

‘Second Fiddle’

God’s hidden heroes of the Bible

40 Day Devotional



Grace Turner

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To Nick

“You've left out one of the chief characters - Samwise the Brave. I want to hear more about Sam. Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam.”

From the film ‘The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers’

Preface

When Leonard Bernstein was conductor of the New York Philharmonic, he was asked by a reporter, “What is the most difficult instrument to play?” With a little smile he replied, “Second fiddle.”

So many wonderful, brave and challenging characters in Scripture play ‘second fiddle’. They are not seen as main characters but without them God’s purposes for mankind would not have been fulfilled. Never say that your life is not important to God, like many of these heroes and heroines, your life was intended to change the world!

DAY 1

Abel

Hebrews 11:4 (NIV) 4 By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

If a martyr is one who suffers and dies for their beliefs, then the first murder victim in the Bible is also the first martyr. If ever there was a man who exemplified what 'playing second fiddle' looks like in Scripture it is Abel. There are just 11 verses about him in the whole of the Bible. Genesis 4 tells his brief story in 8 verses; Jesus in Matt 23:35 says he suffered for being righteous, and John (1Jn 3:12) says Cain murdered him because of bitter jealousy. Yet this beautiful verse in Hebrews 11:4 puts him at the head of the list of men and women of faith and says even though he is dead his life still speaks! That must be the greatest honour anyone could hope for!

Cain and Abel are the first and second sons of Adam. Cain worked the land and Abel was a shepherd. Shepherding was seen as a menial job, being up all night out on the hillside with animals that aren't renowned for their brains! It is all the more amazing therefore later in the Bible when David boasts that the Lord is his shepherd, and that David's 'greater son' the Lord Jesus should call himself the Good Shepherd. But Abel is the first shepherd and when he and Cain bring their sacrifices to God he brings one that he cannot take back. Once a lamb is slain that is the end of it. That is sacrifice.

Notice that the instant effect of this rather ordinary-seeming young man's life of faithfulness and love for God is to make his brother jealous! Why? If it was evident that Abel was righteous surely if you wanted what he had, the obvious thing to do is to pursue righteousness yourself! Not so Cain, his reaction is bitterness and jealousy. In Scripture so often jealousy is linked with murder, Saul seeks to murder David, the Pharisees are clearly jealous of Jesus. Stop and ask yourself if you are jealous of someone else and why. Ask God to show you how to deal with this corrosive emotion before it harms you or the other person.

But the point is, if you burn up with love for Jesus, if you pursue him with all your heart, you will provoke negative emotions in others, after all Jesus himself did. Righteousness gets bad press today but at its most basic, it is being totally in love with Jesus and following him.

So often our life goal is to be acceptable, unfanatical, leading a quiet life. But if you want to be like Abel you will stand out as different, your time, plans and lifestyle will be sacrificed to the will of God. He is looking for ordinary men and women who burn with passion for Jesus not just in stirring conferences, but when the person you live with irritates you, when you feel discouraged and unfulfilled, when family and friends are far away. No wonder the writer to the Hebrews says that though long gone, Abel's life still speaks loudly. You see when we are tired or discouraged the only thing that matters at the end of the day is that God sees and accepts our sacrifice. The life joyfully thrown away on him, speaks joyfully long after death. Whether you are a missionary, miles from home or the chairman of a multi-million-pound corporation, if your life begets Jesus-life in others, it will count for generations to come.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I lay down my life before you. I choose to follow you whatever the cost, whatever reaction it provokes, so long as everything about me speaks of you to others and gives you glory and pleasure.

DAY 2

Enoch

Hebrews 11:5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

If we are looking at lesser-known characters in the Bible, there is even less written about Enoch than about Abel! In Genesis 5 there are only 4 relevant verses about him. Yet this man is in the line of Jesus the Messiah. In early Genesis before the escalation of sin in the world it seems that men lived far longer. Some people say that at the age of 300 Enoch walked with God and one day God simply said 'why not come back to my place?' What a very simple testimony...he walked with God. But that is perhaps the most wonderful thing you can say about anyone. If you have tried walking with God you will know how challenging it is to consciously be in companionship with him day after tedious day, rain or shine, joys or sorrows. There are three important things about Enoch...

- It appears from the few verses about him, that Enoch has a simple humble lifestyle which is focused on God himself. One hymn says "My goal is God himself, not joy or peace or even blessing, but Himself, my God". Ask God today for some simple practical things you can do to remind yourself to walk with God during your busy day.
- Jude verses 14/15 say that Enoch had a prophetic ministry concerning sin and judgment. I'm guessing that's not something we are too keen on! But when you walk with God, he begins to speak to you, so you know how he feels about things, what gives him joy and what breaks his heart. In turn that means that when you speak it is with the authority of one who knows God's heart. That is the basic foundation of a prophetic life.
- His faith pleased God. He had a simple childlike trust in God and lived accordingly. Both my parents were such people, and while admiring their childlike faith, it wasn't that simple for me. I had to ask God how to walk in faith when I was full of questions. Two things he taught me early on were to underline his promises in the Bible, to look honestly

at the conditions that went with them, and then to step out in faith and do things that were risky - talking to a friend or colleague about faith, giving something away, whatever I felt he asked me to do. As a couple we found that each time we got comfortable doing something for the Lord it seemed like he called us to risk in a new direction.

We looked previously at Abel who encapsulates Jesus words in Matt.16:25 that the person who loses his life for the sake of the Lord and the gospel, will find it. Enoch however embodies another truth, that if we make God our number one priority, our perspective will not waver, we will speak authoritatively because he has shared his heart with us, and best of all we will give him pleasure.

Prayer

Father teach me how to walk with you, listening to any whisper or nudge you give me, growing to have a life that prophesies your priorities, giving you pleasure by becoming a friend of God.

DAY 3

Hagar

Genesis 16:7 (NIV) The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert...he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

9 Then the angel of the Lord told her, "Go back...11 The angel of the Lord also said to her: "You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery....13 She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."

I could write a whole book on Hagar! She is the Egyptian maid of Sarai, Abram's wife, and a servant in those days was what was seen as 'chattel', a thing, virtually invisible unless they did their job badly. So when Sarai cannot conceive she passes Hagar over to Abram for the purposes of having a child for her! There are times in everyone's life when they feel unseen, used, mistreated...Hagar will have felt this always. No wonder then, when she conceives, she is a bit cocky about it. Sarai's reaction is to blame her husband, and this is one of the times when Abram behaves weakly and just tells her to do what she wants. Sarai mistreats Hagar until she runs away.

As she wanders the desert this 'nobody', unseen and uncared for, has an encounter with the living God! His question is one he often asks us, 'Where have you come from and where are you going?' There are moments in all of our lives when God makes us face honestly what is happening. He tells her to return to her difficult circumstances and to call her son Ishmael - 'God hears'. And as a result of her meeting, she herself gives a new name to God, she calls him Elohim, the God who sees. Not only are these two of the most precious names of God in the Bible, but it is impossible to overestimate the impact on this unseen, unheard slave girl to find that she is both seen and heard by God himself!

It would be great to end the story there but sadly, 13 years later once Isaac, the child of promise is born, she and her son are cast out again by Sarah. Our first encounter with God

is often so precious to us but it doesn't guarantee that all our circumstances will be good after that. We may, like Hagar, be badly treated and find ourselves and even our family, in a totally desert place. Once again God comes. He does not whisk Hagar off to a fairy palace, what he does is to give her the means to survive in hard circumstances. In Genesis 21:19 it says "God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water". He gives her what she needs at the time. There are several things for us to learn from Hagar.

- Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, we are both seen and heard by the living God. He cares for our situation. Do you feel alone, isolated, hurt? Turn to El-Rohim the God who sees you, trust that Ishma-el the God who hears is with you at this very moment.
- Let God gently face you with the past 'where have you come from 'but also take time to reply to his question 'where are you going?'
- Ask God for water! Ask him, if you are feeling dry and thirsty spiritually, how to find a well. There are so many online teachings and Bible studies tailored to every person's circumstance. Listen to God's last two promises to Hagar –
 - 'Do not be afraid' he says, God has heard her (& specifically her child's) cry.
 - He will multiply blessing even in the face of adversity.

Prayer

Lord thank you so much for the story of someone unseen and unheard who met with you. Thank you that you saw and heard her and her child, and you provided for them in a desert place. In my own life I ask for a realisation that you see and hear me and have a plan to provide. (Bring your situation, your family, or circumstances into God's presence right now expecting him to see, hear and provide).

DAY 4

Eliezer

Genesis 24:1 Abraham was now very old, and the Lord had blessed him in every way. 2 He said to the senior servant in his household, the one in charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh. 3 I want you to swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, 4 but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac."

According to most Bible commentators the servant mentioned here is Eliezer of Damascus, the servant (and also clearly the relative) of Abraham. If this is so, there is an immediate interesting thing to notice. In Genesis 15:2 Abraham laments that his heir is Eliezer of Damascus! Once Isaac is born that heritage seems to have passed on, but here is Eliezer being entrusted with finding a wife for Isaac, who will bear children and therefore put his own inheritance beyond reach! Abraham very clearly believes that this is the man who will undertake the difficult job of finding a wife from his own people, therefore this man is also a man of faith and faithful service.

Abraham is of course the father we of faith, in Scripture, and clearly living with him has made Eliezer not just faithful but a person of faith.

Faced with this big mission for the line of succession, he is one of the first people in the Bible to ask the Lord to give him a clear sign to guide him. He doesn't ask for something easy and obvious either, he asks that when he asks for a drink at the well where he has finally got to Abraham's home area, that the right girl will offer water not just to him, but to the camels he has brought with him. When the Lord answers this prayer of faith, not only by Rebekah fulfilling his very precise request, but also by finding that she is part of Abraham's very family, Eliezer can only do one thing. He worships.

He is welcomed into the family and places his request before them in such a way that they reply 'this is obviously God at work therefore what can we do but agree to it?' A person of faith and selflessness can still wield incredible influence with others by the very fact that he is so obviously walking with God. Pretty much the only other thing that we see about Eliezer in this story is his urgency to finish his task. Middle Eastern hospitality has always been a

lavish and long-drawn-out affair, but Abraham's servant has been given a task and he wants to see it fulfilled, so he urges the family to send him back with Rebekah immediately. His own confidence and faith seems to have been such that Rebekah is willing to go, with little or no preparation. When on the return journey they see Isaac coming towards them, Eliezer tells Rebekah who it is, and that is basically all we hear about him.

Like so many 'second fiddle' characters in Scripture, Eliezer seems to be someone whose faithfulness and obedience has an incredible effect on history, even though most people have never heard of or contemplated him! He reminds me of John the Baptist's words about Jesus "It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the bridegroom's friend is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows. Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success" (Jn3:29) Eliezer seems honoured to simply serve Abraham and his son, and rejoice in their blessing, without inheriting this himself.

Prayer

Lord fill me with such a passion for you that I am willing to put someone else before me, to seek their blessing before my own to further your kingdom and your line of faith.

DAY 5

Aaron

Exodus 4:27(NLT) 'Now the Lord had said to Aaron, "Go out into the wilderness to meet Moses." So Aaron went...'

It is easy to overlook someone who takes a secondary role, that is why we are taking time to look at these great people each day. Aaron also doesn't always feature in sermons because despite being High Priest over the whole of Israel, he had some obvious failings, but let's look at the positives for a moment. He is the elder brother to Moses and God calls him to go and find his brother. It takes faith to go looking for someone who disappeared 40 years ago! He has the humility to accept the job of being his younger brother's mouthpiece, and faces equal risk of his life to Moses, confronting the Egyptian Pharaoh.

As with so many characters, the Bible does not gloss over Aaron's failings. He is clearly the weaker character of the two brothers, easily swayed by Miriam to criticise Moses and even more horrifyingly pushed by the Israelites to make a substitute idol instead of God. His feeble excuse forms one of the funniest lines of Scripture, in effect "I put all the jewellery in the fire and out popped this calf!" (Ex.32:24)

Several of his sons are not godly, and as a result they lose their lives(Leviticus 10:1), but in his grandson Phinehas the priesthood is saved for generations to come (Numbers 25:11).The thing we will see again and again as we look at the secondary heroes in Scripture, is that even when they mess up and thereby delay God's promises, he still fulfils them. Aaron remains in the priesthood and God still calls the Aaronic succession holy.

The Bible shows so clearly that there are two lives warring against each other in every individual, every priest, every church - the unspiritual 'fleshly 'life and the spiritual (1 Cor.3:1-3). A large percentage of any congregation may not be passionate for Jesus, or committed to following God's ways daily, yet one Phinehas can save thousands! In Aaron we see a man who obeys God at risk to his own life, who endures the long wilderness, and who humbly takes second place to his younger brother. We also see a man who can give in

to negative speech and to being pushed into denial of God, someone who seems too lenient when his sons need godly guidance. Take heart from the fact that God still uses him and listen to the words of a much stronger character, Paul, in Roms.7:21-4 & 8:21 “I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. 22 I love God’s law with all my heart. 23 But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. 24 Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? 8:2 ...the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death”.

Is there an area in your life that you struggle with, or keep secret from other believers? Ask someone you trust to pray with you, give practical ways forward and check in on you. The Holy Spirit can and will strengthen you. In the list of heroes of faith Hebrews 11:34 mentions those who “*out of weakness were made strong*”.

Prayer

Lord God thank you so much for the fact that repentance opens the way for you to fulfil your promises. You know me perfectly, my weaknesses and my strong points. Please fill me afresh daily with the Spirit, to overcome in your power alone.

DAY 6

Miriam

Exodus 15: 20-21 Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. 21 Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea"

Moses' sister Miriam is definitely a cautionary tale for older Christian women, but also to all of us in the Church of God. She is first seen saving Moses' life and ensuring that he is brought up in the faith of his mother. Having been set to watch over the baby basket in the bulrushes, all the careful plans seem about to capsize as Pharaoh's daughter finds and opens the basket. But quick-witted Miriam can see that the baby has won the heart of the Egyptian and offers to find someone to look after him, cunningly bringing her mother back as his 'nurse'! This action has long term consequences for the people of God. (Exodus 2:1-8)

40 years later Miriam comes to prominence again as a prophet, and in leading the younger women in worship, singing and dancing for joy at the way the Lord has rescued them from Egypt and their pursuers. Her victory song has often been repeated in worship hymns and songs.

But sadly we find that next time she is mentioned, in Numbers 12:1-10, she has begun to allow negative thoughts to spiral into critical words which influence one brother against another. Sounds familiar? One of the enemy's most effective tools for disunity amongst God's people is a critical spirit and a loose tongue. No wonder James 3:10 says "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be". Miriam's punishment is extreme - she breaks out in leprosy! Leprosy was a living death. When God's spirit is moving in power, the consequences of deliberate sin can appear greater, but actually whenever we become negative and critical, something precious can die within us. Moses prays for Miriam and she is healed, but she was an object lesson for everyone, nevertheless.

A friend told me one day how a member of her church had started insidiously slipping in questioning words concerning the pastor, which developed into full-blown criticism. My

friend said she herself became very bitter against the pastor and although he came to see her to find out how to put things right she refused to listen. 'And then 'my friend told me, 'the Lord himself spoke to me, and when he rebuked me I simply realised I was totally deceived!' I was so touched by her honesty and humble willingness to repent and put things right immediately. She is determined never to allow this to happen again.

You may be sitting there thinking 'Yes but the believer I'm thinking of deserves criticism! ' I have always found that stopping to realise that God is our (and their) judge, releases me from needing to judge someone else, it means that I can release them from judgment and leave it with the Lord to change either the other person or myself! One thing that brings real poison into our spiritual life is when we speak negatively about others.

Prayer.

Is there someone you need to forgive? Bring them in prayer to God and say 'Lord I release (name them) from judgment, you are their judge. Make me a blesser not a curser. Help me repent to anyone I have spoken with critically about this person. Thank you so much that you actually speak so lovingly to us, dear Lord.'

DAY 7

Joshua

Numbers 14:38 Of the men who went to explore the land, only **Joshua** son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh survived.

You may wonder why I include Joshua in a book on secondary heroes, as he seems such a major character in the Bible having a whole book named after himself. However Joshua spent most of his life playing ‘second fiddle’ to Moses, coming to leadership at an age most of us would consider pretty old! Interestingly the writer of Hebrews 11 does not even name Joshua (whose name means ‘God rescues’) among the heroes of the faith! Yet if we look at this extraordinary man we discover a number of things about him.

- Joshua is not a quiet little self-effacing servant to Moses, he is in fact an army General! (Ex 17:8-15) He fights on the ground while Moses fights in prayer...God does not use one or the other but both, to vanquish the enemy. Moses’ weapon, you remember, was his staff, Joshua’s was sword and Javelin (Josh 8:18)
- He is very clearly someone who is worshipper. Exodus 33:11 tells us he stayed behind in the tent of meeting when Moses had left, and he is taken up the mountain on that first occasion of Moses meeting with the Lord (Ex24:13), Joshua is privileged to be in the Lord’s presence, and later in Joshua 5:13-15, the angel of the Lord gives him specific instructions about the coming attack on Jericho
- Like Caleb he speaks out faith to Israel in the face of the other ten ‘spies’ who discourage God’s people from taking the land (Numbers 13:32) and, also like Caleb, he has to pay the cost of other peoples’ faithlessness, wandering for 40 years in the desert.
- Joshua learns from previous mistakes and only sends 2 spies next time they face entering Canaan (Joshua 2:1) and his actions at Jericho mark him out as a man who will obey God’s commands no matter how foolish he looks in doing so.
- Joshua is, I think alone amongst the characters of the Bible, to have not one but two unique miracles occur that are never repeated again - the walls of Jericho falling flat in Joshua 6, and the amazing stopping of time in Joshua 10.

- He makes a mistake as a leader that leads to endless difficulties but, while repenting of making too quick a decision, he does not go back on his word.
- Joshua throughout his life remains both brave and faithful to the Lord. His closing words to his people show his anxiety that they will be unfaithful in the future, ending with that famous challenge ‘Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’ (Joshua 24:15)

Does Joshua challenge you? He should! This man whose name is not even used in Hebrews 11, lends that name to a far greater Yeshua, Jesus the Son of God. I think that the extraordinary thing about this man is that all the glory that is seen during his remarkable leadership, goes straight to God. Israel remembers the capture of Jericho (Hebrews 11:30) but not Joshua. He is happy to slip out of the limelight so that God may take all the glory.

For some of us, God may call us in humility to leadership that we would prefer not to take up, leadership that never receives thanks or mention or even encouragement. He may call on us for acts of extreme bravery that nobody ever knows about.

Prayer

Lord like Joshua I want to say today that I choose to serve you, whether you ask me to do great deeds, or small unnoticed acts that only you see. I want to be a faithful warrior and worshipper during my time on earth and to serve you through disappointments, deserts and battles as well as the good times. Make me a Joshua.

DAY 8

Caleb

Numbers 14:24 But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.

Three Old Testament characters are said to have “a different spirit”. Joseph is one of them, then Caleb and finally Daniel. In the case of Joseph and Daniel their faith clearly stood out to those of different beliefs around them. Caleb’s faith however kept Israel going during years of desert and hardship. As we saw with Joshua, through no fault of his own, he had to suffer through Israel’s 40 year desert.

Caleb’s origins are interesting, he is not originally from Israel! In Numbers 32:12 Caleb’s father is called a Kenizzite, an Edomite tribe mentioned in Genesis 25:19. Wikipedia tells us they probably inhabited some part of Arabia, in the confines of Syria. What an extraordinary person to lead the tribe of Judah!

Caleb is of course first noticed in Num. 13:32 as one of only two men to speak faith and seek to lead Israel into battle trusting God’s promises. 40 years later at the age of 85 he finally gets into the promised land, and we see him go to Joshua and say ‘Give me this mountain’(Josh.14:12)! Instead of disappointment and delay crushing his faith, a sort of holy outrage builds up in him against the enemy, and the continuing conviction that God keeps his promises. In other words he stayed on fire!

Although the Bible tells us Caleb conquered the hill country, it is clear that it was under his generalship that younger men took the land, he was their inspiration and commander. And his allocation of land was Hebron. Of course it was, Hebron was the place of promise right back in Abram’s time. Caleb, despite his descent, is a true son to the father of faith, Abraham, and he inherits the land promised so long ago.

We last see Caleb as a loving father. He has promised his daughter to whoever takes the hill country in battle. Othniel, who becomes judge after Joshua, is the victorious man, and on

their wedding day Acsah asks a wedding gift from her father (Josh 15:19). He has already given them dry land but she asks for streams of water and Caleb gives her 'the upper and lower springs', the overflow. Generous, brave, faithful and faith-inducing, what a role model!

- Have you gone through a testing time where promises seem unfulfilled? Let this story encourage you to even now trust the Lord and ask for more.
- Are you an older Christian in an increasingly age-disparaging society? Ask the Lord for younger warriors to pray for, encourage and inspire.
- Let us, whatever our 'age and stage', ask to have a 'different spirit', that people may see the beauty and difference of a God-possessed life.

Prayer

Lord give me a different spirit, that I do not give up when following you is hard and others are unfaithful. Help me to stay on fire in desert times, to keep hold of your promises and still be ambitious for you in old age. Make me an inspirer of other warriors to come after me and claim territory for your glorious name.

DAY 9

Rahab

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

Most of us know that Rahab is called “Rahab the prostitute” almost invariably throughout scripture, even in the New Testament. Are the writers of Scripture determined to define this woman by her past? Definitely not! They keep mentioning her past in order to emphasise the grace of God!

This Canaanite prostitute speaks faith to the two spies Joshua sends out (Joshua 2:1-14)), telling them that despite Israel’s fear and procrastination, Jericho had been a defeated foe for 40 years! The Canaanites had heard of God’s mighty power at the Red Sea and clearly drawn far more accurate conclusions from it than the so-called people of God. Sometimes our friends who do not know God, believe in his power (if they believe he exists at all) more than we do.

In a continuation of living out this faith, Rahab hides the Israeli spies and asks for protection when they come in battle - she has no doubt that Jericho will be defeated. Interestingly the spies pick the very tool of her trade (a red cord in the window was similar to a red light!) to stand for salvation for her. They say she will be saved if she makes sure the red cord is right there in the window (v17/18). So often admitting where we have come from is the first step to being rescued from it.

It also tells us that Rahab’s house is built into the city wall...the very wall that fell down! I often try to picture how it looked with all the houses along the walls of Jericho falling flat but Rahab’s still standing. We are told that she and her family were allowed to stay outside the camp (Joshua 6:23&5;), where gentiles and sinners would have been, but at some point we know she was assimilated into the tribe of Israel, the people of faith. How do we know? Because her grandson became a wonderful man of God called Boaz (we will look at his life shortly). Boaz also had a wonderful great-grandson - King David, the man whose name is

used most frequently in Scripture apart from God himself! And many generations later, in that same line, a son is born to Mary and Joseph, whose name is Jesus!

How amazing that Rahab “the prostitute” is right there in the line of Jesus. In fact although genealogies of the time only used male lines, Matthew in his gospel goes out of his way to name 4 broken women in the genealogy of Jesus. They are Tamar who was used and abused by her father-in-law Judah, Rahab herself, Ruth a foreigner and Bathsheba who had an affair with David! Matthew isn’t flaunting sin or saying it doesn’t matter, he is drawing our attention to the fact that God’s grace is greater than any guilt or shame, rejection or accusation, when we get right with him. **YOUR PAST DOES NOT HAVE TO DEFINE YOU!** Repentance and salvation defines you. The love of Jesus defines you.

Do you find the story of Rahab speaks to you? In spite of her sinful past, actually probably the worst thing for Israel was that Rahab was a Canaanite, a foreigner. No matter what your family background or your personal history is, you can choose in faith to change, and God can do more than you can ask or imagine through you, when you do. You can be sure that her amazing rescue is precious to someone like Rahab.

Prayer.

Lord Jesus give me the faith that Rahab had to see you as a powerful God who does awesome things, to trust you to do them for me too. Help me where I haven’t repented or received your grace and forgiveness, to bring you my past sins, big or small, and help me to repent and receive your rescue in faith. Help me to trust you to do wonderful things through me and my family line and to live a life that is clearly and visibly defined by the love of Jesus.

DAY 10

Othniel

Judges 3: 10 The Spirit of the Lord came on him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The Lord gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. 11 So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died.

Like so many of the so-called secondary heroes of the Bible, there is very little information on Othniel but what there is, is worthy of note! We first meet him in Joshua 15 where we are told that he is the son of Caleb's younger brother. So like Caleb, his origins are Canaanite, though it seems clear that by this time he is fully absorbed into the people of God. Caleb, that grand old pioneer, spurs his followers on by saying "whoever takes this mountain before us (representing some of the Anakim, giants that had originally caused Israel to falter) I will give my daughter as a prize"! Othniel and his men take the mountain and he marries Acsah as we have seen when looking at Caleb. So the first thing we see of Othniel is that he is a warrior who takes ground for the tribe of Judah, and is generously rewarded for it by Caleb.

But after that generation of faith, the generation of Joshua and Caleb die and Israel falls back. So often the first generation of any movement have the faith to take ground for God, but unless the next generation receive their own call from God they will achieve less or fall back in terms of personal faith. Othniel is not that guy! Judges 3:10 says 'the Spirit of God came on him 'the inference in the Hebrew in these words is that the Spirit fell on him and pushed him forward. When the Holy Spirit falls on a man or woman to empower them for service, he seems to give momentum and push them forward. If someone pushes you forward you have to run or you will fall. Are we obeying the Lord's call to us personally, or living off the faith of our predecessors? This is such an important question because only when we seek God for ourselves will his Spirit begin to push us forward.

Othniel becomes the first named Judge, or ruler of Israel after Joshua, and he moves forward to fight for the ground God has so long promised them. He also brings peace to the embattled people of God while he is alive.

Some questions for us as we look at Othniel.

- Are we willing to fight for the people of God, whether we are well known or remain in relative (earthly) obscurity?
- What are the enemies facing God's people where you live right now? How do you fight against them with humility and courage?
- Are we living off the faith of others, rather than from a personal experience of God's power in our own lives? Are we willing to ask him to change this?
- Will we seek God to fall on us afresh, to push us forward, so that we take ground for his Kingdom and bring peace to his people?

Prayer.

Holy Spirit please come and fall afresh on me so that I may be pushed and run forward with you, give me godly ambition, not for myself but to see your Kingdom expand as a result of my courage and obedience to you.

DAY 11

Barak

Judges 4:9 “Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honour will not be yours, for the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh.

Barak is someone you may not have come across or noticed in scripture, despite the fact that, like Joshua, he is a mighty general in the Lord’s army. The reason that you haven’t noticed him may be because, unusually for the Old Testament war stories, the praise for the victory he effects goes to not one but two women! Read his story in Judges 4.

The first thing we notice is that despite being an army commander, Barak has the wisdom and the humility to respect Deborah the prophetess as one through whom the Lord speaks. We do not know why God does not tell Barak himself to go and fight with the mighty Canaanite commander Sisera, perhaps he is a ‘doer’, someone who loves and serves the Lord but doesn’t expect him to speak to him. We do not know the answer but we know what his reply is when Deborah tells him to act. He says humbly (and any military people reading this will know just how much humility this will have taken!) “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”(Judges 4:8) Barak is fully convinced that the only way to wage war on an enemy that is too great for you is to make sure that God is with you. And for him, everything about Deborah represented the presence of God.

It is interesting to see that despite the fact that Deborah tells him the victory will not be his, but belong to a woman (Jael, the Kenite woman who entices the exhausted Sisera to sleep in her tent and then drives a tent-peg through his temple!), Barak does not flinch from taking up the challenge. How able are we to take up God’s challenges to us even if we receive no acknowledgment for what we do? We see Barak lead an army 10,000, strong (Judges 4:10) into battle against a far stronger army and put them to rout. Yet the next time we see him he is praising God with Deborah that the leaders led and the people followed (Judges 5:1/2), there is no vanity or pride in his victory whatsoever, he gives glory where glory is due. When I was growing up in Southern Africa, my mother told me about Pastor Dumas, a humble

African pastor who had an amazing gift of healing. He refused to ever take any praise but after every healing and every conference his heartfelt prayer was “Take your glory, Lord”.

One last thing to note. We have seen that in the Hebrews 11 list of heroes of the faith, that Joshua is not to be seen. Neither in fact is Deborah or even Jael. But Barak makes it! “*And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets...*” God does not miss the courage and humility of this great warrior in his Kingdom, and it is clear that this is all that would matter to Barak.

Who do you know who seems to bring God’s presence, even if they do not speak on stage or utter magnificent prophecies? These are people to get to know, to seek to understand the source of their faith and to allow them to challenge us to live lives that also bring the Presence.

Does God’s kingdom only advance through well-known Christian speakers or worship-leaders, or through every child of God doing the task God has allotted to them? What are you asking him for?

Prayer

Make me a Barak, Lord, one who seeks your presence above any personal glory, but one who changes the world for you nevertheless.

DAY 12

Naomi and Boaz

Ruth 4:13-16 "So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. 14 The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer... 16 Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. 17 The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!"

Naomi means 'pleasant' but, if you have read her story in the book of Ruth you will know that like so many people, her life did not turn out the way she had hoped. She, her husband and sons had hoped to avoid famine by going into another country, and unlike Abraham (Gen.24:3/4) they had no problem with intermarrying with foreign people and faiths. But sadly though they escaped famine they did not escape death, and her husband and both sons died there in Moab.

But God does not desert Naomi in her place of deepest darkness, one of her Moabite daughters-in-law Ruth, swears to leave her own country and go back to Israel, espousing their faith, in order to care for her. Nevertheless Naomi is clearly in a dark place when she returns home, she asks her friends not to call her Naomi (pleasant) but 'Marah', bitter, for she has lost everything.

Ruth of course is the heroine of her book but it is good to look at the two secondary characters of Naomi and Boaz to see how important they are. Have you ever stopped to realise that Naomi's sadness, pain and sorrow is used by God to bring a gentile into the house of faith and the line of Jesus? Are you going through just such a time of either bereavement, depression, loneliness or sorrow? A time comes, in every sadness, sometimes after a long time, where the Lord begins to make that very hard time fruitful in the lives of others as well as ourselves.

As soon as they return, salvation begins to work for these two women. Boaz appears in the book of Ruth as a 'kinsman-redeemer', a true forebear both physically and spiritually of Jesus, the one who is related to us and able to buy us back from darkness and sorrow. Ruth

'happens 'to choose his field first to go and glean in, and once he hears who she is, he welcomes and blesses her and instructs his harvesters to leave little dollops of extra grain for her to pick up. Throughout this tiny story, Boaz is generous in the extreme, and when at Naomi's instruction Ruth asks for the covering of marriage, he replies sensitively that she has been selfless to choose an older man, he gives her even more grain, and effects a family agreement to take over protection of not just Ruth and Naomi but the fields belonging to their family. His immense selflessness continues when their first son is born and is given to Naomi as reparation for her lost family.

Boaz is such a beautiful type of Christ. He is willing, in a male-dominated society, to care for women in need, but also to subjugate his own undoubted right to a family line, to the needs of his relative Naomi. He is so servant-hearted, selfless and generous, and of course has no possible clue that as a result, his family line continues the redemptive purposes of God through King David and far more so through the birth of the Messiah, Jesus.

- Do you need Jesus to redeem some sorrow in your life? Bring it to him confident of his desire to be generous and help.
- Are you willing, in a self-serving, self-advertising age, to take selfless decisions for the benefit of others rather than yourself?

Prayer

Lord Jesus thank you that our actions can influence generations to come. Make my life one that bears fruit long after I have left this earth.

DAY 13

Hannah

1 Samuel 1:19 Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. 20 So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him."

Hannah is one of a number of women in the Old Testament (think of Sarah, Rebekah, Manoah's wife, mother of Samson) who is barren and desperately sad. Old Testament people had a different and hazy concept of heaven it seems and had a general view that the only way you lived on was through your posterity. So 'no children, no future whatever'. In addition to this Elkanah her husband had another wife who was fertile and taunted Hannah regularly with her barrenness. Elkanah clearly loves Hannah and asks if he is not dearer to her than sons, but her rival's growing family is a constant reminder of her own infertility.

Hannah's story is remarkable for a number of reasons. She goes to the temple and tells the Lord that if he will grant her request she will dedicate her first child to him. This is huge! We know from the story that she keeps her bargain and from the time he is weaned, the tiny Samuel is separated from her. She prays believingly, passionately, and is prepared to pay a price to see her prayers answered. Does this challenge the way we pray? Eli the high priest of the time is clearly unused to people praying with such passion - he thinks she is drunk! In Heb. 5:7 it tells us that Jesus prayed passionately 'with strong crying and tears'. Ask God to move you (if necessary) from formulaic prayer to honest passionate prayer that holds on to God as Jacob once did (Genesis 32:26)

God hears Hannah's prayer and she calls her son Samuel, a name that can mean 'God hears' or 'hears God'! God certainly heard her and she gave birth to a prophet who heard him as well. 1 Samuel 3:1 says the word of the Lord was 'scarce in those days' but 1 Samuel 4:1 tells us that after Samuel arises, God's word is heard by the entire nation! How are you praying for your children, if you have them? Is it that they will be OK or is it that God would use them mightily?

Hannah's song seems to be referenced in Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55), it is full of both thanksgiving and prophecy. Worship so often gives an opening for the prophetic. 1 Sam 2:10 she talks of the Lord thundering from heaven, and thunder accompanies Samuel's ministry several times (see 1 Sam 7:10 and 12:17/18). It is interesting to note that Hannah is the first person to call God 'Yahweh Sabba-oth', the God of Angel Armies, and this title becomes deeply loved by the prophets ever afterwards.

God rewards Hannah's faith by opening her womb and giving her a number of children. It is very easy to say 'God gave Hannah other children so it was an easy sacrifice to dedicate her son and leave him behind in Jerusalem as a small child. Ask any mum of a large family if that means she could give one of them up easily and walk away! No Hannah's promise to God costs her dearly. We have a little line in Scripture (1 Sam 2:18-20) that tells us she made him a little coat each year and brought it to the temple. This is a mother who adores her son but is faithful to her promise to the Lord. In a very real way, like Abraham with Isaac, this is a parent who surrenders everything, even her beloved child, into the Lord's hands. And this of course is the safest place for that child. We cannot save our children by worrying about them, or trying to live their life for them, but we can place them into the hands of Jesus. This great man of God and extraordinary prophet comes from the fervent prayer of a woman of faith.

Prayer

Lord grant me a heart that seeks you passionately in prayer! Challenge my lukewarm prayers and lack of expectancy, I pray. Make me the kind of person who is willing to make sacrifices in serving you. Make me a worshipper and one who hears your voice! Help me to trust in the God of Angel armies.

DAY 14

Saul vs Jonathan

1 Samuel 18:1-4 After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. 2 From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. 3 And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. 4 Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

Jonathan is undoubtedly one of my favourite characters in Scripture. His father Saul had everything going for him. Selected by God from all the tribes of Israel to be their king, he was tall, charismatic and soldierly. When we first meet him he is humble (1 Sam 10:16-22), finding it hard to believe he has been chosen, yet when need arises he is quick to lead his people into battle. As is so common in history and even in leadership today, it is how we deal with success that can be more tricky than dealing with failure. Saul's reign has been likened to the fall of Satan (Ezekiel 28:12-19) in that pride leads to compromising on God's instructions (1 Samuel 15) which in turn leads to lack of courage when the enemy comes against him on at least two other occasions.

The sad decline continues as we see Saul next as demonised, needing David (1 Sam 18:10) to sing worship songs to defeat the demonic attacks. He moves from honouring David's courage to intense and murderous jealousy of him and his popularity. He is outraged that his son Jonathan, knowing that David will supplant him, still loves him. Our last view of Saul is sadly a full descent into the occult, consulting a witch. The Bible tells us that although he died in battle, his death was because of consulting a spiritist medium (1 Chron.10:13).

Jonathan is the polar opposite of his father. He is incredibly brave and confident in his God. In 1 Samuel 13&14, while Saul stays in his tent, fearful of the huge Philistine army, and his soldiers are melting away daily, Jonathan and his armour bearer alone challenge the army. He is wise in asking the Lord for a sign if he is to take on what looks like a suicidal mission, but when the sign comes, he climbs up to the enemy and takes them on virtually single-handed. The rest of the army are then motivated to bravery and chase the enemy off. Saul interestingly makes a foolish pseudo-spiritual vow to kill anyone who eats before the end of

battle, thus weakening his men and putting Jonathan in danger. Amazingly he seems perfectly willing to sacrifice his son and only the peoples 'outrage saves him.

Jonathan is utterly knit to David as a similar, though younger, courageous soldier. His first act is to strip off his armour and give it to David, making himself vulnerable to his friend(1 Sam 18:4). He believes that as Samuel has anointed David as next King, his job is to care for and support God's anointed, despite being heir to the throne himself. He warns David of his father's plots to kill him and we see them as true brothers in arms saying an emotional farewell as David goes into hiding. One last time in 1 Samuel 23:16 we see him seek David out to encourage him in the Lord, at probable risk of his own life from a now crazed Saul. David weeps over his death as one of the mighty who have fallen in battle (2 Sam 1:25/6). Let us ask ourselves some serious questions in the light of these two men.

- Am I jealous of others 'success? How should I deal with it?
- Does competitiveness and jealousy have an adverse effect on the people of God?
- Am I willing to build up and encourage someone else's life and ministry while still moving forward courageously in what God has given me to do, even if it seems a lesser achievement?

Prayer

Lord thank you for this very brave, very humble man Jonathan. Give me the courage to face battle and hardship depending only on your word not the circumstances. Help me to put others first and even see them outstrip me in your service so long as I am being obedient and still running strongly for you.

DAY 15

Obed-Edom

2 Sam.6:11 (NIV) The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the Lord blessed him and his entire household.

Obed Edom was an amazing 'second fiddle' man, possibly a farmer, a gatekeeper, a musician and above all a worshipper. You may remember that in 1 Sam.6 after greeting the return of the Ark of the Covenant ecstatically, one of the priests carrying the ark acts in a way that causes God's anger to flash out and he dies. David is offended and fearful and will not go further, but leaves it to Obed-Edom to host the Presence instead. The Bible tells us that everything concerning Obed-Edom was blessed because he hosted God's glorious Presence. So much so in fact that David clearly becomes jealous and repentantly returns to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

It seems that Obed-Edom had such an experience of God's glory that he couldn't be parted from it, as we next hear of him in 1Chron.15:24 as a gatekeeper in the Lord's house. Perhaps David was thinking of him when he wrote in Psalm 84:10 that he would rather be a door-keeper in God's house than live elsewhere. A Gatekeeper. I remember once being ridiculously offended when someone prayed over us saying we were 'gatekeepers', it felt like he was saying we were just 'holding the fort' until someone more important turned up. Afterwards I realised that that was the greatest honour anyone can have! To host, and provide a gateway into the Presence of Jesus who is more important than anyone.

Elsewhere I have written about Lt. Col. James MacDonnell who on June 15th 1815 held the gates of Hougoumont against unbelievable odds until the end of the Battle of Waterloo, at one point literally holding the gate closed against an overwhelming enemy. When an enthusiastic donor wanted to give £1000 to the bravest person from that battle, understandably the Duke of Wellington did not want to single out one person among the heroes, but when pressed he nominated MacDonnell without whose courage the battle would have been lost. In the great tradition of good gatekeepers, McDonnell insisted that the prize was shared with his unknown sergeant who had fought shoulder to shoulder with him.

Finally in 1 Chron.16:5 Obed-Edom pops up again as a musician, part of the worship group, playing the harp and lyre. Of course he was. Everything about this man shouts that he is a worshipper! From receiving the fearful responsibility of hosting God's Presence in the ark, to following it wherever it went, keeping the gate against enemy attack and of course worshipping with all his heart. It is not surprising that we read that his sons continued the family tradition. Being in love with Jesus ourselves is the best role model our children can have. Not church attendance or rules, important as they may be, but passion for his presence.

Now here is a fun fact that might shock you...Obed-Edom was a Philistine when we first meet him! 2 Sam.6:11 says he was a Gittite. The Philistines seek to return the ark because of the fearsome power of God, David fears it also for the same reason. One man not yet even of the family of faith, wants God so desperately that he is incredibly blessed. No wonder he gets absorbed into the people of God seamlessly and joyfully.

Prayer

Lord make me an Obed-Edom! Let me be someone in whom the Presence of Jesus is at home. Someone who guards his house. Above all make me a worshipper whose every song is for you alone and not for any human praise.

DAY 16

Benaiah

2 Samuel 23:20 *Benaiah son of Jehoiada, a valiant fighter from Kabzeel, performed great exploits. He struck down Moab's two mightiest warriors. He also went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. 21 And he struck down a huge Egyptian. Although the Egyptian had a spear in his hand, Benaiah went against him with a club. He snatched the spear from the Egyptian's hand and killed him with his own spear. 22 Such were the exploits of Benaiah son of Jehoiada; he too was as famous as the three mighty warriors. 23 He was held in greater honour than any of the Thirty, but he was not included among the Three. And David put him in charge of his bodyguard.*

Be honest - have you ever even thought about Benaiah? He seems to be such a minor player in the great King David pageant of history. But among his thirty 'Mighty Men', David honours Benaiah greatly, placing him over his own bodyguard. He is clearly extraordinarily brave, having single-handedly struck down some mighty foes and killed a lion in winter when they are hungriest. As time goes on of course David is at risk frequently, and when this happens, Benaiah comes to the fore as leader of the Cherethites and Pelethites, an elite group of mercenaries under his command, who defend the King. In 2 Samuel 15:18 we see them marching out with their King into the wilderness when Absalom plans his brief overthrow. No soldier loves retreat, but every good one knows when retreat is essential to ultimate victory.

Much later, when David's other son Adonijah makes a similar bid for overthrow, he targets one of the chief priests and the army commander Joab (1 Kings 1:7/8) but he leaves Benaiah well alone, he knows this is not a man whose loyalty can be bought or shaken. Benaiah closely guards David and 1 Kings 1 tells the story of an ageing David whose perspective seems to have left him, offering the obvious chance of overthrow by his son Adonijah, despite David's well-publicised plan to have Solomon succeed him. The faithful men who have surrounded their leader for years, carefully plan a way to inform him of the danger, in such a way that will provoke him to action, while not lessening their respect for him. It is a masterly story of faithfulness in the face of frailty.

We finally see Benaiah (1 Kings 2:25-46) being trusted by David's son Solomon with the punishment of those who have stood against his father.

And that's Benaiah. We have no other mention of him, yet so much of David's (and even Solomon's) story might have been very different without him. Here are the lessons and challenges from his life...

- A man who is extraordinarily brave and resourceful in his own right, is willing to safeguard, defend and show lifelong loyalty to a man far more famous and clearly called by God to leadership, than he is. Does this speak to us of loyalty to those God has called us to defend? Are we too busy making a name for ourselves?
- Do we have a culturally low view of faithfulness? Are we 'in it for the long haul' both in terms of faithfulness to God and faithfulness to his people?
- Are we the kind of person who is avoided when an ungodly plan to attack leadership is hatched?
- When we see someone we respect making weak decisions or not acting at all, are we someone who can challenge them with such humility and grace that they are not left crushed?

Prayer

Lord thank you for this brave man, give me his soldierly courage to attack the enemy Satan, but to defend my friends and your glory faithfully and forever.

DAY 17

Hushai the Arkite

1 Chron, 27:33 *Ahithophel was the king's counsellor. Hushai the Arkite was the king's friend. (NASB)*

I have very little to write about Hushai but I feel if we are looking at lesser known heroes of the Bible, this man Hushai has one of the best titles ever. He is the **King's friend**. In fact this friendship is reiterated (2 Sam. 15:37& 16:16/17) during his short appearance in Scripture.

One time when we moved to a new city, we joined a church where we had a very slight previous acquaintance with the vicar and his wife. They had us to lunch fairly early on and we said to them "Is there something you would like us to do, in the church?" His reply surprised and moved us. He said, "You could be our friends". Leadership is intensely lonely and because we, as the people of God, often put too great a burden on our leaders to be perfect, it can become hard for those leaders to be real with anyone. This in turn can lead to all sorts of suppressed feelings or even secrets which would not have been there if that man or woman of God had simple, uncomplicated friendships with people who are free to agree or disagree with them but remain utterly loyal and loving as their friends.

It is no surprise that the first main character to emerge in the Old Testament line of faith, is Abraham, who is called the "friend of God" in James 2:23. It is also no surprise that our Saviour Jesus, in his earthly incarnation, said to his disciples 'I do not call you servants but friends'(John 15:15). Every leader needs them. Friends can be awkward. A servant does what they are told, a friend says 'Why?' But a good loyal and faithful friend "sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24) and sees us through the spiritual battles that face every life and particularly every leadership.

David uses Hushai in fairly unorthodox way. When his son Absalom takes over the Kingdom (briefly), David is forced into exile. Hushai meets him, full of grief for his friend's disgrace, but David tells him to go back. He points out to Hushai that in coming with him, he will just be part of a large group in exile, but in going back he might damage the advice Absalom is going to receive from his father's disloyal chief counsellor Ahitophel. Hushai manages to do just that. He does not go in 'all guns blazing' seeking to contend with the other man, he waits

for the most important decision of Absalom's brief reign. When Ahitophel tells Absalom to chase after David quickly, something which might have consolidated his victory immediately, Hushai suggests that this particular advice is badly thought out, David is a brave and skilful fighter and will not be caught out, he says. He buys his friend time to get away and established before the onslaught comes.

That's pretty much it! There is no more mention of Hushai. There are times when our friendship can be actually lifesaving for someone else who is embattled with either spiritual, mental or health issues. We may not feel we have done very much but we may be the reason they survive to fight another day. Let's look at some questions...

- Am I the kind of friend who largely takes rather than gives?
- Do I have friendships with unbelievers which are so real and meaningful that they can trust me, and become challenged by my faith but also by my faithfulness to them?
- Am I the kind of friend of other Christians, who is able to disagree well? Or am I so touchy that no one dares to argue with me?

Prayer

Lord grant me the grace to be a friend of people and even more, a friend of God, someone to whom you tell your secrets, someone who is utterly faithful to you.

DAY 18

Mordecai

Esther 10:3 Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews.

When reading the book of Esther, her uncle/cousin Mordecai may seem a shadowy figure but he is a history-changer as any Jew will tell you. Having raised Hadassah as she was first known, in the faith, we know that she is taken into the most powerful and ruthless court of the day to take part in probably the most risky Miss World pageant of all time! Mordecai is so concerned for Esther that every day he goes to the royal courts to see if he can hear about her welfare. His faithfulness to her results in him overhearing a plot to murder the King, and although unrewarded at the time, it preserves the King's life.

When Esther becomes the chosen queen (obeying Mordecai's instructions to keep her nationality secret) Mordecai continues his vigil. Of course, when God's person comes into place in any context, big or small, the enemy rises to try and take them out. Haman is the King's second-in-command, and it irks him unbearably that this one man, Mordecai, a Jew, will not bow before him, a mere man. In a classically enemy response, Haman thinks 'how many of God's people can I bring down through defeating this one man?' His resulting manipulation of the King to bring about the genocide of the Jews is masterly.

This is where we see Mordecai at his most striking. He tells Esther *"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"*

These prophetic words come to us down the centuries with the same relevance for our day as they were for Esther. We need Mordecais! We need men and women who will raise believers to a realisation that spiritually royal blood has been given them to stand up for what is right in the face of a cruel and accusatory culture.

You will know the story - the very moment that the enemy Haman goes to ask the King's permission to hang Mordecai, God's perfect timing is seen. 'That night the king could not sleep,' and to get off to sleep he reads old diaries (infallibly effective!) and sees that Mordecai has saved his life but not been rewarded. The amusing outcome is Mordecai being placed by Haman on the King's horse and honoured above all. The enemy is overthrown and Mordecai through Esther is able to stop the intended massacre of the Jews.

- How deeply do we care for God's people, Christ's bride the Church?
- How willing are we to risk everything to stand up for what is right? (We need to note here that there is a gracious way of doing this, we do not need to be aggressive and gratuitously insulting in order to stand for God's truth, however we also need to recognise that no matter how gracious we are, standing for truth in our day will nevertheless produce adverse reaction).
- Do we trust God's timing, even when the enemy seems to be winning the battle?
- Are we willing to challenge our own 'family' the church to step up and act?

Prayer

Lord thank you for Mordecai. Give me bravery when I need to challenge the surrounding culture, and even my own believing friends.

DAY 19

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

Daniel 3:16 *Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”*

We hear of these three heroes in the book of Daniel. Although Daniel himself is the main character to be seen, these men are clearly his friends and contemporaries. Like Daniel they will have come from a privileged if not even royal background in Israel, and had been captured and exiled in Babylon. Also like Daniel, they were very likely to have been castrated and made eunuchs, their very names changed as was the typical means of further subduing any male captives at the time. Despite losing home, name, position and fertility, these men held passionately to their faith. They, with Daniel, offered a compromise to the King’s servants, not eating the food dedicated to idols but thriving nevertheless. When all their lives appear to become forfeit (Dan 2:12-18) to a very quixotic Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel enlists their prayers as he seeks God for revelation concerning the King’ dream and its meaning. These men were not just holding to their faith as a means of identity in a foreign country, they knew their God and they prayed in such a way as to hear his answers in a quite extraordinary way.

Then we come to Daniel 3. Nebuchadnezzar’s latest fantasy-game is to put up a 90ft high gold statue of himself and command people to bow to it several times a day as to a deity, when the music played. Naturally the men of God refuse to bow to a foreign god and Nebuchadnezzar is outraged and calls them in. Their answer is perhaps the most challenging and helpful response in Scripture for people facing terrible circumstances or even death. The enemy always comes, at those times, with an encouragement to walk away from God. These three heroes speak out faith saying, in effect, ‘God is more than able to save us, he will save us, but even should he *not* do so, we have absolutely no intention of bowing to an idol’!

We have to pick out battles, a time comes to most of us, when we have to say ‘No this is something I absolutely cannot do as a person of faith’. What I love most about this passage

is not just their courage to speak out faith in the power of God, but faith whether they see that power in action or not! I cannot read this story without thinking of a friend whose little 8yr old daughter had cancer. He quoted these verses and said ‘we know God can heal her, we believe he will, but even if he doesn’t, we will worship.’ The Lord did not heal her but we watched in awe as that family chose to worship their way through the tears.

Most people know the dramatic story of these three men who were then thrown into a fiery furnace, so hot that the guards tossing them in were killed by the heat. And there in one of the most exciting stories of the Old Testament, in the Kingdom of Babylon, Jesus turns up! Nebuchadnezzar asks his men if they did not just throw three men in, and they say they did. He replies “Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.” He calls the men out and perhaps my favourite phrase of all is “the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and **there was no smell of fire on them**”. In our walk through life with God there are times where we experience intense fire, but two things are certain. One is that Jesus is walking in the fire with us, and the other is that with his presence, no smell of destruction can cling to us. The result is what it always is - the people watching them see the Lord in action and come to worship him.

Prayer

Lord give me courage when I’m called to stand firm for you, and the faith in times of fire, that as you walk in it with me, my heart will be ultimately unscathed.

DAY 20

Zerubbabel

The unsung heroes of the return from Israel's captivity are all so important, even though you may have hardly heard of them. Names of course mean a great deal in Scripture.

Zerubbabel's name means "Descended from Babylon". His father's name, Shealtiel, means "I have asked God". Right in the time of exile in Babylon when God seems a million miles away, out of intercession comes God's man for the time. This is true for you, for your church, and wherever the people of God are crying out for him to come. God has been preparing people through exile, disappointment or pain to be exactly the right people in place. He has had faithful intercessors who have hung in there. He has birthed more in you in painful times, loss or disappointment when you have had to hold on in faith and trust with no word, than he birthed in all the good times. That wonderful old Chinese man of God emerging from 25 years in prison was asked how he had kept faith all those years. He replied in the words of an English hymn...

"All the way my Saviour leads me
What have I to ask beside
Can I doubt his tender mercy
Who through life has been my guide?
Heavenly peace, divinest comfort
Here by faith in him to dwell,
Since I know whate'er befalls me
Jesus doeth all things well."

Zerubbabel is just such a man. He has been born to a faithful man who has surely cried out to God in exile. But there is far more. Zerubbabel is in the line of the Kings of Israel. He should by rights be taking back his throne, but after the exile there will never be another king in Israel. He is put in charge of the little rag-tag crew of Jewish nomads returning to their home land, and assumes the position of a leader without ever, it seems, seeking his own aggrandisement at any time. His task is to do what is more important to his people than anything else, he is to rebuild God's temple. But after all the rejoicing and return we find in Ezra that after laying the foundation stone amidst joy and tears, the 'enemy within' their land

opposes the building and the builders give up in discouragement. What a hard thing to go through! Not only does his royal heritage count for nothing, but the one thing he has come to do seems to come to nothing.

God does three lovely things where Zerubbabel is concerned. The prophet Zechariah arises and says to the much older and probably saddened leader, in Zechariah 4:9,

“The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this temple; his hands will also complete it.” This is the God who never wastes anything, who redeems all that we count lost in his service. Haggai is another prophet (whom we shall look at soon) who encourages him and the people under him to rise again and work, and Zerubbabel seems to suddenly come to life and begins to lead again with a renewed will. Haggai 2:23 continues with perhaps one of the loveliest things God says over anyone. “I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, ’declares the Lord, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you, ’declares the Lord Almighty.” Zerubbabel must assume that with him the line of Kings has ended, but the last mention of him in Scripture is in the earthly genealogy of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, our Lord Jesus.

Have you struggled with disappointment, or the sense that all you have tried to do for the Lord has come to nothing? Look at the setbacks in Zerubbabel’s life, and see how the Lord, at just the right time, brings prophets of hope and encouragement to get him back on his feet to finish the task. See how the Lord himself describes Zerubbabel as a kingly adornment on his finger, and see the fruit God brings far beyond his life!

Prayer

O Lord I bring you any discouragements and disappointments I’ve had over my time walking with you. I ask you to bring me people of faith to encourage me afresh, and I trust you to yet fulfil your purposes in me.

DAY 21

Joshua the High Priest

Zechariah 3:6 The angel of the Lord gave this charge to Joshua: 7 “This is what the Lord Almighty says: If you will walk in obedience to me and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here [i.e. in his presence].”

Joshua is the spiritual leader of Israel who accompanies Zerubbabel on the journey back from Exile. We do not know much about him, he is mentioned alongside Zerubbabel in all the building attempts and he and his sons supervise preparation of the renewed sacrifices when they got back. A little aside in Ezra 3:18 shows that even within his own family there had been intermarriage with those of other faiths, which needed repentance if the Lord’s Temple was to be served wholeheartedly once more. In the book of Haggai it is clear that God’s renewed call to building is given to and implicitly obeyed by both the secular and spiritual leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua.

The only other mention of this man is in a very interesting vision given to the prophet Zechariah in Zechariah 3. In the vision, the prophet sees Joshua standing before the Angel of the Lord in heaven. Joshua is dressed in filthy rags, and surprise, surprise, Satan is standing there ready to accuse him.

This whole scene with Joshua is very significant. Many commentators believe that when ‘the Angel of the Lord’ is mentioned it often refers to a pre-appearing of Jesus. Whether or not this is so in Zechariah 3, the Angel of the Lord does command that the priest’s filthy garments (representing the sin of his people) are removed and fresh clean clothes are placed on him, just as they are in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, in Luke 15. The watching Zechariah asks for a clean turban for the priest, to cover a cleansed mind as well as body. The Lord then speaks of the coming Messiah, “my servant the Branch” who is going to remove the peoples’ sin in a single day! A wonderful prophetic word about the cross of Christ, to come.

Are you in leadership of any kind over God’s people? This is an awesome responsibility as we represent them before God. It is no surprise that as soon as someone starts to seek God’s

will for his people, the enemy rises up, we will see this over and over in Scripture but also in our own lives. Zerubbabel the secular leader faces opposition on a human level, but Joshua the high priest is being opposed by the enemy Accuser in the very courts of heaven. The only way to go forward with integrity is to regularly check our spirit is clean before the Lord.

How beautiful that the angel of the Lord gives Joshua new clothes, just as God gave them to Adam and Eve, as the father clothed the prodigal son in Luke 15. Whether you are in leadership or not, I can guarantee you have been at the sharp end of the enemy's accusing tongue, because Revelation 12:1//11 tells us he accuses God's people 'day and night'. Do you, or does someone you know, struggle with shame and condemnation, never free from the enemy whisper of guilt? Those wonderful verses in Revelation 12 tell us that we overcome him by the blood of Jesus spilled for us. Stand up and tell the enemy that Jesus has paid the price for you and since you have repented for whatever it is, it has been covered by his precious blood. The word of your testimony is simply the last time the Lord did anything for you, reaffirming his acceptance and love for you! This declaration really does work every time against the accuser, make sure those filthy rags left over from sin have been exchanged by our Lord Jesus for clean clothes, and that you are wearing 'fresh headgear' a cleansed mind to take away the problems in our thought life also.

Prayer

Lord thank you for our leaders, help me to pray for them earnestly, knowing that the enemy is eager to trip them up and take them out. Grant me fresh faith in my own life to stand against the Accuser's lies, to be quick to repent, and to dress in the clean clothes bought and paid for us on your cross.

DAY 22

Haggai

Haggai 2:3 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? 4 But now be strong, Zerubbabel, 'declares the Lord. 'Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, 'declares the Lord, 'and work. For I am with you, 'declares the Lord Almighty. 5 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

Writing about this small Old Testament book, Eugene Peterson notes that really all we know about Haggai's life is contained in his three and a half month mission to help rebuild God's temple! Cyrus of Persia was known for allowing his conquered people to retain their faith, and has generously returned gold artefacts from the original temple and given them enough financially and materially to rebuild it. We have already seen that the story gets off to a sad start. After beginning with joy, the people are threatened by the enemy already within their territory and the work ceases for perhaps up to 15 years. Then the Lord sends two prophets who make a huge difference - Zechariah ('God remembers') and Haggai ('Celebration')!

Haggai begins his ministry, as so many of the prophets do, by a call to repentance. He points out that work as hard as they might, they are getting very poor returns for all their farming and labour. It is like, he says, "putting money into a purse with holes" - does that sound familiar? Haggai's answer reminds us of Elijah, early in his story, when he approaches a widow about to use the last of her food before dying of starvation (1 Kings 1:12-14). He says that she is to first cook something for him and then her food will never run out. Haggai tells the people that they have stopped building God's house first, and that is why they are struggling. God is always longing to help us in need, but often when we put his heart concerns first, it often opens a way for our own needs to be met!

But then this wonderful 'minor' prophet, whose book is only two chapters long, bursts into encouragement and joy. You need people like Haggai in every group of believers, people of integrity but also people of joy who are like lightning rods of the Spirit to God's people. Haggai reiterates the historic encouragement to Joshua son of Nun, to be strong and

courageous but adds “AND WORK” because, he says ‘in a little while ’(always be careful when you read these words! God’s ‘little while’ can sometimes be centuries!) God will shake the whole known world and ‘the desired by all nations will come ’(Haggai 2:6/7). Here in the midst of his very practical encouragement to rebuild the Temple, Haggai has suddenly begun to prophesy about the future, of God’s shaking of the nations and the coming of the One so long desired! Building up the Church needs to always be with an eye to the coming of Jesus.

Then Haggai comes back to the present moment and gives God’s wonderful promise to those discouraged builders. From that very moment when the building begins again, he says, they will once more flourish and prosper. In spite of being so much smaller and less ornate than the first temple, the glory within will be far greater in their midst.

- Do you prioritise serving God before your work and finances, knowing that all the silver and gold are his (Hag 2:8)?
- Are you a joy-bringer? Do you encourage people to greater deeds (Hebs 10:24)?
- Are you willing for your ministry to him to be only seen briefly or not at all by others, so long as you are fulfilling what God calls you to?
- Are we looking back at old past revivals or are we crying out for our own day, whatever structure we may belong to, that we may build through conversion a place where God’s glory falls?

Prayer

Lord make me a joyful encourager, a builder of your Kingdom, and a lightning rod of your Spirit.

DAY 23

The Builders of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 3

Nehemiah 3 is often skipped over in studies of this book, but it is excitingly *full* of ‘second fiddle’ heroes! This story takes place after several returning waves of God’s people, and the rebuilding of the Temple that we have seen with Haggai and Zechariah. You will have seen on TV the look of devastation on the faces of civilians caught up in appalling wars of this century, as they looked at their decimated former homes. This is exactly the understanding we need to bring to reading Nehemiah. Let’s look at who is rebuilding the city walls...

- **The priests** lead the way(v1). So they should. If a pastor or church leader is only interested in himself and his ministry, or even just his flock, he is missing something. The church is there for non members. It is there to change society. Where the priests lead the way, society changes. When the walls of salvation in a society are broken down it should cause church leaders massive pain because they care for the city and for God’s honour. *Our faith is personal but it has never, since the days of the early church, been private.* So few of us expect to lead anyone to Christ today, yet this of course is the calling and enormous privilege of every single believer.
- **Jericho!** V2. I love this. The second group mentioned in building are the people of Jericho. What’s the first thing you think of when you think of Jericho? It’s walls falling flat! *God retakes places of failure.* Perhaps we look at devastated walls in our own life or family. Places that have fallen into disrepair, walk with God, broken relationships, people who have been harmed who once were in fellowship...we have the privilege of repairing broken walls.
- **Leaders.** V15 (Shallum is the official of the district of Mizpah),Civic leaders also lead the way in rebuilding. Godly leaders will do so naturally but also God has “men of peace” in each place to do his will, whether believers or not, people with God’s heart of mercy. Pray for men of peace to do God’s will. Now comes the exciting bit for us...
- **Each business** belonging to God’s people, is represented amongst the builders. Perfumers, goldsmiths, makers of luxury products, and especially the jewellers, use their hands for delicate work, definitely not for building, but they are determined to restore

their city. A passion has got into these people, ‘the enemy isn’t going to have his way any more, we’re not just gonna lie down and have anyone walk in and trample us, we are going to build’! What does this mean for those of us who are in business? Are we prepared to get our hands dirty, reaching out to the poor, the refugees. Are we willing to speak out for righteousness politically where necessary? Or are we concerned only for our reputation or an easy life?

- **They build opposite their own houses** v23. Talk to God about your neighbourhood. Consider prayer walking. Consider saying to your neighbours and friends ‘what would you like prayer for?’ No matter how long you are living there. **Jeremiah 29:7** reads: *“seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you....Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper”*
- **Meshullum** - v30 This guy builds opposite his apartment. The Hebrew word indicates a small space, it’s like saying Meshullum only had a little bedsit but he repaired the wall in front of that! We are never ever too small, too alone, too weak to effect a change in society. We feel most passionately about what we know. What has Jesus done for you? Build with that!

Prayer.

Lord I ask you to fill me with a passion to build your kingdom in the city, the neighbourhood, the very street where I live or work. Fill me with godly sorrow where your house stands in ruins in our day, and a desperate desire to rebuild for your glory.

DAY 24

Baruch

Jeremiah 45: 2 “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to you, Baruch: 3 You said, ‘Woe to me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am worn out with groaning and find no rest. 4 But the Lord has told me to say to you, ‘This is what the Lord says: I will overthrow what I have built and uproot what I have planted, throughout the earth. 5 Should you then seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them. For I will bring disaster on all people, declares the Lord, but wherever you go I will let you escape with your life.’”

After the time of Solomon, you will know that many good and bad kings rose in Judah (and uniformly bad kings rose in Israel) but God faithfully called and called to his people through the prophets, crying out to them to repent and return to righteous living. Sadly despite great kings like Hezekiah, Asa and Josiah, and wonderful prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, the downward spiral continues until the complete overthrow of God’s people by Babylon and Assyria.

Baruch is a scribe in the time of Jeremiah who seems to have chosen to serve the prophet and write down all his warnings. This was both humble and, in his case, particularly frustrating. In Jeremiah 36 the story goes that Baruch takes the scroll with all the warnings that Jeremiah has spoken, painstakingly written out by himself, and goes to the leaders in Israel at the time. They make him read the whole thing through twice to them, and then they tell him to go and hide himself and Jeremiah while they take it to the King. What happens next is a shocking contempt and disregard for the word of God. The king ceremonially cuts off each bit of scroll after it has been read, and throws it into the fire.

Baruch then has to painstakingly write out the whole lot again, so that the Lord’s words are not lost to us, and then needs to add what the Lord says next to Jeremiah. The great and precious promises in scripture come to us as a result of many faithful men like Baruch doing the time-consuming and often seemingly unrewarding job of writing down for us the word of God, given to prophets, kings and disciples. It is in a way fitting that Baruch is hardly known. His name means blessed (and is still used today), yet in Jer 43:1-3 Baruch comes under severe criticism by some who say he is even inciting Jeremiah to bring these messages of judgment and warning. In other words, they were accusing him of treachery in time of

war. Undoubtedly Baruch, like Jeremiah, sorrowed greatly that the city and country that they loved were about to be destroyed.

But God, through Jeremiah, has a direct promise for this dear background scribe who has gone through shame, disgrace, and hardship and remained faithful. He is told that disaster is coming but his life will be spared, that it will be the Lord's gift to him. There is such a challenge in the Lord's words "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Don't seek them".

It is so easy to look at people whose lives and ministries are blessed and to assume that somehow they are more important to the Lord than we are. The 'great' among the Jews in that day nearly all died at the hands of the enemy, but the Lord promises to preserve the life of his dear faithful servant and scribe Baruch.

Prayer

Lord help me to give my all to you, even if you ask me to do humble tasks. Help me to go on serving when I have been disappointed or my work seems to have been completely burned up and pointless. Free me from the desire to 'have a name' and grant me joy in the life you have chosen for me.

Introduction to New Testament characters

If you look at the many figures to be seen connected to the birth of Jesus we see a lot of 'second fiddle' people, representing every part of society.

- The old (Simeon and Anna)
- The young (Mary)
- The shamed (Joseph)
- The barren (Elizabeth)
- The priesthood (Zechariah)
- The wealthy (the Magi)
- Honest seekers from other faiths & nations (also the Magi)
- The poor & outcasts (Shepherds)
- Refugees are represented by the main characters - Mary, Joseph & Jesus!

God seems to go out of his way to teach us how important it is for every single person who loves him to realise their life and faith are enormously significant!

DAY 25

Zechariah father of John the Baptist

Luke 1: 8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot...to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense....11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.

Zechariah has spent a lifetime serving God, he is in the priestly line and clearly devout. Nevertheless he is very surprised when an angel visits him during his honoured visit into the temple 'holy of holies'. We know that the priests took it in turn at that time to perform the high priestly task once a year to enter the holy of holies bearing the sins of the people. To make it even more dramatic they wore bells on their garments so if they stopped chiming the people outside would fear the priest had been struck down for the people's sin! What an awesome responsibility. Yet despite his privileged spiritual position we find a good man who really doesn't expect God to turn up!

I used to feel Zechariah was treated a bit harshly being struck dumb after the Angel Gabriel's shock announcement. After all, faced with an identical situation, Abram was equally disbelieving! (Gen 18). The point is if you have had a lot of disappointments it is very easy to become cynical or at least to struggle to hope for God to act. Both Abram and Zechariah had waited a very long time and it appeared clear that their wives were barren. Perhaps God was giving Zechariah time to trust once more, before he talked about God's promises. Perhaps, knowing the story of Abram and Sarah, he was expected to believe a bit quicker. We do not know exactly why he is struck dumb but what we do know is that God's promise still stands!

In many ways this is the message of the entire Bible! Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and many others all falter, question and doubt. They pay for the consequences of their doubt, often bitterly, but the promises still stand. God does not sigh, shrug his shoulders and move off to someone else, he works in those times of silence we all have (even if not physically dumb) and as

faith begins to return again he opens our mouths once more and like Zechariah we begin confirming the birth of hope. John 'gift of God' is the herald of Yeshua 'salvation'!

- Have you stopped expecting God to turn up? Have disappointments led you to step back a bit when you hear promises or faith in others? Do not forget if a promise is from God it will always be fulfilled (Num. 23:19)
- Is it time to confess your doubts to God and to speak out in faith what you do believe about him?

Prayer

Lord Jesus thank you so much that Zechariah is in your story. Thank you that someone who doubted was father of your amazing herald, John! I bring to you today my past disappointments and confess where I have fallen to a lower level of faith. I choose to speak out the truth that you never leave or abandon us and ask you to once more speak to me and use me to give good news to those who need it.

DAY 26

Joseph the earthly father of Jesus

Matthew 1:16 Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

There are so few verses about Joseph in the Bible, yet this brave and self-effacing man was chosen by God to guide the feet of his Son as he grew to manhood. How disappointed, shamed and hurt Joseph must have been to hear that Mary was pregnant out of wedlock! We know he was a kind man as the Bible tells us his first thought was to quietly and unobtrusively finish the relationship without shaming her, despite what had happened. Does this story of the birth of Jesus cause you questions? One young Hindu man said to me “I absolutely don’t believe a man can become God, but when I think about Jesus I realise of course that God could easily become a man’. It was not long before he met Jesus for himself.

The shame continued for Joseph even after an angel appeared to him confirming Mary’s extraordinary story of divine conception. The first thing in peoples’ minds, when he continued in relationship with Mary must have been that he had fathered an illegitimate child! Certainly we know when they travelled to Bethlehem for the Roman censorship, no family member opened their doors to them. They were isolated by following God’s calling!

The second thing we know about Joseph is that he heard God. Even in the Bible, which is crammed full of people hearing God, Joseph stands out as having many dreams like his Old Testament namesake. Do you hear God’s voice? Do you ask him to speak when you read his word? There are so many ways in which he still speaks to his people but the thing that singles Joseph out is the fact that he obeyed! When I was a child my Mum would sometimes say ‘I’m not telling you anything new until you’ve done the last thing I asked! ‘God is longing to talk to us, Psalm 19:1 says ‘day to day pours forth speech and night after night declares knowledge’. God speaks through nature, through dreams, through other people, through so many ways, most frequently as we read his word, but he is longing for people who are wanting to hear him and obey what he says. C.T.Studd the famous cricketer-missionary, is said to have prayed each day before reading the Bible ‘Lord give me something I can obey

today'! As well as marrying Mary in the midst of shame-inducing circumstances, Joseph was told he was to remain celibate until Jesus was born - he really is given a lot to obey!

Finally, Joseph suffered for Jesus. We have seen he suffered shame, he also became a refugee for a number of years in order to keep his boy safe (Matthew 2:13-15). When at the age of 12 Jesus is missing on the way home to Nazareth, Joseph and Mary find him in the synagogue already showing how different he was to other boys his age. Did this quiet carpenter resent all that he had to go through for Jesus? From the beginning he behaved in such a kind and faithful manner. Perhaps like Moses (Heb. 11:26 NLT) *“He thought it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ than to own the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to his great reward.”* Or like Jesus himself in Hebrews 12:2 he 'disregarded the shame' deeming the privilege far greater than the responsibility.

What challenges you most about Joseph? Is it his willingness to obey? Is it the way he hears God? Is it his readiness to embrace shame, censure and temporary isolation sometimes in order to follow God? Is it the fact that very few people really remember Joseph despite the fact that he is so important to the story of Jesus? Would you be prepared to follow God even when no-one remembers you or sees what sacrifices you have made for him, content to know that God himself sees and delights in your gift to him?

Prayer

Father thank you so much for someone like Joseph who, from before Jesus was born, was prepared to 'play second fiddle' in his own story, to put Jesus first and to obey you. Teach me to learn to hear your voice as he did, to obey your will as he did and to follow your way for my life as humbly as Joseph, for the joy of serving your Son.

DAY 27

Mary

Luke 1:45 *“Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!”*

Depending on your churchmanship you may not think of Mary as a background hero at all! Whatever your church background may be, Scripture only gives very brief glimpses of Mary the mother of Jesus. All her life from almost the day of his birth, she ‘plays second fiddle’ to the son who has cost her so much to bring into the world. However, the things we know about her are challenging. It seems that Mary was probably very young at the Annunciation, and pure in heart. Any of us who have had kids can attest to the fact that even by the age of 12 or 13 it is a wonder for this young girl to have found such favour with God that he entrusts the carrying of his precious son to her.

We see Mary’s simple and uncomplicated response to receiving a vision of the Angel Gabriel, telling her that she will conceive supernaturally. Mary is clearly not stupid, her first question concerns her current virginity, and she will know how this is going to look to everyone. However, this humble young girl responds in Luke 1:38 **“I am the Lord’s servant,”** Mary answered. **“May your word to me be fulfilled.”** Mary goes on to voice spontaneous spirit-filled worship as she visits Elizabeth and finds that, as the angel has said, this much older childless lady is also with child. She is overwhelmed at the grace and miraculous work of God, and like Hannah before her, she speaks out in prophetic worship.

We know that the young couple cannot find shelter except in a very unhygienic place to give birth, and almost immediately they are invaded by a bunch of uncouth shepherds talking about angelic choirs! Later when they move elsewhere they are visited by three foreign stargazers who have come with incredible gifts to worship the new little king. Even then wise beyond her years, she **“kept all these things and pondered them in her heart”** (Luke 2:19).

We saw when looking at Joseph how challenging it must have been when Jesus, at the age children have their bar mitzvah, stays behind in Jerusalem to talk with the priests. Her son is going along the expected path but she may have longed for him not to, we do not know. We see her then play a background part in the gospels. In John 2, she seems to know somehow that Cana is the place to announce his ministry and even though Jesus says his time has not

yet come, Mary tells the servants “Do what he tells you”. She should know the importance and fruitfulness of obedience, she has done exactly what God has told her to do!

Another time when she and her other sons try to see Jesus, he appears to rebuff them by telling the crowd (Matthew 12:46-50) that those who are surrounding him are his true mother and brothers. I do not think this is Jesus ignoring his family so much as his widening the view of his disciples, to see that ‘family’ has a far larger meaning in God’s kingdom. We know that he dearly loves his mother because she alone is the one he speaks provision for, when on the cross where he is dying an excruciating death, he asks John to effectively take his place in caring for his mother.

- How quick am I to obey what God has told me? Do I stall, or doubt his voice even after he has confirmed it to me?
- Have I embraced the fact that Jesus is more important than me, and his desires come first?

Prayer

Lord fill me with the humility that sets Mary apart, as one who first of all believes what you say and then is prepared to obey, at no matter what cost.

DAY 28

Simeon and Anna

Luke 2:25 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.

Simeon and Anna have a cameo part to play in the early life of Jesus, but it is so important for all that. These two faithful saints of God are watchers, they are looking for the Lord to come, alert even in old age, to see his coming. No doubt they really were not expecting it to be in the form of a baby being dedicated that day, but they are so sensitive to God's voice, and so straining their eyes to see him coming, that there is no way they are going to miss the moment!

Here is all that we know about them...but it is still pretty challenging! The three things Luke says about Simeon are that he is righteous and devout, that he is looking for the Messiah to come, and that the Holy Spirit was on him! What a fantastic commendation! If that is all someone says about you, it is pretty exciting! We are told in Luke 2:26 that the Holy Spirit has made him a promise that he will not die before Messiah comes, and so alert is he to the Lord's voice that on this particular morning he hears the Spirit speak to him to go into the temple.

When he sees the baby, he takes him into his arms in dedication and bursts into thanks and praise, saying in effect 'OK Lord I'm ready to die now, you've fulfilled your promise and I have had the immense honour of meeting your salvation (Yeshua), the glory of your people and your light to the Gentiles'! That's quite a prophecy to come out with on seeing a tiny baby! But Simeon has been ready...day after day, year after year, he has been ready, longing for God to come.

Anna is also a prophet we are told, she is 84 years old! She has been through the pain of bereavement after only 7 years of marriage, perhaps she is childless, we do not know, but Luke 2:37/8 tells us "She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

Two things to learn from these faithful, fruitful elderly prayer warriors. The first is you are never too old to influence events in God's kingdom. Have you given up expecting to be used by him? Have you assumed "the race is for the young now, I'll cheer them on and maybe finance their endeavours, but my time is over"? Do you make excuses about praying because you're old and haven't got the energy to pray more than a few minutes? I am always challenged by my parents who went on leading people to Christ in their 80s, because no one had told them they were too old to stop! Woe betide the milkman, watchmaker, florist or lollipop lady, all of them had an encounter with Jesus through meeting my harmless-seeming Mum or Dad!

Or are you perhaps young? Do you tolerate the old members in your church but miss the fact that as with Simeon, the Holy Spirit is on some of them, or that like Anna they have been worshipping in God's house through joy and sorrow, faithful to the very end? Might they have something to teach you?

Prayer

Lord make me like Simeon and Anna, keyed up in the spirit, constantly watching and ready for your presence, faithful throughout my days, still prophetic in old age and able to hear your voice directing me.

DAY 29

Andrew

John 1:41 (NLT) Andrew went to find his brother, Simon, and told him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means "Christ").

The key thing to note about Andrew is that he is always bringing people to Jesus. He brings his brother Peter, he has the faith to bring a young boy with his lunch of a few loaves and fish to Jesus in spite of the apparent insignificance of the amount, he knows Jesus can do a lot with a small gift. When some Greeks approach Philip wanting to meet Jesus, Andrew is the go-to guy for an introduction (John 12:20-26). He doesn't have the spectacular highs (& lows!) of his brother but although Peter is credited with calling Jesus the Messiah, it's Andrew who first understands and suggests that he is. He is totally captivated by Jesus, it seems, from the beginning, and, with John, he is the first of the disciples to follow him. Andrew is one of those people who, once they meet and are convinced by Jesus, they love him with all their heart and follow him in simplicity and passion.

Do you often feel insignificant? Not just to people but to God, perhaps feeling 'if I mattered he would have given me a big noticeable ministry'? As God told Samuel in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 16:7) he does not count outward appearances, he looks on the heart. Every step you take for him is treasured and counted by a father who delights in you. Have you asked God if, like Andrew, you could become the go-to person if people wanted to know God? I met a young student years ago who was extremely shy and quiet. She first came to my notice when our church had an evangelistic service. All her noisier, more vocal Christian friends turned up alone, but an entire pew was filled with the people she brought! She was the first to sign up for a street outreach in our city that summer and she led a dear Cypriot man to Christ whom she met in the high street. He continued to come to our church long after she left. She then went to Romania and started a street children's ministry! The very fact of her gentleness and the simplicity of her quiet faith drew many to her.

A few questions...

- Do you subconsciously think 'professional pastors and Christian workers are the only ones who can lead people to Christ? Where does that leave the early Church? They

weren't 'seminary-trained'. A business man we knew was invited to a big business lunch in the city of London and was seated next to the chairman of the stock exchange. After they were seated, his companion turned to him and said 'David, how can I find God?' Do you want to be that person who may be unthreatening, yet is so open about their faith that people naturally go to you when they need Jesus?

- Are you willing to ask to be an Andrew? Willing to be a background person if necessary but also to take huge steps of faith in order to bring people you love or work with to Jesus?

Last thought. Though not one of the 'big three' disciples, Andrew is last mentioned by the early church father Origen, as going to Scythia, which is modern day Iran! What a brave and faithful role model to have.

Prayer

Lord Jesus thank you that you don't have favourites. Thank you that while some have upfront gifts and ministries, others of us are called to be Andrews - approachable people who can gently lead to you those who are attracted to you because of our gentle, loving and faithful lives. Make me alert to find those you have for me to bring to you.

DAY 30

Philip the Disciple

John 1:46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

I'm so happy that Philip is one of the disciples Jesus went out of his way to call. Peter, for example, is the product of Andrew's evangelism, but Jesus goes and finds Philip. This is the guy that seems to be slightly on the back foot all the time when it comes to knowing what's going on.

John who loves Jesus and watches him so carefully, is the disciple who tells us most about Philip, probably because he knew that for some people it is really important to see that he was called too. We know that in Jesus' time, only the intellectual *crème de la crème* were approached by a Rabbi with the words "Follow me". Here is the greatest Rabbi of all time and he chooses Philip, who can be seriously thick at times in terms of understanding what is happening! More than that, Jesus is very keen to help him to understand. He doesn't just preach at him, or give him endless rabbinic teachings to learn, he asks him questions, the very best way of engaging his brain and heart.

In John 6:5 Jesus singles Philip out, asking him how they are going to feed the crowd. Dear Philip takes this as a genuine concern, clearly feeling Jesus must be worried about the situation, and replies that well, it would take half a year's wages to feed them. He is very different to Andrew who approaches Jesus with a young boy's lunch and the simple belief that his master can do anything.

We find that, because he isn't one of the up-front disciples, Philip is clearly more approachable, and in John 12:21 some Greeks come him asking if there is a way to meet Jesus. Philip goes and gets Andrew, possibly to make sure he is doing the right thing! But despite all this, he is not afraid of asking Jesus questions, he knows that he is loved and accepted. He comes out with what seems like a sure-fire way to Jesus' heart, saying 'please just show us your Father, that will be more than enough for us'. Jesus replies (Jn 14:9) "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" He still just hasn't

got who Jesus is, even after seeing the miracles and hearing Peter's messianic declaration of faith!

In case you are wondering why Jesus picked this guy, think again. Philip is from Bethsaida like Andrew and Peter, and when this extraordinary rabbi, Jesus, calls him to follow him, Philip really understands the simple fact that this is the One foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. His reaction is instant evangelism, he rushes off to find his friend Nathaniel, practically gibbering with excitement. 'Guess what? We've found him! The guy the scriptures have been speaking of, and it's Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth!' Nathaniel looks at him sceptically and says that nothing good can come from Nazareth, it being a crossroads where all the most undesirable element of society meet on their journeys to and from the country. Philip's reply is textbook simplicity. "*Come and see*"!

Are you someone who finds it hard to keep arguments in your head? You'd like to be an evangelist but you are pretty sure you won't be able to answer the clever questions or the aggressive opposition you may meet? Like Philip you have two things on your side. The first thing is that Jesus has called you, and you can always answer a tricky question by saying 'I'm not sure, but I'll go and find out and let you know'. Secondly you have your own testimony '*come and see* what he has done for me in my life'.

Never say you cannot speak out for Jesus or are not clever enough with the arguments, Jesus chose Philip. Jesus chose you.

Prayer

Lord Jesus thank you so much for choosing Philip! Help me not to make excuses about who I am, but to serve you passionately with the gifts you have given me.

DAY 31

Nathaniel

John 1:48/9 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

While some of us may have been pleased that Andrew or Philip were among the lesser known disciples, most of us don't like to admit to being a sceptic like Nathaniel. But Jesus chooses people from all walks of life, even a fire-breathing paramilitary like Simon the Zealot! So why would he not also choose the honest sceptic? And Nathaniel *is* honest, Jesus sees his integrity and immediately comments on it. While it is wonderful to have people who follow Jesus with uncomplicated simplicity, like Andrew, do not exclude yourself because you are someone who asks questions. If ever the kingdom of God needed people who questioned and discerned what is right and what is hype or even heresy, it is now. No one likes the curmudgeon, the person who lives to pick holes in everything and refuses to entertain the possibility that God could do things differently in different circumstances. But the honest man or woman who struggles with questions, is someone Jesus loves to meet with and seeks to illuminate.

Jesus firsts meets Nathaniel when Philip drags his friend off to meet him, still muttering that nothing good can come from Nazareth. Jesus hails him as 'an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit!' Instead of being flattered, Nathaniel says 'How can you possibly know that?!' Being called an Israelite indeed (a compliment Jesus also gives to Zaccheus) means Jesus is calling them out as a man in the line of faith, and in this case, a man of integrity also.

Nathaniel remains sceptical until Jesus says he saw him sitting under the fig tree before ever Philip went to get him. This seems a somewhat strange thing to convince Nathaniel but it isn't really. The person who genuinely wants to know the truth, recognises it when they see God's power in action. Remember this when you are seeking to share your faith with friends who are truly open to knowing the truth but who simply can't get it. Sometimes they are convinced by a simple explanation of the gospel, but sometimes they need to see the power of God in action, changing lives. One part of the church considers this to be sensationalism which is not as solid as profound teaching. But Jesus is so interesting in the way he

approaches the different disciples with what will answer their questions. Perhaps this will drive us to our knees, asking that his power may be seen in us in new and prophetic ways?

Jesus goes on, in John 1:50/51 “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.” Jesus is referencing the first ‘Israelite indeed’, Jacob, way back in Genesis 28:12, who had a vision of angels descending from and ascending to heaven. Jesus is saying that Nathaniel will live to see heaven invading Earth as the Son of God walks among his people. Wow.

Are you a questioner like Nathaniel? Use your natural questions to the blessing and benefit of God’s people, but always be looking out for signs of heaven invading Earth as Jesus does wonderful things in the lives of those you know.

Prayer

Lord help me to walk in faith and integrity like Nathaniel. Help me to work through my questions in a godly way, and above all give me the privilege of seeing heaven invading Earth in your power touching those I know.

DAY 32

The Syrophenecian Woman

Mark 7:24-30, Matthew 15:21-28 'O woman, great is your faith! (Matt 15:28)

Has God ever not replied when you've cried out? I love this story – the whole story seems so out of character in Jesus, yet we see him dealing with this lady in such a challenging way. He has sought to have a bit of private time but she finds out. Now we know that at other times Jesus could hide Himself completely, but He doesn't do so here, yet He doesn't make it easy for her either. Why? If you have ever asked the Lord for something and He has (Matt 15:23) "not answered a word", you are ready to learn from this story. Jesus is dealing with a woman (the bottom of that society) and a gentile woman too. As is so often the case in Jesus' ministry He goes to and includes people who are not acceptable under Old Testament law.

This story is about faith-stretching, it is about persistence in prayer, about asking, seeking, knocking and not letting go of the Lord until He comes.

Mark's gospel calls this lady a Syrophenecian. These people had a monistic world view – "Everything is one, God is in everything, any absolute or restraint is evil". Jesus sets about very deliberately expanding this lady's faith, and he does it in unusual ways. First of all he doesn't answer. At this point people do a variety of things. Some turn from the Lord altogether, some get angry or just withdraw slightly inwardly. We may even doubt the previous times God has answered. We don't know why God doesn't answer, sometimes perhaps like a good parent, he waits to see if we really want this, sometimes perhaps we can't handle what we ask for. In guidance sometimes the wait, the deliberate painful obediences help us to grow and mature. But sometimes the answer is simply "no" and we may never find out why. But there is a right way to react at such a time...*Persist!*

Look at this woman – she just isn't going to give up! She reminds Jesus and herself, (and the enemy, who is undoubtedly whispering to her that God doesn't care for her at all) that he is able to do this and even if she doesn't deserve it, she's still going to ask! As you pray, check

your spirit, is anything blocking Him coming? Begin to thank him for all he has done so far and recommit to trusting him, whatever the answer.

Not only does Jesus not answer, he apparently hurts her. He says 'I've been called to the Jews'. Is this passage saying that is in fact the deal? Does God indeed have favourites? But when God chose a nation, the Jews, it was with the proviso that they bless every nation on earth (Gen.12:3). Jesus is not silent because he isn't going to help her. Is he just not answering you just now? What is your reaction when he does this? We can be angry or fatalistic 'Nothing ever happens for me. God doesn't care'. Disappointment can steal our trust in him.

Or will you, like this woman, like Jacob back in the OT, like saints of God down through the ages, cry "I will not let you go unless you bless me". God is stretching your faith for a purpose – not just to hurt you. He is calling us to deeper and deeper trust. I love Matt.15:28, I always feel this burst out of Jesus "Oh woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you even as you wish!' She has hung on, refusing to give up in anger. She is still at his feet humbly asserting the truth despite all the evidence, she still believes in his love and grace. And her daughter of course is healed. Sometimes we've cried out and yet the worst has happened. Come back to Jesus today and say 'It is in your nature Lord to bring good out of even these hurts, I am holding on to you for more! And your faith will stretch and grow, and God will seem bigger.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, with relief I lay down past or present disappointments at your feet today. I choose to go on trusting you, and I bring to you afresh my cries for myself and those I love.

DAY 33

The Centurion

Matt 8:8-10 "...just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 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."10 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.

In the story of the Syrophenecian woman and this one about the Roman centurion, two things are very clear. Of course, both these people are foreigners, outside the Jewish faith, yet they seem more able to believe than the so-called 'believers'. The second thing is a universal truth throughout the entire Scriptures - God loves faith! In Luke 18:8 Jesus says 'When the son of man returns will he find faith on the earth?' He seems most excited, in the gospel stories, when someone has faith.

I guarantee that for many of us, this is a problem! It is not that we do not believe in him, or that we don't think he can do something, it is that we are not sure if he will. This seems to be the sticking point for most people, and why we either do not pray for things, or hedge it about with provisos...'only if you want to of course Lord'. The two stories of these foreigners are interesting. They don't try and psych themselves up 'I do believe, I do, I must be convinced or it won't happen'. Not at all, they come to Jesus very simply to ask.

In the Syrophenecian's case, she persists in trusting that he is kind. Here in the story of this Roman Centurion whose servant is sick, we find a thoughtful man. He meets Jesus and because you don't get to be a Centurion in one of the most ruthless and tactical military forces ever known without a very clear concept of authority, he instantly recognises what is in play when Jesus commands the sick to be healed. Jesus is a commander in heaven's armies and he speaks to sicknesses very much the same way he speaks to demons, he tells them to go, and because he has ultimate authority they have no choice but to leave. The Centurion has got this, and the faith that Jesus commends here is not that the Centurion stands there bellowing out 'I have authority here, sickness leave' but that he has absolute confidence that *Jesus* has that authority and simply asks him to use it on his behalf.

There is so much teaching that can leave us utterly condemned - teaching that if you don't have enough faith it won't happen, teaching that it is down to you to exert authority. No, what Jesus commends is the person who believes *his* authority, who recognises that he can do all things and who comes to him trusting his power. Notice that while the Syrophenecian has to persist, trusting that this is a God who will hear and care, the Centurion has faith in his power. Have you given up expecting God to be kind? Or have you perhaps secretly given up believing he is in authority when all you see around you is the world's devastation? Maybe today would be a good day to come back to him and ask him to renew your faith in his grace and power, and to choose to step out afresh and risk trusting him again for something.

Prayer

Lord Jesus I want, like the Centurion, to give you joy by fully trusting both your love and your power. I choose again to bring you my requests believing in these two aspects of your character, confident that you love me and have power to act.

DAY 34

Stephen

Acts 6:8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)...who began to argue with Stephen. 10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke....15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Throughout Scripture from Abel onwards there are many martyrs for the faith, but few who are so attractive as Stephen. This man is a deacon, who not only distributed food and charitable aid amongst the poor, but we are told he is full of the Spirit, clearly a great preacher, and in love with the Lord Jesus. His case sounds so sadly familiar. He is a worker of miracles and a brilliant defender of the faith and the religious leaders are jealous of him and infuriated that they cannot beat him in argument. So as with the Lord Jesus before him, they bribed people to lie and say he was uttering heresy.

We in the West need to understand, as believers in many countries still do, that to follow a Saviour who was crucified, may mean crucifixion for us too. Maybe not physically (though in many places this is still the case) but laying down our lives in terms of our careers, ambitions, preferences, reputation, willing and bravely to make a stand, and speak for Jesus no matter what the cost. It is very clear that the New Testament church was aware of the cost of discipleship, Jesus had been very honest about it, and their love for him was such that they would gladly lay their lives on the line.

Wait a moment - if you are thinking that the problem for you is you probably just don't love him enough for this, *tell him*. Be really open and ask him to come by his Holy Spirit right now and fill you. It is only this, his Spirit's love and power within us, that will mean we are willing to face pain and hardship in following him. No amount of good teaching can make us brave as these men were, only God himself can do that. When did you last ask him to fill you? We all know the quote from D. L. Moody the evangelist who was asked why he kept asking to be filled, he replied "Because I leak!" Resolve to become someone who regularly asks for the Holy Spirit to come and fill you afresh.

We see in Acts 7 that Stephen is clearly an intelligent man and he wants to not just give a simple message, he wants to lay out the case for Christianity for those who might genuinely want to know. He builds his case from Abraham the father of the faith and shows how time and again it is the so-called people of faith who reject the call of God. We see the Sanhedrin nodding away, enjoying the first part of the speech, they know all the story of their own faith of course, but when he begins to show the rather dark underbelly of that same history, the many times God's people have missed his presence in their midst and sinned against him, Stephen's time is up! They are incandescent with rage and pride and haul him bodily out to be stoned.

Here are two very interesting things, one is wonderful, the other very sad. Acts 7:55-57 tells us Stephen is still full of the Spirit and is granted the rare vision of the Son of God in heaven. Usually Jesus is now described as 'seated at the right hand of God' but in this case he is standing to receive the first Christian martyr. If a day comes when our faith is severely tested, Jesus will be there! But the sad bit is that the religious people literally covered their ears when he tells them the truth.

- Am I willing Lord Jesus to be a 'deacon' one who does the practical things to help keep the church of God running, but also one who seeks to be full of your spirit and power at the same time?
- Am I willing to face opposition from friends, family or others, if you call me to Jesus?

Prayer

Lord fill me with your Holy Spirit, that like Stephen I may radiate your glory in good times and under pressure. Make me bold, faithful, and strong in your name.

DAY 35

Tabitha (Greek name Dorcas)

Acts 9:36 “*she was always doing good and helping the poor.*”

Tabitha is a loving, caring disciple of Jesus (the best claim to fame any of us could have). She gets sick and passes away, her body is washed and placed in an upstairs room. But word is out that God is healing the sick dramatically through the Apostles and that Peter is nearby, so the believers rush to him and ask him to come. In Acts 9:39/40 it says *All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room...*

Who does that remind you of? Peter was there when Jesus went to the house of Jairus and there again he was surrounded by grief, despair and perhaps as here, a bit of sentimentality also. Never run away with the thought that God won't listen to us or care when we are grieving. That is not the reason Jesus put everyone out of the room, or why Peter, who has learned from him, does the same. It is just that sometimes when we need to pray in faith, we need to step out of an atmosphere of despair or it submerges our spirit. When we are surrounded by pain, as all of us are at some point or another, we have to somehow step outside of it with Jesus for a moment to remind ourselves that our hope is in him.

Jesus speaks to Jairus' daughter with a loving diminutive...it could be paraphrased 'Little lamb, get up'. After prayer, Peter takes Tabitha's hand and utters the same command, and she sees him, and taking his hand is helped to stand. I love the next line "Then he called for the believers, especially the widows..." He was not spurning them because they were emotional, they are the first he brings in to meet Tabitha now alive again.

Although, not strictly about Tabitha I can't resist mentioning how the story ends. Of course, the believers want Peter to stay around and teach them further and v43 says:

"Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon". You will know that because of his trade, a tanner lived on the outskirts of the city and was viewed as ceremonially unclean. Peter had learned something else from his Master, to go to the despised, the vulnerable, not to let success in ministry lead to arrogance.

Tabitha is like so many people - people who are the reason some churches stay on their feet! She is a hidden hero, she is kind, helps the poor, is a fantastic seamstress and uses this gift to bless so many. You can be sure she never thought of herself as important, but God saw her and raised her and from then on, not only did she serve the church, but she had an amazing testimony.

So many folk in mid-to-later life, when describing themselves, start a sentence by saying "I'm just...". They are almost saying 'don't notice me, I'm just the person who puts out chairs/ greets people/runs the nursery/ cooks in a food kitchen'. You are precious to people, whether they remember to thank you or not, but you are also precious to God, he sees you, he cares just as much for you as those who are 'seen' and known and receive thanks for all they do. Like William Carey the cobbler-turned-missionary to India, we can "expect great things *from* God, (and)attempt great things *for* God". No one expected anything from Carey except faithful attendance and help at church, but God is the God who raises a Tabitha, who sends out a cobbler, who stays with someone thought 'unclean'. Do you know you are precious to him...in your heart not just your head? Will you let him raise you up to serve him with a fresh spring in your step knowing what you do for him counts for eternity?

Prayer

Lord thank you that you love the 'backstage' people just as much as those 'front of house', that you do not differentiate between services for you, but receive all with joy. Help me to use my own testimony of how you have raised me.

DAY 36

Barnabas (son of encouragement)

Acts 11:24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

I do not know about you, but I've heard a few talks on Barnabas which seem to make out that he is just a cuddly teddy bear of a man, encouraging and loving everyone. This actually is far from being an accurate description of this fierce, brave, kind and generous Cypriot!

We first meet Barnabas in Acts 4:36, he is a Levite whose name is actually Joseph, but because of who he is, the disciples rename him Barnabas, the encourager. In the early days of the Church this generous man "sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." You can be generous with money but not with forgiveness or acceptance. However, we next meet him when (very understandably) the believers doubt Paul's conversion, as he has been ruthlessly attacking them for some time. Barnabas believes in his conversion and at risk to himself, brings Paul to the believers in Jerusalem, vouching for him (Acts 9:27). When the Holy Spirit moves the centre of missionary vision to Antioch, Barnabas is the guy they send to build up the fledgling church (Acts 11:25) and he remembers that firebrand whom he vouched for 13 years previously, and travels to fetch Paul to minister in this exciting new mission field.

We know that Biblical writers, when writing about two people, would put the person of greatest note first. So up until the middle of Acts 13, these two are always referred to as Barnabas and Saul. They teach the believers in Antioch, go on a journey to Jerusalem to represent them and then, and when this lovely new church decides they need to send out missionaries, they decide to send their best. 'While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" (Acts 13:2)

They set off on their amazing missionary journeys seeing thousands saved, healed, delivered and filled with the Spirit. But now Luke writes about "Paul and Barnabas". The main guy is now definitely Paul. As a younger believer I was impacted by someone saying that if we make it our business to empower and release others to serve Christ (even when some are

more outwardly successful than we are), God will see to it that we always have more than enough to do for him. Barnabas has affirmed Paul, rescued him from total obscurity and brought him into the Church at Antioch only to have him supersede him in ministry. We never once hear of jealousy or quarrels despite the flammable nature of their backgrounds and tempers, until it comes to helping someone else to come out of obscurity. This man Barnabas is willing it seems to let Paul be the one who is hailed and noticed and, despite no doubt seeing equally amazing miracles happen, to be second to Paul, one with him in ministry.

It is sad that there is a schism in the end between these two incredible men, in Acts 15:36-39. They quarrel over John Mark who was clearly younger and had, it seems, panicked and left a mission when things got tough. Paul writes him off as a lightweight where Barnabas is the prince of second chances. However, they sadly have a sharp disagreement and go on their separate ways, still serving the Lord but with different companions. How often division breaks even the best of friends. Paul clearly grows past this and works with John Mark later (2 Tim 4:11) but there is no news about reconciliation with Barnabas.

Do not let a painful disagreement stop you moving forward in God. Do everything you can as a Christian to ‘disagree well’. In other words, seek to forgive rash words, to state your case, but agree to disagree! Pray for the other person passionately and lovingly. If they will not reconcile with you, never speak ill of them but continue to pray for them, trusting God to heal your heart.

Prayer

Lord make me an encourager, quick to give people a second chance, willing to take a more hidden role as long as I am doing your will and being fruitful. Heal my heart where I have been hurt but help me not to allow the enemy to wreck my or others' faith through lack of reconciliation.

DAY 37

Priscilla and Aquila

Romans 16:3 "...Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus."

We have seen, looking at Paul and Barnabas, that in Scripture the first of two people mentioned is usually seen as the more influential of the two. Whether or not this is the case, here, Priscilla is mentioned first in all but one reference to her and Aquila, however one wonders if she would have been mentioned at all without him! These two are that rare thing a couple whose ministry is most effective together rather than separately, and so they are always mentioned together.

We first meet them in Acts 18:2 where we find that they are Jews who have been ordered to leave Rome. It's a one-liner in the Bible but this must have been during the intense persecution of those times and cost them dearly. Paul looks them up, because he too is a tent maker like them. We find that this couple are very willing to take the secondary place and let Paul be the one in the limelight but accompany him while facing the same trials and hardships. As he devoted himself to preaching more and more, they no doubt helped to finance the work of God through him.

Acts 18:18/19 tells us that Paul takes them with him when he sets sail for Syria, but they stay behind in Ephesus to strengthen the new little church that has sprung up from their mission. They are soon joined by a firebrand named Apollos, who is clearly a brilliant preacher even though he doesn't yet know very much about the Spirit. I met someone like that in China once. He started to read the Bible to learn English(!) and he said as he read "the Holy Spirit attacked my heart". He immediately gave up his lucrative job and started preaching, with huge passion and attractiveness, even though he didn't know very much yet.

Apollos was that kind of guy and it says beautifully in Acts 18:26 "When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately". Bless them, not only were they 'second fiddle' to Paul, when the next young leader turns up, full of power and love for Jesus, do they squash it out of him by telling him he doesn't know enough? Do they envy his sudden meteoric popularity? No they see his

amazing potential and take him in, and teach him so that when he leaves he will be an incredible blessing to the people of God.

Paul evidently loves this couple, he sends his greetings to them twice in Romans 16:3, and 2 Timothy 4:19, and in 1 Corinthians 18:19 he says “The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets in their house”.

Are you in that unbelievably busy time in mid-life where perhaps you are caring for ageing parents and have your children in their teens or twenties also needing some help and guidance? Do you feel it is impossible to serve the Lord much as well, and suffer from feeling guilty that you aren't doing what you once did for him? Perhaps you may be missing the most amazing opportunity on your doorstep. You have the possibility of teaching someone, perhaps a family member or someone in your church, by simply “explaining the way of God more adequately to them” over a family meal once a week. Perhaps you can support someone younger who is in mission and needs finances, as well as sending the occasional message to say they are not forgotten but loved, maybe adding a scripture to encourage them.

The one thing we see with this lovely couple, is that whether they are having to move, deal with persecution, support a far better-known minister for Jesus, teach another young man accurately, or having church in their own house, they are wholeheartedly all in for Jesus.

Prayer

Lord no matter what my 'age and stage' help me to be creative in how I can use the knowledge and love you have given me to bless and build others up to reach their best potential in your kingdom.

DAY 38

Jude

Verse 1 “a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James.”

If you have read the book of Jude, you will know that it is just one chapter long. Jude is thought by most to be one of Jesus’ siblings mentioned in Mark 6:3 and his brother James later became leader of the church in Jerusalem. It is so interesting that neither he nor his brother James in their respective books, draw attention to the fact that they are the natural brothers of Jesus! You would expect them to be dropping it into every conversation wouldn’t you? “Oh Jesus? I remember when we were just kids together at the table...” No he introduces himself in the first verse of his small letter, as a servant of Jesus, and brother to James.

We know in fact that earlier in Jesus’ ministry his brothers did not believe in him (John 7:3-5). They had, remember, all grown up in Nazareth where it tells us in Mark 6:4-6 that there was clearly enormous scepticism about Jesus being any more than just ‘the boy who grew up next door’. Keith Green in one of his songs sings about that scepticism saying, “prophets don’t grow up from little boys”. In Mark 3:21 it actually says the brothers try to waylay Jesus and bring him home “to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’”. They knew a lot *about* Jesus, but they did not *know* Jesus as the disciples did, at that stage. Sometimes there is a heavy sense of scepticism in our home area or workplace and we need to recognise it and ask the Lord to help us not to come under it.

We do not know very much at all about Jude, certainly not how he came to believe that this extraordinary brother of his was the Messiah they had been waiting for. But he clearly did believe it, and that knowledge filled him with humility and the desire to serve him forever.

Jude seems a lovely character. He is clearly a leader in the early church and very concerned about false teaching that was beginning to slip in. It is difficult to find many people who juggle being desperate for the welfare of the church in our day, well aware of false teaching, yet not miserable killjoys with it! We so need those who will guard the church with love and discernment rather than endless condemnation. When there appears to be a ‘new teaching’ that people start to get excited about, we do not instantly condemn it but prayerfully, using

both heart and mind, we ask God if this is really from him. Having warned the church urgently about sinners, grumblers, faultfinders, and those who divide the church, Jude has a very beautiful surprise for us at the end. He says in verses 22-23 “*Be merciful to those who doubt; 23 save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.* I actually love the Authorised Version of verse 22 “*And on some have mercy, making a difference*”. In other words, he says, there is a huge difference between those who are intentionally wreckers of fellowship, and those who have been led astray. Those people we seek to restore to fellowship in abundant grace, without compromising truth. Consider these questions:

- Do I know *about* Jesus or do I know Jesus?
- Do I need to ask him to teach me how to be discerning but not judgmental?
- Am I tempted to show off my knowledge and experience or am I truly in my heart ‘a servant of Jesus’?

Prayer

Lord Jesus what a privilege it is to belong to you, for you to call us friends, for you to make us like brothers and sisters and ‘joint heirs’ of all your inheritance. But help us also to know the privilege of serving you, the honour you have conferred on us to be your servants. Help us to have the same passion that you have for your Bride the Church, to safeguard her in wisdom and grace.

DAY 39

Lydia

Acts 16:13-15 On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. 14 One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. 15 When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Like so many of the hidden heroes whom we have considered, there are just these 3 verses about Lydia, in Acts 16:13-15, but as the person generally believed to be the first European convert, she deserves a place in our consideration. Her name probably refers to where she comes from, Thyatira in the province of Lydia (now Turkey). We do know from Jesus' letters to the churches in Asia in Revelation 2/3 that a church was established in Thyatira and it seems fair to assume this was the work of Lydia after she comes to Christ. Thyatira was a wealthy place with numerous merchant guilds and Lydia is clearly a wealthy woman because her merchandise is dyed purple cloth. This was only bought by the rich for clothes and soft furnishing as the purple dye is made from molluscs and therefore worth much more than local red dye.

Do you have a problem believing that if someone is wealthy it is harder for them to come to Christ? Admittedly Jesus said it was hard (Matt.19:24) but actually if you assume that someone cannot come to Christ for this reason, you are tacitly subscribing to the world's own belief that they have so many material benefits that they therefore don't need him! Having lived in Switzerland, we were saddened to hear several times from people whom we had come to love, the phrase "I don't need God, I'm Swiss!" For them a beautiful country and hugely wealthy lifestyle meant they looked to money for their needs. Is there someone you know who is rich in this world's goods? Take heart from this story and begin to pray for them that God would open their heart and mind to himself.

In Lydia's case her conversion seems like 'coming home'. She is already someone who seeks to live righteously and believes in God, so when she hears of salvation in Jesus, she

immediately responds. And in a place where her money can buy her respect and appreciation, she very publicly and humbly gets baptised in the name of Jesus, something that could instantly make her an outcast. It is so easy for us to follow Jesus for us in the West, I never forget baptising someone from a country where she would be instantly killed if word got out that she had been baptised. I think all of us who stood at the riverside that day saw the mixture of agonised tears and great joy as she entered the waters to die to self and rise to Christ. Some questions arise from this story of Lydia...

- How much do we honestly feel we need Jesus, or do we first think of money as the answer to our questions and problems?
- Do we pray for anyone from a country where it is costly to follow Jesus?
- Do we believe that God can save the very wealthy or do we take a materialistic view of their chances, ourselves?
- Are we praying not just for the poor and disadvantaged, but for people of wealth and influence to come to Jesus and use what they have to resource his work and influence their sphere of society?

Lydia's instant response to the gospel is that she wants to help and benefit believers, especially those who have led her to Christ. God has positioned this brave lady, both in terms of her home city, and her wealth and business acumen, to be part of the spread of the gospel through the whole continent of Europe!

Prayer

Lord Jesus help me not to have the world's view of money, and not to look at it as either the answer to every problem or the inhibitor of salvation for the wealthy. Give me a heart knowledge that you are my greatest treasure and only your love can truly change a life. Give me vision to know how to use my unique talents for you.

DAY 40

Epaphroditus

Philippians 2:25-27 & 30 (NLT) “Meanwhile, I thought I should send Epaphroditus back to you. He is a true brother, co-worker, and fellow soldier. And he was your messenger to help me in my need. 26 I am sending him because he has been longing to see you, and he was very distressed that you heard he was ill. 27 And he certainly was ill; in fact, he almost died. But God had mercy on him—and also on me, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.... For he risked his life for the work of Christ, and he was at the point of death while doing for me what you couldn’t do from far away”.

Have you ever heard anything about Epaphroditus? He isn't a hero we know much about, but in Philippians 2:25-30 Paul says some lovely things about him: “my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs”. Wow. A true brother, a worker for Christ, a soldier in the battle against evil, a messenger and a humble servant caring for Paul. There is one more significant thing about this guy, in v30 Paul says that he ‘risked his life’ for him. We don't know how, but the Greek verb *paraboleumai* (to risk) is used nowhere else in the New Testament.

The early Church boasted of people who modelled themselves on Epaphroditus, they called themselves the *parabolani* the risk-takers. These unknown Christians risked their lives during the time of plagues, going into the streets and homes of the sick and dying, to care for them with the love of Jesus. They buried the dead with honour in spite of the strong likelihood of dying from the disease themselves. They were honoured by Christians and unbelievers alike for their servant hearts.

Today perhaps God is calling out risk-takers once more. In a day that is easily as serious as those days of plague and persecution, let's ask the Lord to make us *parabolani*, risk-takers with our faith! Even the most successful of us has a limited sphere of influence...our work colleagues, family, friends and acquaintances. Let us seek to make our lives count, even if nobody knows what we are doing, knowing that God sees and is delighted by our loving service for him.

- Ask God for creative ways to share your faith. Consider putting a 3-4minute testimony of how Jesus has changed your life on YouTube and send your friends a link. Pray for

open conversations or take the risk of offering to pray for a colleague or family member.

- Being a soldier and a servant were not mutually exclusive in Jesus 'day. Ask God how you can wage war in prayer for people. Speaking to someone about Christ may not risk death in the West, but nevertheless we well know that it frequently risks offence or ridicule. Will you ask God for the heart of a lion to choose the road of both service and openness about him?
- Think about some simple ideas of service to those who are struggling emotionally or physically just now, the lonely or the broken whom you know. Perhaps even consider a kind service to someone who has hurt or ignored you previously.
- Pray for new faith to take risks for Jesus and his kingdom.

As we come to the end of 40 days of looking at God's hidden heroes, let's ask ourselves some difficult questions. Am I willing to be hidden? Am I willing to be a hero? Often our challenge falls into one or other of these areas. We feel the need to be noticed and affirmed or we would rather sound humble and say who are we to attempt anything for God. Neither of these are good choices. Let us ask the Lord to use us, whether he chooses to put us in a leadership position we would not choose for ourselves, or whether he wants to make us fruitful but unseen by others, for a time.

Prayer

Lord Jesus make me an Epaphroditus, brave, willing to take risky steps for you, willing to lose my life if necessary, in order to obey you and to love your people. If you choose that I should 'play second fiddle' and someone else should receive the praise, I choose to accept this with joy, so long as I give you glory.

Have a blessed day, Parabolani!