus 8:1–9:21*

The institution of the priesthood is something that many modern Christians may struggle to relate to, as we can go to Jesus directly for grace and forgiveness, with no need for mediation. But what we read about in Leviticus 8 and 9 was pivotal to the framework of faith that God ordained for his people at this stage of their story, following on from their rescue from Egypt and their receiving of the Ten Commandments and other code and law.

It's an amazing scene, and the holiness and seriousness of what happened should humble us, but sin and mankind's capacity to fall is never far away. Just a few verses into Leviticus 10 Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu are consumed by the fire of God's presence after offering unauthorised fire, perhaps because they wanted to artificially engineer some prolonging of a holy moment, or to draw attention to themselves. Then Moses reprimands Aaron's other sons for failing to eat the meat from the sin offering in the sanctuary area. And in Exodus we read that within a few chapters of his ordination as priest, Aaron fashions for the people a golden calf and then builds an altar before it, an astonishing act of weakness and sinfully poor judgment. Aaron appears a man who could follow instructions yet struggled when forced to think for himself.

# Aaron

## *Leviticus 8:1–9:21*

**F**ACING MY BROTHER MOSES, I think how far we'd come and wonder how we've got here: him growing up in a palace; me in poverty along the banks of the Nile. It was only as adults that we truly got to know each other as brothers, bound tight to one another as two Hebrews before Pharaoh's throne. And now we stand together in a desert, him set apart to lead a people loved and longed for by Yahweh, me to mediate for their sin.

The crowd is thronged as far as the eye can see, a whole nation wandering. A people rescued and liberated; yet a people too that are so prone to wickedness. It is not only the tyranny of making bricks that saps the human heart.

They stretch to the horizon; their sin as limitless as their numbers. Their misery was seen and their cries were heard from Egypt, and yet that doesn't whitewash the truth of what they are. There are so many wayward minds, so many corrupted hearts, and so many unclean souls, all able to put their own peculiar twists on the breaking of just ten commandments - ranging from the petty to the poisonous - so the sinful possibilities are endless. In the corner of my eye, I see the bull and the rams, and for a moment there seem to be too few animals in contrast so much guilt. How can *they* be a sponge to *all* of that?

My boys and I are washed with water by Moses and dressed with care both tender and reverent. Every eye is fixed upon me, and as

# Aaron

## *Leviticus 8:1–9:21*

the breast piece is attached to the ephod, so set upon my heart are the names of the sons of Israel. With the Urim and Thummin upon me, Yahweh will make decisions for this people. Moses does the slaughtering as I hold the animal's heads and in their last breathing moments, I take in the flawlessness that is required for sacrifice. He has stood before the Burning Bush and on top of Sinai, and his understanding of holiness is etched across his face.

It is still and silent, except for the last collapsed writhing and frightened cries of the sacrifices giving up their lives. We might have some grasp of our roles in all of this, but the calf and the rams are both in pain and unknowing. You can never get the animals to stand exactly on their spot, and a knife thrust through a coat and into flesh is never an exact science, so that some blood will always drip or spatter where it's not meant to go, or the blade will stick or twist. They'll lash out a kick or give you a butt or angrily flick their tail and snort, as flies buzz about them. It's as if they know they're taking a punishment that isn't theirs and are asking why they should. They rarely fall precisely where you mean them too.

Blood is daubed on our right ear lobes, right thumbs and the big toes of our right feet. It dries almost instantly under the desert sun, our outer edges covered for that moment when we cross into sacred space, protected like doorframes on our last night in Egypt.

Seven days of ordination follow, seven days of making atonement.

# Aaron

## *Leviticus 8:1–9:21*

And then the service of priesthood begins, the gold bells tinkling as I tremble before the altar, their jangling letting Yahweh know that I am coming before him. That it is almost time for his glory to appear.

First the sin offering; then the burnt offering; and then the offering for the people. So many folks ask me if what they call ‘slavish obedience’ to instruction takes away thought, but that’s not how it is at all. Rather, it is the following of instruction that frees us to think. It’s all set out for us and we just have to carry out the steps. The not having to make decisions about what to do next lets us immerse ourselves in the Lord and the moment, totally focused yet lost in the moment, just the way worship should be.

And then they ask me if it’s not repetitive to do the same thing over and over, not realising that it’s in detail that devotion is proved. And actually, over and over, the more it’s done, feels so right. Systems of sacrifice don’t need to be reinvented when there is no or act of rebellion that is out of the box fresh or original. The particular time, the exact place, the people involved – they may all be new – but adultery, theft, lies, every additional act is just another incremental expression of sorrowful and samey human flaws, like a blade of grass adding to the height of Sinai. It is only Yahweh who can be truly creative.

Laying hands on the animals’ heads is to lay the people’s sins upon their sacrifices, their transgressions both deliberate and

# Aaron

## *Leviticus 8:1–9:21*

unintentional. Whether your fall is premeditated or casual, either way it still offends the holy, but whether you walked right in or stumbled over your sin, there is – *always* – this possibility of redemption through these acts of surrender. We do all this in the right order to acknowledge how often we live in the wrong order, putting ourselves before others, lashing out when we don't know the facts, taking something when there's no means to buy it, exploiting a weakness instead of extending compassion.

We give back and always do so from our best: the best bull, the best ram, and the best flour. It's not all about sin, you see: it's also about gratitude. It's one thing to sing God a song, another thing to do with less to give him more.

All of this is pleasing to the Lord and so his glory appears as fire bursts from his presence and consumes our offering, the fat portions disappearing and with them our sin. At least for now. And so, the people fall facedown to worship and sing for joy, knowing that even if the ways of the human heart may mean that sin never ceases, it is a way greater truth that the fire on the altar never goes out.

**How might it benefit us as modern followers of Jesus to overtly rediscover a distinction in our faith life between unintentional and intentional sin?**

# 12

## Miriam

*Numbers*  
*12:1–16*





# Miriam

## *Numbers 12:1–16*

The American priest and writer Richard Rohr has said that behind much anger, there is often deep disappointment, and I wonder if the same can be said about discontent or grumbling with leaders. The same can perhaps be said about fractured relationships among siblings and how family members relate to each other, which is also an aspect of what's happening in Numbers 12.

Church leaders are only human and as a result they're not perfect; many will have experienced leadership that is unwise, ungracious, or lacking in transparency. But there are also many faults among the laity, and the reality is that churches, like all organisations, can't have flat structures. The Bible is clear that gifted leaders of good character are integral to the flourishing of God's people, and when we complain about leaders – particularly for unfair reasons – is the issue more about us than them?

And why too, do some siblings enjoy good relationships but some are consumed by resentment towards brothers and sisters, often for reasons going back 30 or 40 years? And how and why do some who are non-leaders think of themselves as inadequate or inferior because they're not

# Miriam

## *Numbers 12:1–16*

chosen to lead? More of us are Miriams and Aarons than we might want to admit, and we need to address these issues.

# Miriam

## *Numbers 12:1–16*

**Y**OU MUST BE SO PROUD of your brother.’ ‘I don’t know how he does what he does.’ ‘It’s such a shame his mother never got to see what he’s become.’ It would be lovely, just once in a while, to be plain Miriam, rather than Moses’ sister.

And I’m sure Mum would have loved to talk in old age about her boy, Israel’s leader Moses, because goodness, she talked about little else when she was alive. There’s no child more golden than the child that is absent, a long way away and pined for, whilst the rest of us do the thankless stuff, cooking and cleaning, lifting and laying, showing up every day because we’ve no choice but to.

He was always going to grow up. She couldn’t stay in the palace as his nurse forever. And when we did get her back, it seemed at times like it was only in body, Moses’ distance from her casting a long shadow that meant the sun never shone fully in our home.

Maybe I’m cross with her because if I’m not, all I’d be left with is anger with myself. It was me who rescued him, had my wits about me, that spark of an idea, that God-given invention when Pharaoh’s daughter stumbled upon him. “Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?” Yet every time this resentment comes upon me, guilt is never far behind, and I think ‘come on now, Miriam, how could you have stayed silent, was there any other option?’

But it’s the fact that to listen to him, it’s as if that stuff is all whitewashed over, like murdering the Egyptian slave driver and

# Miriam

## *Numbers 12:1–16*

fleeing to Midian. Moses' biography starts the day he met the Lord at the Burning Bush. Everything up to then – me, Aaron, our Mum becoming a totally different person to us – that's just a footnote.

And I get the fact that the Lord had it all worked out, that nothing happens by accident and it must all have been leading up to that point. That only a man raised a prince could stand before their king the way he did. And whilst people comment to be now that I've become ungenerous towards him, wasn't I the one leading the worship when the waters parted and we walked out of Egypt?

"I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea." I meant it then, and I still believe it now.

Well, almost as much. Because manna, quail and wandering... you get to the point where the shine comes off the finest hour. Is Moses trading on past glories or is there some end-game in mind? Is the promised-land poetry or can it be prose?<sup>9</sup>

And then it turns out that it's ok for a Levite to marry an Ethiopian<sup>10</sup>, that it's ok for him to carry tablets down the mountain, but the rules that apply to the rest of us, they don't apply to him. He *always* has to be different and of course their kids will be different, good luck to them ever trying to blend in. He's good enough to lead this people but one of his own isn't good enough for him to marry. That palace upbringing means he'll always be a

# Miriam

## *Numbers 12:1–16*

cut-above. He never baked any bricks himself.

And I push down the feelings, and keep on pushing them down, the way I've done for years and years, but they've got to get out sometime, somehow. And when they do, it's a relief to hear Aaron feels the same way, the conversation pleurably affirming and grubby at the same time. "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn't he also spoken through us?" Aaron's nod is a comforting if squalid vindication.

But never mind his speaking; the Lord also, always, hears. And then he tells us, "Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you." And when we go there, the cloud of presence descends and envelops, and all my thoughts and feelings are shifted – with no choice – from the human to the holy. Aaron and I are summoned forward with a command to listen to the Lord.

"When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions. I speak to them in dreams.

But this is not true of my servant Moses, he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the face of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

I am too absorbed by truth that stings my mind, to notice my skin is like a snow-capped mountain, but deathly also, as opposite to

# Miriam

## *Numbers 12:1–16*

Moses' African bride as it's possible to be, and that to me a piercing rebuke. Only the horror in Aaron's eyes alerts me to my punishment, and I feel the rush of my body draining of self-assurance, like a Red Sea wave crashing from my head to toes. Aaron speaks to Moses – begs him – as if I'm not there.

And Moses cries out to the Lord. "Please, God, heal her!" All my life I've wanted him, just once, to say only two words: 'thank you' for what you did for me Miriam, for what you did for Mum. But he prays these four words instead, and the way he prays them – with my knives barely taken out of his back – so heartfelt, leave me in no doubt how much he truly loves and cares.

Seven days of stillness follow, left alone to reflect and heal, me waiting on the Lord, the whole camp waiting on me. And those words, that wound more every time they're turned over in my mind. Like a girl whose father would spit in her face? Is that the woman that I am? No riddles for Moses, but the harshest of such for me. Lord, forgive me. For I must know my place, and find your goodness within it.

**How do you relate to leaders in your local church, and how might God be calling you to a different posture towards them?**

# 13

**Rahab**

*Joshua*

*2:1–24*



# Rahab

## *Joshua 2:1–24*

Rahab is a fascinating biblical character. There is no denying the fact that she was a prostitute, and the immorality of that choice of profession (though we've no idea what led her to this place in life). And yet despite that questionable aspect of her character, there was also a great deal of goodness in Rahab. She showed incredible spiritual insight as she recognised the one true God, demonstrated bravery and courage, and also acted out of concern for her family rather than self-interest alone. In Matthew 10, when Jesus sent out the twelve, he told them they would be sheep among wolves, advising them to be shrewd as snakes but innocent as doves. For me, Rahab demonstrated those attributes as much as anyone in Scripture: a woman who recognised God; yet also an unquestionably streetwise lady.



# Rahab

## *Joshua 2:1–24*

**S**OME MEN ARE SO AWKWARD. Baser instinct has taken them here, the seedy opportunity to play away when far from home, or maybe a short trip across town to buy intimacy when you're out buying other things, bold as brass about what they want and their willingness to pay. They possess in confidence all they lack in shame. But others, as I say, are more hesitant. They know what they want to do, and yet *don't know* what to do, wait for me to take control of the encounter.

The Hebrew spies are strangely like the latter sort. Spies should be canny and clever and sure of themselves, all the more so the spies of the people with their great God. And yet it's down to me to be the one composed, the one thinking on her feet, the one calmly saying what we should all do now.

They come to me from across the Jordan River, maybe landing on the first inn at the city walls, maybe knowing also that this is a house where strange men blend in, that everyone here wants to be anonymous. You can come in and get what you want and nobody will ask about your chick or child, your home or honour, your neediness or notoriety.

And as a flow of both local and foreign men pass through this place, so too does gossip aplenty. Who is up and down in the king's court; who's building the hotel one block from the market; the clothes that are in fashion that the Egyptians can't get enough of – I knew that

# Rahab

## *Joshua 2:1–24*

flax would go up in value if I held on to it; and what the Israelites – camped across the river – are or aren't going to do to us. So many rumours flow through my house it's like having the Jordan itself in my own front room.<sup>11</sup>

Enemies come and enemies go – the times we live in are never settled – but this lot are different. The mood in the inn is darker of late. There's more gallows humour. There's more after-sex drinking yourself to a stupor. There's more melancholy mixed in with a sense that it's not just the good that die young, that the wicked will die early too, we'll all die sooner rather than later, so grab what you can when you can. For the pain that's coming to this city, take all the pleasure that's available. For the injury that's pending to your body, press it close to someone else's while they'd still want it.

That news has nothing to do with a survey of the walls: how tall they are, how strong they are, how many gates in and out and how well they're defended. And it's nothing to do with the age profile of the city, how many men there are of fighting age, and how fit or strong they look or well-armed they are. And it gives you no sense of the food provisions or water supplies or how long Jericho would hold out in a siege. Fear is seen and sniffed and sensed, even if it cannot be enumerated. It is the soft and intangible types of terror that the Israelites have come here to discern and sense, and it's my survey of such fear that I report to them.

# Rahab

## *Joshua 2:1–24*

I learnt long ago how to read men and get a handle on them, and these guys had come to work, not to play, nervous yet strangely assured and poised as well. Not interested in drink, not interested in small talk, careful not to split, neither one letting the other be alone with me. Careful to protect propriety.

They've barely washed their feet before word gets back to the king that they are with me. Don't ask me how, but needless to say I'm used to curtains twitching and tongues wagging. But whatever you might think of a practitioner of this world's oldest profession, my work's as much about thinking on my feet as lying on my back. I get them hid on the roof, and bluff the king's guards when they came calling. Ok, so I tell a lie, but it's all for a greater good, and it's no more misleading than the authorities' delusional propaganda that there's nothing to fear, that nobody should pack or panic buy or leave, that this city is secure.

It's then that I cut to the chase with the spies. I know how this is going to end. The people are terrified, their hearts melting away in despair, all their hope draining in agonising slow-motion drips, like wax off the candles in the corner of my bedchamber.

Because you can't stop history. You can't stop the God who is behind it. I've heard about the Red Sea, and know all about Sihon and Og. There are gods and then there's God: the Lord the only true God. The one God in heaven above, and on the earth below. There is only going to be one

# Rahab

## *Joshua 2:1–24*

outcome. Write me off as a harlot if you will, but know this: whatever many things I am, I'm a believer too, as many of us are eventually, when the writing's on the wall and our back is up against it.

So, we cut a deal. You want what I can give you; I want what you can do for me. I'm not quick to trust but I trust them.

“Our lives for your lives” is what they say.

Things aren't easy between my family and me. The days are long gone since I was Mummy and Daddy's best little girl, sitting on their laps, having stories read to me. I'm obviously the black sheep, renounced and put outside the pen, but blood's thicker than water, and whatever I am now, still and all I know where I came from. There's few men come through my door that want to fix me straight in the eye. I realise then that I'm trusting more than them – I'm leaning above all on their God.

It all seems to happen so quickly. The scarlet cord would show the home of the scarlet woman, my reputation literally hanging by a thread. “Agreed” I said: “let it be as you say.” I get them out of the city, and into the hills – a bit of local knowledge goes a long way. I get Mum and Dad and kith and kin over here, which is no picnic, but I know people who know people, know the skeletons in more than a few men's closets, so doors can be unlocked and road blocks negotiated.

# Rahab

## *Joshua 2:1–24*

And not long after, it is all over. Six days of marching round the city, us sat at my window in the wall, watching trampling feet and trumpets blowing. And then day seven, and it all collapses around us. Every wall and brick falls, and every man and woman, every child and animal, fall: our city taken for his people by the one true God.

All those years, people wanted me and paid to have me, picked my house when other taverns were available. But they only longed for what I had. No one longed for me. No one cared for Rahab. No one really thought about it. But when they come back for me, when I walk out the door and put my hand in theirs, holding hard and looking neither to the left nor right of me, for the first time in my life, I see what it is to be chosen.

**Think of a Rahab in your life – someone who might seem a spiritual lost cause, but with hidden depths that nobody might see. Bring them before God in prayer.**

# 14

## Joshua

### *Joshua*

### *5:13–6:27*



# Joshua

## *Joshua 5:13–6:27*

Scripture's best-known story of a wall coming down required Joshua. Its best-known story of a wall being built required Nehemiah. There are seasons of our lives when one or other of these things need to happen to progress beyond a point: for God to achieve a step-change in his work and our journey. Nehemiah – a wall being built – is one of the stories Christians reach for most readily when they think of leadership: how it is that he prayed, did his research carefully, pulled together resources, brought people with him and faced down opposition.

But it seems that when walls need to come down, Joshua is less-obviously a co-worker and it is God who does the heavy lifting. In a temporal and human sense Joshua is obviously the Israelites' figurehead, but he plays the role of leader primarily by listening to God and relaying instructions. It is the Lord and his presence that brings the stronghold crashing down.

# Joshua

## *Joshua 5:13–6:27*

**W**ALKING TOWARDS THAT CITY, I look around me at the distant hills. I think of the day the Amalekites were defeated, of me and the troops on the battlefield, the ebb and flow of the times when they were winning and getting on top of us, then the swing back to the Lord and we – his people – subduing them. And in the distance, the pinprick sight of a man holding up his arms and the staff of God, with Aaron and Hur at either side to give Moses strength. But he's no longer with us.

So, I lift up my eyes to these mountains, and ask again: where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. That's a good song to sing: maybe not out loud, but at least inside my head, over and over. Hills are still around us. Yahweh is still both beyond us and with us; out there somewhere, yet as close as breath on the back of my hand.

I turn over other words inside my head. 'I will give you every place where I set your foot... No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous.'

Then he said it again. 'Be strong and very courageous.' If I keep the Book of the Law always on my lips, meditate on it day and night, am careful to do everything written in it, then I'll be prosperous and successful.



# Joshua

## *Joshua 5:13–6:27*

And then a third time. ‘Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.’

I know what God can do with an army behind his people and a sea in front of them, and I don’t know what he plans to do when we’re faced with a city and its walls, but I know that strength and courage is all that’s asked of me.

And then I meet not a bush burning fire perpetual but a man with his sword drawn. My own sword rests in its sheath on my thigh. I know there’d be no point even reaching for it. “Are you for us or for our enemies?” I ask him.

“Neither,” he says. “But as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.”

Yahweh, above all, is on the side of holy, on the side of glory, on the side of purity. Not the side of this tribe or that tongue, not for a them or an us. We can’t be Israel without Yahweh, but he can be ‘I am’ without us. I fall down and remove my sandals, for this is *my* turn on holy ground. I am the commander of Israel’s army, but a man who takes more instructions than I give.

We no longer eat manna but are sustained by the produce of Canaan. We fight not with chariots and horsemen, but led by the

# Joshua

## *Joshua 5:13–6:27*

Ark and by priests, more concerned to defend Yahweh's presence than to attack Jericho. Our sound isn't boots in unison, but rather that of trumpets and shouts. We strike not in a moment but wait for a week. And we don't march right up to the city. Instead, we go round and round it. Yahweh doesn't fly as the crow flies. Just because he's circling doesn't mean that nothing's happening.

After we march seven times on the seventh day, led as ever by his presence, suddenly... it's as if in his dwelling place, the Lord takes his foot and invisibly puts it through these walls, then brings it back and swings it again, little effort really, just flicks of a divine ankle, north, south, east and west, and all we have to do is walk straight in.

And when we enter it's not that the city's to be destroyed, but rather that it's to be devoted – nobody spared except Rahab and her family.

You can be so fixated with knocking down walls that you lose focus on what's behind them, but every living thing must lose its life. Every priest who could persuade us, every king who could captivate us, every man that could flatter us, every woman that could charm us, every boy that could taunt us, every girl that could tease us, every shop we could buy from, every freehold we could invest in, every temple we could wander into, every cattle we could trade, every donkey that could give us too much time on our hands, every sheep we could sacrifice on the wrong altar. Get rid of Jericho so it can't

# Joshua

## *Joshua 5:13–6:27*

turn our heads, get inside our hearts, get under our skin. Then let Yahweh himself be its consuming fire.

As night falls, I wipe the sweat from my brow and take a drink of water from my flask. I put my sword back in its sheath and sense that not far outside the smouldering city, another commander, a different commander, a stronger commander, does likewise.

**What does the greatest need in your life right now look like: a wall that needs to be taken down; or a wall that needs to be built (or rebuilt)? Sit with that image for a time, then take your thoughts and feelings to God in prayer.**

15

# Deborah

*Judges*

*4:1–24*



# Deborah

## *Judges 4:1–24*

Judges 4 tells us about not just one, but two, women of courage: Deborah, who had faith when others lacked it, and rallied her people to fight; and Jael, the wife of Heber, who at the end of the chapter, delivers a fatal - and chillingly ruthless - blow to Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army. A woman of vision and a woman of action combine to deliver Israel.

Despite the fact that this would have been a predominantly male and patriarchal society, there was at least sufficient openness to allowing women to lead, to provide the possibility that these events would play out. It can be debated if that would have happened, had times not been so desperate – necessity is so often the mother of invention – but there was willingness to recognise giftedness and give it a chance, that afforded Deborah to have the opportunity to lead. The church today surely needs a similar openness not to place limits on talented people, whether that be for reasons such as age, class, gender or race or setting up barriers on the grounds of demands for doctrinal purity.

# Deborah

## *Judges 4:1–24*

**I**F THE TIMES WERE GOOD, they wouldn't have needed a Deborah, and if the times were good, well, let's be honest, there wouldn't have *been* a Deborah. So many men, smooth and assured, happy to be at the forefront when the wind blows in Israel's favour, but less willing to step up when the storm clouds threaten both security and stability. Biding their time, waiting for the right moment. 'It's all too difficult to be the next leader, I'll be the one after that.' But the last man standing can't claim power if men don't stand at all.

Word has got back to me that they think I'm too tough, that I try too hard. Clear-mindedness that's seen as decisiveness in a man is called bloody-mindedness in a woman. The work ethic that's impressive in a man is seen to make a woman cold and disinterested in her family. 'It's all well and good for her', they say, 'pursuing her dream, satisfying her ambitions, but what about Lappidoth and the kids? She's a great passion to do what's best for the children of Israel, it's just a shame she doesn't care more for some of Israel's particular children.'

There's always a thing with women. 'She thinks she has to be seen to be strong.' 'She's over-compensating for her weaknesses.' But what if it's *their* weaknesses that I'm compensating for, all of the presence of defeatism and denial, all of the absence of devotion and discipline, that has led us to this place? It's been twenty years now that Jabin has oppressed us. That's a whole generation that's been

# Deborah

## *Judges 4:1–24*

allowed to think that this is somehow normal.

What's happened to remembering, passing faith's baton on to our children? And not just passing on stories, but passing on belief that this is real, that it's true, that it makes all the difference in the world. Too much that's evil in the eyes of the Lord, that's our problem. Too much evil and simply going through the motions.

Day after day I sit under the palm tree and hear their complaints. They squabble but they won't fight, they tell tales but will hold neither shield nor spear. They sacrifice but don't seek, they worship but don't wonder, yet Yahweh in his mercy still sees and hears them, still inclines his face towards them. The nine hundred chariots fitted with iron are trotted out in conversation over and over again, as if they're insurmountable, fifty percent more than what Pharaoh pursued us with to the waters of the Red Sea. 'That's Pharaoh's forces and half as much again. Think about it!'

As if the Lord sees that as some sort of limit. Do we really think that Yahweh can swallow up six hundred but not seven hundred, or eight hundred, or nine hundred, that he can be quantified or measured, big enough for some problems, too small for others? His only limitation is *our* lack of faith and vision, and how does his long arm and strong hand move if we only sit on our own hands? So, I send for Barak.

# Deborah

## *Judges 4:1–24*

“The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’”

To which he replies, “If you go with me, I will go: but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.” It’s man or mouse, our people in a nutshell. Well ok, my son, if that’s how you want it, I’ll go. I’m not afraid. Because it’s not about me, or you, or anyone else, it’s about Yahweh going with us. And the honour won’t be yours, son. Fame will go to a woman and glory to the Lord.

The ten thousand men march and as I go with them, I don’t just see the soldiers, but the mothers too, along with their wives and those they’re betrothed to. I see the women who raised the boys so the Lord could raise an army, imagine them waiting at home, anxious of when news will come and what it will be, unable to rest or relax, constantly murmuring prayer. For the Lord to deliver us with fighting men, many women must first deliver baby boys, and even when they hold weapons in big hands, the tiny hands that a single mother’s finger could wrap around are never forgotten.

The day of battle comes and I take Barak aside. He must be confident in the Lord, but he must know also that the Lord has confidence in him. “Go!” I say, “This is the day the LORD has given Sisera into your



# Deborah

## *Judges 4:1–24*

hands. Has not the LORD gone ahead of you!”

But that wasn’t how it turned out, at least not exactly. Barak’s men got Sisera’s men, but Barak didn’t get Sisera. His pursuit didn’t end in mighty confrontation, but outside an average looking tent he’d not even have noticed without her stopping him. “Come”, Heber said to him, “I’ll show you the man you’re looking for.”

Sometimes it takes a woman to lift a man’s tool and find a new use for it. She was cool as a cucumber, he told me later, so matter of fact when she said what she’d done, could have been describing how she kneads bread or prepares a rack of lamb. Yahweh loves the righteous, but sometimes he needs the ruthless also.

We are delivered. Our best days aren’t all behind us: there are new stories to be written; new songs of praise to be sung. Strike up the musicians!

**Are you or your church setting limits on who might lead you? In so doing, are you setting limits on God?**

# 16

## Gideon

*Judges*

*6:1-40*



## Gideon

### *Judges 6:1–40*

When I think of Gideon, he's one of all-too-many Biblical characters for whom my strongest impressions were formed in childhood. I think of the technique with which it's wisest to drink water from a river if there's an enemy army close by, which funnily enough, has never been directly applicable to grown-up Christian living.

Those Sunday School impressions of Gideon were of a derring-do Biblical character, but the real Gideon – as we meet him in Judges 6 – is somewhat different. The Midianites are terrorising the Israelites in Manasseh both militarily and economically: that they swarmed like locusts and were impossible to count shows the mythic way they'd been built up in the minds of God's people. As we meet Gideon, he's not bucking the trend of his fellow Israelites' mind-set, but is conformed to it: fearful in his winepress; anxious when he meets an angel; courageous enough to tear down his father's altar to Baal and Asherah pole, but careful to do so at night and in secret. He is – yet another – highly unlikely, and all-too-human Biblical hero.

## Gideon

### *Judges 6:1–40*

**I**T'S AS IF A KIND OF PLAGUE has been turned on us, like we're enslaved Hebrews and hard-hearted Egyptians, all at the same time." Only once did I hear someone say that. He looked ashamed, as if it was heresy to even have the thought, never mind utter the words. But he was only saying what many of us were thinking.

For the Midianites are our curse of locusts. For seven years our seeds sown have barely had a chance of the sun shining down on them, or the rain falling on them, before the parasites descend on the promised land. Walking on this autumn's breakfast, sitting on this autumn's lunch, sleeping on this autumn's dinner.

Trampled grass means skinny cows and torn up flowers means ravenous bees. And so, no milk and honey. Don't just frighten us, but make us hungry too. Push us to the clefts and caves, where we hope that this vision of oppression can somehow be overshadowed by a passing glimpse of goodness and glory.

Our eyes fail us for looking, but it's true also that there are none so deaf as those that will not hear. We say we'd give anything to see Yahweh move, yet haven't been willing to listen to him. We cry out to the Lord for a few half-hearted days of resolve, but quit easily and creep back to Baal when we don't immediately get what we want. We worship like Amorites and suffer the Midianites. How many times has the Lord said 'if this, then that' and we his

## Gideon

### *Judges 6:1–40*

people shrug our shoulders, as if to say ‘whatever’?

The world isn’t meant to be this way for Israel, just like you’re not meant to thresh wheat in a winepress. Too small and tight, but a safe place, where nobody can see or harm me. And needs must also: flour before flourishing and bread at least to stave off hunger, for what’s the chance anyhow of knocking back wine and watching good times roll? And it’s as I’m breaking my back, channelling my anger, that the angel meets me. “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”

But is he really, or is that just what angels are meant to say, the kind of script they read from? Look at it all! Look at everything around us! I can’t stand the triteness of priests and prophets, ‘God is in control’ and all the other platitudes they use to glibly bat away our questions, holier than thou but never calling us to change. If the Lord is in control, why are there no grapes in the winepress, and no banquets at which to drink our wine? To which the answer, I guess, is that we seek Baal for our pleasure but resent the Lord for his punishment, singing a pagan medley rather than truly worshipping the Lord who is Yahweh, the Lord who is one.

“Pardon me, my lord,” I say, “but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said ‘Did not the LORD bring us out of Egypt?’”

But he doesn’t engage in debate. Maybe because I’ve no right to ask

## Gideon

### *Judges 6:1–40*

these things, or maybe because discussion – so often – is only grand distraction, displacement activity that stops us getting off our philosophising behinds and doing something, like reading Torah, or worshipping Yahweh, or seeking justice for the poor and actually changing our lifestyles. He turns towards me. “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

As if. I’m no Moses. I’m no Joshua. I’m the least man of the weakest clan. Nobody will ever write books with my name in it, form a movement and put my name upon it. But he persists. “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive.”

I blush inside at some sudden sense of the Lord’s choosing. I soften too. I ask for a sign, and it turns out that as well as it being true that we must wait upon the Lord, he in his mercy is prepared to wait for us. I feel no need to rush the preparation of the sacrifice, do it slowly and solemnly as the task requires. The angel is neither harassed nor hurried on my return.

When I place the sacrifice on the altar, he reaches out with his staff and my vision is fire instantaneous rather than infinite, exploding from the rock, the whole scene lighting up, going dazzling white for a moment. But then the dazzle fades and both the angel and sacrifice are gone. I fall down on my knees at the beauty of these holy ashes. “Alas, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD

# Gideon

## *Judges 6:1–40*

face to face!”

“Peace! Do not be afraid! You are not going to die.” So that’s what I call the altar I build: ‘The LORD is Peace’. It’s not something we’ve called God before, but it makes sense, doesn’t it, given that’s what he promises to give, when he turns his face towards us.

And yet these things take time to take hold of us, to get right inside, form who we are. I tear down the altar to Baal and I cut down the Asherah pole and build in their place the only right and proper type of altar that there is: one for the worship of the Lord alone. But I do so by night rather than day. I know that I’m strong in the Lord yet still the weakest in my family, and those things will always recur and be in tension, shards of doubt so deep inside me that they’ll never be entirely extracted. But my dad had my back the way he’s never done before, suddenly unafraid of Baal, convinced of the Lord, proud of his son.

And it’s then that I feel Yahweh’s presence come upon me, like there’s some wind at my back that’s pressing me on, that makes me stronger and faster, that’s pushing me in a direction that I cannot resist. I blow the trumpet, send out the messengers, call the people to arms.

I step out of the safety of the winepress and move to the open space of the threshing floor, to where I should have been to begin with. First the fleece is wet and the land is dry. Then the fleece is dry and

# Gideon

## *Judges 6:1–40*

the land is wet. All the ground is covered with God's dew. And so am I. And so is Israel.

**Are you crushing grapes in your winepress or threshing wheat in it? If life feels like you're not aligned to the full potential of what God made you for, what is it that's keeping you so confined?**



17

**Jephthah**  
*Judges*  
*11:1-40*



# Jephthah

## *Judges 11:1–40*

Years ago, I had an elderly relative whose response to an act of foolishness on someone else’s part was to exclaim – with no filter – ‘How can anyone be so stupid!’ This was about as helpful as it sounds. Let’s be honest: most of us are self-aware enough to know when we’ve done something foolish; all that it being pointed out achieves is more pummelling of the eroded sense of self in that moment.

Most of us have a theology that gives us a strong and peaceable sense of how Jesus relates to us when we do something wrong, but what about when we do something stupid? We might not behave as luridly as the cartoonish excessiveness of Jephthah’s stupidity – a rash promise compounded by the even greater rashness of not being able to row back on said rashness and spare his daughter’s life – but we all make our own mistakes. (And given the widely accepted conviction that a vow to the Lord simply couldn’t be broken, nobody intervened to tell Jephthah what he was doing was madness).

For us, in our time, perhaps our paramount response to these events should be gratitude that we’re given such a beautiful picture of God in Jesus, that none of us should ever find ourselves in such a rock bottom place as walking in the shoes of Jephthah.

# Jephthah

## *Judges 11:1-40*

**W**HEN CHILDHOOD IS A LITANY of one thing after another being broken, it's hard to know how to make things good and whole as a man. 'Jephthah the bastard-child' was what I heard from my earliest years: the brother from another mother; the son of a whore; the bad apple in the barrel. The boy who could wash his hands from first thing in the morning to last thing in the evening, but he'd always be someone stained.

And when blood brothers push you away, the heart can't help but long for another band of company. Men of coarseness and cursing. Men that make maidens blush and sages despair. Men that couldn't find their way from one end of the ten thou shalt and shalt nots to the other, never mind the rest of the law. Good men though: the sort that would always have your back; would die in a ditch for you and do so in a heartbeat when the heat of battle comes on strong.

Those rough diamonds were the first thing in my life that I saw that properly shone bright. It might do you some good to broaden your horizons, to know some men like that.

But it's amazing how desperation focuses the mind, how convenient it can be to have a Jephthah to run to when you need a port in the storm. When the Ammonites are closing in send for Jephthah: he's shrewd enough to see what's in it for himself; but mad enough too to run into what others flee. Elders are good for talking but the times need men that are good for fighting. So cometh the hour, cometh

# Jephthah

## *Judges 11:1-40*

Jephthah. Now it's my land... I think. Now they're my people... I think. But say it in a vow to the Lord. Risk real consequences from rowing back and then I'll know you mean it.

Everyone thought I was Mr-Off-the-Cuff-and-Spare-of-the-Moment. But before I take up sword or shield, I give the king of the Ammonites a history lesson, call him out on all his grievance. Who was it who said I didn't know the worth of what's been passed on to me – that I couldn't take the long view? Probably the same wise men who are too arrogant to see that where some bullied boys run to is scrolls by the light of candles. Scrolls can't call you names, and nor can they push you over. The wounded boy can be lost in their words, can believe that maybe just maybe he can grow up a warrior: that the belittled can be the hero; that the weak can be the giant. You can fall asleep with dreams – they don't only come to you in the slumber of the night.

And so, I lay it on the line. “Now since the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over? I have not wronged you, but you are doing me wrong by waging war against me. Let the LORD, the Judge, decide the dispute this day between the Israelites and the Ammonites.”

The time for words had passed. Action was required. Enemies are pushed back by motion, and it's those that aren't moving forward who perish. The people need to know their figurehead believes

# Jephthah

## *Judges 11:1-40*

there'll only be one outcome. Strong men say strong things. No man will fall in line and die for someone indecisive.

“If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.”

I assumed whatever it was would be faceless, the way it always is with the slain, a beast at best, a slave at the very worst. Gestures aren't meant to be so consequential. We'd do our fighting, the Lord would do his delivering, and then we'd do our sacrificing to close out the cycle in the proper fashion. And the Lord came through as he always does. Twenty towns subdued. Not a squeak out of Ammon now.

I rode back to Mizpah a vindicated man. Every eye will see me differently now. All perspectives will be turned upside down, when Jephthah is looked up to rather than down on. The critics will be silent and grateful, or largely so, for as long as there's a world, there'll always be behind our backs talk. But as much as it can be, respect is mine, and like anything denied and waited a lifetime to taste, respect will be sweet also.

But who should come out to greet me but my only daughter? My only, prettiest, purest child, dancing and singing and wanting to be her Dad's greatest admirer. And in that act becoming his greatest

# Jepthah

## *Judges 11:1–40*

folly. Rejoicing turns to the bitterest of weeping. I had a good life for a moment and nobody snatched it from me: I threw it all away by my very own actions. Somewhere – far out there – the pagan gods are always angry, and Yahweh says he’s abounding in love and slow to show such dreaded fury, but the guilty can’t be left unpunished, and that’s true for their children too.

“Oh no, my daughter! You have brought me down and I am devastated. I have made a vow to the LORD that I cannot break.”

I’ve turned joy into sorrow, turned freedom into bondage, have made a hopeful maiden a condemned spinster, and have turned, for a moment, Yahweh into Molech.

And so, I am the spectacle of Mizpah, but not as I’d imagined. People look at me but never meet me in the eye. No one mentions her name. They don’t know what to say. It is unspoken yet understood that the sound of timbrels will never be heard in this town again. I was useful when their backs were against the wall, my wildness an asset to them when they needed me. But now, for the sake of a flash of pride, I’m condemned to be an object of pity.

There is no balm for me in Gilead. There is no ram in my thickets. All of Israel can be rescued but there’s no way for my daughter to be spared. I am that boy alone again.

# Jepthah

## *Judges 11:1–40*

**Do you believe God relates to confessed foolishness any differently to how he relates to confessed sinfulness? Do you believe they're two different things? Do you find it easy to show grace to those who are rash?**

# 18

## Samson

*Judges*

*16:22–31*





# Samson

## *Judges 16:22–31*

The East Belfast skyline has for decades been dominated by two huge cranes belonging to the Harland and Wolff shipyards, known to all in the city as Samson and Goliath. The cranes' names have often struck me as strange, insofar as however much they symbolise strength, both Biblical characters also had tragic ends. Maybe there was hubris in the names the city gave the cranes. Or perhaps they're fitting overseers of a city marked by too much futile violence...

It was prophesied to Samson's mother before his birth that 'He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines', and yet despite this promise and both the blessing and Spirit of God being given to Samson, his 20 years of leadership doesn't seem to have resulted in significant respite for his people, and it's only when he dies that things change materially. The great tragedy of Samson seems to me that whatever gift God gave him, his potential was fatally undermined by the lack of any willingness to submit his mind and life to God.

# Samson

## *Judges 16:22–31*

**F**ORTY YEARS MY PEOPLE had been under the Philistines' thumb. Forty years. That's a long time to wander in a desert but a long time too to be subject to foreign foes. I know I wasn't cut from the cloth of a Moses or Joshua, but I was what the nation needed for that hour, not a maverick like Jephthah who came from nowhere, but foretold by the angel of the Lord and dedicated to God in my mother's womb.

'What's with the angry young man?' the people used to ask. Some of it was me being who I couldn't help but be, but some of it too was the Spirit of the Lord. Maybe there were times that I was reckless, but maybe there were times also when the righteous were simply too bland and conformed to recognise passion or know how to deal with it. Holier than thou men of law and learning don't seem to understand that if you want to make a sacrifice you have to spill some blood. Scribes are just priests who don't like to get their hands dirty.

People used to talk to me about having a plan. 'More strategy and less spontaneity, that's what you need Samson.' They'd drone on and on about how much more I could do if I combined brawn and brain but it was all yada-yada to me. They didn't get that all men fear strength but they fear unpredictability as well. Nobody could ever war-game Samson and plot what I'd do next. I couldn't be what they wanted, some nice and neat separation of saint off the battlefield and warrior on it, two Samsons to put in two boxes and

# Samson

## *Judges 16:22–31*

whip out the one you want at any given moment.

I needed to push the limits; be right on the edge every breathing moment. Who wants gourmet honey from a hive when it tastes so much sweeter from a carcass? It's good to beat the enemy, but getting inside their heads and playing with them beforehand, wrenching the head off the chicken's neck and watching it run in circles, pulling the wings off the fly: that can be better still.

Beauty to me is the dance of dying foxes, the patterns drawn as they rip through fields. And I guess if you spend your whole life playing with fire, at some stage you've got to get burnt, but why would I settle for a feeble eye for an eye when I'd the muscles to take out a multitude in lieu of my wife and father in law's lives?

And after that it was on to the next thing. I didn't need trinkets and trophies, didn't have to keep the donkey's jawbone, return to it and look at it and pick it up and reminisce. A man that's invincible doesn't know what to do with a comfort blanket woven from his own nostalgia. Maybe I came to take it all for granted. Others never seemed to lose their wonder at the things I could do, but to me it almost became samey and repetitive that I could flex my frame and do these crashing, crushing, walloping things.

When it came to women, I wanted danger not dullness, longed for the restlessness of a rebel and a lover. Save your ideals of domestic

# Samson

## *Judges 16:22–31*

bliss and look at me. I was hardly going to settle for 2.4 kids and a field and a plough. And my how the web was woven when Delilah was spun into being, all the delights of bodies and hair being tangled together, the times we spent when the sun went down and the candles were snuffed.

If it's not one thing, then maybe it's the other, and perhaps it was both at the same time. I was pulled close by the charm of sensuous allure that stripped me of reason as desire consumed my body, but pushed away also by her incessant grating whining. I said I loved her and looking back I'm not so sure, but who hasn't said that and not meant it?

So, I fell asleep immortal and woke mortal. Yes, it was that one night that my hair was cut, but I'd dropped my guard a long time before then, losing the run of myself and any sense of where Samson ended and the Lord started. The real blindness happened in increments. They thought it was Dagon rather than Delilah who delivered me into their hands, but that was just their god myth embellishing my human frailty.

Shackled and grinding grain – emasculated, just a big girl now<sup>12</sup> – I discovered what it was to be sore and tired for the first time in my life. Having to push and strain against something and it not simply crumbling before me. With every circle of the mill hearing her voice drilling into me, saying 'How can you be tied Samson? You're only

## Samson

### *Judges 16:22–31*

making a fool of me.’ But when I put my head in my hands I feel first stubble, then some furry resistance and soon some flowing locks.

My last act – it seems – is to be little more than a circus animal, a grotesque and humiliated spectacle in a cage. They reckoned on performance but they didn’t reckon on power, so feigning weariness, I plead the relief of a buttress to lean on.

All around me is the noise of thousands of tongues trading small talk and insults, profaning my God and deriding my fall. I can’t relax for as much as a second, with the litany of pokes and prods. ‘Who touched you Samson?’ ‘Where am I Samson?’ ‘Just take the cake and wine if you want it Samson.’ And every man thinks himself the most original wit at the party. I turn my cursing seething tongue to prayer one last time and mutter in inaudible but passionate fury.

“Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please God, strengthen me just once more, and with one blow get revenge on the Philistines for my two eyes.”

The music is playing, the wine is flowing, the raconteurs are revelling, but the muscles are reviving. And there will be no worship of Dagon tonight. “Our god has delivered our enemy into our hands”, I heard them say. But my God – Yahweh – the one God – turns everything upside down, and so they couldn’t be more wrong. I’m black in my mood and aches and pains riddle my body,

# Samson

## *Judges 16:22–31*

but whilst Yahweh can leave a man, he can also return. Even to a man like me. And so, Samson can say – and so Israel can say – My God has delivered my enemy into my hands.

I push and press and as the concrete starts to give I feel one last thrill and surge of being fully alive again, knowing it will only be a matter of seconds before the Pillars of Philistine society will all fall down...

**Can you think of a gift God has given you that could be used to much greater effect if was allied with more prayer and intentionality?**

# 19

**Naomi**

*Ruth*

*1:1–22*



# Naomi

## *Ruth 1:1–22*

There can be few more poignant expressions in Scripture than Naomi's remark to Ruth that she is 'too old'. She is not elderly in the way that our modern society associates with extreme ageing – she doesn't have carers coming in two to four times a day, and she's not been confined to a Moab care home. But because what she sees as her 'productive' life is now over, there is no reason to be hopeful, and she sees herself as only a burden to her daughters in law. In the grand scheme of things, Naomi may seem a relatively minor Biblical figure, yet in a day when people live longer and longer, parallels to her circumstances are playing out in countless lives and families.

Naomi's story reminds us that the old need to be practically but also spiritually cared for. They need to be listened to, loved, understood, and also assured that their value remains even if their bodies no longer allow them to do things for themselves and other people.



# Naomi

## *Ruth 1:1–22*

**W**HAT HAVE WE DONE and what have we to show as a family? I never wanted much, neither craved nor expected my sons to be priests or seers, rich or revered. Just the simple and best things would have been enough: that Elimelek and I would have decent harvests; make kids and grandkids; more generations of each other; pass the land and family baton on.

I see old couples shuffling together, still holding hands. I watch Grannies with infants, pointing out plants and animals, introducing this world and its delights to them. I want nothing exciting, only those small pleasures, for despite the crazy ambition of so many foolish people, it's such little things added up that make a good life.

But ten years and not a child between the two of them. Ten years. The weaning and washing, cooking and stitching: the love and the grind of raising two boys; and for what? How did my strong boys become such weak men?

There are so many things I don't understand, but most especially there's the question of what sin or stumbling brought this about, why the Lord's hand has slapped me so, and why it is that the children and their children are punished to the third and fourth generation. Punished in our case by not even having the chance to be born.

Maybe we were faithless to do what we did, to travel to a foreign land. Or maybe we did what people have always done, not being

# Naomi

## *Ruth 1:1–22*

sure but making our decisions for the best, knowing nothing's a perfect choice, but trying to make the right calls, making life up as we go along. There's more messing up than premeditation in this world.

It was his decision more than mine, and what choice does a wife have but to follow? He wouldn't be talked out of anything. Once an idea got stuck in that head, there was no way of getting it out. 'Are we just running off to Egypt, like Jacob's family?' I asked. 'We could go for a season and end up there a lifetime. And they're *not* who we are in Moab, not what we are, not our own sort.'

'We have to be practical', Elimelek replied, 'we're not in the desert now. God's not going to rain down manna and quail for us. You can't eat faith.' And 'it's only for a while' he said. Just a while.

We've a law for so much of life, instructions on how to wash and prepare anything and everything, code for what to do and what makes restitution for any and every kind of sin. But what do we do with our regrets and disappointments when we grow old? Where do we put them? Can they be atoned for, or is it best just to hide them, dig and dig inside and bury them so deep that we hope that one day, we can't even find them ourselves?

But there's food now in Judah so it's time to go home. Which I guess makes me a kind of spiritual mercenary. Follow the blessing wherever it is, like a dog sniffing out food and going that direction.

# Naomi

## *Ruth 1:1–22*

Not really seeking God but just seeking some sufficiency. Maybe that explains a lot about me, explains why I am what I've become. So, I'll walk back into Bethlehem with my tail between my legs. Can't be a Granny; can't trust the Lord; can't learn to live and stay in one place.

And good as Orpah and Ruth are, much as they've hung in with me, despite all their own loss, I can't let what's defined me define them as well. What goodness is there in a trio of widows, knitted together by grief and sorrow. Just because *I* can't start over doesn't mean that they shouldn't. Whatever little is left for me, they have the rest of their lives in front of them. They need to be told to step out into that.

In all their goodness, they want to stay, but when does kindness stop being loving and start to be suffocating? I don't want to be a burden for the balance of my days, a deadweight on the dreams of others. Their tears are so real, but we'll drive ourselves crazy if we carry on like this together. We need to break the bitter cycle our lives have become, me feeding their sorrow, them feeding mine, trapped by both grief and each other.

And yet the more I weep, the more Ruth clings. Kilion landed on his feet when he landed with her. What could they have been together?

“Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my

# Naomi

## *Ruth 1:1–22*

people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.”

Her foreign tongue speaks kindness, her accent harshly strangling the words, yet the words spoken tenderly and so heartfelt. I can write and read the Moabite language, but I wish I could speak it better. I'd love to make myself better understood. I wish that at so many levels of my life, but especially the days when my emotions are so loaded but the words won't come. Or when they do, come out wrong. And now Ruth is the only light left in my life. I can't refuse her.

Yahweh was once my foremost light, just as he was once the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night for my people. But I don't know who he is now. The one who is compassionate and gracious, yet has made my life so very bitter. The one who abounds in love and faithfulness, but has brought me back home empty. The one who forgives wickedness, rebellious and sin, yet me, me I am afflicted, with grave misfortune brought upon me. His Name is one thing, but is his nature another?

It's dark when we arrive in Bethlehem, the way I want it to be, all the better to creep back in, a failure and unnoticed. I was once the most popular girl in the class, the funniest girl at the party, and that's what they'll still expect. It'll be all over the grapevine in no time that I'm back and I'll not be able to be what they'll all want and remember.

# Naomi

## *Ruth 1:1–22*

It's been too many years since I was full. I left here with my stomach empty; I return with my whole life empty. Too old, too sad; too sour. But the seasons still turn and there's barley to be harvested. Maybe I can reap a little of what others have sown?

**Think of a much-loved elderly person in your family or church who may fear that they've become – or are becoming – 'too old'. Commit them afresh to God and his watching over them.**

# 20

## Ruth

*Ruth*

*3:1–18*



# Ruth

## *Ruth 3:1–18*

We can view the story of Ruth in two ways. We can see it as about God and also about people. The first lens through which the story is seen centres on God's goodness and providence, how Boaz and Ruth's marriage led to the birth of a boy called Obed, whose grandson would be David, out of whose lineage would eventually be born Jesus, our Messiah. The second lens centres on two people – Boaz and Ruth – who in terms of goodness, kindness and integrity, are among the most attractive characters in all of Scripture.

The lens through which we see this doesn't have to be either-or. It's best to view this story through a bifocal reading of Scripture: God's work in these lives is an inspiration to us, but they're also examples, the kind of people God wants us to be, the way he wants us to take initiative and act in faith, and also the way he wants us to treat the most vulnerable around us.

# Ruth

## *Ruth 3:1–18*

**I**N OUR EARLY DAYS TOGETHER, Killion and I would talk often about where we'd eventually settle. He could remember Bethlehem pretty well. The house where they lived. His schoolteachers. Who the neighbours were. The friends that he played with. The market that he ran messages to for his Mum. The workshop where his dad mended the farm tools. The altar at which his community worshipped.

Some days he said he'd stay in Moab, because that was the place he now knew best, and what – other than memories, and maybe sugar-coated ones as well, glazed like his favourite fig cakes (made by his Mum, that I could never get right) – did he have to draw him back. What if he only recalled the best and not the worst? What if people resented his parents' leaving – even if that had nothing to do with him – and he wanted to be back in Bethlehem more than it wanted him?

It was sometimes teasy talk and other times dreamy talk, staying up late talk that was rarely serious. We never actually made plans, and nor was it entrenched talk that came between us. Happy talk. Happy times. We were a love match, you know. Migrants don't choose Moabites, and any prosperous Moabite family wouldn't choose a migrant. It's more that eyes meet and conversations start and two people connect.

So, we weren't without our good days of blessed memories, but then the kids not coming along thing started to become more obvious,



# Ruth

## *Ruth 3:1–18*

and then his Dad died and he never really got over that, and Mahlon after that was such a hammer blow. Migrant boys are brothers thick as thieves. And then he started to be inexplicably tired more and more of the time, and then he became sick, and then...

And so, I go to Bethlehem but *not* the Bethlehem of a carefree boy. Instead, the Bethlehem of a foreign widow. Bethlehem, where I don't lean down to a toddler to wash its face or dry its tears, but where I lean down rather to pick up leftover grain and stubble, the harvest that others have missed, where a morning's work is barely enough to stop a sack blowing over on a windy day. Bethlehem where Boaz treats me so differently to what I expected that at times I can barely say a word to him. Because if I do, I'll cry at his goodness.

My skin is darker, my uptake slower, my technique clumsier, my ancestry hazier, the gods they think I worship weaker. But I'm allowed to be here anyway, because – as happens everywhere – jungle drums beat and he's heard things about me.

“May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

I believe in this God, he who is Lord and one. Maybe Naomi's people can never really be my people, but Yahweh, her God, my husband's God, he really is mine now. You can't see him. He's not one-foot high in the corner of a room on a fireplace, or six-foot high beside

# Ruth

## *Ruth 3:1–18*

a shrine. It's the not seeing him that makes him real. You can sense him, know him, trust him, hear all the stories about Yahweh and believe him. Faith needs no eyes to be sure.

Naomi tells me that Boaz is one of our guardian-redeemers, a man that can restore. I'm not really sure what that means, but I notice that as the days turn to weeks, the other women in the field soften and I feel less apart. The harvest days are long but satisfying: I become more adept at gleaning and sleep better than I've done in years. But the seasons turn, the days grow less warm and shorten. The harvest ends. And as the crops have grown on the land, an idea has grown in Naomi's head. It's time for me to make Bethlehem my own home now, in a way it wasn't before, for the city is slowly healing us both.

Her advice seems odd, yet I don't think to question. For the first time in years, I dress not as a widow, but as the young woman I've almost forgotten that I remain. I can still smell good, look great, turn a head, make a man feel a little unnerved but better about himself all at the same time. But tonight, I'll not look him in the eye. Tonight, I'll lie at his feet.

When he lies on the ground at the threshing floor, he's the best kind of tired that there is. Tired from fresh air and hard work and a big meal, from a day where all his tasks have been in the right order from sunrise to sunset. Without saying a word, barely disturbing

# Ruth

## *Ruth 3:1–18*

him, I uncover his feet and make them my pillow, wondering about the journeys we might go on together. Wondering if little feet might one day follow after. Wondering too how many fresh and good years I might get with a man older than my father, but content that his character is so much more attractive than any chiselled chin or toned frame.

I think about that conversation a year ago with Naomi, and chuckle: would I hang around if she married that night and had another boy within a year? As I do so, I look up at his kind face enveloped in grey hair and beard. Turn it upside down and I would hang around Naomi. Turn it upside down and I would... In the middle of the night, he startles.

Sleepiness becomes alertness in a heartbeat. “Who are you?” he asks.

“I am your servant Ruth,” I reply. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” Cover me Boaz, beneath the shadow of your wings.<sup>13</sup>

“The LORD bless you, my daughter. This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier. You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do all that you ask.”

I creep out before morning and wander home, and when I’m nearly

# Ruth

## *Ruth 3:1–18*

back in town, some people are already out on the streets, starting to go about their day's business. I smile inwardly at how their lives are – today – a little duller than mine, for me and a man share a secret. I know things that they don't know. I know I have a future. I know that my redeemer lives. I know that I'm in love.

**Is your Redeemer simply someone who once paid a price for you, or are you still in love?**

# 21

## Hannah

*1 Samuel*

*1:1–2:11*



# Hannah

## *1 Samuel 1:1–2:11*

Samuel's mother Hannah comes across as an extremely attractive person. Whilst all too many characters in Scripture are complex and show unwholesome character traits, Hannah demonstrates strong faith and great dignity, despite the double burden of childlessness and a kind of uniquely ancient world domestic abuse at the hands of her 'rival' Peninnah.

But whatever our overriding impression of her, it cannot be ignored that when she worships after she has given the infant Samuel to God's service at Shiloh, that prayer talks of 'my enemies' and 'the arrogant'. Even when God has come through and blessed her, strong feelings arising from bitter experiences still need to be acknowledged and processed by bringing them to God in prayer.

# Hannah

## *1 Samuel 1:1–2:11*

**E**VERY TIME MEMORIES of Sarah and Rachel were retold, the candle of hope inside me flickered less bright. Was my life destined to be nothing but Torah tales of sorrow repeated, only without the happy ever after endings?

‘Remember’ the law tells us. Over and over, it tells us to remember. But what good can come of reading this again and again, of punishing yourself with this remembering? What was it Rachel said? “Give me children, or I’ll die?” And what was it Jacob said back? “Am I in the place of God who has kept you from having children?”

“This is God’s good news” say the old priests with their great families of wives, children and grandchildren. How glib it’s easy to be when you’re not *in* the story. What comfort is there in baby based arms races, in stories where just the sight of mandrakes touches the rawest of nerves? But what was it Hagar called you? “You are the God who sees me.” That’s the piece of the narrative that I wanted.

And in it all I can’t for the life of me understand Peninnah. I get her even less than I get myself. She doesn’t seem to see that the way this works is that it’s *me* who’s meant to be the bitter one. She certainly doesn’t remember the stories. I know she must resent her place of second wife, but we both know what makes a woman first in this world is the children you can bear. Yet Elkanah is a good man, even if he’s rather tone deaf to emotions, with his gift of a double portion that’s like a consolation prize from which to give to God.

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## *1 Samuel 1:1–2:11*

And yet... I know he's trying hard and means well, that that's his clumsy way of saying that he cares.

But every four weeks is another cycle of grief, notches etched and scored in fives, the months becoming years. My eyes fail me for looking for answers from Yahweh. Is there anything more exhausting than sifting the same material in your head over and over, only to come to the same conclusion every time? No matter how eloquently new words come to describe the grief, I remain resolutely stuck, praying near the doorpost of the sanctuary, too crushed to enter further into the space.

And then. A new thought from the deepest chambers of my heart...

“LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.”

Is that right, I think? Am I bargaining? The old priest – the big, heavy one, balanced fabulously on the ridiculously small chair – chides me and thinks me drunk, can't bear the untidiness of some hysterical woman amongst his holy order, assumes that emotion flows only from intoxication.

But the pouring out of my soul is ten times the consolation of Elkanah's double portion. We all need to sacrifice *to* Yahweh but



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## *1 Samuel 1:1–2:11*

oh how much more do we need to be heard *by* him. And after the swaying was stillness, after the crying was inner calm. *That* was the day the peace came – not when blessed Samuel came into this world. His name tells all who meet him that he was born because I asked Yahweh for him. In the birth of my child, I was delivered from my aching.

Four years later, he toddles purposefully beside me as we enter the house of the Lord; unaware that I'll leave him and yet running ahead, as if he knows some part of him has been here before. His long locks have gone wonderfully curly, and his dimples appear as he giggles at lambs, but he goes strange and nestles into me when weird priests in wonderful outfits walk by. He stares at the sights but startles at the noises. The knitted sheep he holds tight in his hand now looks out of place. I tucked it inside my dress for much of the trip here, hoping that Samuel will smell me when he holds it tight for as long as possible, and I make Eli promise that they'll let him keep it.

Our last shared experience is the blood and the cleansing of a bull's life for our atonement. Then I give him to the old man and tell him how brave he must be, old hands worn and wizened from a life of sacrifice and being held high in worship now holding Samuel's smooth and chubby fingers, the boy's other gripping his sheep so it's misshaped by his fear. Samuel can't understand and I can't explain. He looks like he desperately wants to cry – there's just the

# Hannah

## *1 Samuel 1:1–2:11*

slightest wobble of his bottom lip – but he’s so strong for Mummy.

Every last time I glance over my shoulder he’s still staring back at me, his gaze unflinching until it becomes just a speck in the sand of faces. Just once he waves – the sheep rising with his hand – but he never smiles. This is not a giving but rather a giving back. And so, childless as I once prayed at Shiloh, childless I turn to pray again, and this time the words flow as my heart sings.

“My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one beside you; there is no Rock like our God...”

Yahweh is a God who sees, and also one who knows, my friend, and in hearing that may you own for yourself my truth that it is not by strength that one prevails, but rather by tender mercy.

• **What has God given you that you might give back to him?**

22

Samuel  
*1 Samuel*  
*8:1–22*



# Samuel

## *1 Samuel 8:1–22*

It would be so easy to overlook this chapter and go to something more dramatic, perhaps from Samuel's interactions with Saul, as he gains and loses his anointing, or with the young David. But the introduction of monarchy to the Old Testament story is pivotal to the arc of the whole Bible narrative. This will shape the people's lives for centuries to come, and of course it shapes our lives too, because the second king, David, was promised that his house, his kingdom and his throne would last forever, a promise fulfilled in the form of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, God made flesh.

This chapter is also a fascinating insight into God's character. He is sovereign and yet doesn't force his will upon the people, all-knowing and yet his people are free to insist that they know best, a divine security that surely comes from his confidence that whatever the people decide, he always has the power to redeem.

# Samuel

## *1 Samuel 8:1–22*

**I T WAS A BLESSING** to grow up at Shiloh, yet too many seeds of sadness were also sown there, because it was a house of worship but never a home. There were always sacrifices to make and praises to sing, the wisest scholars to learn from, and a never-ending parade of interesting people passing through: arriving guilty and leaving cleansed. But a boy needs more than that. A boy needs a Mum and Dad, knees to sit on, arms that enfold, and words and hands to guide and correct.

So, I tried as I could with Joel and Abijah, but right from the start I struggled to be somebody that nobody had ever been for me. I grew up fast in the Lord at the feet of an elderly, blind priest, the deepest of childhoods but the narrowest too. My sons, in contrast, slept all the night through. Yahweh never woke them. Or maybe he tried, but their nights were too preoccupied with other dreams to notice.

My wife would despair of me and say it was therefore up to me to wake up to *my* responsibilities, and I'd tell her I was trying but I didn't know how. Then I'd fall back to reminiscences about Eli and say 'too much praying and not enough playing, that's what I was doing at their age.' I can't relate to the young. I never got to be properly young myself.

And so, Eli and I mightn't have been as thick as flesh and blood, but we were close enough that I could see the sins passed down, and who knows but that they'll carry on further, three or four

# Samuel

## *1 Samuel 8:1–22*

generations, I've seen it happen too many times. But I've also seen much mercy too, to give me hope that for all that my boys are, the Lord may – in his kindness – at least let them become old men.

And yet it comes to this: that the basis of a nation's rebellion is cast up as somehow my fault. You can lead worship and lead a people all your life, have a book called after your name, but if you can't lead your own boys in the way of the Lord, that's almost too much heartache to withstand. I dispense justice to Israel through the front doors of Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpah but they accept bribes by the back doors of Beersheba. Start off in the south I thought, iron out your wrinkles and learn to do the job in a region, then you can take on the nation. But the word has spread of their corruption and all of Israel's elders, every last one of them, have come before me. How long has this been going on and it's only now I'm told?

“You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.”

One of the things that people struggle to understand about me is that I often seem harsh and severe as priest and judge, but I couldn't be that way with my own boys. I knew they weren't perfect but I struggled to see any better options and I guess I hoped that they could somehow, by Yahweh's hand, seek to make their paths straight and grow into the roles.

# Samuel

## *1 Samuel 8:1–22*

The public and the private can be very different. There are many shades of character within us all, and to be the full-on public Samuel at home also, that would have been too much, for my love, for my boys, and for me as well. We're meant to burn our sacrifices; we're not meant to burn our altars too.

I hear the elders' words and they seem such a failure of faith, but they're a failure of imagination also, to think that the best you can have is only something that you see somebody else has. Those set apart to be holy want to be *like* the other nations, just the same as them, as if sitting down in a restaurant and waving away the menu, just looking over to the plates of the Egyptians and Philistines and saying "we'll have what they're having." Thinking that a crown and palace and throne make a king you can see somehow better than the King you can't.

How can they see the power of Yahweh at work and then seek the leadership of some mere mortal? Are we worshipers of wood and stone that delivers fertility and harvest, such that we'd have our own Pharaoh? Is that what we were rescued for, to lift a man up before us who would compete with the Lord for our worship? Have we laid down our Ashtoreths and Baals with one hand, only to take up a king with our other?

Too many questions but I do what I've done all my life and turn them into prayer, and Yahweh speaks comfort to my heart, tells me

# Samuel

## *1 Samuel 8:1–22*

that this is about them rather than me, and that it's nothing new, just as there's never anything really new with this people, rather the same old patterns over and over. Wise men talk about original sin but there's very little folly is ever fresh or new.

So, I tell them that if a king is what they want, then a king is what they'll have. But let's go into this with our eyes wide open. There's very little you can add to your life that doesn't involve subtraction as well.

You can have pomp and pageant but your sons will fight or die in his army. You can watch grand military parades but it's you that will sweat to make the weapons. You can look at a palace from afar but it's your daughters will work as its little people and servants. You can watch golden chariots sweep by in the flash of an eye, but it's your tax – the best of your flocks and fields – will pay for it. It takes an awful lot of bricks beneath it to support the top of a tower, and once the mortar sets, the bricks don't get to swap places. Your cries were heard in Egypt - and wasn't there plenty of brick making there - but that won't always be the case.

“No!” they said. “We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and fight our battles.”

But in order for the king to be over you, you have to be under him. What you worship for a season you will serve for a lifetime.



# Samuel

## *1 Samuel 8:1–22*

Getting what you want is a type of hell, you know, but listen, for Yahweh has spoken. If a king is what you want, a king is what you'll have. "Everyone go back to your own town."

**Is there any area of your life where you risk wanting what other people have more than what it is that God wants for you?**

# 23

## Jonathan

*1 Samuel*

*20:1-43*



# Jonathan

## *1 Samuel 20:1-43*

A moment of writerly honesty. I've sometimes wondered at the Biblical names that people give their children. In particular, I come across people whose sons are called Isaac or Jacob, and however much I appreciate that covenant theology is very dear to some Christians, and the immediate sons of Abraham are cherished figures in that covenant understanding, I can't help but think along the lines of: 'but they were such slippery and unpleasant people. Biblical figures or not, why would anyone want to name a child after these men?'

Of course, Isaac and Jacob were not alone in having shadow sides. Writing this book, attempting to delve into their hearts and minds, I've been struck afresh at God's ability to work in and through people of multiple flaws and failings, and the way of grace is that that extends to us too. But one of Scripture's heroes that seems to stand out for the unambiguously virtuous nature of his character is Jonathan. Brave, faithful, honest and principled, and showing those traits in an impossible situation. He's the sort of man I'd desperately want to be myself, and the sort of man I'd pray for a boy to become.

# Jonathan

## *1 Samuel 20:1-43*

**I**T SHOULD HAVE BEEN MINE but it's going to be his. And when you see the burden of it, and how the weight of it upon a man's head can crush the mind within, well maybe that's no bad thing. Perhaps, for all the holy talk of God's anointing falling on his chosen one, the truer blessing is actually *not* to have this thing. Let the crown be David's. He's a better man than me, or if not better, then certainly fitter for the task.

I love him, but that's no surprise, because that's what most of us do. We love David. We can't help ourselves, and not in a naive going weak at the knees sense: you don't lose your judgment when you love David; your heart simply reads what is plainly before you. The looks, the voice, the smile, the steely self-possession, the way his hand falls on your arm.

His pedigree shines through in every facet of who he is: the guile of a sheepdog; the big dog ruthlessness that means he's not afraid to show his teeth when required; and the beautiful puppy-eyes that make everyone melt. David's greatest story is that in the Lord's strength he takes down giants, yet the reality is he makes them too. Everyone stands a foot taller in the company of Jesse's youngest son.

I couldn't be what he will be, because I don't have whatever it is he has. Nobody can put their finger on it, but we all eat out of his hand, and what we taste – when he decides he wants to give it – is as sweet and life giving as the purest honey fresh from the finest

# Jonathan

## *1 Samuel 20:1-43*

comb. Heroes like him rarely fall before their time, whatever his talk of just a step between him and death.

“Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do for you.” That’s what people say to David. Nobody can refuse him. If he ever has a downfall, maybe it’ll be that combination of chiselled face and easy charm that will trip him up, particularly when the day comes that power is added into the mix as well.

So, he and I are bound now, not by friendship but by covenant. And to say I love David doesn’t mean I don’t love my father. It’s just that Dad love has changed. When you’re a boy, your Dad’s the best man in the world, the strongest man, the surest man, the wisest man, the funniest man. But it can turn out even the best man in the world isn’t good enough to be king. He makes the wrong calls, spares the wrong enemies, slaughters and burns the wrong sacrifices, and every time he does it seems that there is Samuel, to spell out the mistake in condemnation writ large to the scale of ten foot high, yet Dad strangely drawn to him like a masochistic moth to a flame.<sup>14</sup>

What if what nanny said in the nursery is true? What if what’s in the cat really is in the kitten? Would I be just as foolish as him? Would I be just as unhappy? Worst of all to imagine, would I end up just as tormented?

# Jonathan

## *1 Samuel 20:1-43*

As I get older, I look at the scenarios and choices in front of him, look at the moves he could make at any given time, and can't help but imagine what I would do, right down to the words that I'd say and how I'd deliver them. In most of the role plays I take a different path from him, and it always works out better than it does for Dad. But I'm sure it would be different in reality. It's even lonelier to be on the throne than it is to be just you with your thoughts in your head.

And despite all that's happened, he still loves me and lets me in on things: sometimes shrewd things, when the black dog has gone away; sometimes mad things, when the paranoia is running rampant. Everything is run past me in his desperate craving of affirmation, but no assurance can compensate for the truth that the Lord no longer has his back, that the anointing's gone and will not be recovered. He's never told me but I wonder if a part of him is still trying to make me ready to be next, still thinks in the saddest, craziest recess of his mind that what is his can somehow still come to me.

And to say I love David isn't all expediency either, even though I know that's what some folk say. 'Saul wouldn't be cold in his bed, and Jonathan would be the biggest threat, the first to get a knife in the back.' I can't believe David would do that. Maybe it's because I see enough of him in my own self that I'm able to be so sure of that. I don't ask for mercy; I ask for unfailing kindness. And much as we

# Jonathan

## *1 Samuel 20:1-43*

get each other, I ask him to reaffirm his oath, because sometimes – just sometimes – I need to hear David give, rather than always be taking.

The first day of the feast his absence isn't remarked upon, but the second day Dad's not so easily distracted. Where's the son of Jesse? His form is foul. He can't even say David's name now. I tell Dad why, spin the story about the sacrifice, churn slightly as I do so, and of course the anger flares as if on cue, I'm a shame to my mother, and then the party trick with the spear. But I live to tell the tale, because Dad always misses now. Once the big shot, now a bad shot, can't even do with a spear what David can do with a stone, not even from just the far side of the table. The spear simply lies behind me. Nobody touches it or even looks at it. Had it gone right through me, I'm not sure it would have changed the clearing of the starter and serving of the main course.

The next day I rise early. My three arrows fly from the bow. I shout to my boy. "Isn't the arrow beyond you?" Isn't so much beyond all of us now, I think – beyond repair, beyond redemption – as the boy runs home, and I wait for David to emerge. Even after two nights in the fields, something in him shines. But then he bows to me three times, and he means it, and we both know he'll never do so again. We embrace and weep and he becomes strangely uncontrolled, as if grieving, like he knows his star is rising but things precious to him are falling to earth as he soars. Not the David I know.

# Jonathan

## *1 Samuel 20:1-43*

“Go in peace”, I say, “for we have sworn friendship in the name of the LORD, saying, ‘The LORD is witness between you and me, and between your descendants and my descendants forever.’”

Love is complicated, isn't it?

**How easy do you find it to see friends flourish, when you dreamt that you'd flourish the same way but it didn't work out?**



# 24

## Abigail

*1 Samuel*  
*25:1-44*



# Abigail

## *1 Samuel 25:1-44*

Abigail is – at first glance – a peacemaker. On one side of these events is her husband Nabal, thick-set and mean, who doesn't want to give up any of his sheep or wealth and believes that what on-the-run David is doing is little more than racketeering, demanding retrospective protection money. On the other side of the fence is David, who believes that he and his men are due some recognition of the fact they've acted with self-restraint and integrity that very few other fugitives would have shown in the circumstances. And 'the meat in the sandwich' is Abigail.

However, much Abigail's actions help to avoid conflict and the loss of life, there is something more going on here. Abigail is a canny lady – referred to as “intelligent and beautiful”, she is the first woman in Scripture to be described for her mind before her appearance<sup>15</sup> – and has an ability to read events and the way the wind is blowing that far surpasses her husband's. We all need such people in our lives, and whilst the two men think they're locked in a battle of wills around the gaining or losing of sheep, the greatest loss and the greatest prize is actually who loses and who gains Abigail.

# Abigail

## *1 Samuel 25:1-44*

**J**UST BECAUSE YOU'RE GOOD at *one* thing doesn't mean you're good at *another* thing, and what Nabal doesn't seem to realise is that it certainly doesn't mean you're good at *everything*. He's good at the husbandry of sheep, I'll grant him that. He knows how to lamb them and lose precious little of the flock. He knows what sort of grass and land or feed and shelter they need at each season of the year. He can organise their shearing in an impressive and productive manner, sheep in here, sheep out there, his own designs of pens and gates, wool sorted, weighed, bagged and marketed before the flock is back on the hillside again.

He can examine a sheep and astutely assess its strengths and defects, spot things that none of the rest of us can, and the longer he does that the easier it seems to come to him. But what grates more and more as the years go on, is that the more people suck up to him and lick round him for his expertise on sheep, the more he thinks that makes him an expert on every matter and problem in this world. His success is down to himself and his setbacks are down to others. And lately he's had a lot of success.

He'll tell you what Saul needs to do to be the sort of king that people will look up to. He'll tell you what's wrong with religion and how priests are all on the take. He'll tell you that there's too much tax, that this new monarchy business is just another excuse to bleed people dry, and that the elders don't realise they'll only drive traders like him to other regions. He'll tell you how to treat your

# Abigail

## *1 Samuel 25:1-44*

wife, raise your kids and manage your staff. You won't need to ask. He'll just tell you.

And don't get him started on scroungers and spongers, or people who quote the Torah about how we're to look after orphans and widows. "God helps those who help themselves. That might not be written in the law of God but it's written in the law of life. It's in the commandments given down by Nabal." His fleeces have never sought the Lord, have never been laid for morning dew.

And as for these men sent by David, well they're nothing but a bunch of gangsters. "Good health to me? Good health, my ass! If a mob like that had demanded menaces from his father Jesse, would he just have given them what they wanted? No chance! And nor will I. His father was better off rid of him, and Saul as well. Once you start giving in to that sort of racket, where will it end?" It's not unlike the acquisition of sheep, isn't it Nabal? Where does it ever end?

But David isn't having it. He's not a man who's used to being told 'No'. His is an offer you *can* refuse, but wouldn't be wise to do so. "Each of you strap on your sword!" is the word that comes back to me. I wouldn't want to bet on Nabal's cussedness facing down that. And the servant reckons David is a reasonable man: says they didn't mistreat our workers; tells me nothing went missing.

It seems to me that there isn't really anything to debate. Nabal would spend days on end letting off steam and cursing and lecturing,

# Abigail

## *1 Samuel 25:1-44*

and imagine that all his whining was somehow tantamount to decision making, before realising too late that he's wasted what time he had but still has the problem anyhow. But I barely take time to roll my eyes before I'm on my feet and giving instructions to round up gifts and provisions. "And not a word of this to your master!" All of that organised, I send them on ahead, while I fix my hair and put my good face and glad rags on: persuasion comes in many forms.

When I meet David, I can see straight away how wound up he's got himself, and I bow with my face to the ground, which unlike Nabal, I've never had a problem doing. Maybe it's a woman thing, our place in this world. I ask him to give me a hearing, and tell him to pay no heed to Nabal, a fool aptly named. And then I say something I hadn't planned to say, something that stirs deep within, that as it tumbles out phrase by phrase, I can't remember the last thing I said or imagine the next thing I'll say, as if God has taken hold of my tongue. One of his men wrote it down for me and gave it to me later.

"Please forgive your servant's presumption. The LORD your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the LORD's battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live. Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my lord will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the LORD your God, but the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling. When the LORD has fulfilled for my lord every good thing he promised concerning him

# Abigail

## *1 Samuel 25:1-44*

and has appointed him ruler over Israel, my lord will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the LORD your God has brought my lord success, remember your servant.”

Because a stained conscience would be a terrible thing, David. Not as bad as having no conscience at all, but a terrible thing nonetheless. And I think that’s something God wants us all to know. But maybe you in particular.

When I get home that night Nabal is living out his maxim that those who work hard have the right to play hard. I tell him what I did the next morning, stick to the facts, don’t get into all the stuff about ‘you never listen’ because what’s the point, I gave up on that long ago. I’m waiting for the arrows of anger to fly from his bow but they never come. He’s strangely unfocused. And then he keels over.

He never speaks again. There’s no fool like an old fool, and now no fool at all. His sun has set and will not rise again, but a new, brighter, warmer sun is rising in another sky...

**How good are you at being able to listen to advice? Don’t just see that as a kind of self-help question, but see your answer also as something that you should take to God in prayer.**

25

**Michal**  
*2 Samuel*  
*6:1–23*



# Michal

## *2 Samuel 6:1–23*

Everyone has a story and their own combination of nature, nurture and life experiences that has led them to be the person that they are. For many years I had a black and white view of Michal, Saul's daughter and David's first wife, who is so hard-hearted in her antipathy to David as the Ark is carried into Jerusalem. She appears so hostile to her husband and the wonder of worship and God's presence seems to totally pass her by. As is so often the case in Scripture – and life – the actions of the angry and bitter can't be entirely defended, but there is nonetheless much more going on than meets the eye at first glance.

The roots of those events are in 1 Samuel 18, where we are told twice that Michal loved David but nowhere does Scripture record that he loved her. (That's the first time the Bible tells us that a woman loved a man, Isaac's love of Rebekah being the first reference to a man loving a woman<sup>16</sup>). She went on to take risks for David as her father turned against him, and got nothing back in return. We can't understand Michal and her flawed picture of God without understanding the fractures in her relationship with David.



# Michal

## *2 Samuel 6:1–23*

**E**VERYONE ADORES HIM. They all revere him as the great worshiping king, dancing in his linen ephod and doing all his holy moves, shaking and spinning amidst the trumpets and triumph, giving up a bull and a fattened calf. Filling up the air with holy aroma and lavishing gifts on his people. Let them eat cake!

The man after God's own heart: the man who broke my heart in two. The things I could tell you about David but I wonder if you'd want to hear them. I imagine like most people you prefer your illusions of the idealised king. Who wants to trade the myth and hero for who the real man is?

The grave has no fury like a woman scorned, they say, but you can at least hear my story before you put me in a box. I catch a glimpse of him leaping about like some circus act, about as much dignity as a pig gorging from a trough, and all I can think is 'you dog David, you dirty dog. You put on this spectacle of showy devotion, but would you ever lock yourself away David, go out of the public gaze and think about who you really are? Look at the way you treat people David.'

I didn't miss and hit the wall. "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would."

At which points he rubs the biggest pile of salt he can as deep into the wound as he can get it. Goes straight for Dad. Goes straight for

## Michal

### *2 Samuel 6:1–23*

God choosing him instead of my father. Very good David, genius David: how long did it take you to think of that? You claw at my eyes and I'll claw at yours. But I tell you what, whoever said we should bless the Lord who gives and takes away never saw their Daddy lose his anointing and his mind.

And then all the things he'll do: undignified; humiliated; piety this and piety that, whilst probably also thinking, in the back of his mind, about which concubine he'll have sent to him tonight. And to think how I once loved him, was thrilled to land him at Merab's expense and get one over on my big sister, and – I'll admit as well – revelled in all the rebellious buzz of wanting the boy my daddy disliked. To think of the dream that he once was, that there was a day I'd have done anything for him.

In fact, never mind would have done anything: *did* do anything. I remember that evening as if it were yesterday, can close my eyes and be right back in the moment. "If you don't run for your life tonight, tomorrow you'll be killed."

I never felt as alive as I did that night, the intoxicating rush of thinking on my feet energy, him stealing out the window, me making up the idol in the bed with the goats' hair. But the most exciting day was also the day the magic died. No pair could ever be whole with one half perpetually on the run. It was never the same again.

# Michal

## *2 Samuel 6:1–23*

There was no blazing row, no one moment where it ended, just the band marching by and the music fading to nothing as they walk into the distance. He took other wives; Dad married me off to Paltiel – a man who'd slayed no giants, but a man who would hug tight, hold hands, and listen to me.

Those were the best years, and then they were stolen too.

Dad dead, Jonathan dead, and then me the biggest shiniest spoil of war he could find. Long live the king and I'm summoned back with Paltiel weeping behind me all the way to Bahurim, the only man who ever cried for me, and I know he meant it too.

We all need to be wanted by someone at least once in our lives, a memory to cling on to whilst back in Jerusalem, stuck in David's trophy cabinet whilst he acquires ever more mistresses, the harem bigger than the herd the one-time-simple-shepherd-boy watched over. Because that's what they do: boys *love* to collect their toys.

How many psalms have you written this week David, and in any of them, would you dare to speak to God about me and you? Some of your Psalms I know are written *for* you rather than *by* you. I guess if you're a king you can find someone to do anything for you: you can even contract out your spirituality. Is that what you've done with the bit of your heart that I still think I once occupied?

# Michal

## *2 Samuel 6:1–23*

So, judge me as much as you want but where you see holiness, I'll see hypocrisy. It's easy to say 'you've got to move beyond it Michal', 'you've let this define you Michal', 'you can't live your whole life a victim, others have their problems too'. You haven't walked in my shoes or had love thrown back in your face.

I wish I could worship like David can, but the wonder has left my world. It's hard to praise the Almighty when you can't see beyond the king.

**Think of someone you know whose depth of hostility to God you find difficult to fathom? How might getting to know them better and coming to understand their story change your view of them and how you pray?**

26

# Mephibosheth

*2 Samuel*

*9:1–13*



## Mephibosheth

### *2 Samuel 9:1–13*

The New Testament features more stories of people with disabilities than the Old Testament. Think of the paralytic healed by Jesus after his friends lower him through the roof of a house (one of his first recorded miracles), the lame man who can't get to the healing pool at Bethesda, and the crippled beggar healed by Peter and John. God's heart for those suffering such life-limiting infirmities is that they would know restoration and wholeness.

But we shouldn't get too far ahead of ourselves in seeing enormous compassion in David's attitude towards Mephibosheth. David's actions appear to be informed by wanting to do right by any of Saul's family that are still alive, rather than showing kindness to Mephibosheth because of his condition. He doesn't do this until he's confident that his own throne is secure, God having promised him a house and a kingdom. Nonetheless, David models an inclusivity towards Mephibosheth that should always be our goal in both church and wider society.

# Mephibosheth

## *2 Samuel 9:1–13*

**I** CAN STILL – JUST ABOUT – remember running. The sense of invincibility, the belief that the unimpeded sprint of a half-toddler-half-child was something very fast and strong, the wind blowing over me, arms back and chest out, racing against friends and running as if I were racing, even when I was on my own and had nowhere to be in a hurry. Sometimes running with my little wooden sword in my hand, hearing people praise me and saying what a king and a warrior I would one day be.

It was Dad who encouraged me rather than Grandad, who shouted me on from the side-lines. Grandad was always in a mood, always had a sore head or bad temper, or some foul and fused blend of the two. He was rarely interested in me, and I remember vividly that even at such a tender age, I was wary of his moodiness and grateful for his lack of attention.

The day of the accident was like the sudden end of a drought, where the one cloud that appeared in the perfect blue sky was the runner bringing bad news from Jezreel, after which the storm broke in only a few minutes of mayhem, the servants rushing and grabbing what they could, turning me from royalty to refugee in the blink of an eye. My nurse put me under her arm, part grabbing and part carrying me, so that more than anything I was dragged behind her. The hurry and the sandals and the three steps down were a fateful combination. I remember the pain and my feet trapped and time only to pull me free but not to lift any of the stones off them.

## Mephibosheth

### *2 Samuel 9:1–13*

I had to be preserved and rescued but I couldn't be cuddled and held. I had to be somewhere safe but could never again sit on my father's lap.

By the time that a doctor could examine my feet, they were crooked beyond repair. Sometimes things get so misshapen in this world that nothing can restore them to their proper alignment, and what can you do but get on with it, a crutch at each side, learning how to make your arms do all the work of getting you up, eking out a little more progress each day, first inch-by-inch and then step-by-step? Was sovereignty trying to fight its way out of fate or was it the other way round?

I'm sad that I never got to march but grateful that at least I can hobble. A poorer boy than me could have been discarded in a locked room to rarely see the light of day, but the remnant of royalty afforded me some protection, even if no nation would ever want the figurehead of a lame king.

Who wouldn't prefer a crown to a crutch and a father to a servant, and of course, I'd have loved it if things could have been different, but can a man watching little Mika run and skip and play with his mum say he's had a bad life? I'd sooner see him run free and trip and fall than wrap him forever in a safety blanket.

The family of Saul aren't marching anymore, but life's been blessed enough, in its own way, that when the call from the king came, I'd no desire to go, no matter how much both he and I should be comforted



# Mephibosheth

## *2 Samuel 9:1–13*

by the fact I can't be a threat to him.

He's my father's friend and my grandfather's nemesis, so what will he be to me? He can see the tremble of my hand. He can hear the fear in my voice. Everyone is isolated in the open space before a throne, but you're all the more exposed when you've no capacity to run for it.

"Don't be afraid", David says to me, "for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table."

What will he be to me? The answer, it turns out, is benefactor. I was once far off but am brought near. When I cannot kneel down, he lets me bow down, and whilst I may not eat as the king, I can eat like a king.

Ziba will watch over me, his sons and servants will steward my land and afford me, at last, a harvest. So, I'm no pedigree stallion, but I'm no dead dog either. As God prepares a table before David in the presence of his enemies, so he lavishes hospitality on a dead adversary's grandchild. Grace flows from Yahweh to David and runs on to wash over men like me.

Eyes and faces are what matter most. When we sit at the king's table, nobody can see our legs below the surface of the feast.

# Mephibosheth

## *2 Samuel 9:1–13*

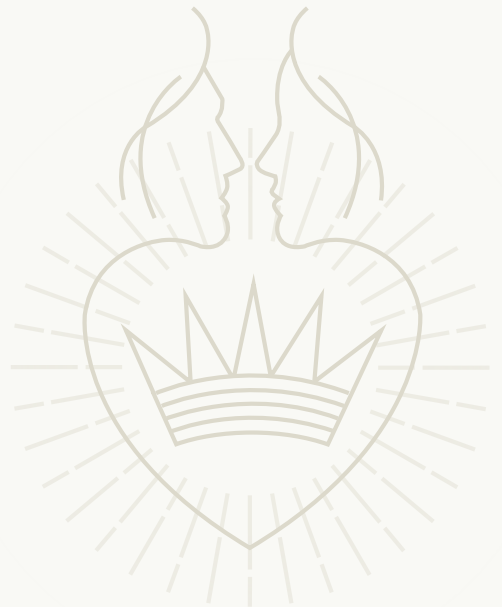
**Think of a disabled person that you know.  
How can your inclusion of them in your life become greater?**

27

David

*2 Samuel*

*11:1–12:31*



## David

### *2 Samuel 11:1–12:31*

There are so many questions that flow from the story of David and Bathsheba, many about David's behaviour, but also – if I'm honest – about God's reaction as well (thinking particularly of the death of their child). When Saul's actions are compared to those of David's, it's hard to see how Israel's second king is – by most people's moral standards – any better than the first, but at this stage God has already promised David that his house and kingdom will endure forever, and his own offspring will succeed him. David may have failed in his commitment to the Lord, but it seems that the Lord was – by now – too committed to David, to withdraw the throne from him as he did so with Saul.<sup>17</sup>

And none of that is to say that David 'got away with it', because he plainly didn't. When he and Bathsheba's infant son dies at the end of chapter 12, David seems remarkably matter-of-fact about the manner, perhaps conflicted between grief, a sense that he could now draw a line under the matter, and the futility of railing against the Lord's decision. But things could never be the same again, and the rest of David's life and reign sees him become a much-diminished figure, as his family descends into a mire of dysfunctionality and infighting.

# David

## *2 Samuel 11:1–12:31*

**W**HY DID YOU DO IT?' That's the question people want to ask. Though they can want as much as they like: it's not actually a question that real people pose to real kings. But I can assure you it's a question I've asked myself and the answer – no matter how many hours I reflect on the matter – pretty much comes down to this. Because I could. Because I wanted to. Because she was stunning. Because she came. Because she let me.

It's easy to see risk on a battle-field, less so snoozing on the palace roof of a late afternoon, then walking round the roof, taking in the view, punching in the time. We fall because we trip, and we trip because we're not watching where we're going. Are a lot of our transgressions really much more complicated than that?

But it seemed ok for me to stay in Jerusalem. Joab was over the army, Jehoshaphat was recorder, Zadok and Ahimelek were priests, and Sereiah was secretary. I could be the figurehead and let others worry about the details. The people want a king for how it makes them *feel* about themselves and the nation, not for his ability to sort out every problem. Moses made that mistake; I'll not repeat it.

And as I lay in contented half-sleep, my hands fell across my midriff. Lying flat can flatter us all, but I noticed I wasn't as trim as I once was: always a possibility when you've too much appetite for too many good things; so, just a little bit flabby. There's nothing

# David

## *2 Samuel 11:1–12:31*

can replace the pomp and pleasure of being king, but – after you’ve done it – there’s also nothing can ever really replace the edge and excitement of living on the run, just you and your men, with nothing but your wits and the Lord to protect you. A palace is plusher than a cave, but a palace can be boring in a way caves never are. The Temple would have given me a project – *something* to focus on – but Yahweh said it’s too soon for that.

So, my body mightn’t be what it once was, but who needs tone and perfect abs, when the power I have is impossible for her to resist, just as her beauty is something that once seen, can’t be put out of the mind. And so, she came; and so, we lay; and so, she went home again.

And then the word comes from her that she’s with child. You can spend so much time wrapped up in doubt and worry about the things you think will throw your life off course, and then the completely unexpected happens that there’s no playbook for. A battalion of Philistines I can deal with, but this...

The Hittite doesn’t fall for the bait, and I guess that’s a pitfall for all of us: believing that others are prey to our temptations. In other circumstances I’d value the principles of a subject like him, but that doesn’t make this problem go away. And whilst the Hittite is loyal, I know that I can always count on Joab too, so I leave it in his hands. Once he’s read my note, he’ll make sure that no trace is left of it.

# David

## *2 Samuel 11:1–12:31*

Everyone should have a Joab about themselves: there's simply no limit to what they can fix.

The news comes of losses on the front, and then the kicker. 'Moreover, Uriah the Hittite is dead.' Gone to Sheol like so many, like Saul, Ish-Bosheth, Abner... There's a lot of moreover in the life of a king, but that's simply the way of the world: the sword surely devours one as well as the other.

Bathsheba moves into the palace. She's distant and moody but she'll come round. We both know too much. We'll need to find a way to make it work.

Months later, the same Nathan who delivered to me the promise of a house that would last forever, delivers my admonishment. He becomes Samuel, I become Saul. Only two kings in and there's already nothing new under the sun. It's a story that cuts through to the heart with the truth that facts can't reveal. Initially I think 'get to the point Nathan, is this going to take all day?' but as his tale develops, so I'm drawn in to both a fascinating narrative and – it turns out – the tightening of a noose around me.

I've fallen further from grace than my predecessor but I'll not fall so far from the throne, diminished and disgraced but not disenfranchised. I'll retain the crown but lose respect, because no matter what I had, I had to have more. Where Saul died once in battle, I will die by my family and a thousand cuts.

# David

## *2 Samuel 11:1–12:31*

“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 all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more.”

“I have sinned against the LORD.” There is nothing else to say.

And immediately this reply. “The LORD has taken away your sin.” But the child? The child will die. Which is the bit I’ve never understood. But then, if I can’t explain my own actions, how could I explain Yahweh’s, and who is a man like me to even try?

For seven days I pray, fast, and weep, prostrate in inner agony that I long to be heard in Yahweh’s dwelling place. And then the word comes: the boy is dead. I don’t think my faith failed: I don’t think the Lord failed; I guess this was simply the way it had to be. I had to pray. I had to try. Even if it made no difference to the child, it mattered to the Lord that I lay before him.

The court looks horrified at my seemingly pragmatic response, but I can’t emote: it just isn’t in me. Joy is one thing but my moments of despair have always been confined to the sanctuary, to prayer, to private words spoken to private Yahweh. But as for other people, I can’t put sadness on display just to make them feel a certain way, and nor will I, whatever they might think. There are more than enough tears from Bathsheba to do for the two of us.



# David

## *2 Samuel 11:1–12:31*

And it will not be the end for the boy, even if in this life, he is gone. I can't bring him back again, and maybe it is better that he's spared what's to come for my house, and the innuendo and shame of where he'd have fitted in, a boy defined by the act of his conception, something he couldn't control. Maybe it's a strange sort of mercy.

So, this much I believe: I will go to him; but he will not return to me.

**On a scale that runs from complacent to vigilant, where do you think your spiritual antennae to temptation are sitting?**

28

# Bathsheba

*1 Kings*

*1:1–53*



# Bathsheba

## *1 Kings 1:1–53*

Some famous historical figures will always be associated with one event that defines them. In British politics, Eden will always be linked with Suez, Blair with Iraq and Cameron with the Brexit referendum. But it can be the same in our more ordinary lives: we can be marked by the bully that humiliated us at school, the university offer or job we didn't get, the engagement that was broken, or the great project that never got off the ground. These events are obviously of genuine weight, but we can also let them become even bigger than they might otherwise have been, can live forever in the role of victim.

The word 'victim' is one that should be used carefully with Bathsheba. We simply don't know to what extent she put herself on public display to seduce David, or when he summoned her, that was an invitation that she'd no ability to refuse. But it's fair to say that it's that adultery that defines her. Yet after those events, she had the rest of her life to live, and had to deal with enormous family problems as many of us do. When we meet her in later life, she seems a more complex and steelier character than we might otherwise give her credit for, her relationship with the prophet Nathan perhaps a key part of her remaking.

# Bathsheba

## *1 Kings 1:1–53*

**Y**OU CAN ONLY BE THE WOMAN on the roof once in your life. After those events I might be – to David, to the court, to you – no more knowable, but I realise I’m less mysterious and less alluring. Only once could he touch me for the very first time.

And so sad to think that we weren’t equals then, and nor are we equals now. The hands that he couldn’t keep off me now clasp blankets to his chin, and he complains even then that it’s too cold – ‘so cold in here’ – that someone needs to put more logs on the fire. Abishag lies beside him but a female body pressed against his no longer does anything for him. If Goliath came back now, David would be no more than a fly that he’d shake off.

Our first entanglement put him on a path where he became ever weaker, less decisive, unable to control events: a direction he set out on and a road Yahweh built. But as for me, as the years have gone on, I’ve become stronger. Stronger in a way that I like, but with it, I’ll admit, harder and tougher too. I had no choice. This is a world where everyone says they’re looking out for the king, but really, we’re all looking out for ourselves.

When you’re a mother that obviously includes looking out for your children. The years pass and before you know it you’ve reached a point where you’re much more concerned for their future than your own. But you can’t be sure of anyone or anything, and you

# Bathsheba

## *1 Kings 1:1–53*

can play every note pitch perfect, yet that matters not a jot if your most recent sound is out of tune.

I think so often of my grandfather, Ahithophel. He was the one we all looked too in the family, the one the king looked to as well. His advice – they all agreed – was the counsel of a man who inquires of God. But there came the time when the Lord frustrated that advice, and the crazy notion overcame him to decouple from David and hitch his cart to Absalom’s wagon, and even before Absalom’s hanging from a tree, Grandpa’s hanging from a roof-beam in his own home. If he could get it so badly wrong, could *so* misjudge the lie of the land, could so misread the people and the situation, what hope is there for me? And then his eyes were no longer in the palace to look out for me and be my protector, but I could see that other eyes watched me, wondered if I’m a threat, if I’ll turn the same way he did, if being the woman on the roof was actually some grand and sinister master plan. Some plan.

Everyone, you see, has an opinion on me. All queens are public property to some degree, put on display on feast days and holidays. But my belonging to the people is about much more than glimpses of me when I’m seen from afar. I’ve been talked about in every tavern in this city, over every market stall, at every mother’s and toddler’s group, and across every dinner table. I’m a byword, a warning and a salutary tale. I’ve never spoken in public and never will and what I’d have to say doesn’t matter anyhow, because however I think I

## Bathsheba

### *1 Kings 1:1–53*

understand myself in my own head, everyone else knows me better in theirs. Everyone has their definitive and certain opinion of what was done by the woman on the roof, of exactly who played who...

But now I need to war-game, look carefully at the board and think three or four moves ahead for the Lord, for Israel, for Solomon, for myself. Ensure the throne passes to a Jerusalem man rather than a Hebron boy, for there are no runner-up prizes in such competitions. Yet just as Absalom had designs on the crown, so it is that Adonijah – another boy too spoilt and handsome for his own good – has an eye for the main chance. I wonder where he got that from...

The court splits, and even the priests are divided, and it's Nathan who's first to forewarn me. Nathan, my husband's chastiser, who became my confessor, who listened to me and guided me, directed my soul. Nathan who sent word that we should call Solomon 'Jedidiah' - 'loved by the LORD' - but David said 'No', for he seemed to struggle then to believe wholeheartedly in Yahweh's love. Nathan who rebuilt me and whose name I *did* give my third son. If only David had let him get as close as I did. If only, if only, if only, how many of those have I uttered and prayed? The prophet tells me what to do to save my life and that of my youngest son. I'm to go first. He'll reinforce me.

I fall prostrate before David, once my lover but always my king. He is at one and the same time the ruler of Israel and wearer of its

## Bathsheba

### *1 Kings 1:1–53*

crown, and yet, just one more of this life's old men reduced to living in their own wee world. "What is it you want?" he asks, nothing in him lighting up at my presence, and for a moment my mind races back to our first encounter, 'what is it you want?' the very first words I spoke myself. Abishag hovers in the background, protective of him but saying nothing, frightened, aware that she's out of her depth, that this is about more than being a pretty hot water bottle. "My lord the king, the eyes of all Israel are on you, to learn from you who will sit on the throne of my lord the king after him. Otherwise, as soon as my lord the king is laid to rest with his ancestors, I and my son Solomon will be treated as criminals."

Nathan follows after me. David may only lie upon a bed now, but he retains a warrior's mind, a leader's instincts, a husband's affection, a king's power. And maybe he could ignore one or other of Nathan and I, but not us both. He can no longer wield a sword but he can still speak an order.

"As surely as the LORD lives, who has delivered from every trouble, I will surely carry out this very day what I swore to you by the LORD, the God of Israel: Solomon your son shall be king after me, and he will sit on my throne in my place."

Later that evening, we tell him that his order is enacted. We'll have two kings now, if only briefly, the one worshipping Yahweh for the other from his bed. My grandfather, if he still around, would be

# Bathsheba

## *1 Kings 1:1–53*

proud of me. But not as proud as I am of my boy. Not as grateful as I am to the Lord.

**What is the event in your life that has most defined you in your own eyes or in the eyes of others? Is that definition fair and is it helpful? Is it time to move beyond it?**



# 29

## Solomon

*1 Kings*

*3:1–15*



# Solomon

## *1 Kings 3:1–15*

As a king, Solomon came to power in difficult circumstances. The last few years of his father David's reign were characterised by indecision and a lack of ruthlessness, and were heavily overshadowed by the attempt to seize the crown by Solomon's brother, Absalom. David made

Solomon king in 1 Kings 1 (the subject of the reflection on Bathsheba), and 1 Kings 2 sees clinical bloodletting as Solomon moves to cement his position. Emboldened by the removal of the less trustworthy members of his court, in chapter 3 he makes a marriage alliance with Pharaoh's daughter and then asks God for the attribute for which he remains best known – wisdom.

But Solomon went on to have a chequered track record as king. He built God's temple, as well as a fine palace for himself, and the country knew rest from war and unparalleled prosperity during his reign. In addition, Solomon wrote the books of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Song of Songs. But he also amassed great wealth for himself, was guilty of commandeering forced labour for

# Solomon

## *1 Kings 3:1–15*

his purposes and onerously taxing his people, and – worst of all – a range of marriages with foreign nobility led him to tolerate pagan places of worship for his assorted wives. Nonetheless, there is much we can learn from his priorities in 1 Kings 3.

# Solomon

## *1 Kings 3:1–15*

**T**HOSE WERE ROCKY DAYS: my father, the king, gone. Indeed, they were turbulent times: my brother dead; the need to remove Adonijah. No place for sentiment: a great commander dead; the necessity of taking out Joab. Everyone and everything that could hinder dealt with in the most final manner: Shimei dead, and Abiathar removed from the priesthood. A blank scroll and a new start, and many around me usefully unnerved. A happy court is a complacent court: people must be kept on their toes. But more to this too than met the eye: my reign established by the firm hand of one greater than I.

My father had a vision for the temple of the Lord, and the Lord had a vision for my father's line, and now such times had come to pass, for the crown had passed to me. Absalom longed for it - there was never shalom in him, despite his name - and Adonijah craved it, but both wanted it so much that they overplayed their hands. But I simply waited for it. You can't hurry the dying of a tired old man.

And the time had also come for Yahweh to dwell in a home and not a tent. It was the beginning of a season of permanence, one regal succession now accomplished, the start of a line to stretch on and on. It was the time for no more wandering – time to give Yahweh more than just high places and tented sanctuaries. Yahweh who was my Lord. The Lord that I loved.

At Gibeon, I sacrificed a thousand burnt offerings. A thousand lives

## Solomon

### *1 Kings 3:1–15*

wrestling and kicking to the last minute, a thousand lives pressed hard to stand still, a thousand throats cut, a thousand times blood spilt on the altar, a thousand times bodies lit up in flames, offering after offering, one after another. All to the Lord I loved.

That night, I lay down to sleep, not counting sheep but seeing their legs buckle as they fell, again and again, beneath their blood-soaked bodies. Now I knew that the sleep of a labourer is always sweet. And it was as I slept, that the Lord appeared and spoke to me. “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

I was king, and all around, they thought me so decisive. They’d seen what I had done. How I had eliminated all threat in my midst, how I was anchored in marriage to the daughter of the Pharaoh. How the temple was starting to rise in the City of David. There were decades at the sad end of Dad’s reign where little happened, but now there were years when decades happened, an invigorating sense of energy for the nation, building with bricks to build up its confidence.<sup>18</sup> Look that way and you see the temple rising, turn another way and you see the palace emerging, turn any which way and in the background, you see the city walls.

But they didn’t know how small I felt, only a little child. How tiny under the crown, how meagre in the throne of David. How suffocating it is that there are always advisors making power plays, always bodyguards watching over their shoulders, always

# Solomon

## *1 Kings 3:1-15*

papers to read, itineraries to follow. I love proverbs but all they push at me is prose. I get ideas best in metaphors but they drown me in facts.

The pressure of being a king, of looking like a king, of acting like a king, of pleasing them by being their king, of always being king, of always being David's son, of never being Solomon - or Mum's Jedidiah - anymore. The power that is intoxicating but the privilege that is stifling. The bar is always high and I am always small and I can't do this on my own.

I've got wise men and counsellors queuing out the door and half way round the block, but I know what I need most is less of them and instead a discerning heart that I can govern, a clarity about that which is right and wrong. I need to be able to read the court, read the people, all their words and motives and manoeuvrings, weigh what matters and what's insignificant, take the long view and there short one too, what needs done today and can wait to tomorrow.

And as this all runs through my mind, beside me lies the princess from Egypt, beautiful but homesick. She struggles to understand me and me her - and that's about more than foreign language skills, I can tell you - so that I'd actually feel less alone in an empty bed. The pyramids weren't designed by minds like her's. But where once they chased us with chariots, now they send us their royal daughters, so it can't be denied, we've come a long way.

# Solomon

## *1 Kings 3:1–15*

And in leading these people I want for nothing, yet that doesn't mean there aren't things I need, and what I need most is wisdom. Not the knowledge that comes from eating fruit from the tree that tells good from evil, but rather the Yahweh kind of discernment. Without my Lord, this will trip me up, and all of it overwhelm me. And in those dreams, I heard a voice speaking back, speaking over the steady rhythmic breathing of my sleep...

“Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for – both wealth and honour – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”

One question, one chance, and one opportunity to ask for what I most need. I didn't ask for money, and I didn't ask for sex, and I didn't ask for power, and I didn't ask for victory. I didn't ask to be David the Second. I wanted to be wise Solomon the First.

And so, after the thousand sacrifices and the sleep at Gibeon, I returned to Jerusalem, to the City of David. And I started at one thousand and one and I sacrificed more, sacrificed and sacrificed

# Solomon

## *1 Kings 3:1–15*

and sacrificed to the Lord my God.

• If it were possible now, to ask God for ‘whatever you want’,  
what would you request of him?



30

# The Widow at Zarephath

*1 Kings*  
*17:7–24*



## The Widow at Zarephath *1 Kings 17:7-24*

How much faith are we called to have? Faith for the rest of our life, or just enough for the day we're in? Is it something that we're given in abundance to draw down as we need it, or do we ask for it day and daily, each day having enough faith of its own, just as it has enough worries of its own? If we think of faith as similar to the daily provision of manna or quail, or equivalent to 'Give us this day our daily bread', then it may be short-termism is more acceptable than we realise, in how we relate to God.

But just as God calls us to be faithful, so he is faithful to us.

And yet, in the case of the widow at Zarephath, a remarkable prior experience of God didn't seem to give her confidence in him when another catastrophe rocked her life. Either that, or she couldn't escape a stuck picture of God – a God she seems to see as Elijah's God rather than one she can directly relate to – that assumed that trials must be punishment for sin. One experience of God's goodness apparently wasn't enough to fundamentally shift her thinking, but in his generosity, he grants to her an even greater miracle.

## The Widow at Zarephath *1 Kings 17:7-24*

**I COULDN'T SAY HOW HARD** I ever searched for God called Yahweh – after all, he was Israel's as Baal was ours – but I know that he has searched for me, for goodness and mercy have pursued me, even if much pain has gone ahead of them. The same Israelite holy man that would confront Ahab and Baal on Mount Carmel – with our very own Lady Jezebel in the background, pulling all the strings, as always – brought bread and healing to my home. Great or humble, we are equal in the sight of the Lord.

I went out to gather sticks and ended up with bread. “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” he said. I could barely keep body and soul together, but he had his problems as I had mine, spent as he looked from walking in the sun. ‘Who knows who you’re dealing with when you meet a stranger?’ I thought. ‘If it’s true that two angels can walk into Sodom and Gomorrah, who’s to say they can’t turn up here, even in the middle of Baal’s heartland?’

I mightn’t have much, but what’s to be lost by showing some human kindness? I leave the scraps of sticks – my morning’s work – in a neat pile and give him a look that asks him to watch that nobody will lift it. Hours of effort, but they look so pathetic when set down on the ground. And I’ve only turned my back when he calls out a second time. “And bring me please, a piece of bread.”

At which point this right man in the right place at the right time becomes the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time.

## The Widow at Zarephath

### *1 Kings 17:7-24*

Isn't it always the way that such simple words can push a person over the edge? You only need to move a stone to break a dam, and the pressure all comes rushing out.

"I don't have any bread", I yell, with arms flung wide in exasperation, held out as if to say 'look around you – where would I get bread for you?' I'm the sort eats from the local temple food kitchen, never mind donates to its supplies. Talk about so heavenly minded you're no earthly use. "I've only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it – and die."

Well, maybe not die right now, because I'm maybe not physically at that point, but I say that and do kind of mean it, because, well, the heart wouldn't complain if random passing happened tonight and gave me a ticket out of this.

And then I think that 'I'm sure you're glad you asked!' And yet, the moment I let it out, I wish I hadn't, because what had I done but add embarrassment to hunger. My dignity is measured in crumbs, not loaves, and now even it's gone too. Just another hysterical woman, unbearable to be around because she's so on the edge.

But the holy man stands still. He doesn't reproach me. And nor does he walk away.

"Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make

## The Widow at Zarephath *1 Kings 17:7-24*

a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land.’”

It sounds absurd, but I could tell he was serious, and what had I to lose? Whether we died in the evening rather than the following morning would make no difference at this stage.

And it happened as he said. And went on happening. The jug *didn't* run out and the jar *didn't* run dry. And maybe, in hindsight, what was a miracle at first became mundane over time. The first few days I went to the kitchen I was amazed, could barely bake for wonder, but then I reached a point where the ingredients would always be there because... well... because they're always there. I guess I came to take God for granted, that everyone needs a well to run dry sometimes to get them to their knees.

And then when my boy became ill, I had to resent Elijah's God, because what else would there be but to resent myself, resent this life, rail against every blessed and damned person or thing under the sun? Why rescue us once, only to punish us later? Why play with us that way? Is his Lord just as fickle and vindictive as all gods are in the end? Am I being punished for the same sin that took the boy's father or have I fallen in some other way? You can be walking

## The Widow at Zarephath *1 Kings 17:7-24*

along so content, and some divine force will stick out its leg and trip you up, and while you're trying to pick yourself up and dust yourself down, it's having a big cosmic chuckle somewhere above the clouds.

The terror in his eyes as life drains out of him – my child, my only future hope – burns through to the core of my being. The rises and falls of his chest become increasingly shallow as he lies in my hands, his moans and his groans grow fainter, and then his breathing stops, his limbs go limp, his head flops back. And so, we're back to where we started, me desperate and berating, the holy man steady and trusting. "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"

I take the jar of oil and I fling it at him as hard as I can, but he ducks and it hits the wall. But that doesn't make me check my rage one jot, and next the flour comes at him too, making a snowstorm as it flies across the room, but he dodges that as well. And my child lies dead amidst what looks like a bun fight at a bakery. And yet... a mother's instinct should be to hold tight and protect but I hand him over when Elijah tells me to, and together they disappear to the room upstairs.

And I hear his plaintive questioning above my head that tells me, actually, that when it comes to matters as desperate as these, the righteous may know little more than the ungodly. He's not asking,

## The Widow at Zarephath *1 Kings 17:7-24*

he's begging, and he's not invoking healing but asking that life that has left the body would return. It feels personal, as if he was the boy's own father. When he tells me "Look, your son is alive," his delight appears equal to mine. This lesson seems as much for him as me.

"Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth." But why did I not learn that the first time?

**Are there lessons God has needed to give you more than once in your life? Talk to him about that.**

31

**Elijah**  
*1 Kings*  
*19:1–18*





# Elijah

## *1 Kings 19:1–18*

The book of James tells us that ‘Elijah was a human being, even as we are.’ Whilst he was an incredible servant of God and arguably Israel’s foremost prophet – it was Moses and Elijah that Jesus met during his Transfiguration – he was also vulnerable to emotions and events overwhelming him, as is seen in these events at Horeb. Many things strike me about this experience, but let me call out just two. The first is Elijah’s response to the question ‘What are you doing here?’ and how loaded it is with anxiety, fear and victimhood, as well as subjectivity (for example, he wasn’t the only prophet left, even if he felt that way: an appeal to God doesn’t have to be factually correct to be heard). It’s also noticeable that when God asks the question a second time, the response is identical to his first answer. Even after meeting God, he seems, in the words of that great U2 song ‘stuck in a moment, that he can’t get out of.’

The second noticeable thing is how God responds to Elijah. He doesn’t act as a divine life-coach and give him a pep talk. He doesn’t address any of the facts of the situation, correct Elijah’s assertions, or sit down with him to see how they can, together, devise a strategy for

# Elijah

## *1 Kings 19:1–18*

when Elijah feels this way again. Instead, he gives Elijah an experience of himself. Instead of a fix, he offers presence; in place of rescuing, he holds out intimacy. I'm convinced that remains a critical way that God still wants to engage with us in our hard times.

# Elijah

## *1 Kings 19:1–18*

**W**HAT IS FAITH? I think I can answer that question. But *how much* faith is enough? Well, that's a different matter altogether. Everyone sees the man of God, so trusting and focused at Carmel, but here, now, is that same man of God, running for his life, fearful and feeble, nothing strong about me. God's word, I'm told, is a light unto my path, but I'm more concerned with looking over my shoulder.

People think, because of what I do, that I'm this fiercely intense personality, and I guess I am intense, but sometimes Lord, how I so want to be someone who is carefree. Someone able to be light. Not always on call, not always available, not always Yahweh's answer to Israel's crises. I want to be both slow and calm. I want there to be quiet, but that day never seems to come, and then sometimes I think that if I ever got to the quiet, with all the adrenalin gone, I'd probably just feel tired and empty, wouldn't know what to do with that either.

So, trust is a peculiar commodity to the faithful. You'd think the more spectacular things you've seen Yahweh do, the easier it should be to go again, to believe that he'll come through the next time also. And I don't think it's that I doubt the Lord, it's maybe more that I doubt myself. I know he can play his part, but can I play mine?

Walking up the stairs with the limp boy in my arms, facing down Baal's prophets on Carmel. There's something exhilarating in those

# Elijah

## *1 Kings 19:1–18*

times, the off-the-cuff enjoyment of put downs like asking if Baal's on the toilet, but beneath the swagger and showmanship, they're exhausting too. You come out the other end of those moments and you're lost in praise and wonder, but you're drained and sideswiped as well, heart pumping, legs hollow, back, neck and armpits soaked. A well has to have water going into it if there's constantly to be water pumped out of it also. Public Elijah; private Elijah; we are sometimes different men.

And so, I run. Run from Ahab, run from Jezebel, but run too from more of it all. *Another* set-piece encounter, *another* great summoning of effort within. Everyone looks to Elijah, but who's Elijah meant to look to, so I run to where nobody can get me, servant and all, leave them all behind. "I have had enough, Lord". I am spent, with nothing else to say.

And yes, I'm afraid as well. Jezebel is a monster, a beast hunting for vengeance and prey. 'What can mortal man do to you?', I hear you say, to which the answer is that that's all well and good in the safety and seclusion of midweek Torah study, but – actually – I've a pretty good idea of what mortal woman can do to me, and it's not a place I want to go to.

I thought I could stay the course, was better than those that have gone before, but we all fail, we all run to the end of our road in the end. One line runs through my head, as I walk those days and sleep

# Elijah

## *1 Kings 19:1–18*

those nights, from the song the priests' wives taught us when our parents were making their sacrifices. Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning. Just enough oil, Lord, that I won't be snuffed out.

And at my lowest ebb, Yahweh gives me shelter. And rest. And bread. And water. And then more rest. And a touch from an angelic messenger. "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." He's right, of course. And it's not just this journey, but the prophet's path as well. *Everything*, now, is too much for me. Even in a wide-open space, I can see no way out.

Forty days and forty nights of walking make a difference, out in the open, clearing my head, putting distance between me and my problems. You moderns, reading this now, don't have a monopoly on that language. Me and my generation, we understand those things too. And at the end, a cave awaits, ready-made to retreat into. And then the Lord speaks. "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. Very zealous indeed. More zealous, maybe, than was reasonable for you to expect. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I'm one man, like Noah, not in an ark however, but holding back the flood, on my own: this sea of disbelief and dishonour. I'm the only one left, and even I'm barely good for the fight. And now they're trying to kill me too.

# Elijah

## *1 Kings 19:1–18*

He replies to me. “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by.”

Wind rips through the mountains, shatters the very ground I stand on. Then it shakes with a fury that gives me no choice but to dance from foot to foot to stay upright, holding on to a cliff edge as unsteady as the ground beneath me. Then the sky lights up in fire, pillars of flames holding hands across the sky, and I put my own hands across my face to shield myself from too much heat, too much light.

It sounds to you like a pre-Pentecost Pentecost, all for the sake of just one man, but one can be impressed and yet unmoved, struck hard and yet strangely untouched. I know you’re all-powerful, Lord. I’ve *always* known that. But what about me?

And when it all subsides, there’s just the faintest, gentlest whisper. And for the first time, in oh so long, I start to feel Yahweh is close by me again, close enough even to be *in* me. What he says is just between me and him. Some things are too sacred to be disclosed. You don’t have to share everything, talk endlessly about yourself, put it all out on public display, like mindless birds tweeting in the trees.

He speaks again. ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’ Well actually, I’m the same but different, still stuck yet ready to move on. And it’s then that he gives me the game plan, tells me that there are three to anoint and seven thousand standing with me.

# Elijah

## *1 Kings 19:1–18*

But before instructions we need intimacy. Before plans we need presence.

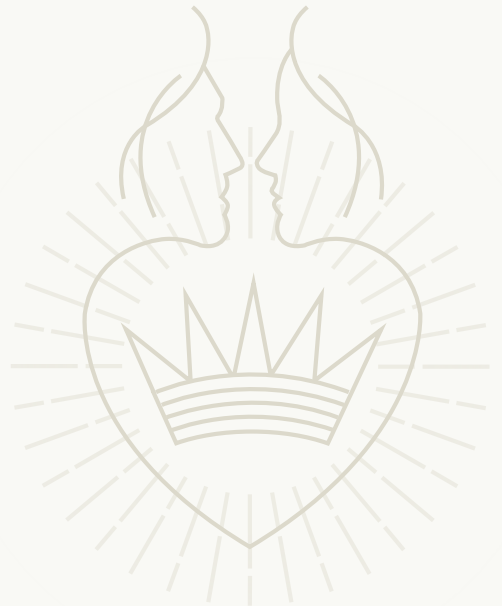
**Have you had enough? Is the journey too much for you?  
Take yourself to a quiet place, seek to be still, and hear God  
asking you ‘What are you doing here?’**

32

# Elisha

*2 Kings*

*2:1–18*





# Elisha

## *2 Kings 2:1–18*

Among the key practices of many large organisations – both commercial and ministry focused – is ‘succession planning’. The successor will be identified on the basis of rising star status, will perhaps have a track record of accomplishment on a smaller stage, will maybe have completed their MBA or Masters in theology, and having been chosen, will shadow the leader for a period of time before stepping up.

Elisha had been chosen in 1 Kings 19, immediately after Elijah’s encounter with God in a gentle whisper amidst earthquake, wind and fire. In 2 Kings 2, he appears distressed at the thought of parting – every time Elijah moves to leave him, Elisha determines that he’ll not part from Elijah. It’s a matter of speculation as to what the exact blend of his emotions were: how much of his behaviour was due to fear of stepping up and how much was about strong affection for Elijah and dread of parting? His final preparation is not a course of study but a road trip with his Master: not a journey into coaching or self-examination, but a tour of the many places where God has displayed his power and faithfulness in the past.<sup>19</sup>

## Elisha

### *2 Kings 2:1–18*

**T**HE FINAL DAY WE SPENT together was both Elijah's last lap and my concluding warm-up, waiting for the baton to be handed over and a new leg of the race to start, wayward people forever trying to outrun Yahweh, but the Lord always a step ahead of them. What, I wondered, would this man of God's finishing well look like? How, I wondered also – as I watched and listened – could I ever be ready to step into his shoes?

To which, you might say, 'but God didn't call you to be Elijah, God called you to be Elisha. It's the Lord that doesn't change, not his servants and the things they're called to do.' But come on people, look at what Yahweh accomplished through my master. How could anyone feel truly fit to follow that? Are you really trying to tell me that you'd have no doubts yourself?

Sometimes I'd wonder if the day Elijah chose me was as random as a divine finger running down the names of Israel in alphabetical order, the Lord moving half an inch from Elijah and seeing Elisha is next, and sure he's such a hard act to follow that this is as good a way to decide it as any. Which is folly, I know. So, I then return to my senses and recall that the one who is sovereign simply doesn't do chance.

The Lord has all this: he had Elijah and now he has me. The plough has been burned, the oxen are dead, and I've said my goodbyes to home and family. The fire of sacrifice is an awesome thing but

## Elisha

### *2 Kings 2:1–18*

when the offerings are slaughtered and burnt, then the worship *is* complete. The Lord then calls us to step out rather than stay and revere the ashes, and it's the same on this day with Elijah. I can't see the expanse of horizon ahead if I only fixate on the last footprints of the final walk.

The master knew inside him that this was the day, but that leaving Gilgal wasn't to be his very last steps. Gilgal, where we were set apart as 12 tribes but one holy people in the new Promised Land. The place where we stopped eating manna and started eating milk and honey. And as I think again of fire and ashes, I hear him say "Stay here, the LORD has sent me to Bethel."

But who can pass up the opportunity to both be with the master *and* be in Bethel? "As surely as the LORD lives and you live, I will not leave you."

When we get there, the prophets are a little too eager to tell me that I'll lose my master today. But I've come to hear from Yahweh, not them. I've come to think of Jacob, his father's blessing ringing in his ears and yet running for fear of his life, with one stone there that was first a pillow for his head and then a memorial to the Lord. The gateway to heaven itself, where angels ascend and descend on a ladder. I think of the Lord who watches over us wherever we go, who doesn't abandon us to face our challenges alone, who *always* keeps his promises. And I think again of fire and ashes.

## Elisha

### *2 Kings 2:1–18*

The master says again that I should stay, for the Lord has sent him to Jericho. But when I say that I won't, he doesn't push back. There are prophets there too. The Lord has his people scattered far and wide, all the faithful and fearless. I'll never walk alone, even if – like Elijah – there might be times when I feel like I do. And as I stand in that place, I'm reminded that more can be accomplished by seven priests with one ark and seven trumpets marching seven times than by armies and kings. Just as with David, when the Lord's answer to a nine-foot Philistine wasn't a ten-foot Israelite, so it was at Jericho. The Lord will do many things but they often won't be obvious or logical or expected; they won't be the things that *we* would do. And when the city was burnt to purify and purge all that was unholy in their midst, *they* didn't linger to worship the ashes, even if later generations went against the Lord, and thought they knew better and rebuilt the place.

We do our ritual again, the master saying he's going and I'm to stay, and me saying I won't. This time it's the Jordan, and when we arrive 50 prophets are waiting for us at the flowing boundary that had to be bridged to reach the promised land. The place where the Lord was with Joshua as with Moses, and where I finally start to accept, deep within, that he'll be with Elisha as with Elijah.

The master takes off his cloak, rolls it tightly and like a fabric imitation of Moses' staff he dips it in the waters, which part in two for us to cross over. After we cross, he turns and looks straight at

## Elisha

### *2 Kings 2:1–18*

me, speaking both slowly and solemnly. “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you.”

I don’t overthink. It comes to me straightaway. If I’m not courageous now, when will I ever be? “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.” It’s not about fame and greatness. It’s not that I aspire to prophetic legend and showboating. It’s simply that if I’m half the man he is and the Lord gives me twice as much power, well maybe he can use me as much as he did the master. He uses the word difficult but doesn’t say impossible, and Yahweh has delivered many a difficult thing for his people before, and of course the impossible too.

We walk on, talking, sharing, a blessed sense of peace between us, relaxed in a way we’d never been before. I don’t remember the exact things he says, just a growing sense that we’re equals in the moment, one prophet ready to step down, one at peace about stepping up, not old and new, not master and heir, but simply Elijah and Elisha, prophets walking together, in step with the breath of God, moving in the grain of God.

And then – suddenly – a chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire fills up the sky, and in the blinking of an eye the master is there no more, wind sweeping him up, pulling him to the dwelling place of the Lord. “My father, my father!” I cry out, “The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” I fix my gaze and then see him no more, and in distress I tear my robe. I was only really getting to know him and now he’s gone.

# Elisha

## *2 Kings 2:1–18*

Nothing can ever prepare us for these moments of parting, yet in my sorrow I know also that my steady eyes have seen enough to claim the blessing.

As the fire of the Lord fades into the sky, its holy embers fall to earth. I am lost in wonder, but I will not worship the ashes. Instead, I return with his cloak to the Jordan, and ask “where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?” When I strike the waters, they part in two. I cross over and know it’s time now to gather his cloak upon my shoulders.

**If God was to take you on a road trip to remind you of his goodness and faithfulness, where are the places that you’d go?**

33

# Naaman

*2 Kings*

*5:1–23*



# Naaman

## *2 Kings 5:1–23*

Like so many Biblical characters, we get only a brief snapshot of Naaman's life. He's a major character in just one chapter and disappears as quickly as he appears. The last we see of him, he is returning to Aram having given gifts to Elisha's servant, Gehazi, and we've no idea how his story ended or how he was received when he went home. But he was a significant figure – as Jesus pointed out in Luke 4, 'there were many in Israel with leprosy at the time of Elisha the prophet, yet none of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian.' Despite his resistance to Elisha's mode of healing and his openness to Elisha that he knew he couldn't have the courage to completely walk away from the false religion of his culture, God worked a mighty miracle in his life, and reached him through the means of a humble servant girl.



## Naaman

### *2 Kings 5:1–23*

**D**ECAY CREEPS, EVENTUALLY, upon every strong man. The circle of life dictates we must all grow weak but this came to me before my time, when I was at the peak of my powers, with the unspecified but unfinished business of still more lands to conquer, more wealth to acquire, more accomplishment to achieve, and more renown to earn.

Washing one day I noticed a few innocuous spots, but the fierce Syrian sun weathers our skin over the years, so I thought nothing of it. But when the tingling and lack of sensation became more on than off, it was harder to ignore, pressing the skin on one side when I was on my own, then carefully applying the same precise pressure to exactly the same spot on the other side, wanting reassurance, but getting none. An amateur and unscientific method of comparing and contrasting, but with unignorable conclusions: when the doctor provided his diagnosis, it was only a formality.

After that, there was first the phase of rationalising: then the phase of denial; and then the taking root of anger and dread. I thought of the risks in battle that I'd taken over the years, the spears and swords I'd avoided to then be taken down by what? Some common ill, the sort that afflicts roadside beggars? There's neither triumph nor glory in progressive disease.

My wife had always had a soft spot for that Israelite servant girl, a perfect spot by the Aziz raiders and one of the best bits of business

# Naaman

## *2 Kings 5:1–23*

I ever did – the one who clung to God as her crutch in a foreign land, still believed as a young woman what she'd learnt as a child. When you need to be hopeful, listen to the most naive person you know.

I could see fear for our future written in my soul mate's eyes, but could also sense already her aversion to hug or hold me, or even look straight at the spots. Only long-sleeved tops were laid out for me now, our table settings further apart. But there was a desperation that meant we'd try anything, go anywhere, and pay whatever it takes, for people like us aren't meant to have these endings. Everything in our house was meant to look so beautiful. It wasn't made this way to be inhabited by broken bodies where the ends fall off fingers and toes. What was there to lose?

My mind seesawed as I travelled to the king of Israel. Rising upwards, I imagined restoration and the blessing of growing old and enjoying the fruits of my life's toil, then swung down to the possibility of gradual but inexorable decay. Faith and fear, then fear and faith. Sometimes imagining another campaign at the head of my men, then thinking about the details of how I'll set my affairs in order, to give my beloved less to worry about. Never able to settle on any one thing.

Every time I looked down at my hands and arms the pale patches made me doubt, a trip that once would have taken nothing out of me now leaving me drained at the end of each day. The night I reached

# Naaman

## *2 Kings 5:1–23*

towards the campfire for freshly cooked game and realised I felt no heat at all.

Arriving in Israel, we were bounced from the palace to the holy man, the king's hysterics doing nothing to fill me with confidence. Elisha hadn't even the manners to come out to see me himself, sending his message second-hand by means of some minion. And rather than some great oracle of wisdom, an instruction to what? Wash seven times in the Jordan? Some skanky foreign river that is nothing to the goodness and healing of the Abana and Pharpar.

And for the first time in all this, rage exploded and I lost my cool, a volcano of anger and sadness for what was to come. I don't lose it often - 'explanation, not emotion' is the good soldier's mantra - but when I lose it, I lose it. Was there no such thing as respect in this two-bit country? Is there not enough compassion to show your face to a sick man? I slammed my fists on the side of my chariot. There was neither pain nor sting.

But isn't it the seemingly invisible that are all too often oh so wise? My servants spoke the greatest sense. "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" That's the way of faith – isn't it – the easiest things we're asked to do can sometimes seem the hardest. The Lord asks for the simple when we crave the spectacular.

## Naaman

### *2 Kings 5:1–23*

And so down to the Jordan I went, wading in, my servants always with me. Seven times I dipped my body, a little more life restored each time, more and more sensation returning, panting and spluttering for salvation, literal living water doing its work and the wonder slowly creeping across my servants' faces. Down and up; in and out; buried and raised.

I've never felt so strong and yet so small, so powerful and yet so powerless, that this world's greatest God would look upon me with such kindness. And all through the 'if only' speaking up of a servant girl. If I'm honest, I'd always done a good line in false humility, but deep inside me I *loved* to get attention. But now I'll do the proper sort of humble, the holy type.

Healed and whole, I want to grab as much earth from this sacred place as I can, take it home with me to recreate holy ground. I sink inside at the thought of going back to the hollowness of Rimmon, the foolishness of all my years worshipping thunder and war that I thought had brought me so far. So much time galloping on horseback with sword and shield in hand, when what I needed was to lie sick in the back of a slow-moving chariot.

I'll never forget the reassuring lack of reproach from the prophet as he says it'll be ok to take the king's arm at the temple of Rimmon, the acceptance that says he knows how messy this world is, that even great men have to make grubby, sorry compromises and blend

# Naaman

## *2 Kings 5:1–23*

in if we're going to survive. His confidence too that grand and holy words won't be necessary when my every appearance will be bold proclamation of what the Lord can do. Anyone who has eyes to see will know what's worthy of worship in that temple.

I'm clean but also understood. Not preached at and condemned, but forgiven in advance for impure acts that... frankly... I've no realistic choice not to commit.

“Go in peace.” Strange words to say to a warrior.

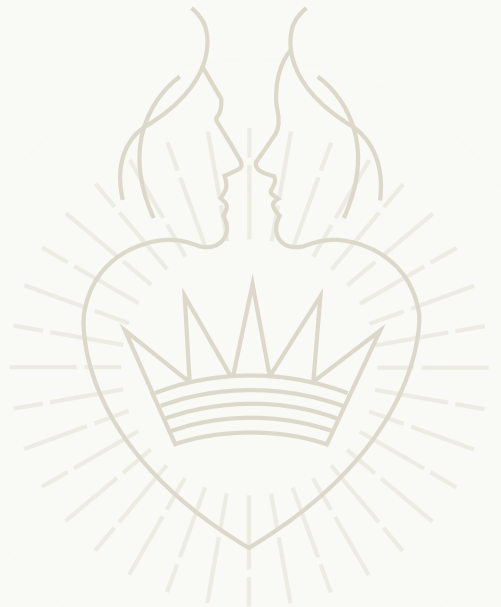
Heading home I'm stopped in my tracks by the sight of the holy man's servant running towards us. Even sages, it turns out, have their moments of forgetfulness, and how could I reproach his second thoughts? What was some silver and clothing for two apprentice prophets after all he'd done for me?

**Is there any way in which you're looking for some grand act from God when he might be asking you to do something simpler?**

# 34

## Josiah

*2 Kings*  
*22:1–20*



# Josiah

## *2 Kings 22:1–20*

In recent years there have been a number of re-evaluations of history that have led leaders to apologise for the oppression that previous generations enacted, monuments in public places removed, and reparations sought or paid because of slavery or exploitation decades or even centuries beforehand. At first glance this seems to run counter to modern and individualistic Christian thinking – ‘I am responsible for my sin so pray to God for my forgiveness’.

But Scripture teaches us that we are also responsible for the deliberate and unintentional sins of community and culture, this being among the lessons from the reign of Josiah, the famous child king under whose leadership the law was rediscovered. Even though Josiah was a good king and hadn’t personally participated in the sins of history, it was unavoidable that its consequences would play out, maybe not in his days but certainly in days to come.

# Josiah

## *2 Kings 22:1-20*

**A** DVISORS AND TUTORS love a child-king; saw me as a perfect canvas on which to paint their portraits of an ideal monarch. I know why they did that and that they had the best of intentions. When you hear the stories of my dad and granddad, Amon and Manasseh, and their epitaphs of ‘evil in the eyes of the LORD’, it’s little wonder they were desperate to break the cycle. Dad was 20 when he ascended to the throne and he got only two years, Granddad just a boy of 12. There are no guarantees that you get much time to prepare a child.

I remember my toy soldiers in the palace nursery, the Israelites lined up on a hill, the Philistines in a valley, each figure meticulously positioned. And then just as I’m about to crash my David figurine into Goliath, putting on my big manly voice – “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin...” – an arm comes over my shoulder and repositions someone, corrects a detail, asks me what I’d have done, what I’d do differently. There’s never time to be a child when you must be ready to be king. It was always David that I held tightest in my right hand and kept under my pillow at night.

The danger is that just like little brothers or sisters are forever stuck in our minds as just that – small, younger, less mature, always needing advice, whether or not they ask for it – so it is with a young king. But whether pauper or prince, every boy becomes a man and starts to form his own views on the world. This boy was no different.



# Josiah

## *2 Kings 22:1-20*

Eighteen years later and we were delighting in the blessing of stability. But when you're a king you expect your life to be changed by words like 'the enemy is a day from the city', or 'the crops have failed this year', not an utterance as seemingly benign as 'Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.'

As Shaphan unrolled the scrolls and read, it struck me how the words that are easiest to understand can be the ones that are hardest to hear. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. A shining face inclined towards us that longs to give us peace. Sins and sacrifice, blessings and curses, love and law, covenant and rescue. Everything we were meant to remember and the people that we are: the God that we worship; the story we find ourselves in.<sup>20</sup>

And the way too that Hilkiah's words were reported to me. "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD." As if it were stumbled over looking for something else. The fact that somebody sometime felt the need to hide it, or simply forgot about it. That we'd wandered so far from being the people that we're called to be that we didn't even know this was missing, like a baker making bread who's unaware that he needs flour.

# Josiah

## *2 Kings 22:1–20*

I know so much and rule so many, but that this was kept from me makes me rip my robes, tear with force the closest thing that falls to hand, because something has to give, and this fine fabric is just empty vanity compared to words of purity that give real purpose. What we are called to be has been left to gather dust. The centre is bound to rot when the best is pushed to the margins. All the things they taught me, what it is they thought essential... but they never showed me this.

I send instructions. Go and find out what this means, because whatever happens now, we can't carry on as before. One good prophet – Huldah – is found, and the word she sends back isn't good news.

“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all the idols their hands have made, my anger will burn against this place and will not be quenched.”

You don't have to try to be evil: you just have to be complacent and neglectful. Take your eye off a cart for a moment and before you know it, it's trundling breakneck down the hill. Weeds always sprout amongst wheat, like yeast spreads through dough and cracks appear in temple walls. The altars may or may not be pure, the high places may or may not be holy, the priests may or may not be pious, and

# Josiah

## *2 Kings 22:1–20*

the incense may or may not be fragrant. The serpent creeps around the edges at its cunning pace, covering more ground than we realise. And yet the way to avoid decay and disgrace is not to scan your eyes around the nation looking for it, but to fix your eyes on Yahweh alone, to never let them wander either to the left or the right.

But the Lord's messenger speaks a kinder word to me, a spiritual rose of beauty amongst the thorns. Mercy in the mess. You don't have to utter a word to be heard in Yahweh's dwelling place: it's a responsive heart and humble posture that he hears; torn robes and weeping that he sees. She says my eyes will be spared this disaster and I'll be gathered to my ancestors, and for a moment I wonder what I'd say to them.

Do you know what you did? Have you any idea? Would you have done anything differently, even if you'd known?

But that's enough for now. Holiness calls. There is so much to tear down, so much to smash to rubble, so much to burn, so many to slaughter. I have to go.

**Is there something in the past that needs to be addressed, even if you weren't responsible for it? Is there something in the history of your family, local church or nation that this generation needs to take to God in prayer, in order for a better future to be possible?**

# 35

**Ezra**

*Ezra*

*9:1-10-10:17*



# Ezra

## *Ezra 9:1–10:17*

I can't explain why but there are few pieces of Scripture that make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, in the way that happens when I read Ezra 9 and 10. Some themes recur from the previous devotional (2 Kings 22 and Josiah's voice), such as Ezra's intensity of response, which is despite the fact that the sins being committed aren't his personal sins, and nor was he part of the community when they did what they did.

Ezra's work went hand in hand with that of Nehemiah. The two books were originally known as 1 and 2 Ezra, and as Jerusalem was rebuilt after exile, Ezra was the teacher and Nehemiah the builder. I've heard a handful of sermon series in my life on Nehemiah, but I'm not sure I've ever heard a single sermon on Ezra, maybe because the practical lessons that can be drawn from Nehemiah seem so applicable and straightforward, but perhaps also because Ezra's passion and seriousness about sin may be almost too much to bear.

## Ezra

### *Ezra 9:1–10:17*

**Y**OU CAN'T BUILD ANY SORT of future if you're not prepared to wrestle with the past. The foundations *must* be good foundations: dug deep; built strong; made with the finest sand and best stones. You can't take your rubble and waste, all life's broken and smashed up bits and bobs, throw them in there as well, and sigh in relief that they're out of sight and you don't have to deal with them anymore. That's not how building back better works.

It's just as the plans are coming together that confession throws us off course. Or maybe sets us on the course we should have been on, depending on your point of view. If the leaders hadn't have said what had happened, I'd never have known, but conscience compels them to confess to Yahweh and level with me. But better out than in; better true than false; better honesty and openness than sneaking past the Lord, passing ourselves off as something that we're not. The Temple is a vast space but not so large you could ignore any spiritual elephant in the room.

For the holy race is mingled with the peoples all around them, blended so you can't tell where the righteous end and the unrighteous start. And if that's not bad enough, it happened top down rather than bottom up. Ordinary infection can get into the body any place, but spiritual disease starts in the heart and spreads from there. Give a false god an inch and it'll take a mile. What's compromise on earth – savvy shrewdness that says 'you've got to

# Ezra

## *Ezra 9:1–10:17*

be realistic’ or ‘this is simply how the world works’ – is a rollover in Yahweh’s dwelling place. I’m sure they thought they had no choice. Where were the good Hebrew girls from successful families that their sons were meant to marry? But you often have more options than you think. There’s *always* some kind of choice.

I don’t form a committee when I’m told all about it. I don’t issue an edict. I don’t entertain excuses that would rationalise the mess away. I don’t whip out some handy Plan B scroll that I’d prepared earlier.

Instead, I tear my robe, my right hand pushing down and my left pulling up in holy sorrow. I pull at my head over and over in disbelief at such undevotion, so that clumps of my hair come out of my hand. And then I fall down, too dismayed to expend more effort, and stay there until the evening sacrifice, with Israel gathered round. Regathering requires men of inaction, who fall on their knees rather than stride with purpose. At last, I look like a leader. Only now is it time to bring to my lips the prayer formed in a Day of Silence, now prostrate, just as I must be, for how can any of us stand?

“I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our sin has been great.

But now, for a brief moment, the LORD our God has been gracious

# Ezra

## *Ezra 9:1–10:17*

in leaving us a remnant and giving us a firm place in his sanctuary, and so God gives light to our eyes and a little relief in our bondage.”

Because of grace you see, there is rarely absolute finality with the Lord. All long years of running far have brief moments when you can return home; all shattered communities have fragments that are found; all darkness that oppresses has cracks that let light in; all wildernesses have pools of water somewhere; all slaves to sin have respites of deliverance. No matter how much you have to fall on your knees, just as walls rise from ruins, so Yahweh’s hand will always reach out and lift you up again.

After hours with my eyes closed and soaked in tears, staring at the ground in looking to the Lord, aware of ever greater numbers gathering in bitter seeking, Shekariah is at my shoulder. He speaks for the people. They will own their unfaithfulness but own too the hope of the Lord. The women and children from these acrid marriage cocktails will be sent away. We’ll break families and rebuild community.

An oath taken, I withdraw to the room of Jehohanan, but I’m too spent to have an appetite. It is good that the Lord forgets our sins, sets them behind us, but what if we forget them too? As much as we remember his faithfulness, we must remember our unfaithfulness: the things that we did once; the things that we could do again.

We give them three days to set their houses in order. It rains hard on



# Ezra

## *Ezra 9:1–10:17*

the day of separation, and I've never seen so many people soaked yet barely noticing their dampness. Wives leaving husbands, children leaving fathers, goodbyes and last looking in the eyes as far as one can see, marriages of convenience at their outset, but the sense of desolation showing the affection that had grown in many homes. It's not easy to watch, and you can see some glancing at me, hoping for eleventh hour relenting. But it cannot be so. Tears before the Lord aren't real tears if they don't result in tears among ourselves, sadness face to face. And for the record, I'm not unfeeling, but no, I'm not sorry either. We must push on. We must follow through.

“Honour the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and your foreign wives.”

At which the elders step forward and call me out. This is too quick. The weather is not divine sympathetic background but is instead too harsh. We risk rough justice, conclusions jumped to rather than considered. Our trespasses are many, but it is not a sin to take more time. This needs to be done properly more than done quickly. The absence of hesitation doesn't mean the presence of holiness. We're in a better place than we were.

**How does Ezra's behaviour conform or deviate from the picture you've formed of what healthy leadership looks like?**

36

# Nehemiah

*Nehemiah*

*2:11–20*



# Nehemiah

## *Nehemiah 2:11–20*

Around 400BC – almost 130 years after the Babylonians had reduced Jerusalem to rubble – a handful of Jews started to rebuild the city. As we’ve already learnt from Ezra, it couldn’t only be a spiritual exercise, and it couldn’t just be practical either: it had to be both. Leadership came from the joint efforts of the two men. Nehemiah reminds us that there should be no separation between Sunday and Monday – between the sacred and the secular. The people needed to return to God, but they also needed to return the fabric around them to a standard that both honoured God and afforded themselves a sense of civic pride, of goodness in the place where they lived.

Another observation is that for many today, faith is an individual concern – **me** getting **my** relationship right with God. That matters, but Nehemiah saw too that community, and wider connections, matter also, and despite his seeming ordinariness, he did everything he could to bind God’s people to a common purpose.

# Nehemiah

## *Nehemiah 2:11–20*

**I**'VE NEVER BEEN GOOD at hiding my emotions. If I *feel* sad, then I *look* sad. I struggle to pretend to be anything other than what I am. It was the months and months you see that shaped my demeanour: four months of the worry and weight of carrying this burden, wanting to be here, to make a start, imagining the scale of the challenge but unable to see it and evaluate with my own eyes, to know whether my mind's visualisation was an over or understatement. This was the only vista in the gallery of my headspace.

Jerusalem's walls are broken, with nothing attached to the hinges at its entrances. The place where my fathers are buried lies open and exposed. The very gates that should be lifting up their heads, as the King of glory strides through them, are reduced to ashes, like the leftovers of some sorry sacrifice of God-forsakenness. Everything that should be upright lying on its side, no means to stop our adversaries walking in, no way to stop our young from packing up their bags and moving out.

Where children should play, wild dogs scavenge. Where their grandparents should sit at leisure, putting the world to rights, instead they queue for charitable bread and broth. Where merchants should trade and thrive, the only market on the up is the black one. Where worshippers should sing the songs of ascent, there is instead a sense of the spiritually listless and lacklustre, not of lament, for even the passion for that is gone. Pride in ourselves

# Nehemiah

## *Nehemiah 2:11–20*

is a sin, but no pride at all in the place around us, well that's a kind of curse.

Does this sound like a sob story? Does all this talk make you feel sorry for me? Well, don't: because in many ways, me, I'm doing fine. There are way worse jobs out there than cupbearer to the king. I don't want for anything. I could have lived well where I was, and die well too, and go to whatever awaits me in the age to come. But when I look up at night, and see the stars, I think of Abraham's descendants, and realise that there's no 'I' in 'Hebrew'. I'm part of something more – something bigger – part of what was before me, and will come after me. If everything around me is not as it should be, then *I* am not as *I* should be.

But I didn't do it on a whim, because that's not my way. I sat, I wept, and I mourned. When I was still, I found it spun around me so much less. But more than all of this, I prayed. No prayer, no bed. No prayer, no breakfast – those are my habits, my daily rhythms. You should have heard the gossip in the palace when I asked the king: "Nehemiah has more brass-neck than the statuettes that Xerxes worships." But chutzpah had nothing to do with it. It's Yahweh who makes things happen, his gracious hand that gives and gives and gives.

I waited three days when I finally got here, nursing that burden of God's heart for this city, resisting the impulse to turn this into a drama. What's that but a drop in the ocean to a people 400 years

# Nehemiah

## *Nehemiah 2:11–20*

in Egypt and 40 years in the wilderness? There's no point acting at haste and repenting at leisure. Our people have spent long enough regretting the past.

And then, in the stillness of the night, I could finally see this place as Yahweh does. For under the brightness of the moon and stars, his love endures forever. The Valley Gate, the Jackal Well, and the Dung Gate: all is dilapidation and decay, yet somewhere, out there, a benevolent face still turns towards the city. It's as well the God of Jacob is our fortress, for Jerusalem could never pass as one now. Back up the valley, along walls with more bricks missing than in their rightful place, to the Valley Gate. Not able to complete a circuit of the walls, but in truth, the first hundred yards alone telling me all I needed to know. The faithful shouldn't necessarily see it as defeat to go back the way they came.

And yet early the next morning, I had to spell it out to them. Can *none* of you see the trouble that we're in? It's *that, that there*, right in front of you. Is it eyes that can't see or are hearts and minds blinded? Where does apathy end and unbelief start, or can you even tell the difference? I said to them "let's all of us rebuild the wall." Not me, *us*. They had to *want* it, and *own* it, and *do* it. It's *us* who will no longer be in disgrace, so it's *us* that have to set it right, all of *us* together. Like I said, no 'I' in 'Hebrew'. No solo runs among God's people.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem don't like it, which was only to

# Nehemiah

## *Nehemiah 2:11–20*

be expected. There'll always be opposition, but Yahweh's ways are high and holy and he's surely not Lord of the lowest common denominator. And it matters more that we are all beneath Yahweh, than some high-minded assumption that some sorts of work are beneath some of us. It is a God-oriented heart that affords God-given authority.

When regathering and rebuilding is required, there are wise and sacred words to be said, but there is also heavy lifting to be done. My vision wasn't of holiness and grandeur, my vocation wasn't about searing rhetoric. I leave all that sort of stuff to people like Ezra. I couldn't be what he is, but I know that cuts the other way also.

Does all this deserve some book in my name? I'm not sure it does, and it's certainly not why I did it. But Yahweh stirred me. What did I see and what did I do? I saw something that needed to be done. And I did it. The road to flourishing doesn't necessarily need to be more complicated than that.

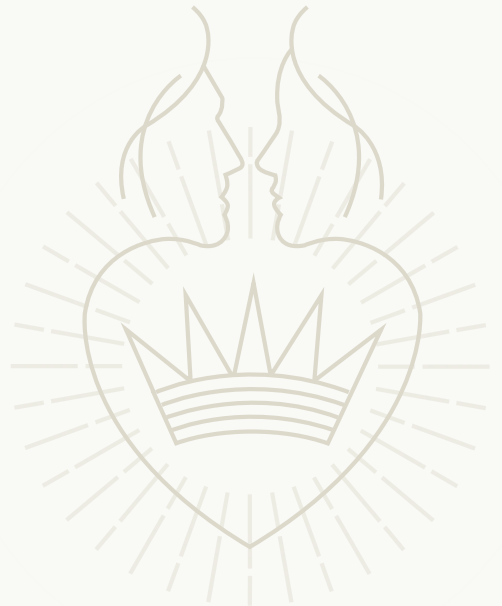
Not that I did it on my own, of course – I could never, *ever*, have done it on my own.

*You've* got to carry the burden: it's *God's* hand that will set it down.

**What practical thing can you do to make a difference to the place and community where you live?**

37

**Vashti**  
*Esther*  
*1:1–18*





## Vashti

### *Esther 1:1–18*

If the book of Esther was made into a film, we'd take it for granted that the star turn would be Esther herself: whoever plays her would be up for Best Actress, with Vashti a lesser role, maybe meriting Best Supporting Actress, if the performance is sufficiently impactful in the few scenes where she features. But in the God-breathed pages of Scripture should we see Vashti as more than a minor figure, only there to set up the narrative, before Esther takes the main stage?

Vashti was 'a person in her own right' – indeed, those few words are at the core of her protest – and whilst her actions weren't as high stakes as Esther's (the rescue of the Jewish people), there is considerable courage and integrity to learn from in her story. As we read about her, all of us must also be open to how Vashti is emblematic of history's recurring story of the subjugation of women, and ask ourselves if there is any way in which we're complicit with such systems and structures today.

## Vashti *Esther 1:1–18*

**S**IX MONTHS! He's been at it *six* months. Reports are carried back to me, and I think to myself: when will it ever be enough Xerxes? 'What pleasure are you able to have on day 180 that you haven't had by day 179? What flaunting and flashing of wealth can be any way original when you've been at it half a year?' *No* restrictions on the wine, they told me later. None at all.

Another piece of gold. Hurrah. Another gem. Wow. Another finely spun fabric. Gosh. Another feast. Excess and success are interchangeable: let's raise a glass to that. What sort of man is so witless that he wants history's telling of him not to be the wise things he wrote or said, but instead to be the record of provinces ruled, things owned, wives married, and parties thrown? Where some men have legacies, Xerxes will mainly have lists.

If he was 30 years into his reign it might be more forgivable, but at three years in, is a bit more focus on the job too unreasonable to expect? What has surprised me most about Xerxes – not that I dare say this to anyone: you learn to trust nobody in a palace – when I find myself alone with him, is how... what can I say... uninteresting he is.

He can tell me about the new gold bracelet he's given me, the mine that the gold was extracted from, who crafted it, but he doesn't have opinions about where gold comes from, or who craftsmen are. He can run his finger across my body and whisper sweet nothings,

## Vashti

### *Esther 1:1–18*

but his tongue never speaks arguments or ideas or viewpoints. It seems to me the blankness of his canvas and popularity as king are too closely linked for comfort. Anything of note he does say is rent-a-wisdom, borrowed from others.

Xerxes can barely choose from a menu without a wise man looking over his shoulder. He paddles in ignorant bliss at the shallow end of the pool, yet left to his own devices, allowed to drift into anything resembling depth of any sort, he could drown in a heartbeat.

But who am I, anyhow, to have thoughts such as these? I might have a mind that could run rings round him, but that's not what I'm here for. I'm royal eye candy on the big set piece occasions, the best trophy in the cabinet, the one that moves and breathes and flutters her eyelashes. My purpose is to give him an heir and a spare. The first of those, at least, now toddles in the nursery, a little security for my future.

It's on the last day of the week, men partying with men, women with women, that I'm summoned to cross the divide, go from being the centre of my own celebrations, to being the cherry on top of his cake. 'You think the riches were amazing and the food fantastic? You want to have seen his wife.'

But whatever Xerxes thinks, there have to be limits, and this is my cut-off point. I prize my dignity more than dresses or jewellery. I will not be the spark that lights a thousand leery thoughts, the

## Vashti

### *Esther 1:1–18*

focal point of two thousand carnal eyes. The eunuchs do their best to disguise their panic and put me over my refusal a number of times, but my decision is final. I'm not going. End of.

He doesn't, of course, speak to me about it. Instead, he consults his experts. Why have a difficult conversation *with* someone, if – instead – you can have it *about* them? The word comes back to me later – it always finds a way, because it's me people really respect, funnily enough – and the problem isn't just about me and that one night. It's the precedent I've set.

“Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.’ This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.”

I'm the domino at the top of the line. Push me, and who knows how many will fall? And we couldn't have that, could we? But what Menukam (who – allegedly – understands the times) doesn't realise is you can control behaviour, but you can't control the mind. If you don't want women to despise their husbands, well guess what:

# Vashti

## *Esther 1:1–18*

you'll also have to look at the husbands...

And so, there's a decree. They call it the Vashti law. A decree about respect. Which cannot be repealed. That says I'm never to enter my husband's presence again. That I'm to be replaced by someone 'better'. Which is kind of ironic. But which suits me just fine.

**Whether in church, community, family or work, is there some area of your life where you've become too comfortable and conformist? Is it time to take a stand, raise your head above the parapet, and say No?**

38

Esther

*Esther*

*4:1-17*



# Esther

## *Esther 4:1–17*

In the fifth century BC a community of Jews lived in a foreign land. Jerusalem was only a place-name to them: they were born, raised and lived in exile. But none of that diminished their identity as God's people. The story of Esther is one in which they find themselves under a terrifying threat: Persia was such a vast empire that virtually the entire Jewish people could have been wiped out!

Esther is an unlikely biblical heroine: she was a king's concubine, and to an outsider her greatest attribute was her ravishing looks. The story challenges our tendency to put people in boxes, as Esther's obedience and bravery shows that there is more to people than mere appearance. Around 100 years after Daniel – a young man and the cream of the crop in his generation, rose to the highest position in the Babylonian court, the polar opposite type of person – a girl who seemed just a pretty face – turned out to have a similar sort of impact.

# Esther

## *Esther 4:1–17*

**T** HIS IS MY TIME, my Joseph and the famine moment. It seems that this is what it's all been for, what God's always-weaving-hand has been working up to. I'm an outsider who has found herself on the inside, but even on the inside... I'm really on the outside, important enough to share the king's bed when he calls, yet never mattering so much that he'd share his thoughts or plans with me. Does that confuse you? It certainly confuses me.

I'm a Hebrew in Persia: far from Jerusalem and far from the Temple, but never far, I trust, from the Lord. There's no tradition for me here, no history or ties. Mum and Dad are long gone, departed before their time, before they even had a chance to teach me the Shema or impress the commandments upon me, whether sitting at home or walking along the road.

Mordecai – my cousin, except he's not really my cousin, he's more like a father to me – says I'm a real daughter of Rachel, and I know he means that in a kind way. That's what all his friends say too, because maybe that's all that most men see: faces and features, shapes and curves. It's back to outsides and insides.

Who wants to know the real me: a good Jewish girl who won a beauty contest and finds herself in the harem of a foreign king, waiting to be someone else's pleasure, whenever he may call? Not a wife to share a life with, but a woman for a whim. Not – in any case – that they know exactly what I am, because as Haman emphasised



# Esther

## *Esther 4:1–17*

over and over, that's to be a secret. You never say, you never let on, you never trust anyone, no matter how kind or plausible they seem.

This then is my place because... well, you've only to look at Vashti to see that all of us women have to be kept in our place. Because as night follows day, so kings have their concubines, and it's not that Xerxes is any worse than others for being a pagan, for from what I've been told, David and Solomon made sure their storehouses were well-stocked too.

So, I'm a girl of the world who has to believe that – beyond this world – there is the Lord who loves me: the maker of the Heavens and the Earth.

And what a world it is, particularly for my people, here in this land. We'd seemed to find a level, a baseline of acceptance where they tolerated us, and we could – just about – tolerate being here. But now the writing is on the wall for us. They don't like us, or our customs, or our God, and despite polite society's seeming acceptance, you don't have to scratch much to find searing prejudice just below the surface. We're too different, too separate. Too devoted with it, and devoted to the wrong things as well.

Haman will have us annihilated on a single day: men, women, old, and young. Which is crazy. To think that in this land of false gods and myriad idols, we're threatened not by holding fast to 'Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one', not for loving Yahweh

# Esther

## *Esther 4:1–17*

with heart, soul and strength, but rather by the capricious vanity of one man unable to deal with another not kneeling down to him.

What's that all about? It *must* be about more than Haman, the small man who got himself the big job. No one that I know can have him – all the girls think he's a joke, mock his walk, the spittle that sprays when he gets worked up, that peculiar thing he does where he taps a pen against his teeth when he's deliberating. He thinks respect can be commanded in an order. But – you've got to hand it to him – he's got to where he's got to, yet the power has made him mad. He's obsessed with himself, and now he's got all of the state's machinery of management, meetings and memorandums dancing to his wicked tune. To think that Daniel at one time did such a similar job – how far have we all fallen? Yet Daniel's life tells us that lions lose their appetites and fourth men walk in furnaces, and that must give us hope.

Even when, outside, the city is bewildered. Beyond the harem where all is cattiness and cosmetics, is the palace where all is pomp and parties – those in sackcloth barred from entry, lest they spoil its shallow veneer – but beyond that my people are in despair. But in the midst of madness, there is the sanity of Mordecai, the divine placing of one good and godly man.

And a placing too – he says – of a good and godly woman.

So, this is my time.

# Esther

## *Esther 4:1-17*

I am to beg for mercy. I am to plead for my people. Thirty days since I've been in his presence, but I'm to make my entrance, unannounced. Silence would be complicity. The king's head is on the face of a coin, and it seems it will come down to that: the turn of a coin and the whim of a mood. I may die or I may not die. But as it stands, my people are going to die.

But they are all behind me: fasting and praying, night and day. And Yahweh is all around me, pervading the very air I breathe. But as for what is in front of me...

My body is too young and beautiful to be torn by the tip of some sword. My whole life is in front of me. I want to have children, be a Mum to someone, even if I never knew my own. I want to nurture the sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, maybe have a little Moses who could grow up in this palace and lead our people from this land.

But before my dreams, reality must be faced. I must do right by my people, do right by my God. If I perish, I perish. Be it swords and sacrifice, or rescue and redemption, there will be blazes of glory. For what is the commandment impressed upon my heart, but that the Lord is God, the Lord is one.

**How do you think God wants to use you in the places where you find yourself, at such a time as this?**

# 39

## Isaiah

*Isaiah*

*6:1–8*



# Isaiah

## *Isaiah 6:1–8*

Isaiah's awe-inspiring experience of God's majesty, in the temple, occurred as Judah's king, Uzziah, was on his sickbed. Isaiah would have entered this place well aware of the seriousness – and holiness – of temple worship. Uzziah was given much success by God, but pride overcame him, and he was struck down with leprosy after entering the temple to burn incense.

The pending death of a man generally recognised as a good – and militarily prosperous – king would have brought fear, rumours, and uncertainty to the people. In the midst of this Isaiah's outlook and future are transformed as he sees the bigger picture of a holy and unchangeable God, the greatest king of all, ruling from the greatest throne.

# Isaiah

## *Isaiah 6:1–8*

**T**HE MIGHTY IS LAID LOW, for the king is a dying man. The Lord gave Uzziah everything, but as so often in life, everything was not enough. It's pride, to be precise, that has seen him taken down, and as power went to his head, so disease sprouted on his forehead, the greatest among us rotting like a fish from the top down.

Who was he to enter the temple of the Lord? Who was he to burn the incense? Did he not remember the folly of Saul making sacrifice? And oh, for all that he'd done, Uzziah was angry, a mighty fury as this world knows it. But he didn't know what anger is until he met it in its purest form, for Yahweh's wrath burns fiercer than any spice. His unfaithfulness has cut him adrift, and he and the Lord are separate now. That pride that laid him low has laid him in his deathbed too, his whole body spotted and peeling with the judgment of The Almighty, weather-beaten like a family home where the family moved out long ago.

In the midst, of this I enter the temple of our God. I have seen his wrath, and I fear him, and yet my whole being is more than ever compelled to worship him.

And then I meet him... I don't read about him, or hear about him, or think or sing about him. I *meet* him, Yahweh in all his fulness, felt and experienced.

# Isaiah

## *Isaiah 6:1–8*

The Almighty *fills* the temple. He is high and exalted, his train filling up the space in flowing folds of light and lustrous fabric. He is everywhere, concealed but known, hidden yet tangible, vast and visceral. He is *all* the light and *all* the space and *all* the sound and *all* the odour and *all* the breath of his own temple. It is so crammed and consumed with the holiness of the Lord that I wonder that I can fit in too.

Seraphs fly above him, with wings to cover faces, to cover feet, and for flying too. I always thought our God was holy, separate, other, but now, all I understand is elevated in thunder and lightning of Yahweh revelation.

He is *more than* holy.

He is holy, holy, holy. More holy than the holiest holiness.<sup>21</sup> His temple is insufficient capacity for him. The whole earth – whether it knows it or not – is full of his glory!

I *see* differently when the robes of his train billow before me. I *hear* differently when angel voices sing. I *smell* differently when my nostrils catch the smoke that rises from the fire of his purity. I *feel* differently when doorposts and foundations shake, the very temple dancing in homage to his glory.

I shrink small at the vastness before me. There is so much holiness in the presence of Yahweh that I am entranced yet bewildered.

# Isaiah

## *Isaiah 6:1–8*

I cannot find my own way out of this, it's like the maze in Uzziah's palace garden, but made of glory rather than of hedges. I am finished, a man irreparably tainted with sinfulness, but before the brilliance of the Lord. And I am just a sample: a specimen of the rottenness of all my people – of all mankind – dropped in here like a pinprick of blood fallen on a snow-capped mountain. We have failed him, every single one of us. We have been no holy nation.

And then I *taste* differently, when off the altar an angel picks a coal and flies to touch my mouth with the ember. There is black and blister on my lips but I hear something as symphonic to my soul as those songs of his holiness: my guilt has been removed. My sin has been atoned for. I have been charred with the forgiveness of the Lord. No pledge or prayer or sacrifice necessary: just him taking it *all* away.

I hear his voice. “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” I cannot leave this place unchanged. A different man must walk from the temple than the one who entered it. I cannot play with fire. “I’ll go. Send me!” He said we’re to be holy because he is holy, and that’s what I’ll try to be.

I’ll go out into the mess and mix of all around me and tell them about him, be his messenger, however ready they are or aren’t to listen. I don’t want to leave this place and moment but I will. I’ll go outside to fallen earth and fallen people that seems the ultimate separation.



# Isaiah

## *Isaiah 6:1–8*

I know it's full of his glory but out there... it doesn't always seem that way. I am in wonderment, but yet too I wonder...

I can leave here, and others can come in, but what about him? Will he ever leave the temple? Will he ever step from off his throne? Will he ever come and be among us?

**Praise God who is holy, holy, holy, yet in his Son Jesus entered this world, a world both broken and yet filled with his glory around us.**

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Hezekiah

*Isaiah*

*38:1–22*



# Hezekiah

## *Isaiah 38:1–22*

In spring 2020 I was shocked to hear of the sudden death of an outstanding Irish public theologian. He wasn't someone I knew well but I'd met him a few times and we could greet each other on first name terms. In a TED talk that he'd given, which I watched the day I heard of his passing, he quoted a line from Irish poet Mary Oliver: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" His death was one of the things that spurred me on with this book project, which had been on the long finger for years, and was something I needed to press on with.<sup>22</sup>

In Isaiah 38, King Hezekiah becomes seriously ill but is spared by God to the point where he's told he will receive 15 more years of life. This reflection seeks to capture his thoughts and emotions at the snapshot of Isaiah 38, though reading beyond this point in the story, he doesn't seem to have used his subsequent time particularly well. The gift of 15 more years was generous of God, and yet maybe it was too much for Hezekiah, and was to him a kind of cheap grace. But his story is a reminder that as the old hymn says 'my times are in your hand', and we dare not take that for granted.<sup>23</sup>

# Hezekiah

## *Isaiah 38:1–22*

**F**ORTY YEARS OF AGE was coming into view. Two score almost done, one and ten to go. Depending on the day of the week, that awareness could make me feel maudlin or mighty. There are times I think of legacy: what will be the big signature landmarks left behind; what will be the summary written in the annals of the kings, by those able to look back and see it all from end-to-end? A good king, I hope. One who did right in the eyes of the Lord.

And I reflect also on what comes next. Will we ever get our enemies entirely subdued, so the land can enjoy the settled flowing of milk and honey? The Lord showed mercy, and Sennacherib will bother us no more, but who'll be next? Because there's always a next adversary across some border or boundary. That seems a given.

Will Hephzibah give me a son, and if she does, what will he be like? I can get my head around it that good follows good, that bad follows bad, but princes are both a gift from the Lord, a blessing, and yet also these maddening and arbitrary beings, that can be bad following good, whatever their pedigree, whatever the input from priests and scholars. God reigns but life can be random. Some things are always beyond our control.

But then I think of the party there'll be and how long the celebrations will last. The wine that will flow, the fattened calves to be feasted on, the sheer enjoyment there will be with one man the hub of a

# Hezekiah

## *Isaiah 38:1–22*

wheel of pleasure. Why wait three years for the best fruit of the land when there's cattle and flocks and barns of grain and olive oil aplenty?

Gifts will be given, and toasts to my name, with speeches also. And I'll be modest and humble, because I think, as well as I know myself, I *am* that way. I'll nod and gesture in ways that say 'enough', 'too much' and 'you're all too kind'. But I'll like it very much indeed, and who – if you got them on their own – wouldn't say as much? There'll be no torn clothes that day. Open the storehouses and let the good times roll.

Still and all, it's a sweet spot in life, isn't it? Old enough to be wise; young enough to be strong. Not so strong, however, that energy can't drain from me without warning, fine at sunrise, then failing at sunset, as infection appears as if from nowhere and then spreads like fire through scrub on a windy day. Is this to be how it ends? Did I not suffer enough when Sennacherib threatened us? Had I not trusted enough, prayed enough, sought the Lord and Isaiah enough? Did I not tear down enough high places and Asherah poles?

I freeze in bed with the sheets pulled as tightly as I can grab them to my chin, doctors confiding in the corner who put on a brave face but clearly have no clue what to do. Not for me, it seems, the glory of death by sword or spear in battle, rather shivering and sweating my road to the Pit. And Isaiah is no bearer of better news.

# Hezekiah

## *Isaiah 38:1–22*

“This is what the LORD says: put your house in order, because you are going to die: you will not recover.”

I turn and bury my face in the wall. To be seen this way. To be this way. I try furiously to pray but the mind races faster than the soul can keep up with, regretting running into confessing running into pleading running into negotiating, muttering and sobbing and then some words strung together, my eyes closed as hard as they can be, then flashing open to look upwards to the heavens, and to check I’m still here, that I’m still in this world. “Remember LORD, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes.”

Days and nights pass both exhausted but unable to sleep. Sometimes there are aches, and sometimes spasms of pain, but there’s never relief. No side of my body is the right way to lie. No tucking in or positioning of my arms or legs can satisfy. My head is sore any way it’s placed on the sweaty pillow. Whether on my front or back, my heart hammers against my rib cage. And dare I rest anyhow, if it means I never rise again? I crave death for relief yet am terrified also, cling on madly to life as it’s pulled hard from me, knowing Yahweh is bound to win this macabre tug of war. Those around see the torment of the body, but none understands the agony of the soul. If the Lord can deliver a kingdom, how can he not deliver a king?

## Hezekiah

### *Isaiah 38:1–22*

And about a week in, as the morning light starts to edge through the cracks of the blinds, Isaiah returns, his steps the feet of one who brings good news.

“This is what the LORD, the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.”

What can I do but worship? What can the restored body do but leave at once for the temple of the Lord, lie down again, but this time prostrate in praise. Some say it’s a second chance, but talk of chance is blasphemy. There’s no luck in the Lord’s love, no fortune in forgiveness. It is the essence of his goodness to let this man start over. Our tears are the dew of his dwelling place, our cold fear wiped away by the fire of his presence, for his only response is grace. *He* has done this. There is *no* chance where angels fly and sing.

He’s put breath back in my body and I’ll use it to sing his praises, as only the living can. I’ll never forget this. That’s a promise to God. That’s a promise to myself.

And then... I confess... the mind starts to wander. Fifteen years. I can work with that. That’s my reign thus far, given to me again with one year added. And no need to rush either. Projects can be planned properly and still be brought to completion. Maybe I can even see a boy become a young man. And forty can be enjoyed

# Hezekiah

## *Isaiah 38:1–22*

and celebrated well, even if fifty will have dark clouds gathering overhead. Though who's to say God won't relent again? So, there are good ways and bad ways of seeing this. My goblet half empty or my goblet half full. I think I'll take the latter. Fifteen years...

**The question is obvious. How much time do you think you might have left, and how do you want to use it?**



# 41

## Jeremiah

*Jeremiah*

*32:1-44*



# Jeremiah

## *Jeremiah 32:1-44*

Known as the weeping prophet, Jeremiah's life spanned a turbulent and disastrous period for his people. His ministry began in 626BC during the life of Josiah, Judah's last good king. After Josiah's death, Jeremiah saw the spiritual and moral decline that eventually resulted in Jerusalem's fall in 587BC, and the subsequent exile in Babylon. By chapter 32, the prospects for God's people are as bleak as they can be: Jerusalem is under siege. Jeremiah's cousin comes to him to sell a field. He makes out that by giving Jeremiah first refusal he is doing him a favour, but in reality, he is desperate to get a price for the asset while he can. Jeremiah buys the field: not because he wants to be a property investor, but to show his optimism in God's future hope for his people.

# Jeremiah

## *Jeremiah 32:1-44*

**I**T'S THE NOT KNOWING that they find hardest: the not knowing when. Do they take the flour and bake the last good loaf now, or save it for another day? Do they pack that coat or will they want to wear it? Do they load that cart with what they have or will they need it for firewood, and will they still have their oxen to pull it? Do they sell the family silver now or hold on to maximise its value, given the price of everything you can actually get seems to rise by the hour, never mind the day? Because it's not a case of 'if': it is 'when.' Jerusalem's walls *are* going to tumble down. This world as we know it *is* going to crash around us.

The city is besieged. The Babylonians are coming. And me? I'm confined to the courtyard of the royal palace: Zedekiah's madman in Zedekiah's tower. All because I speak the words with which Yahweh would long to grip this fool's neck and pull his head out of the sand. 'The people mustn't hear Jeremiah', he says, as if the people don't hear lurid rumours and can't see what's as plain as daylight.

They say that outside the palace, the city is shrinking with every passing day. Amidst fear and the futile rushing about of people, the streets become narrower and the corners tighter. Dead ends are springing up. Hens kept for eggs are killed for meat, water is running out, and the family heirlooms that aren't yet sold are buried or hidden, flowers planted over the filled-in holes as reminders where to look upon return. And fear is all-pervasive. The men fear swords, the women fear rape, the traders fear pillage, and the

# Jeremiah

## *Jeremiah 32:1-44*

faithful few fear apostasy.

Stench and disease fill the air, sickening the people like their sin makes Yahweh wretch. All heads look down, and no eyes meet, with Jerusalem a cage of sitting ducks. All their lives they have ostensibly looked to ‘God who brought his people out of Egypt’, and sung the refrain that his love endures forever. That was both their proclamation of faith and their rhetoric of complacency, a grubby form of Yahweh propaganda. And now the land that flowed with milk and honey will flow again, but this time with their blood and tears.

It’s all Yahweh’s way of saying ‘fine. If you want to live your way – not my way – you can live your way. But this is what happens when you live your way.’ All he wanted was to look at their faces and know them, his own face shining upon them, but they turned their very backs on him. Soon, where the Lord looked down and saw drink offerings to Baal, and incense burning on roofs, vultures will look down and spy out flesh to swoop and pick apart.

And in the midst of all of this, along comes Hanamel. Pleasantries are exchanged, whilst reality is suspended. To buy the field is my right and duty, yet he still tries to spin it to me as a kind of favour as well. Talks about the yield it’s given him in the past, whether by crops or rent. Says it’s a sound investment, that whether you’re from Babylon or Benjamin, you’ve still got to eat, and there’ll always be

# Jeremiah

## *Jeremiah 32:1-44*

a market for meat and vegetables. And – apparently – they’re quite sophisticated farmers, they could even get more from the land than we have in the past. There’s spin too about long lost family members that neither of us can really remember. His prattling displays his anxiety, he can’t bear the silence, this tortuous exacting of profit from a prophet.

The thoughts bubble from his head: ‘I’ve got to cut and run – Jeremiah is a fool!’

The truth bubbles in my head: ‘I’m going to stay. Yahweh has spoken. You know nothing. The Lord has guaranteed a bright tomorrow.’

Hanamel can’t believe his luck. He dances in impatience as I count out the coins. To him, I’m like a lunatic looking for hairs on the palms of my hands. As I check terms and conditions, the contract flutters as he sighs in frustration. It has many more clauses than the Ten Commandments, but it’s of what consequence, really?

The social niceties are receding now. He fears that I will see sense at any moment, but there must be witnesses. If Hanamel had three hands, he’d have them all out by now. But all is proper and correct: it’s a deal.

‘It’s a deal’ is what he thinks, but it’s more than a deal. It’s a promise. It’s a covenant. It’s a foretaste of what’s to come. All over this land, one-day, houses, fields and vineyards, will again be bought and sold,

# Jeremiah

## *Jeremiah 32:1-44*

and it is not just crops that will be sown and grown, for Yahweh himself will assuredly plant his people in this land with all his heart and soul. Hope will be as natural as breathing.

Prosperity. Flourishing. Growth. Value. They are the words of the rich, the Hanamels of this world, the language with which they speak money. A form of currency. But in the dwelling place of the Almighty, far beyond what we can see, they are words of love, expressions of his people's worth.

The Lord will shepherd us back, and because of holy fear, there will be security. In the land that he gives, there will always be boundaries. As far as the east is from the west, so great is his love for us. But yet, we *must* have limits. Such reverence protects us. He is great, and we are small. He is Yahweh, and we are not. But the mighty hand and outstretched arm will wrap the Lord around us, and beyond all this, we will be gathered. We will go home.

**Is God calling you to invest in a person, a place, a church or a ministry, someone or something with little obvious basis of hope for the future, but which he wants to see flourish?**

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Ezekiel

*Ezekiel*

*24:15–27*



# Ezekiel

## *Ezekiel 24:15–27*

One of the hardest of all prophetic callings is that of Hosea, who marries the prostitute Gomer and in the indignity that the relationship forces him to endure, displays the pain that God faces as a result of his people's unfaithfulness. But right at the very centre of Ezekiel's story is what seems an even more astonishing moment – this prophet's wife dies because that is necessary that he might experience raw and real insight into the depth of God's grief for the loss of Jerusalem, but also, in foregoing normal mourning rites, show how the people really feel about the city and Temple that they claim to love.

The terrible pain that Ezekiel endures illustrates that God doesn't just see our sin and measure it in some objective way against his law and holiness: it also elicits deep feelings within him. God is all-knowing, all-present and all-powerful, but he's also deeply emotional, responding to us not just on the basis of power and purity, but also reacting to our lives on the basis of love, passion, jealousy and grief, gloried by and delighted with our successes, but incredibly hurt and upset by our sinful offences against him and one another.



# Ezekiel

## *Ezekiel 24:15–27*

**I DON'T TELL HER** what is to come because what would be the point of that? She is – and always has been – a good woman, faithful to me and devoted to Yahweh. Her affairs are set right because she's walked a straight and true path every day of her life. She has no need to fear the grave. 'With one blow' the Lord says, and I pray that that means what it sounds like, that when it happens it will be quick and she'll feel no pain at all. And that for what's to come for this city, it will be a severe mercy for her.<sup>24</sup>

Black market prices are getting crazier every day, going up in line with the fear of the rumour mongers. The merchants that already have so much are acquiring even more off the back of such unease, but I manage to buy a fine cut of meat and some fresh flour and spices, all the ingredients we need for her favourite meal. When I get home, she wonders what's happened that she deserves this attention, but I bat that away. There's no law that says that it's only on anniversaries, birthdays and festivals that you can give your life's love a treat.

We use our oldest pot, the one that smells of years of feasts and flavour, even when it's scrubbed clean. Yahweh says that the city itself is such a pot, an image I can't get out of my mind, however much I try to. For 15 years I've been a priest, from the age of 30 I've been a prophet, and for 20 years we've been man and wife, and she's paid her own heavy price for my first two callings, but has backed me all the way and rarely complained. Tonight's a night to be

# Ezekiel

## *Ezekiel 24:15–27*

a husband alone. Tomorrow there'll be sorrow and a new message to be told.

I try to watch her as closely as I can without it being obvious. The eyes that were the first part of her to draw me in, with little lines now appearing at their edges. Her smile and look when she's absorbed in her work but glances over at me, notices me noticing her, lost in watching her, as if I'm gazing at a painting in a gallery, or am even the artist himself, taking in his muse. The little lines of grey that appear now in her tied back hair, but the elegance that gives her, and the still smoothness of her neck and the top of her back that the ponytail puts on display.

Later we snuff the candles out and she's full of questions about the noise outside, the running and crying, the smell of smoke and glow of distant flames. I tell her that we've done all that we can. All the warning that any people needed – and then some – has gone forth. It's in the hands of the Sovereign Lord, just as it always has been. I hug her especially tight after we gently sing part of a bedtime psalm, make a quiet harmony in our rebellious and trembling city.

“Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.”

May that be true for you tonight my love. May you not so much as gasp or shake at your last breath. May your sleep be rest in God

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## *Ezekiel 24:15–27*

himself at whatever moment your dreams that process our last day together give way to visions of many creatures with many faces and many wings, worshipping Yahweh, gleaming on his throne, surrounded by more jewels and colours than even Solomon at his most decadent could have given the Queen of Sheba. May you rest in peace and awake in Yahweh glory, held in Yahweh mercy.

In the morning she looks as if she's merely sleeping. But draw near to her and she's cold and gone. I pull the bedclothes over her and collapse back on my pillow, staring at the ceiling, wondering how to sit up, how to put my feet on the ground, how to dress and eat and somehow face this day. And the last line of our bedtime psalm comes to me.

“One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard: “Power belongs to you, God, and with you, Lord, is unfailing love”, and “You reward everyone according to what they have done.””

I am broken. But Yahweh is just. And she is safe now.

The body does the normal routines that the mind is unable to engage in. Turban fastened, sandals on my feet, moustache and beard uncovered, I head out into my day, the widower too dazed to look the part. The people fail to comprehend, ever seeing, never knowing.

“Won't you tell us what these things have to do with us? Why are you acting like this?”

# Ezekiel

## *Ezekiel 24:15–27*

This loss that I endure, it's all going to come to you as well. You think you know what love is when you have the person with you, but it's only when she's gone that you realise the things you should have said, the times you didn't listen, the way your heart beat slower in her calming silence and faster in her intimate nearness, all the ways she gave you peace. Every day will be longer now she's gone.

You think you love the sanctuary. You think it's your greatest pride. The delight of your eyes, the object of your affection.

But very soon it will be black and charred, cold and lifeless. Its walls are yet to collapse but the glory left a few years back, and there'll be too much shock for sackcloth, too much anguish for ashes. The Lord shall do it. He won't hold back. He won't spare. He won't relent.<sup>25</sup>

And anyhow, where's the good in retrospective love? Like I said, every day will be longer when she's gone, and then – on that day – you will know and see that Yahweh is the Sovereign Lord.

**What is it that you love the most – tradition – whether of church or state – or place or the Sovereign Lord?**

**What would you miss most if it were taken from you?**

# 43

## Daniel

*Daniel*

*1:1–21*



# Daniel

## *Daniel 1:1–21*

In 597BC, Daniel was one of four ‘cream of the crop’ young Israelite men, who were taken into the royal court of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, after he besieged Jerusalem during the wicked reign of the then king, Jehoiakim. Stories about Daniel – such as ‘The Lion’s Den’ and ‘The Fiery Furnace’ – have become Sunday School staples that tell of the need for dependency on God, and the book is also known for Daniel’s complex and mysterious visions of God’s sovereignty and power.

But Daniel – and his friends – also have much to teach us about the need for obedience, integrity and good decision-making during times when we are threatened or marginalised. The events of Daniel 1 tell of how he started when flung into a situation of enormous loss and distress, and 60 years later he remained in Babylon, still at the centre of power as Cyrus came to the throne.

# Daniel

## *Daniel 1:1–21*

**S**OMEHOW, THERE HAS TO BE a place of hope within the maze of choices. Is my life now, reduced to either-or options? Thriving or surviving, the outcome turning on the black and white of obedience or disobedience? Would there be any comfort in a grey area? Could any man of God delight in a life reduced to expediency, sometimes looking out for my faith and its ethics, sometimes looking out for my new masters, always looking out for my three friends, sometimes looking out for myself?

Part of playing the game in a place like this is doing the right thing, and part of it is looking the part, *appearing* to be someone you can trust to do the right thing. Blend in but also be prepared to stand out.

And yet – surely this is true – nothing happens for no reason. I believe it is the Lord who delivered Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar’s hand, and I know too that my life is held by the same strong and merciful hand, however much history seems to be sliding in the wrong direction. Ashpenaz thinks he has placed me here, but I know better. It’s Yahweh who has taken me from home and put me in the king’s palace. Right in the heart of it all. Right in the centre of power and arrogance, a centre where there’s so much to learn.

Rising before sunrise each morning to attend to language lessons. Grammar and vocabulary thrown at you thick and fast, read it, write it, hear it, speak it, tests every day, sink or swim. Then it’s on to geography lessons, history lessons – all with a distinctive

# Daniel

## *Daniel 1:1–21*

Babylonian spin – and literature and science. There’s no headroom for error, no margin to fall behind. There are – we’re frequently told – proper Babylonians who’d had given their right arm to have the opportunities we do. They could send us where we arguably belong and replace us ten times over, and we should never forget that. We should be grateful.

And whilst it was the machinery of their army that brought me here, it’s the machinery of their state that I’m now to serve. Here’s how they make a business case. Here’s the ministries and structures and how they fit together. Here’s how Nebuchadnezzar likes to be briefed, the three things you have to hit him with in the first two minutes if you want to get his attention. ‘*Never* put a question in a document’ Ashpenaz tells me. ‘He doesn’t like to be asked questions, he just wants the answers. And *never* repeat yourself, either. Say something once and move on. He *hates* repetition.’

Occasionally, in the papers they give us to work with, they throw in memorandums about what’s happening in our homeland, accounts of small and futile insurrections and how ruthlessly they’ve been snuffed out, so many people dead and the leaders’ bodies on poles at the city walls, all written and laid out in exactly the same style that’s used for explaining a new drainage system or plans for new roads. You see them watching us as we read them, so you learn not to look shocked, or appalled. It’s subtle but it works. When the Babylonian dog growls or nips, you train yourself not to bear your



# Daniel

## *Daniel 1:1–21*

own teeth or bite back. You assure yourself you're of a different pedigree. You remind yourself that Yahweh has your back.

But it's not all bad, you know. There's a part of me enjoys it, the way anyone enjoys the things they're good at. A new concept is introduced, and they never need to go over it again. I can tap my head and give a nod: got that. I can read complex arguments set out on a scroll and speak back the thrust of it in a sentence.

But still and all, there's a dark side to their mould that my mind and abilities are to be poured into. They've even changed my name, you know. I'm Belteshazzar now. But Belteshazzar didn't learn his first words of Torah on his mummy's lap: that was Daniel. Belteshazzar didn't learn what trust is when he took his daddy's hand and we walked together to the House of the Lord: that was Daniel. Belteshazzar didn't lean forward to drink in every word when the scroll was undone and the story of deliverance from Egypt was read aloud. I'm so glad Daniel listened as best he could, that I can feel my head and know I've so much of that *in* there, am able to bring it to mind when I'm unsure of the boundaries. Better to remember that than the last picture of the city burning that I saw from the back of a cart.

Today the sacred – silver and gold from our temple – resides in the treasure house of a false god, and there are rumours that they even have the ark itself. There is no longer Judah to be loyal to, but I *will*

# Daniel

## *Daniel 1:1–21*

be loyal to the Lord my God, the Lord who's one: steadfast when they want to cleanse 'I am' from my mind and soul.

And now they want to change my diet too. 'It's only food' they say. That's like saying 'he's only Yahweh.' Either something matters or it doesn't matter. I don't want the defilement of their royal food and wine, something sacrificed to apostasy, not cooked on a stove but burned on an altar, the bitterness of its untruth upon my tongue.

The Lord in his greatness has given me wisdom to understand dreams and visions, but how I wish that I could comprehend all this. And then I see the image of 'I am' when – in the face of everything being oh so alien – one good man has the courage to say "ok". I watch these officials and they're no risk takers. But no one can argue with integrity. For just ten days we can do our thing: we can go with the grain of Yahweh, rather than in the groove of Babylon. And I know afresh that my God loves me, when I see that this man likes me.

Not that I will always do this: I don't believe Yahweh would have me say 'no' to everything. Not all accommodation is betrayal. I can't ask the Lord for insight and then turn everything into battles of red lines and ultimatums. The prophet told us to seek the peace and prosperity of this place, to pray for it and trust that plans for hope and a future *will* be fulfilled.

And whatever the pain of our exile, whatever the heartache of not being able to sing the songs of the Lord in a strange land, I must

# Daniel

## *Daniel 1:1–21*

realise that sorrow and lament are one thing, and grievance and outrage another. The former draws me towards Yahweh, the latter only exhausts and embitters the spirit. So, I will analyse their evidence, weigh up their options, and make them recommendations. I will shake hands and kiss cheeks. I will be obedient every time, but that won't mean 'no' every time.

Nebuchadnezzar says there are none equal to Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah, and myself. That's what he thinks, but *I* know differently. *I* know the truth: that there is none equal to Yahweh. I pray as I face Jerusalem that he will see that. I ask 'I am' that in all my reactions, the king will see connections: the threads the Lord weaves between what I believe and how I behave.

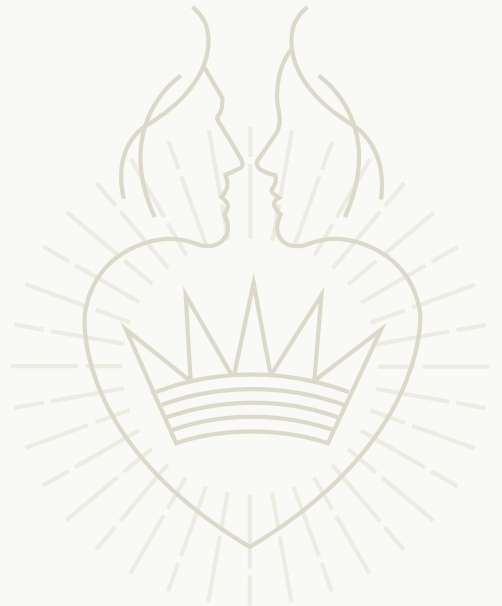
**Recognising that it's rarely an option to say 'No' to everything, what will you say 'Yes' to, and what will you say 'No' to, as you seek to be obedient to Jesus Christ?**

# 44

## Hosea

### *Hosea*

### *3:1–5*



# Hosea

## *Hosea 3:1–5*

Hosea's marriage to Gomer didn't start one way and turn out another. By God's leading Hosea knew what he was getting into right at the beginning. Adultery is cruel and destructive, but whilst there was devastation in this relationship, there were no surprises. It's the same with us. Whether it's the ancient unfaithfulness of his people Israel or flawed and fickle followers of Jesus in the twenty-first century, God knows what we're like but he pursues us and loves us anyway.

Hosea's story is incredibly sad and painful, and it can't be glossed over that it contains promises of punishment as well as restoration. We don't hear anything more of Gomer after chapter three, with no neat finale that tells us if 'they all lived happily ever after', a perhaps deliberate ambiguity that speaks to the complexity of steadfast love chasing fickle hearts.

# Hosea

## *Hosea 3:1–5*

**Y**OU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.  
I've often thought it no accident that that holy injunction sits between the prohibition of murder and theft. For every time she strayed another little part of me died. A different man caressed her again and another part of my ability to hold my head up high was stolen away.

'I do' she said. 'I will' she promised. Our marriage of two vows and two thousand humiliations.

The times I returned from worship when she was gone, and not so much as a hastily scribbled note left for me on the table.

Smiles of barely suppressed passion and backward glances in the market square.

Occasionally crossing paths with those men, their casual self-assurance in my presence, their condescending implication of pity for me.

The murmurings behind my back about why he can't satisfy her, what is it that he doesn't have?

The promises... that it's over now... of no more... that that was the last time... that we can put this behind us... sincere in their own way, but guaranteed to be broken.

The more water I pour into the well, the more she drains it.

# Hosea

## *Hosea 3:1–5*

She is unknowable to me and yet my heart's desire.

It was a scandal from the outset. Prophecy and promiscuity are no match they told me, yet from soil of flowers and thorns are fallen loved ones born.

For other men her body all their yearning and pleasure, for me the aching meeting of seed and womb that creates three lives that are Massacre, Not Loved and Not My People. Sons of Hosea and Adam, daughters of Gomer and Eve, yet children of the living God.

For all these wanderings the law would say that both she and her lovers should be put to death, rocks rained down on gorgeous skin that men – me among them – crave. But you can't stone evil out of anyone any more than you can beat love into them. It is beauty that can rescue and redeem, not screaming rows where we want to gouge our eyes out but tenderness that says 'I want you, I always wanted you, it was only you I ever wanted.'

So, I will not sit back and wait for her to move first. I will be the one that responds, obedient always to History's Most Moved Mover.<sup>26</sup>

The Lord said to me, "Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes."

*Again.* I never loved Gomer once, you see. It was over and over,

# Hosea

## *Hosea 3:1–5*

by and by, our always one more time, always second chance, seventy-seven times marriage. A lover sprints and fades but your husband can run after you Gomer, to the very ends of the earth. Other men say they love you, and maybe in the moment they truly mean it, but it's not the rugged sort of love that I know you need, once more love, another time love, forever and ever love.

Any man, you see, can *make* love to you Gomer, and call it that and maybe even convince himself that's what he's doing. But I'm not going to make love, I'm going to *show* love.

That's a different expression of love Gomer, love in a more vulnerable form, maybe for you in a more frightening form.

This is a different intimacy that is so whole now, Gomer, that it cannot and will not be split. And as I love you again Gomer, please will you let yourself be loved again, and show that to me whatever way you can. Our bodies – for now – cannot press against each other, and should maybe never do so again, but eyes only for me, your ears only for me, your time only for me, your heart only for me is all that I ask for.

**Hear the heart of God in the words of Hosea 2:23. “I will plant her for myself in the land: I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one.’ I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’, and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”**



# 45

## Jonah

### *Jonah*

### *4:1-11*



# Jonah

## *Jonah 4:1–11*

As someone who has lived in Northern Ireland all my life, I'm able to identify with what a potent mix religion and tribal identity is. The culture wars of the mid-noughties onwards have made many more of us aware of the damage that can be done when people believe themselves to be exceptional, with the toxic fusing of American patriotism and Christian evangelicalism the most obvious example. Whatever we might think of Jonah he was called and chosen by God to carry out a great mission, but his resistance to the idea of God rescuing a particular people – and it shouldn't be overlooked that a man like him had many good reasons to fear the people of Nineveh – appears a hurdle that it was impossible for his heart to overcome.

# Jonah

## *Jonah 4:1–11*

**I**T WAS FIGHT OR FLIGHT and I chose flight. There's no good ever comes from a man heading east of Eden and I wasn't going there for anyone *or* anything.

I know now that it seems crazy, that it's hard to outrun an unseen and everywhere-present God but going the opposite direction – heading to the farthestmost ends of the earth from where he wants you to go – seems as good a way as any to plot that course.

To be handpicked by God to go on a mission might sound a blessing to you, but I'd like to see how many of you would join a queue to go to Nineveh. It was more a cesspit than a city; its people a heady cocktail of pagans, savages and animals. This wasn't the nice and neat two-week mission trip to middle class – and already holy – children in Jerusalem that you might prefer, the last day picking up souvenir knickknacks in the streets around the Temple. Stand up and preach against Nineveh? I might as well have a placard on me saying 'tear me limb from limb'.

As if they'd listen to me anyway, as if one man can even scratch the sin of 120,000 heathens. I get that God's all-knowing but it seemed it would just be token preaching - 'go and die on that hill, for the Lord's looking for a futile gesture.' They were clearly beyond the pale. And all on my own, some martyr to what cause? At least Moses got to bring Aaron with him when he went before Pharaoh.

So, I grabbed a ticket to Tarshish and hadn't long set sail when a

# Jonah

## *Jonah 4:1-11*

violent storm arose. The Lord wasn't in Elijah's wind but he surely was in mine. I was woken to a frantic babble of the boat buffeted and broken, panic and profanities abounding with cargo being jettisoned all around me.

The short straw said it was all down to me, which they seemed surprised at but I obviously saw coming, a miserably inverted tribute act to Samuel calling David out from among the sons of Jesse... Yes, yes, I mention Moses and Elijah and David, but before you go playing therapist with me, laying me on the couch in your imaginary consulting room, let me make clear that I never for one moment had fantasies about being the next hero of the faith. Oh no, it was the quiet life that I wanted. But some chance... And then questions were fired at me from every direction, faster than I could answer, and amidst the crash and splash, a flash of clarity emerges.

"I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."

At which point we could barely stand or hear, truth yelled as we lurched in uncontrolled steps from left to right, clinging to whatever we could for balance.

I can tell true God from false god and right from wrong – can tell too when the game is up. I wouldn't pull others down with me, but though I was the one to go overboard, they were the ones afraid.

# Jonah

## *Jonah 4:1-11*

“Pick me up and throw me into the sea” I said, but they’d hear nothing of it, then the supposed godless and me the supposed godly, but them caring more for my life than me, and fearing my God more than me. But eventually they relented and tossed me. ‘An innocent man’, I heard them cry, as I went over the side.

Deep called to deep within the roar of the water as a huge fish gobbled me in one swallow, to rescue me from waves and breakers. In moist, stagnant and fleshy pitch darkness, I called to God through days and nights indistinguishable, like returning to my mother’s womb for a chance to start all over, to be delivered to dry land and born to live again. Born a second time for new opportunities to pray, worship and sacrifice.

Born again to go to Nineveh and tell them God’s word and my story, three dark days meeting God in the belly of a whale to be made ready for three days of light, walking through that city proclaiming: “Salvation comes from the LORD.” It didn’t need to be more complicated than that. And many heard and feared and put their trust in Yahweh.

At the end of which I sat down both humbled and humiliated, used by my maker yet feeling *so foolish*. God it’s great that you’re gracious and compassionate but if that reduces me to being no different in your sight than scum like the citizens of Nineveh, then what’s it all about? Will you go back in another week or month or year and see

# Jonah

## *Jonah 4:1–11*

what you observe in Nineveh then Lord, because I'd be interested to see how long this lasts?

And even if this lot sticks to it, another generation will come after them, and they won't know the law the way we do. Leopards don't change spots and zebras don't forego their stripes. Redemption is temporary but race is permanent. And whether Hebrew sin or foreigner sin, sin can't be ignored. You know, God, that there are only two ways to deal with it – sacrifice or punishment – and now here you are, telling me to tell them the city would be overthrown, then throwing slow anger and rich grace into the mix, upsetting all that you'd ordered so well.

Tell me Lord: why have I pursued good living all these years only for you to fail to see through their sackcloth and ashes? It's moral hazard for the soul to let easy grace trump hard graft. Would you turn back the clock if you could and offer salvation to the Egyptians too? Would the Philistines be ok if they said one prayer at the end of one sermon? If the Assyrians are acceptable now, why not all the nations? Why bother with any borders and boundaries, just have salvation free-for-all? Were there no clouds at all in Father Abraham's sky full of stars?

But I tell you, if this is how it's to be, I want no part of it. They get forgiveness and after all I've done for you I get what: a plant for shade that's taken as quick as it's given? After what I did for you,

# Jonah

## *Jonah 4:1–11*

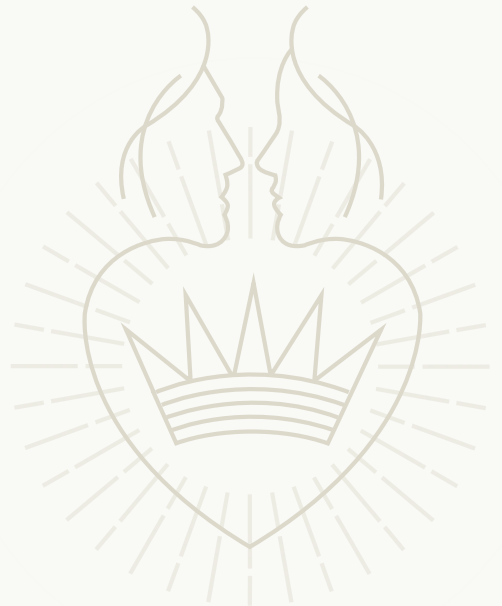
am I like a little Pharaoh, and is that my one little plague? It's a damned and dry place now the tables are turned.

If Nineveh's now righteous then who knows how to measure evil and how can the holy define themselves? I preferred things the way they were: the old law; the old markers; and the old certainties. Take my life now God, if you won't give that back to me.

**Do you think this was the end of Jonah's story, or can you imagine more to come in terms of God's work in his life?**

# 46

## Joseph *Matthew* *1:18–2:23*





# Joseph

## *Matthew 1:18–2:23*

Even our amazing God could not settle his remarkable new dispensation - that came with the arrival of the Messiah - entirely on his own: he needed co-workers to support him as it played out. One such person was Joseph, an apparently ordinary man who showed incredible openness to God speaking to him in dreams (Matthew 1:20-23, 2:13, 2:19-20, and 2:22): four times God spoke; and four times Joseph obeyed.

We often act as if every theological argument is settled, every debate sorted, and there is nothing further to be known or understood about God. But Joseph's story is one of God bringing enormous disruption to a man's life, and that man taking risks and responding every step of the way. How could God have worked salvation if agents such as Joseph had not acted as they did?

# Joseph

## *Matthew 1:18–2:23*

**T**HERE'S A FAMILY STORY has been handed down that we're from royal stock. That I'm a son of David, and – stretching back as far as can be traced – of Abraham too. Of course, we're all sons of Abraham, but it's more than 'stars in the sky' talk for us. Apparently, we're the real deal. Dad even has a family tree to prove it: he says I'm to have it when he dies, write my own first born's name at the bottom.

So, I'm a son of David, and a son of Abraham. A son of the promise, and a son of Israel, and a son of exile. But... I sometimes got to thinking... people say these things... but people say all sorts of things...

My favourite Torah story was Joseph, probably because my good Israelite parents gave me that good Israelite name. Joseph the dreamer – and by the Spirit of the Lord, I became a dreamer too.

A dreamer who was just a carpenter: only a plain man. My craft was robust, a vocation of solid timber, straight lines and exact measurements. I was no scholar, no expert of interpretation. I built tables and chairs and was building my life, looking forward to a future with Mary. We were half way there, betrothed but not one flesh. The law called her my wife. I called her my life's hope and heart's desire.

And so, I was building for Mary and me. Building the business and building our home. Making everything right for the two of us.

# Joseph

## *Matthew 1:18–2:23*

We were starting out and looking forward. Fourteen generations from Abraham to David, and fourteen from David to the exile. Mary and I, together we would make the fourteenth generation from the exile to empire. Yet I was happy enough for Mary and I to do a new thing – I wasn't looking for the Lord to do a new thing too.

And then the perfect wood began to splinter. Life went against the grain of all the plans I'd made. "There's something I have to tell you... you've got to hear me out... don't be jumping to conclusions..."

You think you know someone, but through hurt so sore it racked me head to toe, I gave her this much credit: her sin might not have been original, but her story certainly was.

It's amazing how many nights you can sleep so little yet still function after a fashion. The more my body tried to rest, the more my head sprinted, competing in a race with my thumping heart, one trying to overtake the other. There'd be no feast now: no wedding supper; no celebration; no coming together of the village. And yet for all she'd done, whatever had happened, I couldn't throw Mary to the dogs. I'd longed to hold her body and worship it, and so much wanted her to be mine, but I'd never see Mary broken to pieces. I'd sign the papers, recover her bride price, and let that be the end of it. Draw a line under the matter, and then step over it to get on with the rest of my life. Or at least try to.

A discarded gate post, reworked, can become a stick for a man to

# Joseph

## *Matthew 1:18–2:23*

lean on. However disappointed you are, it's only ever a last resort for wood to be for burning.

So, I barely slept those nights. Sleep and wakefulness became neither one thing nor the other. But in the depth of one of those nights, a flash of holy light appeared before me. A presence that was near and told me not to be afraid. That told me to take Mary home, because what was conceived in her was of the Holy Spirit. And I was to name this child Jesus, because he that was in Mary will save our people from their sins.

I don't question. I just follow the plans that others give me. I brought Mary home to the place I'd prepared for her, just as I'd promised I would. We were half a man and half a wife, but we lived together in one home, and when the time came, the half a man and half a wife travelled to the census in Bethlehem.

And in that place, our deliverer was delivered. And so, there *were* fourteen generations from Abraham to David, and fourteen from David to the exile, and fourteen from the exile to our son Jesus. There was muck and filth and squalor. And there was gold and frankincense and myrrh.

I barely slept those nights either, in Bethlehem's cycle of feeding and crying. And in another dream, another shift: another new direction. Take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt: flee *to* it just the way our forefathers had fled *from* it. A Joseph dreaming and

# Joseph

## *Matthew 1:18–2:23*

going down to Egypt, God intending to accomplish good for Joseph in Egypt. God intending, perhaps, to accomplish the saving of many lives...

In Egypt, another dream and another move, more starting from scratch again, but we're not the only Hebrews, and plenty of people look out for us, just as the Lord looks after his own. Then Monster Herod is dead and it's time to go home: time for the refugees to return to their roots, and for Israel to be saved from its sins. But where to go with Archelaus reigning: the son of Herod, Monster Junior as folks called him, a chip off the tyrannical block.

A final dream and a final warning from the Spirit of the Lord, told us to withdraw to the district of Galilee. And so, we fell back to Nazareth, and there we stayed. And there we raised Jesus the Nazarene, and a small boy learnt what can be fashioned with saws, chisels and vices: what it is that's possible when nails are hammered into wood.

**If God called you to an entirely new direction in your life, how open would you be to that?**

# 47

## John the Baptist

*Matthew*

*3:1–17*



## John the Baptist

### *Matthew 3:1–17*

John the Baptist is a fascinating figure, someone who was in many ways austere and severe, speaking about repentance and offering people a physical experience of cleansing, yet also preaching harsh words of coming wrath, God with a winnowing fork, and chaff burnt up in unquenchable fire. There's a frequent temptation to gravitate to grace, mercy and love in our presentations of the Gospel, but John illustrates that in order to get how good the good news is, you have to get the bad news first.

There's nothing light about John: he was a serious man who spoke of serious things, and in his singularity of purpose his goal above all was to show people the way to repentance and Jesus, a call that remains current to all Jesus followers in this generation.

## John the Baptist

### *Matthew 3:1–17*

**I**T'S NOT HERE YET but it's surely coming, the new kingdom of heaven drawing near. So much of who we are, what we're about, how we worship, is about looking back. Back to the Red Sea parted, back to Jericho's walls falling, back to David establishing Jerusalem as the City of Zion, and Solomon building the Temple his father wasn't permitted to. Over and over, we're told to remember, and time and again we do so.

The faithful love the poetry of 'behold I am doing a new thing', yet they live in the prose of everyday faith where new things rarely come to pass. A God of Holy Disruption is inspiring to read of in history books, but a God of Increments seems to be all they have in the here and now. And so, when the new thing does come along – when a man like me comes along – the best of the righteous pounce like a cat on a mouse.

Mum and Dad gave me so much, inputed to me in those sweet years as a late child and young teen, poured law and love into me until they were so full of years that they no longer could. And then they were gone. Folks say it must be lonely in the desert, but I've been alone a long time now.

But what Elijah ran from, I run into, wearing his outfit and all. Not that God wants to appoint holy impersonators of past heroes – the *new* things, my friends, look for the *new* things – but running with a sense of destiny; striking out and leading the way. There's



## John the Baptist

### *Matthew 3:1–17*

an irrepressible holy urge inside *me*, yet when I see Jesus from time to time, there's nothing hurried about *him*, only poise and stillness. The last time I saw him, he was finishing off a synagogue table in the family workshop, absorbed in the task and yet fully present to me also.

His father Joseph used to say that “when you’ve almost finished the job, that’s when there’s most temptation to sprint for the finishing line and move on to the next thing. But the best creation was done on the sixth day, not the first. The devoted are good at waiting, and so they should be for the practice the Lord has given them.” Jesus has learned that lesson well.

But waiting ends, just as everything ends. Isaiah’s words have inhabited me long enough and it’s time to move out, to make straight paths in the wilderness, look all around me and watch as people seek me out, longing for their lives to change, see their valleys raised up and mountains and hills made low, as the glory of the Lord is revealed.

Wild honey sustains me, gives me all the energy I need, just as it did for Jonathan. He was happy to be in David’s shadow, just as I long for the time to come when Jesus steps forward and I can step back.

And how I need strength and stamina as the people come in droves, desperate for forgiveness. They confess all manner of sins, all of which the law has made provision for, and yet our centuries old

## John the Baptist

### *Matthew 3:1-17*

restitution now seems so inadequate. It's not just Gentiles seeking Yahweh that need this immersion: it's Yahweh's own as well. They fall back into the water, one of my hands at their back and another holding on to them, and then rise up again gasping for breath, the sun momentarily blinding their blinking eyes, but cleansed and startled and panting like new-borns. Soaked as if with the morning dew that brings new mercies every morning.

That's what they want: to be new people. What can a priest do but lift a weight off their back that's only going to appear again in the heartbeat it takes to curse or covet, steal or cheat. Sin grows in our insides like our hair and nails grow on our outsides, and I can't make that stop but I can give them freedom for a moment, a glimpse and foretaste of something better to come. They don't need another animal to die for another of their sins. They need instead to feel more alive - more Yahweh awake - than they've ever done before.

Not that what I'm offering is easy religion. I set the Pharisees and Sadducees straight about that, whatever it is they've come looking for. They think they can flee the coming wrath but the new thing God's doing is an invitation more than it's a threat, and anyhow, even the righteous are only told that they can run and not grow weary, not that any of us can outrun God.

And it's not enough, either, to be washed if that doesn't result in change, if there isn't fruit in keeping with repentance. And if there

# John the Baptist

## *Matthew 3:1–17*

isn't fruit? Then there's always an axe, and where there's an axe, a fire is close by.

But if you get fixated with the smoke, you could miss the fire itself. Why fight with me, why stare at me, why hold on to me when I'm only an aperitif and a feast awaits. I'm the warmup act to Messiah's entry on the main stage, a sign that points and says 'salvation's that way'.

"I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

And then one day who steps out of the crowd, but just another ordinary figure who is in fact the extraordinary one?

Jesus and I have known each other since we were toddlers running from our mothers' laps to play and laugh together. But I can no longer be familiar with him. Instead, I must fall at his feet. He says he needs this gift God has given me to bless and cleanse others, but I can't see how that's so. If this is to happen between us, it *must* be the other way round. He is poised but insistent.

"Let it be so now. It is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness."

## John the Baptist

### *Matthew 3:1–17*

I think of that expression his father Joseph used to use when he was following plans, or laying out tools, or measuring wood. A task well done when others were urging him to rush would finish with a satisfied uttering of ‘proper order’.

And this is proper order now: that I submit to Jesus; that Jesus submits to his higher Father. And so, I consent. And as I do so the Lord gifts the rending of the heavens and comes down, a dove descending and resting on him, the Spirit of God both powerful and calm as it meets the one it has known since the beginning of time.

“This is my Son, whom I love;” says a voice, “with him I am well pleased.”

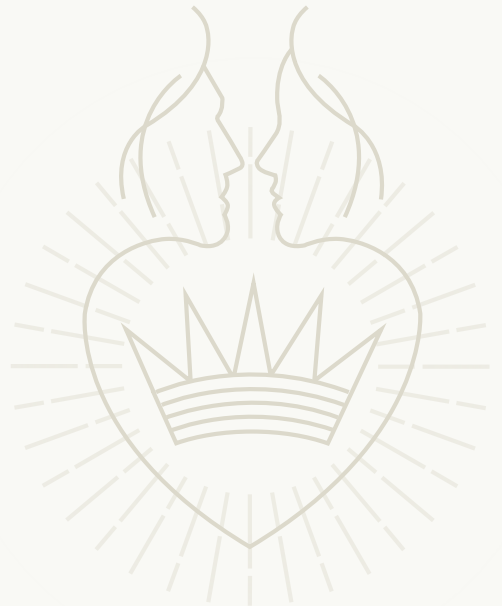
**As you reflect on and pray for someone you long to come to know Jesus, do you think they need a John the Baptist type figure in their life, before Jesus himself can come into view?**

# 48

## The Centurion with Faith

*Matthew*

*8:5–13*



## The Centurion with Faith

### *Matthew 8:5–13*

The Centurion who sought out Jesus in Capernaum was clearly no ordinary Roman commander. Whatever qualities of clear thinking and leadership he must have had to attain his rank, he would also have needed some hardness and capacity for brutality to succeed in his environment. And yet alongside that, he displays other and somewhat unexpected qualities.

Luke's gospel tells us that he had come to know and respect the local Jewish community and elders, and had even built a synagogue for them. He has a concern and compassion for his servant, and a remarkable open mindedness. There is spiritual curiosity to seek out Jesus and the humility, despite his military rank and spiritual outsider status, to ask for help. And above all he had an extraordinary faith. He is, altogether, among the most unlikely of believers.

Matthew and Luke differ in their accounts of this story – in Luke, local Jewish elders represent the Centurion to Jesus, but I have followed Matthew's account, where he appears to speak directly to Jesus.

## The Centurion with Faith

### *Matthew 8:5–13*

**FIND IT HARD TO BE HELPLESS.** There is always something I can do: always a man to summons; always a command to give. To watch a servant – a servant so long serving he’s almost a friend to me – look at me, stare at me, life draining away, and I’m able to do... well... nothing... This might surprise you, and I guess it’s a control thing, but sickness can actually be much more frightening than battle or riots. I’m a hard man, and I’ve done hard things - cruel things, not difficult things - but I find *that* hard to watch.

Physical conflict is largely behind me now. Keeping order in this Empire outpost mostly sees me leading from behind a desk with quill in hand, rather than on a horse riding, or on feet marching. Where there’s a customs post there’ll always be smugglers and low-lives on the make, but as one arrest certificate after another search warrant pass across my desk, my mind wanders beyond the boundaries of bureaucracy to the private place inside every man, my inner temple of belief and doubt.

And in that place, I think about how it is that I have worshipped gods and goddesses. I have looked to stars and sun. I have swum in pleasure and fertility and been beached by pain and sorrow. I have asked for weather and wine, luck and success. I have praised the Tiber and the Seven Hills of Rome. I fall down to Caesar, but seem bowed – like we are all in the end – to fate.

## The Centurion with Faith

### *Matthew 8:5–13*

Yet here I have met different men. And good men too. You can't live your whole life opposed to everything and fighting everyone. The rule of Rome is the bottom line but there's got to be some meeting in the middle, some trading of the intellect with their traditions. There's got to be give and take, and their land and their ways, they've got under my skin.

Their God, this single God, their talk of God who's One, it turns my head. It may not quite make total sense, yet draws me in and makes more sense than anything else that I've heard thus far. Was it those prayers for luck or trust in fate that led me to this posting, when my wife and I were so keen on Gaul - better food, less antsy locals - but I was sent here inexplicably at the eleventh hour? Was it mere coincidence that led me to show such an interest in the synagogue? I've always believed you rule better if you try to understand the strangers you want to submit to you. Or was it something more, the sovereignty they attribute to the one they call Yahweh?

Lately, I've heard too of this man Jesus, who's into Yahweh but in a different way to all the others, right out on the edges, pushing all the limits. And I don't know what I know or don't know anymore, I can't judge or sift these idols and ideals, but I do know one thing: I can judge a man. I can judge and read a man, and I know a man with authority when I see one. This man Jesus may or may not be right about their law, but he's possessed of a divine poise, assured in a way I've never seen before. They say that no one has ever heard



## The Centurion with Faith

### *Matthew 8:5–13*

him raise his voice, yet everything goes the way he wills it.

My friends, my good friends, they build bridges to this Rabbi, but then I go to him myself. The safer way is the nod and wink of ‘my people can talk to his people’, but there comes a time when you’ve got to look your greatest needs in the eye, and that means looking Jesus in the eye as well. I ask for help and that’s not easy – it’s not easy in any case for this man to ask for help, but it’s harder still to be one of us and ask one of *them* for help.

And he said, “Shall I come and heal him?”

Normally, I’m asked a question and I simply answer yes or no. Even just a glance will do from me. Yet in a moment all is stripped away. He has no sword, no shield, no uniform, no rank, no soldiers, no Caesar, and no kingdom. But whoever he is, and whatever he has inside him gives him presence that makes me feel smaller, yet calmer, than I’ve ever felt before. There’s no them and us now. I take a step back, as if waiting to be dismissed. It’s enough to ask for healing: I can hardly expose him also to the risk a pure man takes when he steps into an impure home.

“Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go,” and he goes; and that one, “Come,” and he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this,” and he does it.”

## The Centurion with Faith

### *Matthew 8:5–13*

And that was no order, but he understood me, he got me, like I know no one has ever seen right into me in this life before.

Then he spoke to those around him, and he talked about faith and east and west, and a feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and something else about kingdoms.

Just me and him and the crowd, and him looking at me and talking to me, and them looking at him because he's talking to me – like I'm an actor and a prop at the same time – and then he turns and looks straight at me and says: “Go, let it be done as you believed it would.”

No sword, just his word. No hands, just his voice. No presence, just his will. And I stepped back and I nodded a small drop of my head in thanks.

And at exactly that moment, my servant was healed.

**Who are the most unlikely of believers in your life at the present time? How can you be Jesus to them?**

# 49

## The Canaanite Woman with Faith

*Matthew*  
*15:21–28*



## The Canaanite Woman

### *Matthew 15:21–28*

Among the things that strike me most about Jesus in this story is his willingness to let the Canaanite woman have the last word. His growing reputation as a leader and teacher would hardly have been burnished if word got around that a Gentile – and a woman at that – had got one over him in an argument. Given his infinite knowledge and wisdom it would surely have been no effort to him to retort her line that dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table, but it speaks to Jesus remarkable sense of security in himself, as well as his love and compassion, that he didn’t have to ‘win’ the encounter. What mattered most were a sick child and her desperate mother.

## The Canaanite Woman *Matthew 15:21–28*

**D**EMONS DON'T KNOCK AT YOUR DOOR to ask if they can come into your child's life. They don't make appointments or send messages ahead of themselves. When they're doing their worst, they're doing as they please.

I can look at the sun and estimate its place in the sky, sense the hours there are to sunset, but I can never tell when the next fit will come. When these episodes occur, her body is theirs and not her own. She shudders and convulses and every movement from head to toe is involuntary. All I can do is watch and wait.

A so-called wise man told me once that watching and waiting is the way of faith. He said I need to trust more. See it as a test. Or even a gift. The wall behind him was shelved from top to bottom with parchments. He seemed impatient: I think he wanted to get back to his studies. I'm sure there is some kind of virtue in watching and waiting for centuries for a promise in a text, but it seems to me much harder to watch and wait in those cruel minutes of attack. I wonder how many of his scrolls were written by mothers.

In the early years she'd tell me what it was like, describe the sensations as best she could recall them, words rushing out of her in the pouring of a child's heart. She'd weep and fret, hold her head in her hands then lift her hands to the sky, tell me she was frightened, plead with me not to leave her, cry for reassurance that it will all be ok. To which I reply that we'll get there in the end. What an odd

## The Canaanite Woman

### *Matthew 15:21–28*

expression. There's only one end, really, that rids us of all sorrow.

But for now, there are no more words to say. Everything hopeful comes out like a platitude, and everything realistic is too grim to speak. Now she just pulls the sheet up to her head and turns and faces the wall, and between the last event and the next event she never acknowledges the affliction.

Her father has long ago checked out. Twenty years ago, my heart raced at even the anticipation of seeing him, but now I look at him and have no idea where ineffectual ends and defeat begins. Sometimes, when it's kicking off, he feebly starts to get up, as if he might actually get involved, but I then I shoo him and tell him not to bother, and as he sits back down we both know that's what he wanted me to do in the first place. Wall to wall, floor to ceiling: this whole house is silent. Conversation and laughter have packed their bags and gone. We've tried every doctor, bought every potion, spent every shekel, cried every tear and prayed every prayer.

But then I hear the Galilean miracle man has arrived in town – the one some say might even be Messiah – seeking to lie low and have some time out. But a few folks have seen this stranger and where he's staying, put two and two together and worked out who he is. Ours is a small village. Nothing here stays secret for very long.

I rush to find him. I have to prepare for the worst but believe in the best. In the rehearsal in my mind as I head to where he is I'm

## The Canaanite Woman *Matthew 15:21–28*

dignified and eloquent, but at the first glimpse of him, I'm blown away by how out of control I suddenly feel.

“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon possessed and suffering terribly.”

I'd heard all about his hands of healing and his looks of compassion, but his response to *my* heart's cry is...

Nothing!

Even his face betrays no emotion. His disciples can't cope with the silence or deal either with this mad hysterical woman, not one of their own so they think they can shoo me away, but old enough to be their mother and streaming tears.

My mess and noise are interrupting the neat silence of their holy retreat.

Then he looks at me. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

Which I can't answer. Because I'm not the man with the wall of scrolls, so I don't understand about the lost sheep of Israel. And actually, I don't care about the lost sheep of Israel. I care about every hope of a future stripped from my daughter. That's what's lost that I care about, and in desperation I fall at his feet. “Lord, help me!”, I say.

“It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.”

## The Canaanite Woman

### *Matthew 15:21–28*

But if the world was right my daughter wouldn't be at home right now too scared and ashamed to set a foot outside the door. There's so much that isn't right. There are too many poor, too many sick, too many exploiting, too many guilty, too many hungry, and too many unclean. You don't walk in my shoes Rabbi, so don't tell me what is and isn't right.

'You don't talk back to a holy man', my father used to say. 'When you're as wise as they are, you've earned the right to be heard, so people like us, we should know our place and listen.' But what do I have to lose?

"Yes it is, Lord" is what I reply. "Even the dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." I'm nobody's poodle, not one of those yappy little house dogs that rich wives go in for round these parts, but nor am I biting back like some centurion's Alsatian, even though I think I've every right to.

And it's then that the most beautiful smile I've ever seen lights up his face. That must be the look I've heard them talk about, and its eyes fix their gaze on me.

"Woman", he says, "you have great faith! Your request is granted."

**Is there any deep hurt in your life, where if you told Jesus how you really feel, you might be surprised to find he'll let you have the last word?**



50

The Servant  
Girl in the  
Courtyard

*Matthew*  
*26:69–75*



## The Servant Girl *Matthew 26:69–75*

In Scripture's Easter narrative, we see scenes play out in two settings. We see the 'inside' narrative, where Jesus finds himself face to face with the High Priest (and his father-in-law), Pilate and Herod. These are scenes of gripping tension, where Jesus' poise under pressure and the words he speaks are compelling.

But we also see an 'outside' scene, a courtyard of servants and guards and two disciples that have managed to get within the wider premises of the High Priest's home, if not the house itself. We find the 'inside' scene fascinating, yet most of us probably live our lives more in this world's courtyards. How would we have behaved if we'd found ourselves there, and how firmly would we have stood our ground?

## The Servant Girl

### *Matthew 26:69–75*

**I**’D RATHER BE A DOORKEEPER at the house of the Lord than this job here, doing oh-so-dull household chores for the High Priest and his flunkies. But ‘you’ve got to start somewhere’ is what I’m always being told, and given the unalterable fact of being a girl, not a boy, well let’s face it, the doorkeeper thing is never going to happen for me.

And if a servant girl *is* all I’ll ever be, I’d rather be the more heroic sort, waiting on someone like Pontius Pilate’s wife, speaking holy wisdom that takes her breath away, and forcing the move towards God that changes their lives forever. I want to be like the girl who served Naaman’s wife, make my mark and be written about in a scroll someday. Mr and Mrs Pilate could do with someone like me tonight, for the knife edge this whole city’s sitting on.

And I’d rather be doing the day shift than the night shift, but a year or two more at the bottom of the ladder, and then I’ll maybe climb a rung or two. Tomorrow I’ll be woken by my father from catch-up sleep in the latter part of the afternoon, and I’ll celebrate the Passover meal with cloud in my head and grit in my eyes, and tiredness will mean that some sacred words pass me by, and then I’ll be back into the bustle of pilgrim packed streets to return here again. But that’s tomorrow. And tomorrow can wait, for tonight has enough drama to fill a thousand daytimes.

Not that I get to see much of it. I’m closer to power than you might

## The Servant Girl

### *Matthew 26:69–75*

be, right in the heart of the High Priest's home in the holy city, but I'm still far from Jerusalem in the grand scheme of things. I hear doors slam and see officials come and go, and tonight they're both moving more quickly yet pausing more often for murmured conversations in huddles. But my place is such that some stop talking and look pained when I go into the meeting room with fresh food and water, whilst others carry on in the confidence that I won't understand what they're saying anyway, that one torn fragment won't give a girl like me the slightest clue what the whole parchment is about.

I don't know every detail of this, but I know that Jesus of Nazareth has overplayed his hand, has pushed things too far, and tonight the game is up, his goose cooked. The High Priest and his officials have been going in and out and straight through him all night, and now he's sat with the guards in the corner, looking roughed up though not sorry for himself, waiting to see what tomorrow brings. I've some idea what's happened because I actually got to work too early this evening, had allowed more time than I needed because of the extra Passover crowds, and being as early as I was, it seemed to do no harm to follow the pack to Gethsemane and see what was going on.

So, I saw the fisherman. I saw him and I won't be told I didn't. I saw him and heard him too, his yokelly ooh-aaar accent, plainly neither Jerusalem born nor bred. I saw him wield a sword and want to take the whole lot of them on, not go down without a fight, before Rabbi Jesus did his meek and submissive thing and called him off.

## The Servant Girl *Matthew 26:69–75*

I didn't see *this* bit myself, but people are talking about Malchus – the High Priest's secretary and my very own cousin, the one who got me a job here – and he's walking around holding the side of his head and looking like he's seen an angel.

I know it's the fisherman because for a few moments my eyes rested on him and admired him, noticed that hauling around nets does more for a young man's body than carrying around piles of paperwork. I saw him until he was gone and liked him until he turned chicken. Maybe he thinks he is someone because he's been close to Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe he thinks he's someone as well because he knows John and John and I go back a bit, and I know I shouldn't, but when John asks and seems so desperate, I agree the two of them can come in as long as they make no fuss and don't let on who did it. But when hardy comes to hardy, the fisherman and I are both pretty much the same: the sort always destined to sit outside in the courtyard.

He's anxious and restless as he grabs what heat he can at the fire, wants to do something but can make no difference, wants to be present but not be seen. I decide to play with him in a few moments of silence, because even a night as fraught as this is still a long night, and what else is there to do?

I get straight to the point. "You were with Jesus of Galilee."

He's immediately indignant, does an outraged 'not me' look to try

## The Servant Girl *Matthew 26:69–75*

to turn the shame on me for even saying so. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

But for all his acting offended, he’s not so sure of himself that he wants to hang around, so he slopes off to the gateway, where he thinks it’s a different huddle of people, and none of them will know him. But my friend Racheli is there – we’d been to the garden together – and she says more or less the same thing as me. “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.”

And he tries too hard to deny it, for only the guilty need oaths to buttress their words. “I don’t know the man!” But nobody’s buying that, and where there might have been some pity for him before this act, waves of irritation are starting to wash through all of us, and it must have taken about an hour, but then our collective exasperation explodes and some random guy calls out how preposterous he is, that he *must* know Jesus, that his accent is a giveaway.

At which point he starts to huff and puff and the crudeness of the fisherman that he is – whatever he pretends otherwise – starts to come out, punctuated with more “I don’t know the man!” No filter on his swearing despite the proximity of holiness that he sits so close to.

It’s so late in the night that it’s getting close to morning and suddenly the first rooster of the new day crows. Jesus startles at the bird’s sound and looks straight at the fisherman, who for no

## The Servant Girl *Matthew 26:69–75*

apparent reason, suddenly breaks down in bitter tears. None of us know where to look and none of us moves to comfort him. Then I'm distracted for a moment by a door opening and guards approaching Jesus, and when I look back again, I see that the fisherman's gone. You can still hear him sobbing in the distance. What was all that about?

**Whether your life plays out more in the Boardroom or the Courtyard, are you always faithful in speaking up for your Lord and your faith?**

# 51

## The Bleeding Woman Healed

*Mark*  
*5:21-43*





## The Bleeding Woman Healed *Mark 5:21-43*

Among the things that has struck me writing these reflections, is how much similar themes recur in the stories of women in the Bible: childlessness; promiscuity; widowhood; their own sickness or that of one of their children. That list speaks of how harsh life could be for women in the societies we read about in Scripture.

It would be easy to come to this particular story and ask what will be fresh or different about it, but even if the themes are familiar, the individual is new, and she and her specific circumstances mattered immensely to Jesus, just as we do now, however much we believe that ‘there is nothing new under the sun.’

One aspect of this story that is a little different is that it tells of miraculous multi-tasking. As crowds brought the sick and lame to Jesus at many times and in many places, it is probably the case that there was more crossover between healings than we might realise, but the fact that the three Gospels that record the story of this woman and Jairus’s daughter all do so together, alerts us to the lessons to be drawn from the interaction between the crises of a leading family in the village and a – probably – largely invisible and ordinary woman.

## The Bleeding Woman Healed *Mark 5:21-43*

**T**HE DISEASE BLED ME DRY, and then the doctors bled me dry as well. Broken and broke, that's what I am.

Go to the doctors and they scratch their head, get impatient, have nothing more to add, say they've done all they can do, even though each one was billed in advance as the best man around for this sort of problem. Funny how they all take their money upfront. Go to the synagogue for some consolation and be told I have to stay away, can't come in here, not impure as I am, but it's nothing personal, it's the law doesn't allow it. Get away from the moneylenders and all their talk of having to work out a payment plan. 'You can't get blood out of a stone', I say. There's always irony. Go home and sit alone, stepping round buckets in my one small room of bloodied clothes soaking in cold water, examining them in the shafts of light that get through the narrow windows, all of them now so stained that they'll never be clean or at their best again. Go to bed with a warm jar of water heated on the fire and wrapped in a cloth, pressing it against my stomach, with no expectation at all that tomorrow will be any different.

I hear at the market that this man Jesus, the one so many are talking about – who listens to you, who looks you straight in the eye, who even heals people – is at the other side of the lake, and he's got into a boat and is coming our way.

But before I get to the shoreline, there's already a commotion, a

## The Bleeding Woman Healed *Mark 5:21-43*

crowd on the move, coming into the village. Jairus is at the centre of it all. But it's not the normal Jairus, smooth and in control and all together. This is a desperate Jairus, and the reason why is rippling through the crowds. His daughter is sick. Worse than sick, in fact. The doctors reckon she's dying. It's the youngest one too. She's only 12, alive as long as I've been ill. Where's the justice in that? For either of us?

I've never seen Jairus on his knees before, but I've been on mine before him plenty of times. Pleading for a chance, a break, an opportunity to worship. But he has to say no. It's Leviticus, you see. It gives him no choice. The discharge makes me unclean and makes my seat unclean, my clothes unclean, anyone who touches me unclean. And by the time my seven days of cleansing would be done, the bleeding would invariably be back again, and anyhow I'm broke and broken, so how could I buy two doves or pigeons for atonement? Life's all straight lines and what's written in the law with Jairus. But look at him now, not a man to give mercy yet desperate to take some. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

Row by row I steal through the crowd, and they're all too focused on Jesus and Jairus to see what I'm doing, and in just a few minutes, I'm almost at the front. He's looking at Jairus as they walk, calming him, his hand on his shoulder, and I'm so close and yet so far. What chance does someone like me have of getting any attention, with a man like this beside Jesus, and me at his back? Isn't life all about

## The Bleeding Woman Healed *Mark 5:21-43*

hierarchies, wherever you go?

But I can't let the moment pass me by. It'll never come again. I'm meant to touch no one but I *have* to touch him, steal the touch, do it whilst nobody's watching. Jairus is the law personified, my holy nemesis yet also my decoy. A rush of energy heats my body and I don't know where adrenalin stops and healing starts but I know immediately that I'm different. My entire frame feels lighter as I move to turn round and weave back through the crowds. But suddenly Jesus stops, so everyone stops, and he takes his eyes off Jairus and looks around.

"Who touched my clothes?" he says. The disciples try to rationalise and I think I've got away with it. There are so many around him, how could people not brush up against him? But he's insistent. "Who touched me?" and then he starts to scan the faces all around him, meeting every eye or at least the ones that aren't looking down.

After a few moments, I can see he won't let this go. And so, I step forward and fall at his feet as well, Jairus and I suddenly equals, separate in so many ways, yet now united, reduced to the same level, at the feet of the same Master, at the end of our ropes and yearning to hold on to the hope that he brings.

He wants to hear my story. All of it. How it started. How it got worse. How it drained me at so many levels. All the ways this one illness crept in every direction that I turned, rippled through every

## The Bleeding Woman Healed *Mark 5:21-43*

facet of my life. As I speak, I sense Jairus getting more antsy and anxious, my need met, but his becoming more urgent with every passing moment. But Jesus won't be rushed.

“Daughter, your faith has healed you”, he says. “Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

But just then some people arrive from the town, and it's clear from his face that Jairus knows them, and they're bringers of no-good news. His daughter is dead, they say, don't bother the teacher any more. What have I done? Why did I muscle in? Must sorrow always follow sorrow? My life was pretty much spent, could she not have had hers? But when I think of the stories I've heard about Jesus, surely there's more than enough power for just me and my needs today. “Don't be afraid”, Jesus tells him, “just believe.”

My healing was public, her healing private, but rich or poor, high or lowly, old or young, the power is still the same. The child was not dead but asleep. Maybe Jairus needed to be brought down a little, just as I needed to be raised up. I notice now that we can meet each other in the eye.

**Have you a willingness to tell Jesus your whole story that's as great as your desire to reach out and touch him?**

52

# Bartimaeus

*Mark*

*10:46–52*



# Bartimaeus

## *Mark 10:46–52*

A thought-provoking aspect of the second half of Mark 10 is one question, asked twice, in very different contexts. In response to the bold assertion of James and John – ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask’ – and also in response to Blind Bartimaeus and his cry for mercy, Jesus asks, on both occasions, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ In the case of Bartimaeus this seems illogical on the part of Jesus, as his physical incapacity must make his need plain, but it is telling that Jesus wants Bartimaeus to articulate his need, however ‘obvious’ it may be. Indeed, there may also be a lesson in the fact that Bartimaeus had to get up and go to Jesus, and Jesus – for whatever reason – did not go to him. The contrast between the requests of James and John and Bartimaeus is also striking: whilst the ‘insiders’ focus on personal gain and glory, the ‘outsider’ makes a plaintive request that flows from rejection and suffering.

There are two other accounts of this story, which contain notable differences – in Matthew 20 there are two blind men and not just Bartimaeus, and in Luke 18 Jesus and his disciples are entering rather than leaving Jericho. This exploration of Bartimaeus and his story is based solely on the account in Mark.

## Bartimaeus

### *Mark 10:46–52*

**T**HE DARKNESS WAS A PLACE where I could never be safe, could never feel secure. With no way to see or doublecheck my surroundings, I could never rest, never relax, never, simply, switch off: always in the constant shadows.

Begging on the street, you could say I relied on the kindness of strangers, but to me, every person in life was a stranger, every face unseen.

At the gates of the city, they came and went, every man and woman with a purpose and mission, a destination and reason, and beside them I sat, at the one spot, on no journey to no place, life continuing on, and life at the same time ended.

But that day, something different was happening. Around me there was chatter, and bustle, and sweat, and movement, but not the normal type. There was noise and tension at the city gate, but not the usual sort. Because another stranger was passing through our town. And from the crowd's squawk and squall of endless voices merging into one another, I heard mentions of Jesus, and mutters of Rabbi, and tantalising snatches of Messiah and talk of Son of David.

I tensed and stiffened and felt myself become more alert. I'd heard of this man Jesus, the things he did and the way he did them. A man who talked and touched in a way that made things different. They said that this man healed, made the lame walk, and drove out



## Bartimaeus

### *Mark 10:46–52*

demons, that nobody he set his hand on remained the way they were before.

My palms sweated as it washed over that this was my time.

He could come and be gone and my one chance of change could pass me by. And so I shouted out. I didn't know where he was, where to turn my head or project my voice. Was he left or right of me, or straight ahead or upward? I didn't know but I cried out.

“Jesus, son of David have mercy on me.”

Because I didn't need more scraps, I didn't need more loose change, I didn't need more leftovers from people who I knew looked at me as little as they could get away with, whilst I couldn't even see them. I sat on the ground against that wall so everyone who ever looked at me only ever looked down. Every soft or hard voice I ever heard only came from above me.

My brain didn't need to do anything for my mouth to say ‘any change?’, ‘anything for a blind beggar?’, ‘anything you have at all mate?’, ‘any chance?’ They all become involuntary if they're the only things you ever say.

I didn't want what's left from someone. I wanted – just for once in my life – the best that someone had to give. I wanted God's mercy, and I wanted God's kindness and I wanted his blessing and I wanted his face. Not just any face. His face, the one that even Moses

## Bartimaeus

### *Mark 10:46–52*

couldn't see, but even though I see no faces, I want a glimpse of that. And the blackness in my eyes went moist with desperation.

I could hear these voices, pompous holy voices, saying 'Not now Bartimaeus' and 'Don't disturb him Bartimaeus', saying the same old story to untidy and not neat Bartimaeus, to always to be kept to one side Bartimaeus, a stain on Jericho's entry of 'Palestine's Best Kept Town, AD30', the reason for it coming second-place.

But if not now, when? Because this was my chance, my last chance of change, and as they palmed me off with platitudes the anxiety and the desperation was rising within me, adrenalin racing and rushing, and my heart pumping. And like an animal I yelled. My throat rasped and my lungs filled and emptied, and deep called to deep and I screamed the unignorable:

“SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON ME.”

And then it all stopped. It went quiet and one gentle voice spoke: “Call him.”

The wind can blow more than one way. They all changed their tune and fell into line. “Cheer up, on your feet, he's calling you.” I threw off my cloak, and hauled myself up. I stumbled, quickly but uneasily – a man like me shuffles rather than strides – some sixth sense reeling me towards the Son of David.

“What do you want me to do for you?”

## Bartimaeus

### *Mark 10:46–52*

I didn't have to think, not even for a moment. "Rabbi, I want to see."

"Go – your faith has healed you."

And just then, instantly, the darkness dissolved and the light flooded in, and where there was chaos there was definition, and where there was nothing there was... the face of Jesus, the Christ. And seeing and believing, I left Jericho, and followed him along the road, every step I took looking ahead, watching and considering and gazing at the Master, mile after mile after mile.

The day is hot and the only thing that dazzles my eyes now is the midday sun. I'll follow Messiah's light all my days, yield to him my flickering torch, knowing that in the blaze of his goodness, every day now can be only brighter and fairer.<sup>27</sup>

**If Jesus Christ were to ask you now 'What do you want me to do for you?' what would your request be?**

53

# Elizabeth

*Luke*

*1:39–56*



# Elizabeth

## *Luke 1:39–56*

We want to be able to envision the future. I don't think that necessarily makes us faithless or lacking in courage – it seems to me that much of that is understandable and simply hard wired into human nature. But God has a way of imagining the future that far transcends ours, his picture of what's in front of us drawn by the Holy Spirit and as expansive as his limitless foreknowledge. Maybe we only see one possibility for our lives but God sees many; maybe we wind ourselves up believing we've got to be on the perfect-God-track, and if we fall off it, that's a disaster, and yet God can work well and use us, whatever our mistakes.

Elizabeth must have believed her future was done and dusted, all settled with no prospect of the reversal of childlessness. Mary would have been excited by the idea of marriage to Joseph, anticipating the children they might have together. Neither got what they expected: both experienced immeasurably more than they could ask or imagine. The call to us is surely to be comparably open to God, to imitate Elizabeth and Mary and go wherever the Holy Spirit takes us, however risky that may seem.

## Elizabeth

### *Luke 1:39–56*

I 'VE ALWAYS BEEN THE TALKER and Zechariah the quiet one, but never before has it been like this: this hear a pin drop stillness in our home. My thoughts aren't ordered until they've streamed from my mouth, and he can absorb all that like a cloth mopping up water, and still have room in his head for his own divine ruminations, loving the Lord in his heart, mind and soul but rarely having to share it.

At the start I wanted to chatter on and on – as always – but as the odd new reality of his dumbness became our norm, so I slowly folded into his ways, said less and embraced quiet and seclusion, all of this too precious to be put on public display, a pregnant-Granny-circus-act for people to stop and stare at.

He wrote that for him not to speak is fine and fitting, for it's Yahweh who's talking now. For 400 years it's been *so* silent. No kings to command us, no prophets or sages to encourage or rebuke: show us the way or set us right. The pillar of fire by night has been a barely flickering candle. And now this. Yahweh ablaze and kicking back against a fallen, fickle world, literally kicking in an old maid, the Holy Spirit filling my child before he's born. It's ridiculous. No wonder Sarah laughed.

Zechariah pens meticulously the words of the prophet. "For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one

# Elizabeth

## *Luke 1:39–56*

has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him. You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways.”

We can neither hear nor perceive what four centuries of a silent God has been about, but we can see the steady swelling of a tummy and know that something new has been seeded. An awesome thing is indeed on its way, a thing that we did not expect, a coming down that will rend the heavens, whatever exactly that looks like.

I wonder how much of it we’ll get to see, how long our old frames will sustain us, whether we’ll only know him as a child or teen, or will see the blossoming of all that Yahweh’s planted in him. We wonder if John’s words from God will be harsh or healing and what hurt they’ll lead our little Elijah into. ‘Do not be afraid’ the angel said to him. But it’s hard not to be; at least sometimes; if only a little. My hands move across my stomach and I pray the Lord will meet him in a gentle whisper should Herod or some son of his be John’s Ahab, should fear ever cause my beloved to flee for his life to Horeb.

Mary’s coming soon and I want to make the house clean and neat for her, but it’s a double portion of strain to be both full of years and full of child. Everything’s an effort now, but she’ll lift the house from its holy hush. I remember my sister having her, the first time I held her in my arms and cried for my childlessness but passed them off as tears of joy. And sixteen years later, well look at us now.

# Elizabeth

## *Luke 1:39–56*

Her visitation was not in the place of temple sacrifice, but the ordinariness of her bed chamber. Yet it was the same messenger from the same Yahweh that delivered it, indifferent to his surroundings, the same power and presence filling both spaces.

Gabriel speaks a second time to announce the conception of the Son of the Most High, coming to sit on the throne of David and reign over Jacob's descendants. The holy one to be born to her will be none other than the Son of God. His last words to her were "for no word from God will ever fail." I told Zechariah that and he simply nodded and smiled.

When Mary arrives and shouts her always cheerful 'Hello', a thousand butterflies seem to rise in perfect unity and press together against the lining of my womb, so gentle and strong at the same time, one unborn leaping in longing to be able to touch and see and worship the other. It feels like hands reaching out but I wonder too if it's a head bowing down. Our house has been hushed for so long but nothing inhibits me and I speak at the top of my voice.

"Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear! Blessed is she who believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"

Mary doesn't speak back but instead she sings, and what else can she do? Her soul glorifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her Saviour. His mercy, she says, extends to all who fear him,



# Elizabeth

## *Luke 1:39–56*

from generation to generation. And as she sings that, I think of my forefather Aaron and what he started, and Zechariah showing up day after day in the Temple to honour that covenant, a long unbroken line of all the faithful who kept on sacrificing and seeking, even when Yahweh seemed to have nothing to say.

All my life I've believed in God who comes through. Now I get to see God who comes down. The humble are lifted up; the hungry are full; the promises are coming true. Messiah is on his way.

**Has God ever done an awesome thing that you did not expect in your life? How does the possibility of him doing such an awesome thing in the future make you feel?**

# 54

**Simeon**

*Luke*

*2:22-40*



## Simeon

### *Luke 2:22-40*

How did Simeon know that this child was Messiah?  
How did he see what others couldn't? The answer appears to be an openness to the Holy Spirit, mentioned three times in three verses from Luke 2:25-27. "Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the **Holy Spirit** was on him. It had been revealed by the **Holy Spirit** that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the **Spirit**, he went into the temple courts."

Simeon was open to the Spirit and the Spirit in turn was upon him, revealing himself to Simeon, moving him. Who knows what God can do through us, if we're ready to wait – maybe even for a lifetime, as Anna did also – in a similar posture of openness?

# Simeon

## *Luke 2:22-40*

**T**HERE IS ALWAYS BUSTLE and busyness in the Temple, the comings and goings of those so familiar with its holiness and scale that all that is special now passes them by. They mingle with those who are confused, pilgrims here for the very first time, who look around themselves in puzzlement asking ‘how does all this work?’ and ‘where are we meant to go?’, assuming that those around them have it all better worked out than they do.

If you want to *seek* the Lord you must come here, yet if you want to *know* the Lord you must seek silence. The older I get, the less sure I am how that circle can be squared, just as I’m less sure about so many things.

Next year in Jerusalem, things will be better, but next year comes, and the year after, and the year after that, but what really ever changes? It’s been too long waiting for Messiah, too long waiting for even half a semblance of David to show his face, too long waiting for more priests for whom atonement is more than a job, for prophets to come again to lament and grieve, scorn but inspire us.

We tell the tale of Goliath defeated whilst Octavian’s Governor of Judea looks down from his palace. We recount the fall of Jericho’s walls whilst inside this city’s boundaries march legions of Roman cavalry. We remember Josiah finding the law whilst Herod finds endless new ways to turn justice upside down and inside out.

## Simeon

### *Luke 2:22-40*

We celebrate the sparing of our firstborn sons but wonder if Yahweh now passes by rather than passes over. My eyes are too old to meditate and mine new gems in the Scriptures, and fail almost as much from looking for the Lord.

Everyone says we need an army from Yahweh to liberate us, a new warrior king. But our greater need is the consolation of this nation: every tribe and town; old and young; man and woman; boy and girl. The God who comforts his people, makes them drop their defences, and nurses them on his lap. Reveals to them that to be calm and content is the picture of freedom he wants them to see. Not making Judah great again, but longing for Yahweh to be great in Judah.

But the Lord has given me his peace of late. I'll not die until I see Messiah. And I'll see Messiah because I'm looking for something different, will perceive God's otherness in the ordinary, the divine from head to toe in twenty inches.

I catch a glimpse of a young couple not even out of their teens, obviously from out of town, nervous looking, awed by Temple grandeur and fear of the Lord, yet anxious also of acting foolishly, putting a foot wrong, being scolded by officialdom that wants to keep things well drilled and frictionless. But the proper presence of God needs the sight of those as vulnerable as these.

The attendants are shamefully impatient with them as they count out the money for the two pigeons, not even able to stretch to the

## Simeon

### *Luke 2:22-40*

turtledoves, reduced as they are to endless coins of small change, hesitant, just about having enough. The price is paid that their firstborn be redeemed, though the boy himself looks remarkably pure, in lesser need of sacrifice to cleanse than anybody in this place, and my sense of that being about more than infant innocence.

Because as they approach me, I'm washed over by the essence of the Spirit. The father carefully hands over the pigeons and as quick as I can I pass the birds to my assistant, eager to hold majesty in mortal flesh, my hairy, pockmarked, withered hands cradling this perfection. Forty days old but eternity in his head. I stretch him high above me and look beyond him to the heavens.

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

The parents are a mixture of both awe and poise, lifted to some other place by what is spoken over their boy, yet steady as if they've heard similar words before. You'd never pick them out in an identity parade search for the mighty, but the one who knows best has chosen this pair. There's more to them than meets the eye. As there will have to be. They will need much strength for they will endure much sorrow, especially she that has borne him. I speak the words of Aaron over them – that the Lord will bless and keep

## Simeon

### *Luke 2:22-40*

them, turn his face towards them and give them peace – but I’m compelled to say something more to the mother, speaking gently to soften this truth.

“This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Those words will stay with her, linger and be turned over tonight and for many nights and years to come. Almost as soon as I speak them, Anna draws by the mother’s side, thanking God, praying and praising, and promising also the future redemption of Israel. Her timing, like the Lord’s is impeccable. They need that to be the last thing they hear before they leave.

The four of us huddle tight before they depart, me embracing him, Anna embracing her, bonded by the secret Yahweh has shared with just the four of us, the old his gift to the young. They have a long journey ahead.

**Are you still enough for the Spirit to rest on you, open enough for the Spirit to reveal to you, and ready for the Spirit to move you?**

55

# A Sinful Woman

*Luke*

*7:36–50*





## A Sinful Woman

### *Luke 7:36–50*

One of the hallmarks of the church denomination in which I was raised – and still belong to – is covenant theology, which places great importance in passing on faith to children through both Christian parenting and the input of the local church family, honouring Peter’s words in Acts 2 that ‘the promise is for you and for your children.’

Whilst this has many merits and benefits, I sometimes wonder if one of its downsides is that so many church members within the denomination have come to faith as small children, and so, never having strayed dramatically far from God, don’t see ourselves as having far to go to return home. That can show itself in a certain hardness and gracelessness at times, as a people who have been forgiven less invariably run the risk of being less loving. However early in our lives we have come to faith, we all need to retain something of this woman’s astonishing wonder and amazement at the love of God at work in our lives.

## A Sinful Woman

### *Luke 7:36–50*

**I** WONDER HOW MANY PEOPLE get to experience their dreams coming true, *actually* live as an adult what the child had hoped for. I never saw Rahab as an anti-heroine I wanted to emulate. It's just that one thing leads to another and before you know it you've fallen so far off whatever a road called righteousness looks like that there's no chance at all of ever scrambling back up the hillside, dusting yourself down, and starting the journey again.

And that can't happen anyway, because it's clear to the holy and clear to me also that there are gates now between me and that road, and they've been locked from the inside and the keys thrown away. So, they weigh me in the scales and find me wanting, but I suspect for all their scholarly godliness, they read books a damn sight better than they can really read a human being. Because I don't know the great and learned things that they do, but I get that life can chew you up and spit you out, that one person's promiscuity is another person's pragmatism.

I lie with the Romans at night and hide from the Hebrews by day. My time is spent mostly in the company of men, a bit of Palestine exotica for the occupying forces. Some are rough and ready, can't stop being soldiers even alone with a woman. Others are needier and homesick, longing for intimacy hundreds of miles from home, needing to be heard as much as held, but it's their money that's paying for the time, and if that's what they want I guess that's ok.

## A Sinful Woman

### *Luke 7:36–50*

And they do pay. They pay well. Piety can't put a roof over my head, and at the end of every evening I count up my earnings, what's for now and what's for the future, the time that will surely come when I'm past my best-before date, yesterday's desire and unwanted. And know too, that however much I can tell my story and play back my life in my mind to see that in all too many ways I'm a victim, when I'm alone in my chamber in the dead of night, it's self-loathing I bathe in more than anything else.<sup>28</sup>

I'm still surprised that Simon's servants let me in, but a few coins can buy anyone and once I was there, I was there, and the Pharisee so wanted to make a good impression on Master Jesus that he wasn't going to make a scene and put me out. I knew what I wanted to do but I can't explain where it came from, for I've learnt to be calculated, not the reckless type. Yet once the idea got planted in my head it was impossible to shake it off.

You can't afford to be too polite or life's opportunities will pass you by. I realised that once they started into their meal, the moment could slip right out of my hands, that I couldn't steal in but would have to break in. Everything went both slow and silent as I rose and the strangest thing is that despite how I imagined it would be, nobody tried to stop me.

I fell at his feet and sobbed, the tears streaming down my face and me lifting my hands from my head to his feet, wiping the moisture

## A Sinful Woman

### *Luke 7:36–50*

from myself and wetting him as if with the dew of despair, my eyes a well inside me from which all the years of shame and despair flowed. To most in the room the tears were more like some liquid from sin's bottle (Chateau du Lust and Immorality, perhaps) that was knocked over and spilled, but once this was started, it couldn't be stopped.

Scandal pervades the room but the beauty of the fragrance overpowers it, whatever the shock when I unclip my hair and kneel right down to pull it over and back and around his hard and calloused feet. He stays calm and still, fixing my gaze, letting me serve him. All my life's been about men touching me, all the grubby grasping hands that can't keep themselves off me, but the tables turn as I touch this one man. I'm told his touch can heal, and I don't know about that, but I surely know his power when my hair and hands fall on him.

Our world turns on obsessions with clean and unclean but there's so much freedom in this moment. I kiss and I kiss, my mouth darting here and there to cover every inch of his feet. For a moment I thought of Ruth lying beneath Boaz - Rahab's very own son - and my longing all my life for my own redeemer. I'm her and he's him. I don't know what redemption for me might even look like but I know that I need it, want it, am starting to feel it. I'd always wondered if such good news was only a fairy tale, if such blessed things can truly happen, but I know that they can and indeed they are, right here, right now, in real time.

## A Sinful Woman

### *Luke 7:36–50*

Half the people in the room don't know where to look and the other half can't take their eyes off us. But what does that matter? When your reputation is on the floor, you've nowhere further to fall than on your own knees. Down I am and down I stay.

And yet for some reason it's the prickly Pharisee that Jesus condemns and not me. A story is told about debts getting paid but that's for greater minds than mine to meditate on. I have my own story to tell and that's what I'll cherish.

“Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you, go in peace.”

**We long for the experience of Jesus touching us, but what might it mean to you to turn that image around and long for the experience of you touching him?**

56

Mary

*Luke*

*10:38-42*



## Mary

### *Luke 10:38-42*

“You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one.” How many of us, however long we’ve been following Jesus, need to hear that truth, over and over? The demands and expectations of twenty first century jobs, family life (caring for children, grandchildren, or ageing parents – or maybe a combination of these), and activist church programmes that often place huge expectations on volunteers, can all conspire to rob us of what we need most: time with Jesus. And that’s before we consider the allure of trappings such as Netflix, sport and social media.

I’ve often thought that one of the worst aspects of my witness is the constant busyness of my life. I wonder how many colleagues and friends have looked at me over the years and thought ‘the Jesus you talk about sounds interesting, but goodness your life seems exhausting.’ How much more attractive might we and our faith be, if we were actually to take these words of Jesus to heart?

## Mary

### *Luke 10:38-42*

**I**T SEEMS STRANGE TO SAY THIS, but it's amazing how one can feel so obvious yet invisible at one and the same time. I stand out, of course, like the proverbial sore finger, the one woman in the room, but I'm too caught up in his words and wisdom, his poise and purpose, to be aware or concerned with other's opinions.

Whatever the men are thinking, they keep it to themselves. Why upset the apple cart with fussy righteousness about men's places and women's places, when you can make a bigger impression asking the best question of the day? I get plenty of room around me: they take the seats and I'm alone on the floor, lest someone should inadvertently spoil their purity by brushing up against me. I haven't just invaded their space: I've captured it, put my flag upon it and that of my gender, have dug in tight and will not easily yield this presence and territory.

And that also means I get to sit right at his feet, literally, not just 'sit at the feet of the Rabbi' that is the holier than thou expression, where you talk more humbly than you act. My neck and back will be sore, tomorrow, from looking upwards, but I don't notice it now, and anyhow, him looking down and me looking up feels the best place to be in the room.

I know Martha will want help, that she has this need to be the perfect hostess. She'll have the tasks divided out in her head,



# Mary

## *Luke 10:38-42*

the bits she'll do, the supporting act I will be to her. Those jobs are never entirely absent from my mind, but Jesus absorbs me more and more. I'll hear his sermon and then I'll go. Then I'll hear him answer a few questions and get up to help after that. But then he starts asking questions himself, opens it all up, doesn't have to be the centre of attention the whole time, cares about us as people rather than an audience, wants to hear what we think too. Before I know it, two hours have rolled by.

I can feel the tension rising as I sit there. Nothing is slammed down in front of guests but every time she comes in, she's a little more frantic. Nothing is said, but who needs words when a sigh can say so much? Counting the room to see how many still need a plate of lunch, muttering the numbers, and with it the sideways glance that says there'll be no scene now, but I'll have hell to pay when the guests go home.

Sometimes it can all seem so joyless and moralistic with Martha, everything so dreary and dutiful. "You love all this talk, Mary, of loving your enemy and walking the extra mile. Well, what about loving your sister and walking from one room to another with a plate of breads and olives? The Lord might provide the food from his good and generous hand, but he doesn't prepare it and set it directly in front of us."

Give us this day our daily bread, but we must do the mixing and

# Mary

## *Luke 10:38-42*

kneading and baking. She expects the Master to take her side, which I guess we're all guilty of, at least some of the time. Just because someone's a little blind, doesn't mean they're always bad on those occasions. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself. Tell her to help me!"

As much as I remember what he said, I remember the way that he said it. "Martha, Martha." It's like a Roman commander bending and turning the reins to slow down his horse when he rides into town. If the mind races, it gets to its destination quicker, but it misses so many good sights and sounds along the way.

"You are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Jesus knows that I don't just have hands and feet to do chores and jobs. I was made for more than cleaning and cooking and child bearing. I have a heart that wants above all to love and worship. I have a soul that will slowly die if it can never be still. I have a mind and can love Yahweh with it. I have strength and can carry good news to others. *Hear that, o righteous men of Israel. Hear that, please!*

Much of today will pass away when evening comes and we lie down to rest. Tomorrow will require that fresh water is fetched from the well, new fruit is picked, new dough prepared, clothes newly

# Mary

## *Luke 10:38-42*

washed. Sometimes hard work is good for the soul, but much of the time it crushes. But what it never does is go away. Each day has enough tasks of its own, just like worries. By the sweat of their brows the men work the land, and by the sweat of our brows we turn their harvests into meals.

But time with Jesus, like faith, hope and love, is what remains. There's a reason we should call him Lord and King, not just friend, even though he's been the best friend that Lazarus, Martha and I have known. We build the day around him, make him our first thought, not an afterthought. Moments to think, moments to pray, moments to remember: they stay with us and slow us down, like he put the brakes on Martha. You can't be active to any good purpose, if you don't know how to be still. And who to be still with.

**A wise friend once told me to 'give up the good for the best'.  
What might that look like in your life?**

57

# The Crippled Woman Healed

*Luke*

*13:10–17*



## The Crippled Woman Healed *Luke 13:10–17*

The Gospel accounts record 32 separate miracles of Jesus. Turning water into wine, multiplying food to feed thousands, the submission of nature (walking on water) and the raising of the dead (Jairus's daughter, Lazarus and an unnamed widow's son) account for nine of the miracles. The rest are healings.

Four of those healings relate to women: Peter's mother-in-law; the woman with a haemorrhage; the Syrophenician's daughter; and this healing of an infirm woman.

The account that we read in Luke 13 is one of 14 miracles that are only referenced once across the four Gospels. Given how marginalised and mistreated many women were in first century Palestine – and all the more so those who were infirm – there seems to me something particularly attractive about these miracles. Jesus doesn't only heal the sick: he also notices the invisible. He doesn't only display his power: he also restores the disempowered. And in this case, he doesn't only heal the outer sickness: he also sets the lady free from an internal oppression.

## The Crippled Woman Healed *Luke 13:10–17*

**I**T IS, WE'RE TOLD, the sacred day of rest. A day not to work. A day to be still. A day set apart for worship and to imitate our creator, to catch our breath before we go again at the start of a new week of chores and labour. This one in seven is different, a holy rhythm that is the heartbeat of our faith.

The softer of the wise men say it is a gift of God for our goodness, though for many of us it seems to be just two more impossible lines to stay within. How, in any case, can you rest when you feel so tense and tight? And how do you cherish the blessing of rest when your body's too broken for paid toil, but every task's a breathless effort, when high shelves are beyond reach and corners impossible to clean?

It is not my place to speak at synagogue. It is my place to simply listen. But that's ok. I want nothing more than listening and it's something I do well. A bent spine affords little scope to look around, to be distracted, to people watch and wonder who's pure or impure, who's walking humbly, who's loving mercy. I see more sandals than I do faces, but I've come to treasure such a view of the fellowship, for feet all look much the same, and I want to believe that's how God sees us. I am outwardly stiff necked but inside my heart is straight.

It's almost twenty years now since the tightness seeded and settled within me. It was about the time I moved with my parents to the house on Olive Row, the one where people said the lady who lived there before was into fortune telling. But we were new to the village,

## The Crippled Woman Healed *Luke 13:10–17*

and mummy said that people say all sorts of things, particularly about strange types who don't fit in. The soreness started not long after, then the pain and all its spasms, and after that the impossible stiffness.

People ask me if I'm angry, but I ask them what good that would do, it would change nothing, and they smile and have no answer. The truth is more disappointment and regret.

Disappointment that as mummy and daddy aged, I couldn't help them and support them the way life's proper order says I ought to have been able to. Daddy went first, and she washed clothes and floors and made all the food right up to the very end, until the day she fell at the market and never got up again.

Regret that despite all my betrothed's soft soap about not leaving me, and being faithful come what may, the engagement was broken – and in a pretty blunt manner – when his parents realised that I wouldn't get better, and leant on him hard. I hobble past the nearest synagogue to come to this one here, because he and the woman he did marry go there, along with their children – three sons she gave him – and some things are just too difficult to encounter, even if he's oddly more awkward than I am.

But it's funny that the older I get the more peace I now find I have, even if I've less hope. I can only bow. My body permits no other posture.

## The Crippled Woman Healed *Luke 13:10–17*

‘Lift up your heads, you gates,’ the Rabbi reads, ‘be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.’ The Temple cannot break like bodies can. Its heads are strong enough, permanent enough, to give the Lord the praise he’s due, perhaps in ways that we can never be.

A Galilean called Jesus is reading the law today. His accent is strange but he makes the words so clear. The way he speaks them, I believe he could impart wisdom and wonder without so much as a scroll in front of him.

He calls someone forward and from the corners of my eyes I can see those left and right of me are looking in my direction. Staring up I observe a gentle, beckoning smile. I gingerly walk forward on my cane. He eases his knees to my level like a father to a child, talks to me, not at me, looks at me, not around. In the middle of the synagogue, I am the centre of his world.

“Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.”

And speaking those words, he sets his hands upon my shoulders and as he pushes on his knees to return to his normal height, he brings me with him, like we’re rising up together from a pool, heat flowing through my back and neck as it straightens. It’s as if for a moment I am Samson, but the power is without not within, cutting all the ropes that bind me, making me stand tall. We’re evenly face to face now and his smile is the light of the world.



## The Crippled Woman Healed *Luke 13:10–17*

Marvelled applause ripples through our meeting house. I've never heard that in this place before – it seems this freedom he speaks of is contagious. I look around and see more faces at any one time than I've done so in almost the past two decades. And they see my face too. I belong again.

But suddenly there's a hushing and shushing, a calling to order. This joy will not do. One face remains scornful, dislocated at the peoples' love for this man. Its righteous voice shouts nervously, maybe to Jesus, maybe to me, maybe to all of us, grasping for a foothold.

“There are six days for work. So, come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”

But I didn't come for work, sir. I came for worship. I came for rest. Your arguments are beyond me and for finer minds than mine. All I know about what happened today is that I received what I came for.

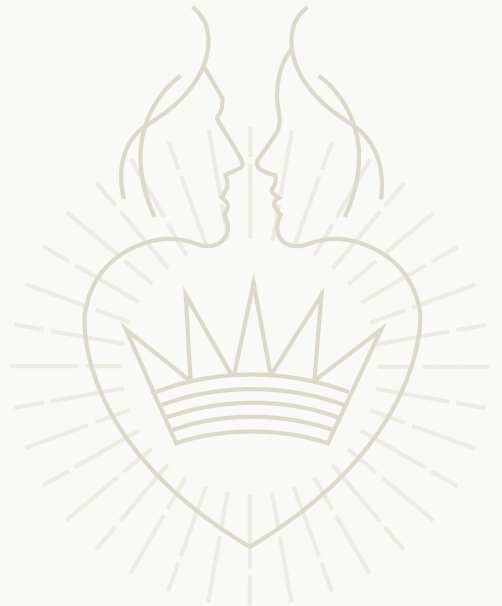
**What do you think is work in our minds that isn't work to God?**

# 58

## The Rich Young Ruler

*Luke*

*18:18–30*



## The Rich Young Ruler

### *Luke 18:18–30*

It's noticeable that the stories of the Rich Young Ruler and Zacchaeus are located so closely together in Luke (the only gospel where Zacchaeus appears, whilst there are also accounts of the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19 and Mark 10). General life experience would seem to suggest that the younger man should have been more idealistic and open to formation and the older man harder to reach because he'd be more set in his ways, but those expectations are turned on their head. When their encounters with Jesus happen, the younger man – who's in the acquiring and empire building phase of his life – seems to have much less insight into his own heart and need to change than the older man who, paradoxically, has much more to lose.

## The Rich Young Ruler

### *Luke 18:18–30*

I 'M AHEAD OF WHERE I EXPECTED to be at my age. Ahead too of where my dad was at this point in life. My backers are pleased. I've surprised a lot of people. Borrowing and building, loans and land, return on investment, this comes naturally to me. And I've noticed lately that people are coming *to me* now, asking for my advice, bringing me into projects earlier. And bigger projects too.

Life is good, and yet... I find myself starting to ask if there's more *to* this life, sometimes even if there's life *after* this life. That's one of the things about wealth; one of its greatest luxuries is having time to think about these things. It's a quality too rare in people. They say people like me get ahead by luck, but if it's all 'right place, right time' or 'who you know, not what you know', why aren't more doing it is what I ask? But too few people take time to think these days.

I'd heard about this Jesus. I wanted so much to meet him but now that I have, I'm not so sure about him. Not so sure about a lot of things. It happened so quickly, and no matter how many times I play it over, I still can't get my head around it.

I got myself to the front of the crowd. I'm not sure how, it just seems to be some way I carry myself now, the odd look or hand on a shoulder to move someone aside. But I don't want to think about that too much, in case I lose it. You should think about a lot of things, but you should *never* overthink your strengths.

## The Rich Young Ruler

### *Luke 18:18–30*

And I remember falling on my knees. That's not an easy thing to do in a crowd, particularly one that could have some of your tenants in it, but my Mum always told me, 'you show respect to a Rabbi, these are good men, they have a lot to teach us.'

It started badly and went downhill from there. What was that thing with the putdown at the start? "Why do you call me good?" He *is* good, everyone knows he's good, that he's gooder than good if there is such a thing. I was only calling him what everyone calls him. And I plainly didn't call him God! Humility, I can have, but there's something about false humility that's awfully off-putting.

And then "You know the commandments," he said. "You shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and mother."

And as I said, I've kept all those since I was a boy. That wasn't me being proud, that was just me saying what I've done. I didn't have to think much about that. I know I'm not sinless but I actually think I've more than a bit of Job in me, because if you asked me to describe myself in one word, I'd say 'blameless'. It's the bridge of the righteous between sinless and holiness, and I reckon I do blameless well. And it's not a quality that seemed to make it wrong for Job to be a rich man, so why is it wrong for me?

So, meeting this Jesus, in a way, was a strangely disappointing anticlimax. I must confess: I was expecting something more profound.

## The Rich Young Ruler

### *Luke 18:18–30*

And funny also that he didn't mention the first four commandments; I don't know what that was about. But I reckon I've done ok on them as well.

And when I said what I've done and how I've lived I get this. "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

But I didn't ask what I lack. I asked what I needed to do to inherit eternal life.

The words keep ringing in my ears. Everything! Sell *everything!* But it's all been earned fair and square. And I tithe. I can multiply 0.9 in my head in a heartbeat: I know what's legitimately mine. 57 talents, go, 51 for me, little round down for me, little round up for the synagogue, scrupulous the whole way through.

I do *everything* the law commands of me. Isn't that the *everything* he should be worried about? Always have done. But give it all up for the poor, for the people that can't pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. For those who queue at synagogue food bank at one o'clock and are drinking too much wine by two. There's a reason I have them pay a month in advance and not in arrears. What business of theirs is my soul? Should I be buying their sacrificial pigeons as well?

Would that be poor people like the Galilean ne'er-do-wells that he's

## The Rich Young Ruler

### *Luke 18:18–30*

gathered about him, fishermen or casual labourers or whatever they are. I'd back myself against them in a purity contest any day of the week.

At the end of it all I expected him to call me back, to say something more. It felt ruthless the way he let me leave. A good deal maker knows when to let people walk away but I'd expect better from a Rabbi. And I *still* think he might at least have pulled me aside, rather than speak to me that way in front of a crowd. I wouldn't do that to either a debtor or a creditor. And I say he was ruthless and yet... the thing that stays with me is the look. I've never been looked at that way before. The words still don't seem fair but goodness, that man looked at me like he really loved me.

As I was leaving town, I saw a small vacant property that needs doing up. I could put three men on that for a month and turn twenty per cent on it. I've never been one for paralysis by analysis and before... I'd have snapped it up in a heartbeat. But now I'm not so sure. And all because of the look. I can't get the look out of my head...

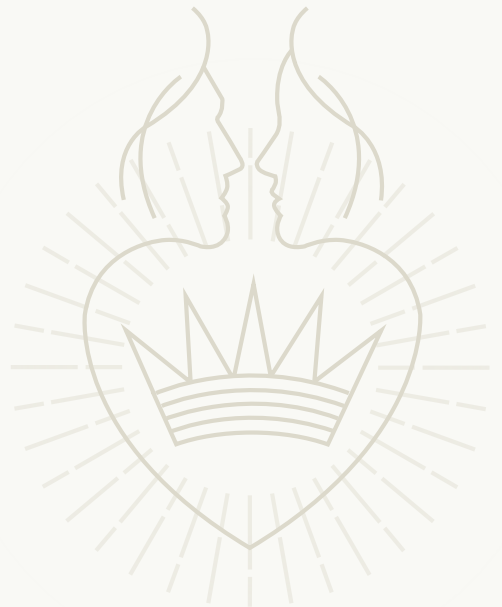
**The Rich Young Ruler asked a question eerily equivalent to the modern evangelical gospel. It seems he genuinely wanted to be saved; yet he didn't want to make any lifestyle adjustments. How does his story speak to the church in this generation?**

# 59

## Zacchaeus

*Luke*

*19:1–10*





## Zacchaeus

### *Luke 19:1–10*

We all find ourselves in conversations from time to time, whether in our homes or coffee shops or on the High Street, where other people come up in conversation and their characters are distilled in a matter of words. I don't know what other people say when they talk about me, but human nature is such that, like most people, I'd want it to be positive.

With that thought in mind I've always been struck at the sense of total condemnation in which some people in Jesus' day were known in their towns and villages as 'tax collectors and sinners,' the door slammed entirely shut on any redeeming aspects of their characters. What must it have been like to be thought of that way? How does a human soul bear such weight put upon them? Zacchaeus was one such man, not just a tax collector but also the Chief tax collector in Jericho, which I guess also made him a Chief of Sinners.

## Zacchaeus

### *Luke 19:1–10*

**J**ESUS OF NAZARETH this and Jesus of Nazareth that. What had I not heard about this man Jesus? This dreamy radical from Galilee: the things he did and the things he said. An itinerant always on the move: a handy way to avoid his dues, I'd wager.

He'd already brought a good few of my own kind under his spell. Wherever he visited, we seemed to be one of the sorts he went for. There was Levi in Capernaum in particular. I'd never met him myself – wouldn't know the man if he walked past me in the street – but they say he had a great future in front of him, a properly smart guy, could have been whatever he wanted. But he just got up from the booth one day and walked away. And for what? There's got to be some imbalance to a man like that. So sad the way some throw away good prospects.

Death and taxes *are* the two great certainties. You can moan all you like and say a shekel is a shackle, moralise about everything being rigged and stitched up, but you can't wish Tiberius Caesar Augustus away. Herod tax, Roman tax, Temple tax, how much of a burden really is a bit of Zacchaeus tax on top? it's just a glaze of honey across the top of a cake? If you don't like it, cross the road and get yourself on the right side of the system.

And you know they go on and on and on about purity, an irony not lost on me, because there's nothing purer and more cleansing,

# Zacchaeus

## *Luke 19:1–10*

actually, than putting in long hours at something you're good at.<sup>29</sup> I'm a man aptly named, well... sort of<sup>30</sup>... But it's not for no reason that we call our measure for gold 'talents'. And believe me. I'm a talented man.

Every year I say I'm going to beat last year and every year I do. I write down three percent on a piece of paper, but inside myself I want *at least* five. It never gets any easier but I've the exit plan worked out. Five more years of this will do me and then I'll be out of this swamp, off to the coast and our second home near Joppa, 'Castel del Little People', a nod to both me and the people who paid for it. But until then it'll be tariffs, tolls, imposts and customs. And it all has to reconcile.

If I'm going to get a proper look at Jesus, I need a decent vantage point. It's not just the fact that I'm no Goliath when it comes to feet and inches. It's also that there are people round here who would knife me as quick as look at me, and if I tried standing on a rooftop, they'd be queued up behind me to push me off. And my heavies aren't with me today, something about a Bar Mitzvah in the family or some excuse like it. They've only four boys between the two of them and they seem to turn 12 with remarkable frequency. So, I can't be too careful.

It's a long time since I've climbed a tree. I'm better at getting up the sort of greasy poles that no one can actually see. I clamber up the

# Zacchaeus

## *Luke 19:1–10*

blind side to the crowd. I'll be damned if I'm going to give *any of them* the pleasure of seeing this. Short legs and arms and too many good dinners make it damn hard work, and there's a good robe plucked on the way up, only the second time I'd worn it – and I can't not notice these things, I'll not wear it again – but I manage to get myself in a great position. It's certainly a different view of Jericho and its people than any I've seen before.

And there they all are. There's that builder who cried poverty about needing more time to pay, the one with the sickly child. There's the olive oil trader with the hooky-sized jars. And that stropky merchant with the better clothes and bigger house than match his declarations. I'm not through with him.

And there he is too, Mr. Celebrity Rabbi. The excitement builds in waves through the crowd as he starts to walk my direction, all touch and tactility, doesn't mind the people being near him, rather him than me.

And then he stops. And looks up. I look about me and I see it's me he's looking at, and then all these heads turn in unison and it registers on their faces who *they're* looking at, and I want to say 'what are you doing?' but nothing comes out of my mouth. All my life people have looked down at me, whether it's calling me 'midget' or 'dwarf' or 'mouse' behind my back, or disdaining me as I sit at my booth, asking me how many cushions I have to see over the top of

# Zacchaeus

## *Luke 19:1–10*

it. And as I'm perched up a tree, I should be looking down on him. But it isn't like that. It's as if we're on this strangely level ground. And then Jesus of Nazareth speaks:

“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”

It all goes quiet. You could hear a denarius drop off a table. Then a chorus of disapproval, muttering and head shaking, all the judging that's the thing they're best at. “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

Because that's who I am. I'm Zacchaeus the sinner. But he stands firm. He doesn't shift. He keeps looking straight at me. He doesn't speak but something on his face says it's ok. I'm the one that's loved. Not an eye for an eye, but eyes locked on eyes. I should flush with embarrassment but I find myself looking straight back.

I've always weighed so carefully. The arguments for and against, pluses and minuses, debits and credits. My head's the fastest abacus in Jericho. And then this rushes from my heart and gut.

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Later I heard *all* the stories. The miracles and the parables, the sick healed and the hungry fed. Talk of being born again, and living

# Zacchaeus

## *Luke 19:1–10*

water, and lost sheep and coins and sons. But I didn't get any of that. I just got the look and the invitation. The look that said I'm loved and the invitation that said I'm acceptable.

Salvation came to my house, because the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. Because like I said: it all has to reconcile...

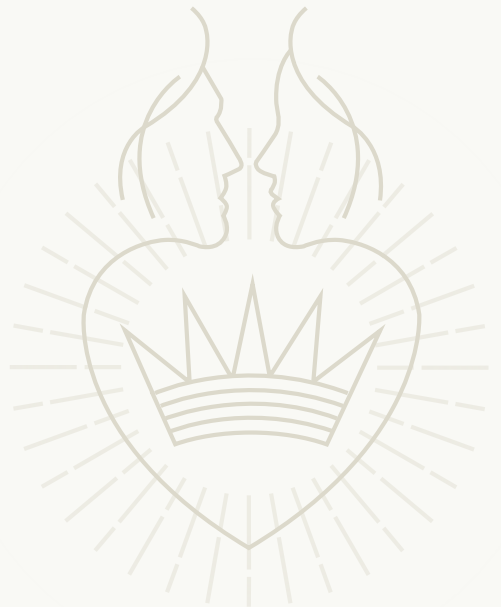
**Reflect on the astonishing truth that Zacchaeus was an unacceptable person converted by the simple act of Jesus telling him he was acceptable.**

60

Joseph of  
Arimathea

*Luke*

*23:50–56*



## Joseph of Arimathea

### *Luke 23:50–56*

We all know the story of Peter’s betrayal of Jesus in the temple courtyard, but did Joseph of Arimathea feel a similar guilt about what happened that fateful Friday? John’s gospel tells us that he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, because he feared the Jewish leaders, of whom he was actually one. What kind of frustration and shame must he have felt with himself? But he finds his courage. He steps away from the Jewish council and boldly ‘comes out’ as a follower of Jesus to take the lead in taking care of his Master’s body. There comes a time when the tension of being one man in private and another in public becomes unsustainable, and a brave and costly choice has to be made.



## Joseph of Arimathea

### *Luke 23:50–56*

**I** 'M A MAN OF SCROLLS AND THINKING. I don't do many practical things. Not because I think such tasks are beneath me, but more because I've never been particularly good at them. Words, ideas and arguments are the crops of the field that I excel in. 'I can barely drive a nail into a piece of wood,' I used to say, jokingly. But I'll never express my uncoordinated ways with that turn of phrase again. Not after what I've seen today.

Not much makes sense this past week, but a Roman soldier among those in charge of operations – rough and ready but with a rare streak of humanity that acknowledges that I've not been here before and don't know how it all works, where to stand, where to look, what to say – is clear on one thing. 'As long as he's alive, he's *our* responsibility. You offer him not so much as a crumb of comfort without my say-so. But when he's breathed his last, and we've checked that he's definitely gone, then you can have him. But that includes the dirty work of taking him down, you got that? If I'd wanted to be an undertaker, I'd have done that, but I signed up to fight for Rome and Caesar, strange kind of fighting as this might seem to you. And be quick about it, I don't want your lot whining in my ear about their precious Sabbath: you've all caused us enough problems this week. The sooner you have him down, the sooner we knock off.'

I show him the piece of paper from Pilate that says I have permission to take the body. The Governor was shocked at the relative speed of

## Joseph of Arimathea

### *Luke 23:50–56*

his death, almost disappointed. ‘The greater the spirit in them, the longer they tend to linger.’ The soldier checks the documentation over but in a perfunctory fashion. He doesn’t seem bothered about details. He wouldn’t have made much of a Pharisee.

Jesus was the softest of men – by which I mean compassionate, there was nothing weak about him – but he died in the hardest of places. And us? We’re the worst of humanity posing as its best.<sup>31</sup> To think that all those disputes with him were rooted in interpretation of Torah, were about degrees of holiness and honouring God, but in order to settle it, it all had to be brought out here, outside the walls of precious Zion, to a hillside where so much blood cries out from the ground that even if you close your eyes, you’re equally tormented by voices in your head, Abel ad infinitum.

More people cry and moan and wail here than use words to form sentences.

And I can’t even look back on last night, or the weeks that went before it, and say that at least I had a tongue in my head. There’s no point being principled in your mind if those thoughts can’t find a way to your mouth. And now Jesus is dead and I’m ostracised anyway. Their catcalls and abuse at the foot of the cross leave me speechless, the divine being devoured by the devoted.

But I can do *this*, however too little and too late it seems. Jesus may never know I was there for him in this hour, but I’ll know. Someone

## Joseph of Arimathea

### *Luke 23:50–56*

said he told an amazing story earlier this week, the last of a bit of really pumped-up teaching that he did on the Mount of Olives, passionate and raining down woes and warnings. He talked about sheep and goats and how we are to treat the hungry and thirsty, strangers and prisoners. ‘You were a dead man and I put you in my tomb.’ I’d want to be able to look him in the eye and say I did that for him, if I ever actually saw him again.

While I’d gone to see Pilate, Nicodemus had rushed back to the city to get myrrh and aloes. For some reason the eleven were hanging back, but they loved him most, knew him best, and I guess they were most confused. But Nicodemus – born again Nicodemus, who was one of the first to cotton on and see who Jesus *really* was – wasn’t going to let me do this on my own. You learn who your friends are when hard times come.

They give us two small ladders, and I take his left side – the side pierced with a spear – and Nicodemus the right. The ground is unsteady, the cross less firm than we expected with the weight of three men on it.

The smell off him is both stale and strong, vinegar and sweat and dried blood, and between the beating the night before, and the thorns on his head, and the savage work of the cross itself, there’s barely an inch of him uninjured. Touching him the first time I recoil: who’d ever have thought that Jesus of Nazareth could become cold? This tree was green but now is dry.

## Joseph of Arimathea

### *Luke 23:50–56*

I realise I've never been this physically close to him before, and feel like I'm serving him but invading his space at the same time. I can't remember the last time I ate or even what it was, but suddenly my mouth is full of vomit. It's harder to swallow than to spit it out, but I fight lest the sickness inside me spews out and desecrates his body.

We didn't have a plan as such, but we were reverent and careful. A heart to do a job well can be more important than skill or technique. The clock is against us but once we're up the ladders, we don't rush. It's already been strangely dark once today and we'll find time to do this right before the sun goes down again. First, we do the hands that healed and touched so many, then the arms that embraced the outcasts and unclean, and after that we have to inch down the ladders, more awkwardly now, with the weight of his upper body on our shoulders. Stepping back on to the ground, two servants step forward to hold him, and we unfasten his legs and the feet that walked the length and breadth of Palestine to spread good news and announce the kingdom I've been waiting for all my life.

The linen cloth is already laid out and we carefully set him down and wrap his body. The women want to serve him as we've just done, get to work with their spices and washing. But the day of rest is too close now and that will have to wait: his star has fallen but the three Sabbath stars are glistening in the darkening sky.<sup>32</sup> I feel clinical telling them this but they accept it. What's another sorrow on this day of days?

## Joseph of Arimathea

### *Luke 23:50–56*

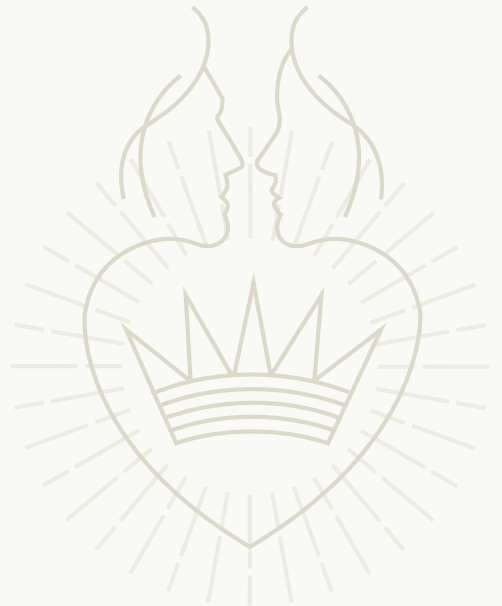
Later, when we come out of the tomb, and several of us are getting ready to move the stone across the entrance, two soldiers are standing there, sent to seal it and then keep guard. Nicodemus goes to argue, says enough is enough, and I do what I can to call him off. They don't want to be there any more than we want them there, but orders are orders, and what's the point in fighting now? I want to go home. I want to be alone. I leave the soldiers, one at either side. I don't know what they think they're waiting for.

**Have you ever felt that you've let Jesus down badly, by not speaking up for him? What might you do to make amends?**

# 61

## Mary (Mother of Jesus)

*John*  
*2:1–12*



## Mary (Mother of Jesus)

### *John 2:1–12*

A statement that I often hear in worship services, prayer meetings and in conversation with friends is that ‘God is in control’. It’s not a phrase that is ever directly used about God in Scripture, yet many believers clearly set great store by the certainty attached to such a statement, and given the frequency with which it’s used, they seem to genuinely believe it to be one of the foremost praiseworthy attributes of God. Personally, I’m never entirely sure what the expression means and how we reconcile the Biblical truth of God’s sovereignty with what Scripture says about free will and spiritual warfare. We see through a glass darkly.

Scripture tells us that Jesus is the exact representation of God’s being, the clearest picture of God we’ve ever had, and yet Jesus often seems reactive rather than in control of events: parables are told in response to questions; healings occur as a result of interruptions. And when it comes to the start of Jesus’ public ministry, he seems to be practically bounced into its commencement by his mother, who ignores his protestation that ‘My hour has not yet come’. Could it be that a key part of God’s

# Mary (Mother of Jesus)

## *John 2:1–12*

character is that however much he **can** be in control, he doesn't always **need** to be, and if we see him as flexible and adaptable, what new pictures does that open up for us?



## Mary (Mother of Jesus)

### *John 2:1–12*

**I**T'S THAT STAGE in the proceedings when the rites and rituals are complete. The vows have been solemnly taken: before the Lord; before one another; before their families; and before the community. The wedding is ending and the marriage is beginning. However ready they are for this new chapter, man and wife is now what they are.

Yahweh knows what joys and tribulations lie ahead of this pair, the experiences that will make them their family's patriarch and matriarch in forty or fifty-years' time. And, of course, the day will inevitably come when only one is left. The Lord also knows how much I miss Joseph on days like these, particularly the bliss of marital small talk, the little things couple notice apart that only seem complete when they're shared with their other half.

We never got to have a day like this. Joseph had in mind to divorce me quietly, and set that aside when the Lord met him in the first of his divine dreams, but our wedding was bound to be quiet, given all that happened. No village was going to gather round a girl like me in joy. No one waved us on our way when we stole off to Bethlehem. Yet I'd never trade what Yahweh gave me for a day such as this.

Angels and promises, shepherds and wise men, Simeon and Anna: so much treasure for a young girl's heart. My soul glorified and rejoiced in God my Saviour, that special day in Elizabeth's home, and it still does now. Yet I've been told a sword will pierce it too,

## Mary (Mother of Jesus)

### *John 2:1-12*

and that's a prophesy that never really leaves me, magnified in my mind with each passing year I wait for it to happen. But sad or deep thoughts should flee away now, and ponderings about the future should be set to one side. Today's a day for celebration. It's party time.

And enjoyable as it is to revel in people watching, it's more interesting still to fix my eyes on him alone, watch him as he watches others. The boy who grew in wisdom and Yahweh's grace to become this man. So settled, so strong, so self-possessed through all God's fullness. But whilst John is striking out, he's still hanging back, like he's holding back now from the rowdiest of dances. Even after his encounter with the Baptiser in the wilderness, what happened when the dove descended and the voice spoke from heaven, he's blending in at a wedding feast, as if just the same as the rest of us.

It's every Mama's dream to see her boy settle down. The other women bone me for gossip about him at market day in Nazareth. 'Is your Jesus ever going to find a match?' That's never been a disappointment to me, because it's never been an expectation. He'll have a family, but not the ordinary type. You can see that starting now, with these new friends gathered round him. No matter how much you try to scrub them up for a day like today, fishermen will always be fishermen, their Galilee accents rough and broad, but he seems happy with them and them with him, and that's what matters, and there's a realness and approachability to them

## Mary (Mother of Jesus)

### *John 2:1-12*

too, not like so many of the Synagogue leaders. As Joseph used to say, it's often life's most unpolished folks that shine the brightest.

My boy is at my side chatting when the wine runs out. He could tell parables but make small talk too. I go to get us a top up but come back with two empty goblets. He raises his eyebrows as if to ask 'what?' "They have no more wine", I say. I look across the room and can see the bride's father and mother have withdrawn to a corner to talk, his head in his hands, what can be glimpsed of his face white as a sheet. He's mortified, his body language shouting to his wife 'how will I ever live this down?' A part of me thinks 'can nobody in this country count anymore' but the greater part of me is my heart going out to these people, seeing their joy robbed by nothing deliberate, just a miscalculation. And so, I take Jesus by the arm and start looking round for the Head Waiter.

"Woman, why do you involve me?" he whispers, trying to wrestle free. "My hour has not yet come."

The hour never comes my boy, not if you don't actually wake yourself up and start into its day. You were born when the set time had fully come, and you must show yourself at some time also. I catch a waiter's eye and push Jesus forcefully in the small of his back. "Do whatever he tells you."

Jesus steps forward and looks around. He weighs up the room and notices six large jars. "Fill the jars with water", he tells them,

## Mary (Mother of Jesus)

### *John 2:1–12*

and after they do that, he says, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

Jars that were made for washing are filled instead with wine. What was intended for cleansing and purity is instead our source of joy.

I hear the master of the banquet draw the bridegroom aside, beaming in tipsy surprise and delight. “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

There is layer upon layer of aroma and flavour. Spice. Fruit. Earth. Creation. Every time I put the cup to my lips, I discover something new: the balance and intensity that comes from thirty years of waiting. I look across the room and see a small smile on Jesus’ face, as if relieved he’s finally started. Wine like this, when it starts flowing from the bottle, won’t easily go back in.

**Jesus says to his mother: “Woman, why do you involve me?”**

**Is there a situation in your life in which you’d like to see**

**Jesus more visibly involved than you think he already is?**

**What do you think that might look like?**

# 62

## The Woman at the Well

*John*  
*4:1–30*



## The Woman at the Well

### *John 4:1–30*

One of the interesting quirks of the Gospel accounts is that in the case of some of those with whom Jesus has significant encounters we know their names – think of Bartimaeus, Jairus, Nicodemus, and Zacchaeus – but in others we don't. Examples of the latter category include the Rich Young Ruler, the Roman centurion and the subject of this story, the so-called 'Woman at the Well'.

That we don't know her name seems appropriate because in her mystery she represents a type of person that I suspect most of us know and that are part of every church and community: the individual on the margins, the one that prefers to be anonymous, the one who'll slip in just before the start, and disappear as soon as a gathering ends. And it's to this outsider, this woman on the edge, that Jesus offers an invitation to living water – **before** raising the issue of personal morality – and it's also to her that he first reveals himself as Messiah.

## The Woman at the Well

### *John 4:1–30*

**T**HE HOTTEST PART OF THE DAY makes the task harder but the place easier. After just a few minutes, the throat starts to dry and the beads of perspiration become little trickles down my temples and neck, but what does that matter when it's good to be alone?

Religion, it seems to me, is all about borders and boundaries, and I live on the far side of the wall, in the territory that is called shame. The ones that ignore me – harder than hard as they are – are in a funny way easier than the ones who kind of look at me pitifully, but are too tongue-tied by innocence to know how to make conversation with a woman like me, beyond the word 'Hello'. I pray dear God that you'd make the bad people good and the good people nice, but then I look at them and ask who'd want to be nice if it means being so dull?

And then I encounter this Teacher, the safest but most dangerous man I've ever met. "Will you get me a drink?" he says.

In a hostel or an inn, or in my younger days, I'd have shot back at him with a teasing come-on twinkle in my eye. "What's a nice Jew like you doing, asking a Samaritan girl like me for a drink?"

But I'm too careworn now to be so carefree. I can still play a little with men, but honestly, the years have beaten all that's light-hearted out of me. This is different: *he* is different. This is serious. This should not be happening.

## The Woman at the Well

### *John 4:1–30*

“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he’d have given you living water.”

All my life I’ve wanted to be worth more than charm and small-talk, more than humour that hooks her so he can reel her in and wed and bed her, and then the prince becomes the chauvinist and the princess becomes subservient, doing the chores, holding her tongue, knowing her place, fetching the water. And now this: just who is this man? And why is he speaking to me in too-clever Rabbi-riddles? I’ve dealt in double meanings much of my life but I’m better suited to the earthier kind.<sup>33</sup>

So, I ask him how he’s going to draw this water and then something pops into my head about Jacob and his sons and I think ‘say that, that’ll maybe impress him or deflect him or silence him or...’ Something... I really don’t know.

“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,” he tells me. “But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

And I think to myself ‘teacher, everyone thirsts. Maybe life looks different when your nose is always buried in a scroll, but everyone thirsts teacher, nothing ever *really* satisfies.’ What I’d give to feast and not hunger, to walk and not tire, to love and not lose, to be wooed to be kept, to speak and be heard.



## The Woman at the Well

### *John 4:1–30*

“Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

“Go, call your husband,” he says, “and come back.”

I instantly burn up. What’s that got to do with it? “I have no husband.”

And then the jar of taboo is smashed at the well. ‘It takes a village to keep her in men’ is apparently what some say about me, but most people’s scorn is silent. It’s usually what’s not said, what’s not named, what’s never acknowledged. Shame and secrecy are always inseparable. ‘Please Rabbi’, I think, ‘this is too much, take our conversation somewhere safer. Take it anywhere but here. Take it to the abstract. Let me lead the way.’

But that’s not how he operates. Name the trespasses and put them on the table. Get it all out there, like the retrieval of Achan’s sin from his tent.<sup>34</sup> Silence scars but talking heals.

“You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband. What you have said is quite true.”

Harsh words, you might think, but spoken so kindly. It’s so unlike the holy not to pull the rug from under me. But at last, a man who gets that there’s no point at all condemning people that already feel condemned. Truth, law, and code is all well and good but if you drive

## The Woman at the Well

### *John 4:1–30*

a nail into a tree enough times, pretty soon you'll just be banging your hammer on the tree itself, and what does that achieve?

What the Heavenly Father wants, he tells me, is people who'll worship him in the Spirit and in truth. There's so much that is free about that word Spirit. There's so much that is free about him. That's a different take on righteousness, a wind to be carried by, rather than a hurdle to clear. That's not impossible. That's a righteousness I can do.

"I know", I said, "that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

He looks directly at me. "I, the one, speaking to you – I am he."

**We all-too-often think of God knowing everything about us as being somehow threatening – how will he judge us; how can he love us if he knows who we really are? But ponder on the comfort and consolation this woman derived from declaring, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did."**

# 63

## The Woman Caught in Adultery

*John*  
*8:1–11*



## The Woman Caught in Adultery *John 8:1–11*

Legalism can't persuade: instead, it can only condemn, a truth powerfully illustrated in John's story of Jesus' theatrical rescue of a woman caught in adultery. The contrast between Jesus' behaviour and that of her accusers is striking. Not only is grace pitted against legalism, but there is also an artfulness and subtlety in Jesus' actions compared to Pharisees who seem to have subjugated any ability to think or show mercy to slavish obedience to law. The sad reality – also – is that where you get fundamentalist expressions of religion, the submission of women is all too often on display.

## The Woman Caught in Adultery *John 8:1–11*

**I**’M BROUGHT TO THE TEMPLE AT DAWN. I’ve never been here before. Was never clean enough or good enough. Brought to the big holy visitor attraction where they coin it in from the pilgrims. Brought to the purity factory for it all to end.

I was caught in the act and caught in the night. Caught doing what they can’t stand. The things that people do when the sun goes down.

All I got on the frogmarch from his home to here was code and condemnation, shrill voices competing to be the strictest. “It is written in the Torah” and “the Law of Moses says” and “thou shalt not” and umpteen variations assaulting me from every direction. They were never as interested in my life before.

They talk about mercy but their greatest power is shame. They can drive cattle and sheep to the temple all day long but every now and then there’s got to be a person thrown in for good measure. That’s the best they have to persuade us. That’s the best they can offer us.

And of course, there’s no sight of my lover. Probably someone his dad knows. There’s no shortage of fixers in cities. And isn’t it always the way of it too? The man takes the pleasure and the woman the jeopardy.

A number of them are holding rocks even as I’m hauled in, some casually juggling them between their two hands, a tool to kill a harlot, but a way to kill time too. I don’t know how long it will

## The Woman Caught in Adultery

### *John 8:1-11*

be till it starts. How much does it hurt? How long does it take? Will they land a big one on my head or neck to get it over with quickly? Do they bag my head so I can't see, and make it easier for them to do it if they make me faceless? Will the one who lands the fatal blow know it's him? They'll pulp my body but that's already started, my knees cut to ribbons. "Ha! The fallen woman" I heard some Smart Alec say.

And I think too of my Mum's words, the row we had, how I stormed away the last time I saw her. 'Stay away from the boy Efrat', she said, 'he's betrothed already to a match well above our station. He only wants one thing and it's not what's best for you. Once he's taken what you're stupid enough to give him, he'll toss you on Gehenna without a second thought.'

The rocks make me tremble. Her words make me burn.

There's a youngish Rabbi opposite my accusers that looks less neat and tidy, looks so obviously like he's come from out of town. They're facing off on two sides. A crowd of people had gathered to hear him teach. The lesson now is sinful show and tell.

"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery," says one of them, not that much older than me. He's excited and nervous all at the same time – his words fast, his voice strangely high pitched – looking to the older ones for approval. "In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

## The Woman Caught in Adultery

### *John 8:1-11*

I am Exhibit A, at turns both the bait and the catch. But the youngish one opposite, Galilean I think he is, he's not ruffled. But he doesn't say anything either. I don't know what the silence means.

I wonder if I can run, but it's impossible. They're everywhere. There's no way out. And then the Galilean kneels down, and starts to write, a big long finger making words in the sand that I can't understand.

"Love always stoops" my Granny used to say.<sup>35</sup> She said that was a line in the Psalms.<sup>36</sup>

And they keep at him, bombarding clever questions that mean nothing to me, but he stays with the finger, them getting wound up tighter and tighter. I remember that bit from Synagogue lessons, what was it, something about God's finger that wrote the commandments on tablets for Moses.

And then the Galilean stands and says, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And before any of them can say anything it's back to the thing with the finger in the sand. His hands look like they've done work in their time, not like theirs.

And then one thud as an old man drops a stone and walks away. Then another old man. Then twos and threes of them are discarding their rocks and walking, and now they're looking at each other

## The Woman Caught in Adultery *John 8:1-11*

rather than the Rabbi or me. The younger ones look bereft, a couple of them angry, holy to humiliated in just a few moments, but soon they're all gone, for the righteous move in packs.

Nothing to see here, then. Except the stones, like little altars in the wilderness, waiting and waiting but no one to die upon them.

Silence. The Galilean looks straight at me, the first time anyone has done so since all this started. "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir", I replied. I notice I'm still shaking.

"Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."

They told me later that his name is Jesus.

**When everyone else has melted away and it's just you and Jesus, what do you hear him say to you?**



# 64

## A Man Born Blind

*John*  
*9:1-41*



## A Man Born Blind

### *John 9:1–41*

I am writing this reflection with the benefit of a 24” monitor, size 12 font, and MS Word zoomed to a 140% setting. A large desk lamp shines over my Bible. I am also wearing reading glasses. I was born with a right eye that is effectively non-functioning – if I cover my left eye, all I can see is blurred colours and shapes. My eyesight is not without its challenges, but I realise I am deeply blessed. If my left eye were as weak as my right, my life would be radically different. As I get older, I recognise a growing need to trust God, whenever fear creeps in and I ask what would happen to me if an accident or disease robbed me of that left eye.

But even though my left eye has compromised me to some degree, nobody has ever suggested that my poor vision is the result of spiritual deficiency on my part. For the man Jesus encounters in this story, the affliction of blindness is compounded by the cruelty of a religious system that sees only the binary possibility of the blindness being a result of either the man or his parents’ sin. I thank God for the light of Jesus versus the darkness of such a worldview, and for all the grace, love and power that is manifest in Jesus in this story.

## A Man Born Blind

### *John 9:1-41*

**E**XPERTS ALWAYS HAVE TO EXPLAIN. I suspect it's more for their sake than ours. If 'it is what it is' then why spend a lifetime in learning in libraries? If 'that's just the way some things are' then who gets to be looked up to in the room, and who gets put on the pedestal they long for?

There has to be an ordering of the world for it all to make sense. It's the righteous who flourish and the wicked who fall. There must be a reason for everything under heaven, and there have to be categories of blessed and damned. Because if there isn't, well, all we can do is shake our fists at the heavens and ask 'why do the wicked prosper?' which – funnily enough – seemed to be good enough for the Psalmists, railing and ruminating and getting it all out there. But here I am, doubly damned to be both born blind and be so at a time when anything hard and difficult has to be dealt with in a way that's loaded with certainty and free of doubt.

I even heard his disciples say the same kind of thing. "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

What a luxury it is to philosophise on the misery of those on the margins. They think I'm a kind of deaf and dumb animal, that I'm unable to hear as well as unable to see, that I can't detect what's said in whispers. And neither did I hear coins fall at my feet or smell fresh bread as it was placed in my hand.

## A Man Born Blind

### *John 9:1–41*

But then a different voice speaks. A louder voice. A more assured voice.

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no man can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

The noise of spit and splutter is followed by a hand gently rubbing a damp and earthy gravel on my eyes. And then he seems to want me to do the rest. “Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam.” Not seven-times – the Naaman way – simply once will do.

I do just what I’m told, and as the water rubs away dirt so a spectacle of shape and colour becomes clearer with each rinsing of my eyes. I see sky and earth, planted trees and streams of water, birds and wild flowers, hustle and bustle, pretty girls smiling, children playing, and the old enjoying huddled small talk. Above all, I see the delight and wonder of those who love me. The brightness makes my eyes smart at first, but I have to keep them open, gaze into the light, resist the temptation to close them again and bow my head.

Yet other things must be seen in this world too: its so much light but too many shadows. The rush of those too busy and successful to stop and look. The faces of doubters, the furrowed brows of the scornful, and the disdain of the proud. ‘We can’t believe our eyes,’ they say. I know that I believe mine.

## A Man Born Blind

### *John 9:1-41*

“How were your eyes opened?” they ask. I explain it all. The man Jesus, the mud, the pool, the blindness disappeared. And then – before I know it – I’m being frog marched to the Pharisees, paraded before the great and good who previously had barely noticed me.

Because there are all sorts of blindness in this world, not just the obvious type. “There are none so deaf as those who will not hear”, my mother used to say, complaining that my brothers and sisters heard when a cake was freshly baked, but not when it was time to do their homework. ‘Selective deafness’ she called it. I suspect we can be that way with all our senses.

No one has pondered the hand I was dealt more than me, but it’s pretty clear that only the Pharisees’ questions count. Any answer of mine seems beside the point. Who did it? *How* did he do it? Why do it on the Sabbath? Didn’t you know you were breaking the Sabbath? How can a sinner perform such signs? What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.

“He is a prophet”, I answer, but still they theorise. Why ask for proof if you don’t want to believe? Why demand signs and then explain them away?

My parents are brought into it, as if they can justify what they didn’t witness, second hand better than first hand, as long as that’s what you want to hear. Then they start into me again, fiercer and louder: hit me harder with a larger hammer and I might break. Invite me

## A Man Born Blind

### *John 9:1-41*

to plea-bargain with disciples of Moses, that Jesus and his disciples might be thrown under a chariot. “Give glory to God by telling the truth.”

“I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?”

Which lights the blue touch paper. They love ideas but they don't love people. The goodness of God is in the pages of history but can't be seen in real life. Whatever or whoever they worship, it's out of reach to the likes of me. Their parting shot of certainty is that I was steeped in sin at birth. How can wonder and goodness be drained from events so quickly?

And then I get to see Jesus. The gentle gaze, the kind face, the peaceable way he carries himself. There's only one question he wants to ask.

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

**When faced with problems or suffering, do you gravitate more to theology or practical action? Do you think God is calling you to a different balance of those priorities?**

65

Martha

*John*

*11:1-44*



# Martha

## *John 11:1-44*

The premise of these devotions is that they are written from the perspective of key Biblical characters – in this case, Martha – yet God, either in his actions or instructions, or in the form of his son Jesus, is always in the stories as well. But as I sat with this passage, I found it hard not to be drawn to seeing these events through Jesus' eyes as well as Martha's.

Immediately after the death and resurrection of Lazarus, we read of the plot to kill Jesus, and are then straight into the events of the first Easter, with Jesus returning to the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, and Mary anointing him with perfume in both worship and anticipation of his burial. As Jesus interacted with this family, as he ordered the stone of Lazarus' grave to be rolled away, and then called the dead man to come out, how much must his thoughts have been dominated by what lay ahead for himself over the next week or two? Lazarus' raising from the dead was a great day for this family, but also a dry run for the soon to occur greatest day in history.



# Martha

## *John 11:1-44*

**L**AZARUS WAS QUIET THAT DAY, though there was nothing – in and of itself – unusual about that. He was often a man of few words and was working long days. “TATT – that’s what they should call you”, Mary had taken to saying, because of how he talked increasingly of being ‘tired all the time’. In the evening, he didn’t seem much interested in his food, but what was really worrying was that he couldn’t rouse himself to study Torah or say his prayers.

“Martha”, he said, “I have *such* a sore neck,” rubbing his collar as he spoke. “I’m going to go and lie down.” And lie down he did, and he never got up again. He quickly fell into a deep and sweat-soaked sleep, from which he would stir only momentarily: nothing eaten; nothing drunk; and nothing said. And nothing, the doctor concluded, that could be done but wait for the end. “Make him comfortable and commend him to the care of the Lord.”

But where there is Jesus, there is hope. Maybe the expectation that Jesus will keep on returning to Bethany, keep on showing up in this home, keep on walking or sitting beside us, is the only way I can actually define hope. And so we sent word for the Master. “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

But he didn’t come. Before then, it had always seemed so attractive, the way that he was never in a hurry, but not then it wasn’t. What we’d always loved about him was that he seemed more

# Martha

## *John 11:1-44*

interested in people than theology. It was one of the things that made him different from the other teachers, but two whole days he waited. They might have flown by for him, whatever he was doing that was so important, but not for us, the longest days watching a strong man slip away in slow-motion, sinking into his bed as if he's falling in macabre increments into the grave itself.

Some of the disciples said later that they'd noticed Jesus more single-minded and less spontaneous of late, increasingly serious, sharper with both friend and critic and talking all the time about having to be on the road to Jerusalem. Maybe if we'd known that at the time, it would have made a difference, but then again, maybe not.

When Lazarus' body finally gave up, we were flung from private fear to public loss, sitting Shiva like a shop window of grief. All the village seemed to gather round us, sometimes comforting us, other times crowding us. Some coming to be present. Others coming to preach unsolicited wisdom. Some coming because coming's the thing you do. And amidst the rush, Mary occasionally catches my eyes with a desperate look that says 'What are we going to do now?', because I'm always the practical one and I'm meant to somehow know.

Maybe the more you love, the more you feel let down, and where Mary stayed at home – always led by her heart rather than her head – I went out to meet the Master, racing from the house as soon as I heard he was coming into the village. Mary might have been the

# Martha

## *John 11:1-44*

first of us to choose what is better – the only thing that is needed – but by now, I’d chosen it too, and however great the loss of a brother, not even that would take Jesus away from me.

“Lord”, I said to him, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

“Your brother will rise again.”

I said I knew that. Isn’t that the hope of all of us, that the grave will not have the last word? And then he looks at me and speaks with audacity and authority that – even when you’re used to him – takes the breath away.

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

And I reply to him, with something I hadn’t planned to say, but came from somewhere irresistible, from outside of myself. “Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into this world.”

Mary comes when she hears the Master is looking for her, and half of Bethany with her. And she falls at his feet, and word for word says exactly what I did. Everyone thinks we’re so different, typecasts her as one thing, me as another, but we’re more alike than people

# Martha

## *John 11:1-44*

realise, believing and worshipping this man who is more than a man. Mary's been in pieces, barely able to function. She's kept a pint of nard in a bottle all these years, always said it was for the bodies of her closest and dearest when she lost them, but when the time came, she couldn't bear to use it. I wonder what will happen to it now. Beauty is all bottled up, sorrow won't go back in its bottle. Then she speaks through her tears. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

There is no law against weeping, no law against shouting and screaming at him, if that's what's inside us and has to come out. Jesus has a slight frame yet broad shoulders that could stretch out and carry any load.

And it's then that *he* cries, which seems to me a sign of strength, not weakness. His tears are sad and bitter too. He's upset but there's something about him also that looks like he's spoiling for a fight, but not with any of us. His fists are rolled up and his fingers pressed into the palms of his hand, as if he wants to punch the grave stone, lash out against it for all it represents, how it is that death is the great disruptor, the source of so much pain.<sup>37</sup> Even when we get to the tomb, it's not clear that he's regained his composure.

"Take away the stone," he said. And we protest, imagining the stench that will greet us, but he stands firm, and so it's rolled away. "Father", he prays, "I thank you that you have heard me." And then he speaks louder, "Lazarus, come out!"

# Martha

## *John 11:1-44*

And so, our brother emerges, sleepy but full of life, startled at the bright light of the day and yet calm and at peace. And the Master speaks again, talking as if to death itself. “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

**Resurrection power is not only for life after this life. Ponder on Paul’s words to the Ephesians, when he writes of God’s “incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...”**

66

Mary  
Magdalene

*John*  
*20:1–18*



## Mary Magdalene

### *John 20:1–18*

Whenever hard times come, common human instincts are to either deal with our fear through frenetic activity, or to run from the place of hurt. Mary Magdalene does neither of those things. Perhaps that was a deliberate choice on her part, or maybe she was simply paralysed by grief. Whatever her motivation, Mary is richly blessed for staying in the place of her pain, as she's the first of his followers to meet the risen Jesus, in an encounter permeated with beauty and intimacy.

The sense of this encounter as one that is personal to Mary grows over the course of the reading. Mary shifts from the statement that 'they have taken **the** Lord out of the tomb, and **we** don't know where they have put him', to 'they have taken **my** Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him.' Jesus Christ is the greatest figure in history on the greatest day in history, yet is also a deeply personal figure, one that can be known to each individual in nuanced and different ways, who on the day of his victorious Resurrection still takes time to ask the question 'Woman, why are you crying?'

# Mary Magdalene

## *John 20:1-18*

**L**IE AWAKE MUCH OF THE NIGHT after Sabbath, our holy rhythms turning round for another new week. Kill a man on Friday afternoon, rest – and worship Yahweh – on the Sabbath day, and then back to normal life they go. Whatever normal looks like now. The same, I guess, as it always has, the glorious and grubby all so intertwined.

As I lie and toss, I find myself turning over the last three days in my mind, then the last three years, fitfully jumping from one to the other, never settling with any image or teaching or events for long. Grabbing bad sleep in short and restless bursts.

When my mind's eye sees him on the cross, bleeding and battered and stripped of any dignity, I recoil and have to physically roll my body to the other side of my bed, face the other wall, try to think instead of the carnival of expectation when he rode into the city on a donkey. Seven demons were cast out of me, but I feel darkness returning and trying its hardest to envelop me again. I try to blot out the terror by repeating those words over and over, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' But I'm so confused. It doesn't really work. How could we go from that to this in less than a week?

Mary, Joanna, Salome and I want to be up as early as we can. As always on such long nights, it's just when you're starting to finally get some proper sleep that it's then time to rise. But there's no point lying here, and what we must do will be no less difficult the



# Mary Magdalene

## *John 20:1–18*

longer we delay. The city will be hectic too with Passover pilgrims, on their spiritual mountain top because they think they've seen the best that Yahweh can be, whilst we are all stuck in miry clay. And then there are the gossiping and vindicated armchair theologians, wise after the event about Jesus of Nazareth and why Messiah will look and feel a different way and come at a different time. At which I think 'Messiah will be going some to be greater than Jesus', but keeping such thoughts to myself of course.

But when we get to the tomb, the stone has been rolled away. (We'd no idea how we'd actually have shifted it had it not been moved already. It's madness I know – four women, one boulder – but we figured that love would will some way). I peak in. It's empty. There's no one there. *Who* would do that? *Why* would they do that? Have they not made their point? Has there not been enough of this cruelty? I run to Simon and John, and wake them from such sleep as they've got.

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

The two of them race to the empty grave, because even though there's nothing to see, there's this mad impulse to see nothing for themselves. John holds back but Simon rushes in. Some things never change. But the man of action seems stumped as to what to do next, looking intently at the headcloth and linen, but not daring to touch

## Mary Magdalene

### *John 20:1–18*

either. When John eventually goes in himself, something about his demeanour changes. There is wonder, a flickering of belief across his face, even if he doesn't know yet what it is that he's believing in.

And then, men being men, there's *got* to be activity. There's a need to take charge of a situation they don't actually understand. The other Mary goes with them, and in the rush and urgency, I'm just left standing on my own – as if to say 'you look after yourself Mary' – the tomb still empty, still no Jesus. I rest my weary body against the stone, and my back slides down it as my tears become uncontrollable. The tiredness is really kicking in now.

Then I stagger to my feet, my body wanting to leave but my heart wanting to stay. I bend down for another look, thinking this time something might be different, and what could only be two angels are sitting and shimmering where Jesus body had rested, moving and yet still at the same time, one where his head should be, one where his feet should be, as if they'd been guarding him all this time. "Woman", they ask me, "why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him."

Before they can answer me, I become aware of someone behind me, maybe one of the others come to have their own look, form their own view. I glance round momentarily but it's nobody I recognise, certainly not one of Joseph's servants who were here on Friday.

## Mary Magdalene

### *John 20:1-18*

It's maybe a gardener I think, noticing the weather-beaten appearance, the scratched and cut hands, a forehead that's leant into too many thorny bushes. He asks me why I'm crying as well, asks who I'm looking for, and grappling for something to hold on to, sensing him still at my back, I say "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

He speaks my name and it's then I realise that it's *him*. "Mary." There's the mix of cheerfulness and calm that was always there when he spoke to me. It's said in the manner of friend greeting friend.

I turn and am startled and my hand covers my mouth and more tears well up and I cry out "Rabboni." I can't take my eyes off him, nor him me, and then I step forward to embrace him, feel his arms, look at his hands, before the instinct to worship compels me, overwhelms me, and I fall down, bow down, clasp his feet.

When I look up at him, I notice that his eyes are somewhere else for a moment, and when I turn round, I see he's staring at my bag of spices and ointments, and then I look at him again and we both laugh out loud. He doesn't say it, but we both think it: he'll not be needing those now.

He might be my Lord but he's theirs and yours as well. The embrace must end. I have to share him. "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." I must be more attached than ever

# Mary Magdalene

## *John 20:1-18*

before, but strangely less attached. There'll be other opportunities yet, but it's also true that love commands that we give things away. I have seen the Lord!

**How might you encounter Jesus more deeply by choosing to stay in the place of your pain?**

# 67

**Peter**

*John*

*21:15–19*



# Peter

## *John 21:15–19*

None of Scripture’s major figures could ever be called cardboard cut-out heroes, plasticised and conventional in their virtues, and there’s nothing either that is mythological about them. Which I guess makes perfect sense. None of us in real life have ever flown too close to the sun or struggled to push an actual boulder up a mountain, and when we read the Bible, we can always see ourselves as we relate to its very human protagonists and all their emotions and flaws.

In that respect Peter is a standout character. He was one of three disciples in Jesus’ inner circle, but whilst John was ‘the disciple Jesus loved’, it’s Peter we see most of in the Gospels. Peter is a ‘heart on his sleeve’ man who can be impetuous – think of his walking on the water but then doubting, or his misreading of the Transfiguration, when he wants to build tents. John 21 tells us of the aftermath of Peter’s lowest moment, Jesus’ restoration of him after he betrayed his Master in the temple courts the night before his execution.

# Peter

## *John 21:15–19*

**I DIDN'T SET OUT TO DO IT.** Not, I know, that that makes it any better. The law allows for sin both intentional and unintentional, and rightly so, for Yahweh knows the human heart so well. We are oh so fallen, but foolish too.

Looking back, that third crow of the rooster was the only time one of us wept in the whole three years, and the embarrassment of tears was nothing, set beside the shame of betrayal. I want to say that if I was back in the temple courtyards and could do it again, it would all be different, but that's just not possible. After the big gesture comes the big fall: that's been my story all my life.

I'm the man who walked on water, but the man who looked around himself too. I want to be able to change, but I no longer think I can. Jesus is raised but it seems I'm just the same old Simon, not needing my new name now. And I can't look the others in the eyes either. They do their best and say it doesn't matter, that we all make mistakes and I shouldn't be so hard on myself, but what must they think if they're honest? What must they say when I'm not there and who could blame them either?

And what do I do now? We were meant to end in Jerusalem, and whatever the Master is planning to do next, it seems like we're not going back on the road again. The days of healings and parables are over. The days of daring to hear a call and drop everything can't be relived. The things he said in that Upper Room the night before it all

## Peter

### *John 21:15–19*

unravelling, that was as inspiring and intense as anything he taught us, right up there with the crowds on the mountainside, but what should it look like, what does it all mean in practice?

I ask myself what the last three years were all about if it's all now back to the start? I answer myself that I got to see things an ordinary fisherman could never have dreamt possible, even if there's a sense now that maybe, after the last few days, an ordinary fisherman is all I was ever meant to be, and all I'm good for too. A dread that I've got the whole of the rest of my life in front of me, and I'm going to have to crawl back to my father – and the village – and ask back into the business, hear the endless mileage that other crews on other boats will get out of this.

“I'm going out to fish,” I said, and Thomas, Nathanael, James and John didn't have to be persuaded to join in. The sense of defeat gives way to the comfort of nostalgia, as the familiar smells and sensations kick in. It all comes back to me: *I can do this*. People need to know they're good at something at the times they feel they're good for nothing.

Except, it seems, I can't. Because there were no fish in the sea that night. All was empty, even the belly of the Sea of Galilee, just like the first time we met him after a long, futile night at Gennesaret. Water holds so many memories. The day that he called us, pushing out to deep water where the catch was so abundant. The water



## Peter

### *John 21:15–19*

where the wind and waves stood still. The sermons given from a boat to crowds gathered on the shore. And the water, of course, on which I'd enough faith to walk towards him, but not enough to hold my nerves when I glanced down, always so faithful until five minutes to midnight.

“Friends” he called to us, “haven’t you any fish? Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you’ll find some.”

And it’s at that moment that John twigs. “It’s the Lord. It’s Jesus.” And without thinking I’m into the sea to wade towards him. We’ve seen him twice already since he rose from the tomb, but now there’s a surge inside me, a ravenous but simple hunger to be with him and fall at his feet that I can’t begin to explain.

We pull the fish ashore for breakfast, 153 we counted. There is so much more than enough. That’s the way it always is with him, baskets left over if we had them to hand.

After we eat, he nods his head towards me as an invitation for us to walk together. The nerves kick in immediately, but as he starts to get up – not at all gingerly, despite what his body’s been through – I haul myself up and follow after him.

And then he asks me the question. I didn’t know if he was going to mention *this*. The first two times I’d seen him, he hadn’t. But those occasions were all about *him*, *his* rising, *his* glory, *his* defeat of the

## Peter

### *John 21:15–19*

grave itself. And I was hardly going to mention it myself. Part of me had itched to be alone with him, but another part dreaded that thought. Would he say something to me? Should I bring it up with him?

‘Who goes first?’ is the question that hovers over a thousand of life’s quandaries. I’m glad at least for the mercy that this is not in front of the others, and gladder still when the silence is broken.

“Simon”, he calls me, for I am no rock. “Do you burn with love for me more than these?”<sup>38</sup>

Burn with love? What is this? He’s my Master, not my Lover, yet this is Song of Solomon intense, David and Jonathan intense. I’m grateful to be strolling beside him, safe and not having to look him in the eye.

“Yes, Lord,” I replied, “you know I’m your friend.”<sup>39</sup>

“Feed my lambs,” he said. Then a second time he digs in deep with language of the most loaded sort of love, wanting more than this Galilee fisherman can say, and after I truthfully tell him again that I value him as a friend, he replies, “take care of my sheep.” Is that a sign of progress, a little affirmation, the progress of lambs to sheep, the step from feeding to watching over and taking care?

Then a third time – and yes, I know why it was three times, I get that – he comes again. “Simon, son of John, are you my friend?”<sup>40</sup>

# Peter

## *John 21:15–19*

He won't let the matter drop. Won't let it drop until I drop all I'm holding on to. Drop my pride, drop my guard, drop all the barriers, drop my fisherman identity, drop my centre of attention urges, drop to worship and fall down at his feet. I stop walking. He stops too.

Now I turn to face him. "My Lord, you know everything. You know that I burn with love for you."<sup>41</sup>

It's then that I see that he didn't want me to be a hero. He didn't want to be the big man with the big gestures. He only wanted me to desire him, want him, burn for him.

There's something deep inside us that needs to know we're loved. But he needs to hear those words too, even risen, even after he's been what he's been through: our love is our Master's sufficiency, self-sufficient though he is.

**Why was it more important in this moment of restoration for Peter to say he loved Jesus, than the other way round?**

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Matthias

*Acts*

*1:12–2:47*



# Matthias

## *Acts 1:12–2:47*

Matthias is one of the fringe figures of Scripture, mentioned in just three verses, all of them in Acts 1. He is gone from the story as quickly as he appears, albeit he no doubt accomplished and suffered much for Jesus as the early church was established and expanded. But whilst he might be on the margins of the overall Biblical narrative, Matthias got to be an eyewitness to one of the most astonishing days in human history, as shortly after Jesus ascended, the Holy Spirit descended. Those events followed quickly on from another significant event in Matthias's life, as he became the one disciple not personally called by Jesus, brought into the group of 12 after the disgrace and death of Judas Iscariot.

# Matthias

## *Acts 1:12–2:47*

**T**HEY SAY THAT ONCE the Master calmed a storm, sleeping as the boat he was in started to fill up with water, then waking to order the wind and those waves to be still. But nobody could calm this Holy Hurricane or tell it what to do, a violent force of divine energy ripping from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, buffeting our bodies, pushing us back but pulling us in, twisting and twirling to the breath of God. This, then, is the wind that blows wherever it pleases.

And all the time fire raining and resting on us, spitting and splitting: like Holy Ground fire at Mount Horeb, burning yet not consuming us; like fire setting boundaries at Mount Sinai, shaking and smoking before the Lord spoke his commandments, but now his word engraved in our hearts rather than pillars of stone; and like fire pronouncing purity at Mount Carmel, making us want to fall and proclaim that the Lord alone and his Son Jesus is our God!

Not the burning coal upon our lips but the Holy Heat of the flame itself, enabling new tongues to bring good news to Jerusalem and Samaria and even the ends of the earth, to us and our children and all who are far off – whoever they are and whatever that will mean, sinners and tax collectors I guess, and each culture's equivalents on those on such margins.

Earthquake, wind and fire and this time the Lord in them all: the followers of Jesus of Nazareth shaken, blown and warmed.

# Matthias

## *Acts 1:12–2:47*

Our minds not fed with law and wisdom but our whole physical selves turned upside down, the heat welding together our fear and amazement, as all is power and all is presence.

The backdrop to this was the permanence and tradition of the Festival of Weeks, with good Jerusalem pilgrims going about their good business, thanking Yahweh for the harvest, offering their first-fruits and celebrating also the gift of the Law. Burnt offerings, sin offerings and fellowship offerings – each sacrifice given according to its own meticulous plan. Priests, Pharisees and laity, men before women, old before young, rich before poor – the hierarchy of the holy before the ordinary. Many a year I was there myself, enjoying ritual and stability and what I thought was the best of God. And then Messiah shows up, and after that the Spirit among us also, and faith becomes like the peeling of some onion, layer upon layer and more depth, flavour and goodness the further that you go.

A few days before this I was an outsider to the once dozen disciples, among the 120 but not – as far as I could see – the sort of person people noticed much, but relaxed and at ease with my anonymity. But now I'm among their number, the missing piece filled in to scatter and form 12 tribes for the new covenant. Not for me a call by the Sea of Galilee to leave all behind and 'follow me' but the mysterious sight of the Lord's hand sifting and sorting the lots, a response to prayer and the revelation of everyone's hearts.

# Matthias

## *Acts 1:12–2:47*

At one and the same time I sat humbled at the size of the calling, but empowered at the mystery of God's choosing – and that before the Great Power had come and blown within. After the storm and fire, I heard my mouth talk languages my ears knew nothing of, with my friends all doing the same, snatches of words and accents that I recognised from Asia, Egypt and Rome, some of the languages harsh and guttural, others romantic and beautiful, but every word the speech of truth and consolation to its hearer. And in this noise, the wonders of the Lord proclaimed to random worshipers, coming to Jerusalem for one experience of Yahweh, leaving with an experience altogether different.

Drunk they said we were – on cheap new wine – and it barely beyond breakfast. New wine in new wineskins, I'll wager, for maybe Yahweh still inhabits something of the old vintage, as his Spirit presses goodness into us, but I'm not sure of that. Not far away, you can still hear the noise of the Temple, the lung-busting calls to worship, the Psalms being sung, the sacrifices crying in agony, the crowds chattering and bustling. But now that is background noise, or so it seems to me, for Messiah's at the forefront. What we once revered is audibly fading.

And then Peter stands up. To think of what he was just a matter of weeks ago, sobbing in that Temple courtyard itself, barely able to look the Master in the eye. But my how he'd grown, his voice in particular so strong and loud, not as emotive as he normally is, but



# Matthias

## *Acts 1:12–2:47*

discernibly more controlled, like a prophet preaching on a soapbox to set the people right.

My how we'd all grown. Not that what we were had been completely tossed out the window. The Lord's making something new but using the same foundations and Peter explains how the pieces come together. You can't lose yourself entirely in visions of the future: you've got to know what the past meant as well. Gaining Jesus our Messiah doesn't mean losing the law or the prophets or David or any of our other heroes.

And we who once were Galilee fishermen are now the dreamers of dreams. For hundreds of years, we'd thought the prophets were silent but now it turns out we're their heirs, sons of Isaiah and daughters of Deborah. Peter, the very first preacher of this good news proclaims the Lord's new truth in a nutshell.

“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.”

At the end of the day, perhaps the greatest wonder of them all, three thousand added to our number, repenting to walk as people of The Way. Who'd want to see the Red Sea divide again, or the prophets of Baal routed again, or Goliath fall over again, when we can be baptised instead in the name of Jesus Christ? There's a new

# Matthias

## *Acts 1:12–2:47*

song in my mouth as many see and fear and put their trust in our Lord – those who came to the great city to sacrifice, leave with salvation. ‘What does this mean?’ they’d asked earlier. Now they knew. Or at least began to know. For there’ll be many more layers of the onion to peel away yet.

We worshiped by living simply, selling possessions and pooling resources to level the peaks and fill in the valleys among us. No rich or poor, no man or woman, no old or young, no tribe or caste, no pure or impure, and no slave or free. Just the new people of God: teaching, fellowshiping, breaking bread and praying. Our tongues full of praise, our hearts glad.

**How comfortable or uncomfortable does putting yourself in Matthias’ experience of Pentecost make you feel? What might God be teaching you in your response?**

# 69

Saul

*Acts*

*9:1–19*



# Saul

## *Acts 9:1–19*

Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus resulted in a truly remarkable transformation. The contrast between what he was and what he became cannot be overstated. Saul was a Pharisee with impeccable credentials – as he would later describe himself, writing to the church in Philippi, he was – in terms of legalistic righteousness – 'faultless'. Today we think of him as Paul, whose legacy to the church was primarily letters such as Romans and Corinthians, Paul being among the first great apologists of the Christian faith. And yet, law or code or scrolls could not change Saul's life. Saul's life was changed by an experience: it was changed by an encounter with Jesus...

# Saul

## *Acts 9:1–19*

**I WAS IN A ZONE**, a man in a deathly groove. I was cantering to Damascus like the thoroughbred that I was – right race, right tribe – a Hebrew of Hebrews of the purest stock. The zeal of the Lord God Almighty can accomplish much, and you’d be surprised the difference that the zeal of his servants can make as well. Maybe that zeal would have been shown more, pursued more, if there was more of it about, if so many of the faithful weren’t so milk and water.<sup>42</sup>

But I was a man in such control that I was out of control. We went from house to house. We dragged them one by one. We imprisoned them cell by cell. And we felled them stone by stone. And yet they were like some hideous monster the Greeks might talk of, cut off two heads and it would grow three more, the Jesus people increasing in number day by day. But as much as they grew, I had that zeal to help me keep up: get up earlier; work harder; organise more investigations; and get to the bottom of more rumours of blasphemy.

They say that one of those saccharine parables that Jesus of Nazareth told was all about weeds among wheat – how very clever, how terribly provocative – but it’s his followers that are the worst weeds of all, a pestilence to purity, thorns among the branches of Israel. And I was going to pull them up, every last one.

I was a thinker and not a soldier, an educator of minds and a minder

# Saul

## *Acts 9:1–19*

of clothes, whilst the pure yet wild mob ground teeth and took out their prey. My head that brimmed with Scripture nodded its approval, allayed the anxieties and doubts of the squeamish, or the wavering of those listening to Gamaliel and his pseudo-wisdom that allows the possibility that this ‘could’ be from the Lord rather than of human origin. I’d got into the habit of playing back my great teacher’s lectures in my head, and every time I did, I picked up more clues of his now revealed capacity for error and weakness. Hindsight’s a great revealer of heresy.

Damascus was to be the next phase, a ratcheting up of our mission. I conceived the plan and none other than the High Priest approved it. I knew I could count on him to sign it off. He knew he could count on me to deliver it.

And so, we were striding forth with holy purpose, chattering with relish as we neared the city, more cleansing in our sights. In my mind’s eye I rehearsed our pending achievements, how fear would pour across the faces of the followers of the Way, how remorse would lead to repentance, how holy momentum would swing back our way.

Then...

My eyes went white. Open or closed, I saw the same thing. Bright light fell over me like I was face to face with the sun. A great heat accompanied the luminescence, sweat trickled down my neck, my mouth went dry, and palpitations raced and drummed within my

# Saul

## *Acts 9:1–19*

chest. My knees buckled under me and I fell.

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Who is ‘me’? Who is this? It’s ‘them’ I seek to bait. It’s the followers of Jesus I’m after. They talk of their Way but I seek the well-worn and proven paths of righteousness. If this is Yahweh, if I’m Isaiah or Ezekiel, he’ll know – he *must* know – it’s him that I’m doing this for. Am I not to see Cherubim or Seraphim? Am I not to see jewels or fire or rainbows or a throne? Am I to be permitted no glimpse of the likeness of his glory? Is there no vindication of my holy vocation, my fervent longing to reset the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to put things back the way they’re meant to be?

“Who are you, Lord?”

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

But I was terrorising *them* – the wrong ideas, the wrong beliefs, fishermen and tax collectors that turn things upside down and masquerade as teachers of the law. These upstarts that have less study of Torah in their minds than I have in my little toe. These neither priests nor prophets who think it’s their place to gather crowds around them within the temple precincts. My tyranny was against their movement, and not some person...

And yet I heard the voice say ‘I am Jesus and you are persecuting *me!*’

# Saul

## *Acts 9:1–19*

My friends took my hands and my striding became staggering. My self-satisfied stepping forth was now just paces into nothingness. No excited babbling, no noise at all, just my hands in theirs and the slap-slap-slap of my feet as we went forward into only air and heat.

For three days, nothing passed my lips. No morning, afternoon or evening prayers, no scrolls before my eyes to study and make some sense of this madness. I sat still: shocked and silent, the most inactive I believe I've been in all my years on earth. But a stampede of thoughts rushing in my mind; a stampede, and *that* voice, calling *me* by name.

“Saul, Saul, *why* do you persecute *me*?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Then hands fell on my head and Ananias called me ‘Brother, Saul.’ A man I'd have gladly lynched just days ago. Sent by Jesus that I might see again; that I might receive the Holy Spirit - whatever that means and however and wherever such a force might propel me.

I blinked and sight started to creep in. Moment by moment I saw more and more, as flat and rough pieces of skin flaked away, dead flesh snowing on my chest and lap like manna from the dwelling place of God, as my eyes met those of some saintly stranger.

I rose on an empty stomach and trembling feet, and immediately wanted to fall again. And that I did: into water, immersed in



# Saul

## *Acts 9:1–19*

the name of Jesus Christ, buried like death beneath its surface, and rising up, drenched in forgiveness and a new life with Jesus.

On the road to Damascus, there was a holy interruption. And it was on Straight Street that I found the Narrow Road.

**Ponder on how it was that the church's greatest ever theologian met God not in words, but in an experience.**

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# Cornelius

*Acts*

*10:1–48*



# Cornelius

## *Acts 10:1–48*

It sometimes seems to me that in the modern church we can be resistant to even incremental changes in our doctrine or understanding of God. I wonder how many of us might have coped had we been the disciples or other first century followers of Jesus, people who were required to reimagine their pictures of who God was in ways that were nothing short of a spiritual revolution.

The only comparable level of change that Christendom has experienced is the Reformation, and we talk today about the church reformed and always reforming, but how much space does the Spirit truly have to move, at least in some quarters? The openness to change of both Cornelius and Peter – both of them willing to move beyond established cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries – is surely something we can all learn from.

## Cornelius

### *Acts 10:1–48*

**H**OWEVER MUCH IT MATTERS to be born again, it was impossible to get past the fact that where and to whom you were born in the first place, was also pretty important. Don't eat this. Don't touch that. Wash after you do that. Pray at these times, using these precise words. Every occasion you're corrected or need to have their habits explained to you again, the sense of inadequacy increases another little bit. If you didn't start learning those rules from before your first steps, I'm not sure you'd ever be able to make up all the lost ground.

Every culture has its insiders and outsiders. I truly believe that I didn't love the Lord or fear him any less than they did, but I'd *never* be one of them. That's just the way it was. It left me in a kind of limbo: too much an observer of Jewish rites and values to be a good Roman; too much an occupier and soldier to be trusted and welcome in their tent. Not circumcised in the body so assumed to be uncircumcised in my heart. I only had to say my name in my accent – 'Cornelius' – and there were very few folks that couldn't disguise a look of wariness across their face. I walked the paths of righteousness, but always on the back foot.

It was in the middle of afternoon prayers, just past the hottest part of the day, that suddenly an angel approached me. I've faced baying mobs and angry insurrections and held my own: the nicks and scars upon my face and body are proof of that. But I'd never felt fear like at the sight of its appearing. There was the brightest of lights and

## Cornelius

### *Acts 10:1-48*

the daintiest of figures, so willowy that I could swat it away with my hand but so powerful that it could have taken my life with a word. The greatest assignment of my life awaited me.

“Cornelius” it said. “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.”

That’s about one day’s trip. I sent the men immediately. I’ve always wondered if the voice that spoke to me was the same one Peter heard. He told me later that his vision was of a sheet descending from heaven, with all sorts of animals, reptiles and birds on it that – beyond the basics of their rules – wouldn’t have meant anything to me, but certainly meant something to him. Lots of ‘thou shalt not’ creatures. “Get up Peter,” the voice said to him. “Kill and eat.”

I heard later that he actually argued back. Maybe it’s my training and it being drummed in to me that you never debate a command that makes me startled at that, but he did it, three times in fact, despite the rumours of sorrow that such triple resolve has brought him in the past. One man’s fearless is another man’s foolish. Then, he says, the voice spoke to him *again*. “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

But when my men passed on the angel’s message to me, he said he’d come, just like that, no questions asked. I can’t imagine myself ever being so spontaneous.

## Cornelius

### *Acts 10:1-48*

And so, three days after I'd seen the angel, here he was, Peter himself, in my home. He'd brought some of his friends, and I'd friends and family gathered too, so there was barely room to stand. I went all tongue-tied, found myself talking faster than I normally do and stumbled over a few words. I fell at his feet when he came into the room, but he soon snapped me out of that. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

A mist of embarrassment rises from my frame, but evaporates as - barely pausing for breath - he carries on. "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean." His vision had been full of animals, assorted markers of identity, but it was people that the Lord wanted him to see differently. Just as with parables, so it is with pictures he said later: you've got to sit with the image and work out what it really means.

I explained why I'd asked him to come, and found myself saying - and I don't know why I said this, because it's not me, it's just not the sort of language I'd use, or would previously have thought I had the right to use - that *all of us* were gathered in the presence of God. Maybe he was just being polite but he didn't correct that.

He said so much that day, all of it astonishing, and if I was to relate it all back to you, I'd be here all day, but you don't need me to do that, because Doctor Luke wrote lots of it down. But one thing in particular

## Cornelius

### *Acts 10:1–48*

meant so much to me that I had it written out on my own little scroll. I keep it close by, to go back to again and again, every time I feel afresh the smallness or that sense of being an interloper, every time the ‘you’re not really one of them’ voice speaks again in my head.

“I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.”

There is no partiality in the eyes of the Lord. Instead, there is only love. No tribe or tongue or colour or rank, no gender or status is more special than any other. We all fall short; we can all be lifted up. I’m a Gentile brother of a man with a Hebrew mother.

I’m not saying it wasn’t messy at times – not every day was as beautiful and peace-filled as that one. It’s one thing to have the ‘ah, I get it’ moment, another thing to work out the detail of give and take, of keep and leave out, of hold tight or carry lightly... all that’s involved in living together as the new and ragbag family of God. But we stand in the same presence, are filled with the same Spirit, are baptised in the same name – and, more important than anything else – fall at the same feet.

# Cornelius

## *Acts 10:1-48*

**Are you setting unreasonable expectations on people – whether related to belief or behaviour – of who God looks upon them and says, ‘I know that they fear me, and they do what is right’?**



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# Barnabas

*Acts*

*15:36–40*



# Barnabas

## *Acts 15:36–40*

Barnabas - best known as Scripture's 'Son of Encouragement' - is a minor character in the context of the New Testament. He's only mentioned by name in 33 verses, but in 24 of those Paul is mentioned in the same verse, and Paul himself writes another five of the verses. Paul couldn't have been Paul if it wasn't for people like Barnabas alongside him.

Barnabas is rarely in the spotlight, and in none of those verses is anything he says directly recorded, despite the fact that there are a number of references to Barnabas's teaching in the early church. That's clearly an ability he had and yet for whatever reason, his teaching doesn't make it into Scripture, either as sermons quoted or letters, as was the case with Paul and Peter.

It seems there was such a security in Barnabas in who he was and the identity he derived from relationship with Jesus, that he didn't have to be at the centre of things, or be put on a pedestal by others. This piece reflects on probably the most painful episode in his life and is an attempt to give him a voice.

## Barnabas

### *Acts 15:36–40*

**T**HEY SAY THAT BLOOD is thicker than water, but that's not been my life experience. Not the way that I've seen some friends bond and siblings fall out. Look at Jacob and Esau and David and Jonathan and then go figure. I genuinely thought at times – was I foolish to do so? – that Paul and I had something almost as special as Israel's greatest king and Saul's son.

Who couldn't believe we were destined to do great things for the Master, and do them together, after that time of fasting in Antioch Pisidia when the Spirit himself set us apart as a pairing? Oh, to rerun the race and get back to that place now.

After hard yards experiences such as those we had in Iconium and Derbe, our partnership seemed to be forged like steel by the anger and threat of those baying mobs. I never dreamt for one moment it would end like this. We'd lay down our lives in a heartbeat for Jesus, but also for each other too, and yet what parts us is rage rather than martyrdom: nothing to dignify either of us; and an utter absence of glory to the God we both love. I pray every day 'Lord deliver me from evil' and reckoned I was pretty self-aware of my virtues and vices. I knew his fuse was short but I didn't know I had it in me as well. How big a fall we set ourselves up for when we stare into another's soul more than our own.

Anger like the cracking of a whip on a horse's back and off it raced. His face so learned and so wise, his head so often tilted to one side

## Barnabas

### *Acts 15:36–40*

as he listened to arguments, that brain that was always processing and working out ever greater depths of insight about what Jesus and his coming meant. But now his whole visage screaming and screwed with rage, those big saucer eyes looking like they were going to pop out of his head, and me an equally twisted mess.<sup>43</sup> What shadow part of the heart does that inability to row back come from, the not being able to count to two or three – never mind ten – when the fuse is lit?

What got me then – what still gets me now – was the hypocrisy of it all. When I think of the times that people were *so* wary of him but I had his back, the occasions when I had to negotiate long into the night with folks just to get him a hearing. I always try to see the best in people – that’s just what I was doing with John Mark as well – but he, ever the critic, had to bring the great weighty mind to bear on the subject and argue the bit out. It’s as well he hadn’t met someone like himself when he staggered blind into Damascus, or the history of our movement might have been very different. It was clear that we could differ on the details as long as we both agreed that he was right at the end of it all.

And the lifeblood of our partnership has barely gone cold and he’s chosen Silas in a heartbeat, as if there was always a fallback plan in his mind. Barnabas is dispensable. And certainly replaceable. I wonder what’s being said about me, even now, in Syria and Cilicia.

# Barnabas

## *Acts 15:36–40*

Not that I don't know what some people say about me behind my back. The son of encouragement thing is humbling, and it affirms what I try to be, but I know there are also some who call me the son of naiveté, the church's big soft touch. And that's fine by me because I'd sooner be called naïve and a fool than be one of those who think they can read people so well but all they do is drain others with their cynicism and condemnation wherever they go. People need to believe in Jesus but they need to be told also that Jesus believes in them, that he wants them to remain true to him but true to their own selves too.

Look, I can't deny that the kid deserted us once, and that might make him seem a bit flaky, but everyone deserves a second chance. Calling out a teenager for being unreliable is like calling out a dog for barking: that's what they do. But hey, the teenager's flaky and the dog does bark, but isn't it true too that God loves as surely as a duck quacks<sup>44</sup> - loves us long and high, and deep and wide, and hangs in there with us.

We're given three score years and ten to be transformed to the best of our potential, and a lot of us need all that time to iron all the wrinkles from our character. The boy's not going to have every blemish sorted at a quarter way through his lifespan, and to think he can just doesn't seem reasonable. But he's a heart and a half for Jesus: the rest we can work on.

## Barnabas

### *Acts 15:36–40*

Just the other night he was showing me these scraps of parchment he's gathering up from the things that he's heard. He hasn't shared it with anyone else – people are often that way with me – but every story about Jesus, the things he said, the people he healed, what exactly happened inside and outside the city that awful but glorious Passover, John Mark is writing it all down. He's adding pages by the week, and when he's tired and on his own at the end of the day, he sets the pages out, thinks about the structure, improves their order a little more. Won't that be a great blessing to the Way when us and all our memories are gone. But because he's starting it humbly, it's hidden and counts for nothing.

Yet what is it you were always saying to me Paul? 'Barnabas, my friend, remember that we change at the speed that fruit grows.' I can see potential where others are blind to all but the finished article, and every movement that's going to last needs as much raw talent as it has polished leadership.

And I can play all those arguments over and over in my mind, can pray and lament and repent and give it all over to God, but all those things seem a great falling short of what I want most: to simply see you again and get back whatever of the lost ground we can. How is it that we were men of revolution but we couldn't do reconciliation, Paul? How is it that we could bring together Jew and Gentile, slave and free, but we couldn't build back bridges between two men Jesus loves and who so love Jesus?

# Barnabas

## *Acts 15:36–40*

Perfume spilt can't be scraped up and put back in the bottle, but how I long for the fragrance of friendship restored. And how I long, right now, for some son of encouragement who'd believe in me.

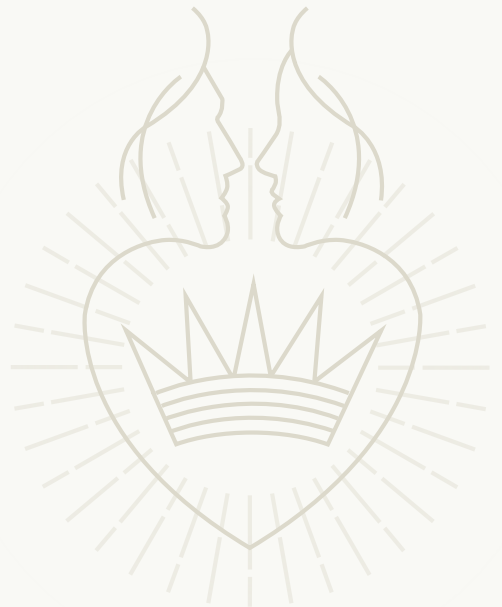
**Can you think of someone in your life where talent is raw and mistakes have been made, someone for whom God might be calling you to be their Barnabas?**

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# The Philippian Jailer

*Acts*

*16:16–40*





## The Philippian Jailer

### *Acts 16:16–40*

The Christian Gospel has at its centre the point of invitation and decision that leads a person to be ‘saved’. As translated in the NIV, the Philippian jailer specifically asks what he has to do to be saved and Paul replies that if he believes in the Lord Jesus, ‘you will be saved’. It is for him the literal saving of his life, an unravelling of an immediate crisis that he’s faced with, but also a dramatic illustration of what Christ holds out for all of us.

We don’t know what eventually happened to this man and his family, and given the cost to many in the early church of martyrdom, and the consequences for him of calling Jesus rather than Caesar his Lord, it may only have been a temporary reprieve – the ending of one set of problems and beginning of a whole other set of difficulties. But a man filled with fear became a man filled with joy, and whatever his future, he could surely face it with new courage.

## The Philippian Jailer

### *Acts 16:16–40*

**W**HEN MY WIFE HEARS that one of our friends or relatives has had a child, there are always questions that she immediately asks, or tells me that I should have asked, if I'm relaying the news. What's the gender? What's the name? (Even I know to gather those facts). And what's the weight?

It's not dissimilar in my game. The way justice works, it's the courts that are meant to treat all criminals differently and on the basis of their particular charges and circumstances: weigh the evidence; listen to motives; distinguish between misdemeanours of off-the-cuff passion and crimes planned. But to me, they should be all the same: the judge judges and I'm just here to supervise their time, and keep them in check. Make sure they don't harm themselves or anyone else. Ensure no dry tinder gets lit or dining room tables overturned.

But when I see them for the very first time, watching from my first-floor window as the carts are emptied of their shackled loads, two questions always come straight to mind. What are they charged with? And how long is it likely to be before they're trialled, or is there even a date? More than the numbers we ink on their wrists, those are the facts that attach themselves to them, impossible to thereafter be shifted from prisoners, and justice inevitably becomes both rougher and more impartial the more you know about them.

For most of them, part of their strategy for getting through their

## The Philippian Jailer

### *Acts 16:16–40*

time here is to rewrite their story – a rewriting that’s further embellished and edited every time it’s told – with themselves at the tale’s centre as its greatest victim. But there are no real victims here, just as there are no better angels within human nature, and certainly not in this place. Everything might not happen for a reason, but everyone’s under my charge for a reason.

When this funny looking little barrel of a man arrives, moving remarkably quickly despite his squinting eyes, the hammering that he got, and the inhibition of his strange legs and gait, two possibilities cross my mind. One is that he won’t last five minutes here, for the runt of the litter is always the easiest prey in the jungle. In fairness, though, I’m told he took that beating he’s already got like a man, so I realise I should be careful about my assumptions...

The alternative is that I’ll never get five minutes peace, that he’ll be the knows-all-his-rights and asks-every-question sort. But this is prison and not a kindergarten. Most of the time he’ll get no answer at all, and on the rare occasions that he does get an explanation it’ll be little more than ‘because I say so.’

‘See those cuffs on your wrists? See that sword at my side and those keys hanging from my belt? *That’s* why you’ll do what you’re told. Understood?’

‘What are this pair in for?’ ‘Some religious thing that’s kicked off’ is the answer. Advocating customs unlawful for Romans to either

## The Philippian Jailer

### *Acts 16:16–40*

accept or practice, but all a bit blurry, and there seems to be a stirring up in the mix as well. It seems the midget one crossed someone's path in a way they didn't like and it only takes one thing to lead to another and apparently the whole Empire is under threat. 'How long are they likely to be here?' Long enough to let the situation cool off, or for the magistrate to actually make a decision about what to do with them: whatever comes first. Better to put them in the inner cell and fasten the stocks, just to be sure. It doesn't matter what happens to them as long as I'm not left exposed and without a seat when the music stops.

And talking of music, as evening becomes night, they pray and sing songs to whatever nebulous deity they worship, who they actually claim is the only true God, and normally you'd expect the other inmates to kick off and complain but instead a strange peace settles over the prison, like some divine lullaby.

Until... suddenly! An earthquake shakes the whole place, all our jars and cups and plates crash around the house, and I'm rolled out of bed and can barely get to my feet, and by the time I gather myself and get to the prison, the doors are wide open, so forget about my Captain's pension and what I've gathered up from this job and five more years before I retire to Umbria, because this is it, this is how it ends, I'm a goner, there's no way back from a balls-up like this, cause a life for a life, that's how this works, and what is there anyway, the dross of humanity, then the dross of the grave, my love has

## The Philippian Jailer

### *Acts 16:16–40*

appeared now and is staring at me frozen like a blank faced statue of a long forgotten Caesar's wife, but I can at least have the dignity of plunging *my own* sword into *my own* belly, and as I grip its handle and steel myself, the beat-up midget urgently shouts...

“Don't harm yourself! We are all here!”

I grab and light a torch and the flames flicker and dart all over the cell, flashing fitfully in sync with my trembling hand. And whilst I'm the one that's meant to be in charge, there's some strange instinct that leads *me* to appeal to *them*. “Gentlemen, will you please tell me how I can get out of this mess?”

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be rescued – you and your household.”<sup>45</sup>

It is a prisoner who sets me free. A prisoner who speaks of a Son. Who says that who the Son sets free is free indeed. I suddenly see them differently. They're no more battered and bruised than when they arrived, but it's amazing how when you've experienced this thing they call mercy, you suddenly want to give it back, and I wash and tend their wounds.

Then we head out under the moonlight and down the path that takes us to the nearby pool. Behind us the prison is debris and rubble, and I've no idea how that's to be set right, but one by one we go into the pool, Paul at our right side, Silas at our left, falling dead beneath the

## The Philippian Jailer *Acts 16:16–40*

waters, lifted back up as new and clean people of new and devoted possibilities, washed in water, rescued by blood, hopeful and whole despite a broken and smashed-up backdrop.

Life will be different now. There is purpose like never before but there will also be consequences. What is it that I've done? How long have I got?

**Whose pain might you stay with, even when you have an opportunity to walk away? How might that allow you to share Jesus and his offer of salvation?**

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Titus

*Titus*

*1:5–2:15*



# Titus

## *Titus 1:5–2:15*

Words matter. In his song ‘What Susan said’ Rich Mullins wrote ‘And ain’t it funny what people say, and ain’t it funny what people write, and ain’t it funny how it hits you real hard in the middle of the night.’<sup>46</sup> I wonder what, among the things Paul wrote, hit Titus – a young pastor overseeing young churches in the spiritually inhospitable environment of Crete – real hard in the middle of the night. Some words might have stood out, the words that recur, not because Paul was a repetitive writer, but because they really matter.

The word ‘good’ is used eight times in this short letter, with a call to live a good life: one that is set apart and stands out. Paul uses the term ‘Saviour’ 12 times in all his letters and six of those are in Titus. Crete was a decadent and immoral place and God’s people there needed assurance that they were saved and rescued. The word ‘sound’ is used in none of Paul’s other letters but is used eight times in the book of Titus, the church in Crete called to faith that was solid and robust. How did words like these impact and shape Titus, get into his head and under his skin, keep him going in the hard times that he inevitably faced?



# Titus

## *Titus 1:5–2:15*

**W**HEN I GOT THE LETTER, I read it more times than were possible to count, first fast, then slow. At speed I take great bites of it and wolf it down, so hungry am I for Paul's wisdom and insight, encouragements and warnings. And then at other times I go slow, not reading it all but lingering over a sentence or even a phrase. Most of the time I read the lines but other times I'm tempted to read between them. But then I check myself and rein that instinct in.

I always hear his voice as I read. 'To Titus, my true son in our common faith.' Words written to keep me right, not from a coach or advisor, but from my true dad. There's so much good advice to take in, but that's a blessing and not a burden because there are so many pitfalls, so many problems, so many to please, so many that need to be saved, and so many that *are* saved yet you'd struggle at times to know it. Perhaps too often I've pondered how it is that Jesus let twelve disciples be together as a group, yet sent me to an island to do this on my own.

But I must put in order the work that's unfinished, which I guess – in one sense – it always is, for what are saints but sinners that keep on trying?<sup>247</sup> Good elders, however, will make a difference. As Jethro taught Moses, we're called to be leaders not heroes and we can't, however isolated I might feel at times, do it all on our own. And anyhow, it'll help the churches to be led by those like themselves, men who speak their language, know their streets, get the implied

# Titus

## *Titus 1:5–2:15*

and inferred things – culture’s quirks that outsiders never really understand – Cretans born and bred.

Men that are blameless is who I’m to seek out, blameless as Job was, their lives displaying end-to-end integrity that cannot be disputed. That’s a high bar but he says it twice. And one who loves what is good. As I read, I’m forever scanning the gatherings, looking around the rooms in my mind’s eye, seeing familiar faces in the places they always sit, using Paul’s words as a measuring stick.

When he writes of the circumcision group, my heart sinks a little. Those that it seems can never be pleased, obsessed with their purity tests, still thinking the church is a nation made of twelve tribes and imagining that ancestry and outward signs places them on top of the pile. Grace that rescues us can be in such short supply. Will we ever get past this, or are we destined to be forever split between Jewish them and Gentile us?

It’s meaningless talk yet it’s frightening how so many are more taken in by the certainty with which something is said rather than the actual thing that’s spoken. But the Lord only does truth, he doesn’t do half-truth, and where there is spiritual myth or mystery there is almost always spiritual mischief. Nobody likes confrontation, but there’s no ambiguity. He says they must be silenced.

He tells me also how to approach the different parts that make up the body. There’s one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and

# Titus

## *Titus 1:5–2:15*

Father of all, but this plays out amongst old and young, male and female, slave or free. Among those hard pressed and those with too much time on their hands. Among those whose greatest temptation is the body and those whose greatest vice is the tongue. Just as he said in his Philippian letter that we're all called to love much, love well, love appropriately, so I'm called to teach much, teach well, teach appropriately. They all need the same message, but each their own emphases.

And there's another phrase he uses over and over, whoever he's talking about. *Teach* the older men to be self-controlled, *urge* the younger women to be self-controlled, *encourage* the young men to be self-controlled, tell all these loved ones to *live* self-controlled. Discipline is vital. It's not enough to say Yes to Jesus if you can't say No to a side-dish of paganism beside Messiah as your main course, to more wine, to another rumour, to the transactional anonymity of a stranger's body, to taking what isn't yours when no one is looking.

Everyone here wants more of something, but because Christ gave himself up, because he redeemed us, because we're purified, we don't need what the rest of Crete needs. We believe that less is more. We will live as people of faith and trust, belief and behaviour, among those of passion and pleasure, gut and groin. As the Lord himself taught, we are wheat among weeds.

Sometimes all of this can seem too high a calling. So, at those times,

# Titus

## *Titus 1:5–2:15*

I look up and around me, hear his words reminding me that the grace of God has appeared. It's visible in Gregory, whose hands shake from too much wine over too many years, but is steadier now than at any other time in his life. You can see it in Marcus and Flavia who wounded one another by each straying to the beds of lovers, but have rebuilt their home by his mercy. Cecilia now passes on gossip to nobody, except to her Lord in prayer. Grace be with you all, Paul writes. And I look at Crete's churches, and I see that it is.

**What are the words that matter most to you: recur in your mind and on your lips, the words you speak inwardly to keep yourself going and outwardly to keep others going?**

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**Timothy**  
*1 Timothy*  
*4:1–16;*  
*6:11–21*



# Timothy

## *1 Timothy 4:1–16; 6:11–21*

The role of Pastor or Priest is one that is loaded with challenges, coming as it does with both privileges and burdens that are unique to the role. Many of us load a level of hope and expectation on to our ministers – often driven by the fact that we all have our own individual visions of what we believe the church looks like at its best – that are neither helpful nor reasonable, for whatever their calling and gifting, they’re human, just like us.

For those of us who are ordinary five-eighths members of the local church, there is surely a calling to be much less preoccupied with constantly doing the ministerial equivalent of rolling-restaurant reviews or five-star customer satisfaction surveys, and focusing more on loving and encouraging them and being the best members, we can be for them. And that includes also our expectations of their time and visibility, encouraging them to be people set apart for private study and reflection, to enable them to better support us in their public platforms.

# Timothy

## *1 Timothy 4:1–16; 6:11–21*

**T**HE MORNING IS MY FAVOURITE time of the day. Rested so that I can concentrate, cool and comfortable at my desk by the window, where my eyes fall to Scripture and then look up occasionally to see the early bustle of the new day, worshippers heading to synagogues and temples, traders going to markets, servants and slaves fetching fresh food and water. Head down to read the text, then head up to see the street, always relating the one to the other.

Most of them are strangers to me but some wear the familiar faces of my flock, the new people of Jesus Christ saved by his mercy alone. All of them works in progress to some degree, but the Lord bearing with them patiently, and urging me to do likewise. The ones who think that grace means anything goes, that the Lord has their soul and they can do what they want with their bodies. Those who pivot to the other extreme and are so paralysed by joyless purity that they'll barely eat anything, go anywhere or talk to anyone. And the ones who want to fill up their heads and the heads of others with sophisticated and so-called 'spiritual' speculation, deluding themselves they've got some special inside track of knowledge about 'light', instead of resting and remaining in simple truth, so slow to be devoted, so readily deceived.

As they rush about, and move and sell in the streets below, these ancient words settle and still me. Daddy gave me the philosophers and Mummy gave me Torah, fighting out the gentle proxy war of

# Timothy

## *1 Timothy 4:1–16; 6:11–21*

their mixed marriage in arguments about what was best for their boy to read, the compromise being to raise me with a bit of both and then when I was older, I could decide for myself.

And then the Good News of Jesus Christ came along and that was less a decision but more a drawing, a being pulled-in, a conviction that this way is new and different and way better than any other path I might follow. I rarely see Dad now, am not even sure where he is. He's a good man in the broadest sense of good – and means well – but Paul couldn't have come into my life at a better time, and I'll be eternally grateful that he did. Dad only spoke *at* me, but Paul speaks *to* me, and listens as well. It's obvious to both of us how wiser Paul is than I am, and yet he treats me often as a friend and equal. I hope someday I can pay back his loyalty. I fear that day may come too soon.

And now, as a man, I orientate myself each morning with a half hour of Scripture, the exercise and training that matters most, the heart, mind and soul's essential equivalent of running to the woods two miles from the town walls, then turning round and running back again. Come into this room at sunrise each day, close the door, and pray to the Father who is unseen, but assured that he sees all that is done in secret, and that this matters more than any public piety.

Sometimes Torah. Occasionally history. Often prophets. Always psalms. And increasingly I linger over the stories and teachings of



# Timothy

## *1 Timothy 4:1–16; 6:11–21*

our Lord and King himself that people who saw him in the flesh – who knew him – are starting to pull together, because like all of us they’re not getting any younger, and in the hostile world of Empire, who knows how long any of us have? It’s one thing to pass it down orally, but they could be gone in a heartbeat and their memories with them, so it’s good that it’s being committed to paper. And I read too Paul’s letters, all the soaring and sweeping statements about who Jesus is and what his coming and dying and being raised to life means, and all the nuggets of wisdom about belief and behaviour and how they go hand-in-hand, and how to do this marvellous and messy thing we call church.

I now think of it all as a unified whole. The law, the history, the wisdom, the prophets, the Jesus stories, and the letters. It all merges into one, goes backwards and forwards and knits together like a seamless God-woven cloth, the newest material seeming just as sacred as the oldest. When I’m thirsty I take huge drinks of pages and pages at a time, and on other mornings take little sips of a few lines here and there, and whatever I do it always feels right, and is proved to be so as my day plays out.

As I watch the town’s hustle and bustle, I read these words. “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift,

# Timothy

## *1 Timothy 4:1–16; 6:11–21*

which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.”

As I look down on them, whether from this window or the small stage in our meeting house, so they look down on me. I watch them, they watch me. Isn't that the way of it: people are *always* watching us. Don't just read here in private, read this in public too, unpack this and train them, every day and especially on the first day of the week. It's said that the old senators in Rome tell their young colleagues starting out to 'never apologise, never explain'<sup>48</sup>, but I'll be humble every step of the way and I'll *never* stop explaining to the church. By the Spirit of God, I'll clarify the confusing, reveal hidden meaning and spell out hard truth.

And reading Paul's letter, I pause and pray for my example one word at a time, benchmark my life against holy measures. Speech, conduct, love, faith, purity. What are the words I'll speak today? How gently and wisely will I deliver them?

It's almost time to go to my breakfast meeting about the welfare of widows. I notice that on the back page he says to 'fight the good fight of the faith.' There can be *so many* quarrels among them. The arguments and confrontations drain me. I'll not fight or be drawn into their narrow and petty squabbles today; I'll fight the good one. The volume of Scripture in my head is reducing now, the agenda for the meeting is pressing in, what I'll say, how I'll

# Timothy

## *1 Timothy 4:1–16; 6:11–21*

frame it, the resistance that I'll meet. I remember that bit near the end, how to relate in particular to the wealthy and their always so smooth self-assuredness.

“Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

Much to think about. Much – as always – to pray about. The answer to the question of the widows is right under our noses. But now it's time to get out among the people. Time to leave the study and head into the streets.

**How can you best support and encourage your pastor, particularly if he or she is younger than you?**

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**John**  
*Revelation*  
*1:9–20*



# John

## *Revelation 1:9–20*

The Jesus that so many people encountered in the gospels was God made flesh, divine and unconstrained in his authority and power to heal and redeem, yet having to do so within the limitations of this world's time and space, his flawed followers, and scepticism and opposition from established religion.

But around sixty years later, John – the last disciple still alive – meets another Jesus, way more amazing, even, than the Jesus who defeated death and ascended to Heaven. The Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world, is now majestic as a lion. John's encounter humbles us and reminds us that however much Jesus is the most transparent picture we have of an intimate God who draws us into close and loving relationship, he is also a grand and glorious figure to be adored and praised, bowed down to and served.

# John

## *Revelation 1:9–20*

**I AM THE DISCIPLE JESUS LOVED:** was as a boy and still am as a creaking old man; was when I saw him face to face, ate with him, leaned against him, and remain so now when he's only pictures and phrases in my head. There are days now when I can barely remember what it is I had for breakfast, but I can still bring to mind – as if they happened yesterday – the things I saw Jesus of Nazareth do and the words I heard him speak. I can't imagine that I've long left now and I rest easier at night, knowing that I have it written down, looking forward to being with him again, this time forevermore.

Is it because he loved me so much that – a little like Elijah – I'm the only one left? The boys from Galilee, so young, so proud to be called – and proud in the *right* way – so full of faith we were foolhardy, so together and then so scattered. James and I, carefree brothers on the seashore, filling the small nets Mummy sowed for us with pebbles, hauling them up the beach and counting them out like real men with real fish. And James surely was a real man, a fisher of men who took a sword in his belly like a hero of the faith, at the whim of Herod and for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. So, I'm the last one left, and maybe for a reason. "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"

I may be a fisherman on an island, but I look more to the sky than to the sea. It is the Lord's own day, the start of another new week. Life's seven-day rhythms used to end with him, but now he's also

# John

## *Revelation 1:9–20*

the beginning of everything, Alpha and Omega, the one who is, was and is to come. I'm caught up in the Spirit, sitting, worshiping, simply being and being filled, and the way he appears to me is as the one I love through and through: Jesus-humble in how he comes from behind; Christ-majestic in the blast and authority of his voice.

“Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

I turn around and it is the same Jesus who broke bread and shared wine, who multiplied loaves and fishes and walked on water, who touched lepers and opened blind eyes and deaf ears, who welcomed tax collectors and sinners, who spoke blessings and parables, promises and woes. The same Jesus but different, like a son of man – not a man but *like a man* – that's the best way I can describe him, like him saying himself that his kingdom is *like* a mustard seed or yeast or treasure hidden in a field.

Like a man in his face, frame and features, yet like a man nobody has ever seen, except – I guess – maybe Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah, his robe reaching his feet, the golden sash of a perfect high priest around his chest, and seven golden lamp-stands his backdrop. The hair on his head is white as snow or wool, but not like one who is old and done: the Jesus before me is pure and ageless. His eyes are like fire yet I still know he's looking at me, and nor do they burn

# John

## *Revelation 1:9–20*

through me. His voice has a force and energy within it like that of rushing waters.

Seven stars are held in his right hand, and they rest still, finely balanced, however his hand moves about. He can hold all of this and it's no effort to him. A sharp double-edged sword comes out of his mouth, for he doesn't need armies: he only needs to speak to win and have his way. His face shines with a brilliance that makes the burning Patmos sun like a candle in comparison.

I can only fall at his feet and worship. It is the only place to be. I could never be by his side, whether right or left. If that idea was crass then, how foolish and out of place is it now? Before him, prostrate, adoring, staring at his feet as if bronze glowing in a furnace, and imagining that once this same Lord and Master had washed my own dirty feet clean. His righthand rests upon me and he speaks again.

“Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One: I was dead and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”

It is, you see, him that writes our stories. We sometimes rest and remain, and we sometimes plan and press against his purposes, but whatever you've done, whatever you've been, whatever you've



# John

## *Revelation 1:9–20*

lost, whatever you've accomplished, whatever you're enjoying or suffering right now, whatever it is that's going to take place in a future in which he'll surely be with you... know that our place above everything else is to worship, and it's him who does the writing, sketches our characters and the outlines of our stories in our mothers' wombs, brings us life in all its astonishing fullness despite this fallen world and all its foul and ugly empires, and waits upon his throne for us to join him in his future without end.

When your gaze gets too settled on what's in this world, be prepared to turn around and see him, fall before him, and let Jesus Christ place his hand upon your shoulder. Because never forget, loved ones...

**Our place above everything else is to worship.**

# References

Scripture references within devotions are from the  
New International Version (NIV),  
Biblica, Inc., 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011.



1. From *The Listening Life*, Adam S McHugh, InterVarsity Press, 2015.  
[Back to Introduction.](#)
2. Quoted in *The Listening Life*, Adam S McHugh, InterVarsity Press, 2015. The full quote is “Remember that everyone you meet is afraid of something, loves something, and has lost something.”  
[Back to Introduction.](#)
3. From *Jacob – Unexpected Patriarch*, Yair Zakovitch, Yale University Press, 2012.  
[Back to Introduction.](#)
4. Another insight from *Jacob – Unexpected Patriarch*, Yair Zakovitch, Yale University Press, 2012.  
[Back to Esau.](#)
5. There’s an old Rabbinic tradition that says that in the ancient world you rarely if ever saw yourself, given the lack of mirrors that make us – today – familiar with what we look like. But when Esau sees Jacob, he sees what he himself looks like as an older man and the years that he’s wasted in hating. Check out the TEDx talk entitled ‘Faith, friends and fulfilment’ by Rabbi David Wolpe.  
[Back to Esau.](#)
6. A powerful quote from Dallas Willard is aptly demonstrated in Esau’s story. “The person who has the most power over your life is the person you have not forgiven. That person holds a part of you in bondage. To forgive is to regain your self.”  
[Back to Esau.](#)

7. Moses is the first character in the book to refer to God as Yahweh, after God has named himself as such in Exodus 3:15. “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 you shall call me from generation to generation.” This insight comes from *God has a name*, John Mark Comer, Zondervan, 2017. In this book, I have only used the name ‘Yahweh’ for those individuals it seems to me were sufficiently near to God at those moments of their lives that using his own name suitably reflects their picture of him.  
*Back to Moses.*
8. An adaptation for Moses of the famous phrase of Julian of Norwich that ‘all shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well’.  
*Back to Moses.*
9. A comment based on the quote from former New York governor Mario Cuomo that “you campaign in poetry; you govern in prose.”  
*Back to Miriam.*
10. *The Complete Jewish Study Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2016) translates Numbers 12:1 as ‘Miryam and Aharon began criticising Moshe on account of the Ethiopian woman he had married, for he had in fact married an Ethiopian woman.’ A footnote in the *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008) states that Moses’ wife coming from Ethiopia ‘leads some commentators to suggest that racial or ethnic prejudice may have been involved, the objection being

to someone of African descent.’

*Back to Miriam.*

11. It is said that the wife of Sir Anthony Eden (British Prime Minister, 1955 to 1957) ‘remarked ruefully to some Tory ladies that she’d had the Suez Canal flowing through her drawing room.’ *Gimson’s Prime Ministers*, Andrew Gimson, Penguin Random House, 2018.

*Back to Rahab.*

12. John Goldingay explains how humiliating it was for a man like Samson to be left grinding grain. ‘Israel had conventional ways of dividing up tasks for the family: the men plowed while the women ground grain. There isn’t much a blind man’s captors can make him do. What they make him do is the work of a woman.’ *Joshua, Judges and Ruth for Everyone*, John Goldingay, SPCK, 2011.

*Back to Samson.*

13. The Hebrew word for the ‘skirts’ of a robe is also the word for the ‘wings’ of a bird. *Joshua, Judges and Ruth for Everyone*, John Goldingay, SPCK, 2011.

*Back to Ruth.*

14. This line is informed by a brilliant commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel: *Men Behaving Badly*, John Goldingay, Paternoster Press, 2000.

*Back to Jonathan.*

15. An insight from *David – The Divided Heart*, David Wolpe, Yale University Press, 2014.

*Back to Abigail.*

16. Another insight from *David – The Divided Heart*, David Wolpe, Yale University Press, 2014.  
*Back to Michal.*
17. Another observation from *Men Behaving Badly*, John Goldingay, Paternoster Press, 2000.  
*Back to David.*
18. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin is quoted as saying that “there are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.”  
*Back to Solomon.*
19. A sermon by my minister, Rev. Stuart Hawthorne (Waringstown Presbyterian Church), was enormously helpful in shaping the structure of this reflection.  
*Back to Elisha.*
20. The line ‘the story we find ourselves in’ uses the title of a book. *The Story We find Ourselves In*, Brian D McLaren, Jossey-Bass, 2003.  
*Back to Josiah.*
21. *The Complete Jewish Study Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2016) translates the threefold repetition of God’s holiness as “More holy than the holiest holiness is Adonai- Tzvalot!”  
*Back to Isaiah.*
22. The theologian was Glenn Jordan, who spoke at TEDx Stormont on the theme of ‘Marking our Store of Days – The Spirituality of Attention.’ The talk is available on YouTube.  
*Back to Hezekiah.*

23. *My times are in your hand*, William Freeman Lloyd, 1791 to 1853.  
*Back to Hezekiah.*
24. 'A severe mercy' is a phrase ascribed to CS Lewis and the title of a book, *A Severe Mercy*, Sheldon Vanauken, Spire, 1977.  
*Back to Ezekiel.*
25. These words based on John Goldingay's translation of Ezekiel 24:14. 'I Yahweh have spoken. It will come about. I shall do it. I won't spare. I won't relent.' *Lamentations and Ezekiel for Everyone*, John Goldingay, SPCK, 2016.  
*Back to Ezekiel.*
26. 'History's Most Moved Mover' is taken from a book title. *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, Clark Pinnock, Baker Publishing Group, 2001.  
*Back to Hosea.*
27. Although deprived of his eyesight in his youth, George Matheson served God as both a minister and hymn writer, among his works being *O Love that wilt not let me go*. Bartimaeus' closing words are based on verse two of the hymn. 'O Light that follows all my way, I yield my flick'ring torch to thee. My heart restores its borrowed ray, that in thy sunshine's blaze its day may brighter, fairer be.'  
*Back to Bartimaeus.*

28. Scot McKnight explains that this lady is “a woman who “earns her oil” as a courtesan (a female prostitute reserved for wealthy Roman leaders).” *The Jesus Creed*, Scot McKnight, The Paraclete Press, 2004.  
*Back to a Sinful Woman.*
29. The Proclaimers’ song *Follow the Money* (from the album *Hit the Highway*, Chrysalis Records, 1994) includes the line ‘Well I need to work, cause it’s good for my soul, I feel clean when I’m working...’  
*Back to Zacchaeus.*
30. The name Zacchaeus means pure, footnote in *The Passion Translation*, BroadStreet Publishing Company, LLC, 2018.  
*Back to Zacchaeus.*
31. Inspired by the words of former Labour party ‘spin doctor’ Alastair Campbell, who described one of his political adversaries as ‘the worst of British values posing as the best of British values’.  
*Back to Joseph of Arimathea.*
32. The beginning of Sabbath at the onset of night was signalled by the appearance of three medium-sized stars. *The Complete Jewish Study Bible*, Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2016.  
*Back to Joseph of Arimathea.*
33. Tom Wright makes reference to Jesus and the Samaritan woman’s ‘conversation with a teasing, double-meaning flavour to it’ – *John for Everyone*, Tom Wright, SPCK, 2002.  
*Back to the Woman at the Well.*



34. The Samaritan woman would only have known the first five books of our Bible – the Torah – well, so there is some artistic licence here, but the line seemed fitting to the situation.  
*Back to the Woman at the Well.*
35. ‘Love always stoops’, words spoken to Ian Morgan Cron by a lady known only as Miss Annie. *Jesus, my Father, the CIA, and me*, Ian Morgan Cron, Thomas Nelson, 2011.  
*Back to the Woman Caught in Adultery.*
36. Psalm 113:6 (NIV).  
*Back to the Woman Caught in Adultery.*
37. Brian Zahnd, describing Jesus’ behaviour at the tomb of Lazarus writes that “out of Jesus’s compassion there rose a passion. From the sorrow that Jesus shared with the loved ones of Lazarus arose an anger at death itself. As Jesus stood there with His grief-stricken friends, He “groaned.” When he stood before the tomb of his friend, He was “groaning in Himself.” The word translated “groan” is probably not the best translation of *embrimaomai*. This word is better understood as “growling” or “snorting” with anger... Jesus felt compassion toward the grieving friends and family, but toward death Jesus felt the passion of anger.” *What to do on the worst day of your life*, Brian Zahnd, Christian Life, 2009.  
*Back to Martha.*
38. “Do you burn with love for me more than these?” is Jesus’ first question as translated in *The Passion Translation*, BroadStreet Publishing Company, LLC, 2018.  
*Back to Peter.*

39. *The Complete Jewish Study Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2016) translates Peter's first two replies to Jesus as "Yes, Lord, you know I'm your friend."

*Back to Peter.*

40. "Are you my friend?" Is again using the translation from *The Complete Jewish Study Bible* (Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC, 2016). It's noticeable that the language Jesus uses in the third question is the language Peter uses in his first two answers, as if Jesus is deliberating adapting his language to make things easier for Peter.

*Back to Peter.*

41. As per *The Passion Translation*, BroadStreet Publishing Company, LLC, 2018.

*Back to Peter.*

42. The opening chapters of Tom Wright's biography of Paul were helpful in informing a greater sense of Saul and who he was, and in particular the idea that he was meditating on the first chapter of Ezekiel as he travelled to Damascus. *Paul – A Biography*, Tom Wright, SPCK, 2018.

*Back to Saul.*

43. Tom Wright states of the intensity of Paul and Barnabas's disagreement "The word in Greek is *paroxysmos*, from which of course we get 'paroxysm'. When the word is used in a medical context it can mean 'convulsion' or refer to someone running a high fever. It carries overtones of severely heightened emotions, red and distorted faces, loud voices,

things said that were better left unsaid. A sorry sight.'

*Acts for Everyone*, Tom Wright, SPCK, 2008.

*Back to Barnabas.*

44. 'God loves as surely as a duck quacks' is a phrase used in *Free of Charge*, Miroslav Volf, Zondervan, 2005.

*Back to Barnabas.*

45. The jailer's words in verse 30 and Paul and Silas' response in verse 31 are as per the translation in *Acts for Everyone*, Tom Wright, SPCK, 2008.

*Back to the Philippian Jailer.*

46. *What Susan Said*, Rich Mullins, Edward Grant Inc., 1992, from the album *The world as I best remember it*, volume two.

*Back to Titus.*

47. 'The saints are the sinners who keep on trying', Robert Louis Stevenson.

*Back to Titus.*

48. 'Never apologise, never explain' is a phrase that has ended up being attributed to Winston Churchill, but may originally have been said by Victorian Oxford scholar Benjamin Jowett.

*Back to Timothy.*



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