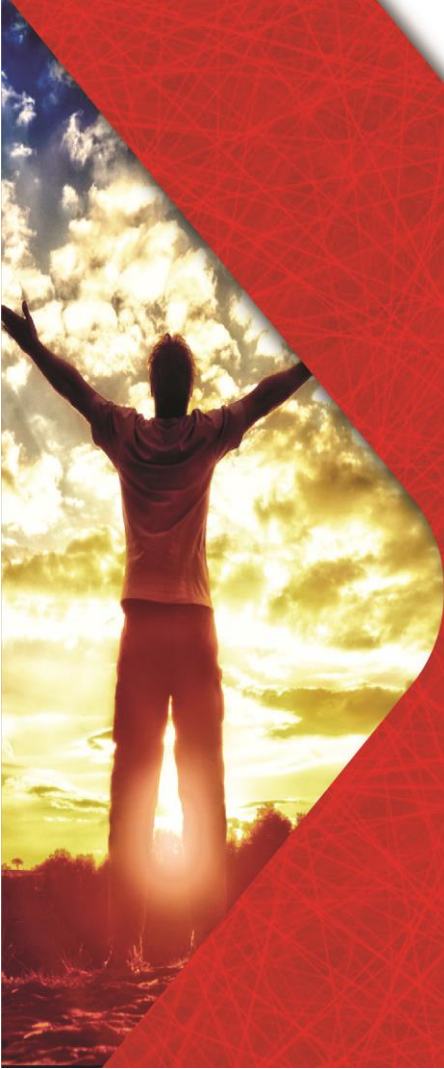


EXTREME

Training

the Crucible of Preparation



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Extreme Training

In our world today there is a new class of sports called Extreme Sports. Wikipedia defines extreme sports as activities having a high level of inherent danger. They often involve high levels of physical exertion and highly specialized gear. One other aspect of extreme sports is that they are usually counter-cultural and rarely sanctioned by the traditional groups. It also involves competition against not only other athletes but against environmental obstacles and challenges that cannot be controlled.

So what then is the meaning of the term extreme training? To understand what this means we need to understand what would be standard or normal training. The norm for training is structured programs offered in controlled environments. Evaluation is based on ability to retain information given and complete various tests of one's knowledge of that information. It usually involves set time periods and curricula.

So Extreme Training would be something that happens outside of the normal stream of education provided by the government for general education and the standard training programs offered by churches. It would involve unique time periods and conditions to carry out the training of a person for an unusual, difficult and possibly dangerous task. It would involve training that adapts to the changing conditions of the environment that exist in the world around us.

Extreme Training is often built on periods of intense organized training that is structured to develop basic skills in key areas. It also involves intense times of personal training which can be as unique as the person and the place where they are expected to carry out the task they are being trained for.

The Bible is a book that espouses both forms of training. It includes structured training to create the foundations needed for living as members of the kingdom of God and Extreme Training to prepare people for special service in the kingdom. There are no absolute guidelines as to how the training will take place, where it will take place and how long it will take. But anyone who wants to truly serve must be ready for a period of Extreme Training.

As you read through this book we will be looking at a number of examples of Extreme Training in the scriptures. It is hoped that through this study we will be open to such training for ourselves and ready to help others when they are selected by God for Extreme Training, training that will prepare us to serve in God's mission to bring the message of salvation to the world.

Potential Issue - It can be a dangerous situation if we depend too heavily on what others have done as the basis of our relationship with God and of our faith. Our parent's relationship will not save us nor connect us with God. This may be a place to begin but it is not the same as a personal relationship. In time we will be subject to the influence and ideas of others. That influence may be enough to sway our faith and lead us far from God.

Query - How much do you depend on the faith and strength of others to determine your decisions about your faith and commitment to God? How often do you settle for insight of others instead of taking the time to study God's word for yourself? Do you know where to find the answers to your questions? Do you seek God out or simply ask another to provide you the answer?

Adam

Adam – the impact of one decision

I have often thought about the life of Adam after he fell and was exiled from the garden. What was his life like? What did he do? These and other questions could make for an interesting discussion. One of the more significant ones would be, “what was his relationship with God like during the long years that followed that day when he found himself no longer in the garden, no longer able to walk with God as he had in the past?”

The Bible is very limited in what it has to say about the life of Adam. Its key focus is on the impact of the decision he made and how it affected all of humanity. There are a few comments that add to my interest in this. Paul makes the comment that Adam was not deceived (1 Timothy 2:14). Genesis 3:17 seems to support this idea when God states that his punishment related to the fact that “he listened to his wife and ate.” Adam knew what was going on. He was aware of the disobedience of his wife, he was aware that if he chose to accept the fruit, he too would be disobedient, yet he still chose to eat. He knew and he chose to listen to the wrong person.

Hereafter Adam would spend a lifetime living with the impact of that decision. He would watch one son kill another. He would see and be a part of the life of Enoch. Using the genealogy we discover that he would live to see the birth of Methuselah and maybe hear the warning from God that a day of judgment was coming.

So what was it like to live year after year with the knowledge of what you had done and see the impact of that decision in the lives of your family? (For everyone Adam talked to was part of his family.) What was happened between Adam and God through those many years?

There are lessons that only God can teach and that are almost impossible to explain. Lessons that involve restoration; involve forgiveness; involve God providing strength every day to deal with the impact of our lives on others. It is a topic we rarely care to discuss but one that was all too real for Adam -the impact of our wrong choices on the world around us.

We have no idea of how one lie, one selfish act, one wrong decision, one wrong attitude can impact others and drive them away from God and the chance to walk in fellowship with the creator of the universe. Adam had to deal with this in a very personal way. For very early in his life he would see its impact. One son would listen to him, the other wouldn't. Then one day the word would reach him that Cain had killed Abel. His decision in the garden cost him the life of a son. Then he would watch as Cain was exiled and had to live under the fear of retribution. But instead of creating a sense of devotion and awe of God, Cain's behavior would be twisted until just a few generations later Lamech would boast about how he had murdered a man.

I wonder what impact that action had on Adam as he saw God take the time to help his son make the right decision and watch him make the wrong decision. It is hard to imagine the pain that Adam had to endure as he watched these things happen. But it seems apparent that God was working and teaching Adam lessons along

the way. Lessons about learning to forgive - even himself. It would have been very easy for Adam to become depressed, shrivel up and die. But the record suggests he didn't.

I am sure Adam's lessons were difficult to learn. The pain that had to be accepted and dealt with would have been very intense. Imagine the hours of thinking about the decision, the failure and what would have happened if he had not agreed to eat the fruit. Through them Adam may have learned more about God's love and his desire to maintain a relationship with us. A relationship based on confession of the truth that would allow for restoration. Consider that the next son of Adam, Seth, arrives with the following comment, "God has granted me another son in place of Abel. (Genesis 4:25) This indicates that God is working to restore Adam and help him move on and it is working. Adam is looking to God for his life and the strength to continue living.

Following the birth of Seth the record includes an interesting comment. "At that time men began to call on the name of the Lord." (Genesis 4:26) For this to be possible there needed to be a person who made it possible for them to know who the Lord was. The best possible source would have been Adam, the man who actually walked and talked with God in the garden before all the problems began. Adam had learned to deal with the guilt of his sin, deal with his responsibility.

Yes, he could have withdrawn and avoided people but it seems clear that he did not do that. Instead he began to share his knowledge of God. He took the time to help them understand what had happened in the garden and sought to lead the people to a relationship with God. Why do I say this? Because there were those who chose to walk with God, like Enoch. So it appears that Adam did not keep his past to himself but sought to tell others and risk the accusations and rejection of his descendants rather than simply let them repeat his error and never have the chance to learn about the God of creation and not just the God of judgment.

What seems clear to me is that God did not abandon Adam. In those dark moments God was near. When Cain chose to head down the wrong path, the same path as his father, God came. God met with Cain to try and help him understand what was happening. And even after Cain failed, God protected him with the hope that he would not continue following the same path. God did not ignore Adam's son.

Of course most of the above is speculation. Yet it carries a great truth and a teaching that God wants us to learn to live by. The truth is that we, by our lives, actions and words, are helping others to make decisions that take them closer or farther from God. We are not the ones who are ultimately responsible but we do influence others. Our lives have a direct impact on their choices. This is not an easy lesson to learn and it is not easy to deal with the facts once we have accepted them.

What is equally important is the lesson that God does not abandon us because of our actions. He is always near to help us deal with our guilt, the results of our actions on our life and the lives of others and to guide us in a path that will allow us to teach others to call on his name. The question to us is will we allow God to teach us about his forgiveness and how to forgive ourselves so that we can help others call on him?

NOAH

Noah and the hundred year curricula

What would you have done if you had been asked to build something you had never seen before far from a place where it could actually be used? What would you have done if you were also told you had to supply all the materials for the project and convince others to help you? How long would you have lasted at such a job?

God had a plan and needed a man to carry out the plan. However in the entire world only one man came even close to qualifying. But his qualifications did not even relate to the project that lay before him. God wasn't looking for the manual skills, but rather for a heart willing to commit to the project.

Over the time involved Noah would have plenty of time to learn the skills needed and develop them. This was a course with only one test and only one grade possible. He either accomplished the task and lived or failed at the task and died along with everyone else. Further this was not the task of a day, a week over even a year. The size of the task, the technology available and the number of people willing to help (seven, a wife, three sons and their wives) meant it would take not just years but decades to complete.

There would be a constant flow of lessons to learn, skills to develop and a message to preach. The class would proceed on several levels, skill development, program management, administration and communication. Material acquisition and preparation would come first. Second would be developing the message and the toughest skin in the world to deliver it and survive the ridicule.

Carpentry skills would now be learned and lessons in geometry and physics given to deal with construction issues. There would also be classes in family management and economics. Noah would have to know how to care for and keep his family united for the duration of this project. He would also need to learn personal communication skills to keep them and himself motivated.

Animal husbandry would be included at some point. He would then be taught key principles of anger management and stress management. The onlookers could be so obstinate and the responsibility of getting them to listen let alone save them would be enough to stress anyone out.

At some point he would receive special instruction in food production and storage. Feeding two of every kind, as well as his family, would become a challenge. We don't know when the animals began to arrive but this would begin to tax their resources and relationships. They may have needed a weekend seminar in marriage building to keep them sane and in support of each other as the task stretched out before them.

Could the training have also included a course in navigation and sailing? Why not? Based on the details of the story they were going to spend a great deal of time in the thing they were building and it would be floating during the entire time.

Then came the training in staff management and systems planning. All of these animals needed to be cared for and their food stored properly; with a plan for feeding and caring for all who would be

on board. Thousands of animals with different dietary needs, different habits, different schedules, as well as the need to keep them and the environment clean would keep the crew very busy. Sanitation could become a grave problem without a clear plan and the structures to deal with it.

During all of this was the continual need to meet the people. To give a message no one was interested in hearing. A verdict that was terrifying in its scope but almost unbelievable given where the activity was occurring. Who builds a boat, any boat, where there is no water? Even more ridiculous was constructing a boat of this size that cannot moved to a river, lake or sea. This added to the people's rejection of the message.

The word tells us that Noah was found righteous or honorable in God's sight. So God chose Noah to build an ark. He also told Noah that only those who entered the ark would be saved from God's judgment that would destroy the entire world by a flood. We are also told the size of the ark and that it took Noah and his family 100 years to build the boat. During this 100 years Noah preached a message of warning to the people.

It says no one listened. Only his wife, his three sons and their wives heeded the message. Only they helped to build the ark and only they were saved along with the animals God sent to join them on the ark.

One hundred years of work and preparation for one event. One hundred years of teaching and preaching with only seven who chose to listen. One hundred years. That is an extreme length of time to get ready for anything, but that is what God had in mind for Noah. One hundred years of preparation to prevent the total destruction of mankind. One hundred years of learning, listening and teaching so that man would survive.

We complain about having to go to school for a couple of years. We complain about all the hard work the teacher gives. We

complain because we think we are prepared and yet, what do we really know. God made a decision about the size and location of the ark, knowing how long it would take. Why? Because God knew what must be learned in order for there to be no misunderstanding about the message of judgment and the decision about who would be saved.

We are impatient. We are restless. We are egotistical. So we need to be trained and only God knows how long the training should last before we are truly ready. The question is, will we submit to God's plan for training? We will follow through and complete the training? Will we continue until the moment when God decides we are ready?

For Noah the training and preparation lasted 100 years. The size and location of the boat, the location and availability of materials, and the time needed to learn the skills required 100 years. It was also the time that God determined was necessary to be absolutely sure that the people would see that there was no mistake about his evaluation of mankind and of the decision to destroy all but Noah and his family.

Real training does not occur overnight. It occurs over a life time. Extreme training requires the sacrifice of one's entire life in submission to the master teacher so that that person will be ready to do exactly what is necessary, when it is necessary.

Abraham – Learning dependency on God

Jesus made a comment during his ministry that is often the focal point of discussions on the true meaning of service and obedience. Only those who hate their father and mother are those who love me. (Luke 14:26) . For many, such a decision may easily be interpreted as rejection of one's family and a lack of love for them or the decision to obey God could be seen as denying one's responsibility to care for the needs of their parents and members of the family. However it probably wasn't Jesus intent that we should

hate our parents, yet it is clear that our family relations should not interfere with our decisions when it comes to believing in God or in obeying God when he calls us into service

This was not the first time this issue had been raised by God. The earliest instance of God requiring such a decision is may have first come to Abraham's father in Genesis 11:31. We are told that Terah left his home with the goal of moving to Canaan. He never made it there. He got as far as Ur and decided he could go no further. We are not told why he chose to move or what prevented him from completing the journey.

The next chapter begins the story of Abraham. God tells him to leave his country, his people and his father's household and move to a land that would be revealed to him at the appropriate time. The command to go included a promise of blessings, prosperity, children and usefulness. Abraham left but he didn't leave all of his family. Lot and all of his possessions went along as well. This would be a source of various struggles and distractions for Abraham in the future.

The call to leave meant that Abraham would have no one to depend on. There would be no support structure, no help in times of need and no one to turn to for protection. He would become a stranger, a wanderer, dependent on the good favor of others or on his ability to protect himself.

There would be many tests, many lessons revolving around the issue of who to depend on.

Abraham used deceit as a means of protecting himself. On two occasions he told his wife to lie or hide the truth about their relationship. "Tell everyone you are my half sister but not that you are my wife."(Genesis 12:13; 20:2) To some extent this worked; not because of his skill but because God was protecting his wife from a bad decision. Both times he was paid a handsome fee to leave and go somewhere else so that there would be no further risk

of God's wrath falling on those whom Abraham had lied to. It was clear that Abraham could not depend on his wisdom to provide for his safety.

Lot would further stretch Abraham's concepts of who was dependable. This relationship slowly fell apart, starting with the workers and finally causing a separation between uncle and nephew. Abraham let Lot make the decision about who would receive which piece of land.(Genesis 13:8-10) It looked like a good decision. I will take care of my family by sacrificing for them. But this decision led to a series of complications. It didn't solve anything.

Lot and his family were abducted and it was left to Abraham to rescue them. He won and correctly refused to receive any pay from those he saved. Then he gave a tithe to the Lord. (Genesis 14:18) But the rescue of Lot was only temporary. Lot chose the wrong place to live and once again Abraham was forced into a position of trying to save Lot. Lot was saved but at a cost. He lost his wife, his home, his possessions and his honor. The story is a sad one and carries a harsh truth. Abraham could not protect Lot from Lot. His attempt at being a blessing to others, especially to his own family was a failure. Abraham's abilities and loyalty to family only created a limited type of blessing.

Abraham was also dealing with the future. He wondered how God would produce nations from him when he had no child. He queried God about this. He was concerned how a servant could be the heir and fulfill this promise. God told him to be patient but he was not. Sarah saw the frustration and worry and suggested a plan. "Take my maid and have children by her." (Genesis 16:3) This sounded good and Abraham didn't recall God saying who would be the mother of his dynasty and so agreed. She was not his wife, but culturally, it was a common way that barren women gave children to their husbands and protected their position as wife.

This decision brought a great deal of heartache and strife. The wife and maid fought constantly. Sarah was jealous and offended. Hagar was arrogant and dismissive of her mistress. Abraham was caught in the middle and had to make difficult decisions. Actually on at least two occasions God had to intervene to protect Hagar and her son Ishmael. Finally God told Abraham to send them away because they were not part of the plan that God had established. They were the result of Abraham not understanding how to depend on God.

Over and over Abraham had to learn the lessons of dependence from God. Each time his attempts to take care of the situation resulted in more problems; problems that God would have to solve for him. Each time Abraham learned more about his limits and just how much he needed to depend on God. He learned through the failure of his lies about his wife that he could not protect himself. He learned through his attempts to protect Lot that he could not protect those close to him, even his family. He learned in his attempts to provide an heir that he could not protect his future.

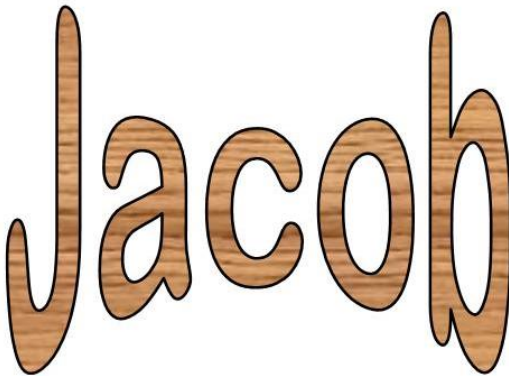
Each had a negative result. He was no longer welcome in Egypt and not welcome in the house of Abimelech. He had to watch Lot as he drifted farther and farther away from God and lost everything. He had to watch Sarah abuse the mother of his child and then send that same son into exile to protect his son by Sarah.

This training program was not an easy one. But he learned that God's plan was the best and that only by depending on God would he see its fulfillment. The lessons learned would be put to the test when God told Abraham to sacrifice the son of the promise. Would he trust God? Would he depend on God? Or would he try again to find a different solution, depending on his own wisdom, strength and ability?

We all know the story. Abraham willingly followed God's commands. Abraham's confidence in God was so complete that his son did not resist when Abraham bound him and placed him on the

altar. (Genesis 22:9) Abraham found his faith that day and God began the next phase in redeeming the world. This process would be repeated many times as God searched in each generation for those who would depend solely in him. Those who would enter into a time of training so that God could work and so redeem the lost.

It is not easy to learn dependence. For some of us it takes a lifetime of teaching before, like Abraham, we are able to sacrifice all and hate our mother and father, in order to serve God and become his testimony to our family and others. For others the decision will come quicker. But for all, the price is the same - sacrifice all that we depend on, including ourselves.



Jacob and the danger of short cuts

One of the more dangerous things to do when trying to achieve a significant goal in life is take a shortcut. It is like cutting in line and making others wait; but more serious. Serious in that while we may get what we want or where we want to go sooner it can have a very negative impact on personal relations and the development of key aspects of character development.

The desire to use shortcuts often relates to time pressures and the expectations of others. We don't want to wait and we are under pressure to meet some form of deadline or goal. What will happen if I don't arrive on time or someone else gets there first? The risk is that I won't get what I want when I want it. To avoid that I will do whatever it takes to get to the front of the line and prevent others from getting there before me.

God had made a very clear pronouncement regarding the future of Jacob the day he was born (Ge 25:23). He would be the master of his older brother and become a great nation. As the years passed, Jacob became very frustrated with how events were developing. His father was definitely playing favorites and his older brother, Esau, was getting all the benefits. He began to plot, along with his mother how he might supplant his brother or somehow cut to the front of the line.

Here is where the problems began. Jacob's mother probably had told him about the pronouncement. But he did not take into account that there could be more than one way to become a nation and obtain the more prominent position. All he could see was that his brother was ahead of him to receive the larger portion of the inheritance and that he would not receive the blessing that was given to the first born. So he began to plot how he would steal those emblems of honor and position.

He took advantage of his brother when he was in a weakened state physically and mentally. He bought the birthright, the inheritance, for the price of a bowl of stew. Then with his mother's encouragement and help, he tricked his father into giving him the blessing that belonged to the first born. He took advantage of his father's blindness and carelessness.

Jacob had done nothing to explore the meaning of God's words. He had done nothing to study the history of his family and how God had worked in their lives. He had depended on himself and his ability to get ahead. It is possible that he knew little about what

real physical labor was. He may have been a mama's boy, a wimp, who depended on his mother and not on learning the skills needed to truly succeed.

All that was changed when his deception backfired. Esau was mad enough to kill him and even made a private vow to do so after his father died. That threat caused Jacob and his mother and so causing him to flee to save his life. All that he had tried to gain was lost. His life of comfort was replaced with difficulty. The image of this young man using a stone for a pillow provides a powerful picture of what had happened. Jacob was in a lonely place. He had stolen and cheated to get ahead and as a result had been, in a real sense, exiled from his family and deprived of all he sought to control.

It was at this point that Jacob's training begins. Step one involved a revelation of the one who was truly in control. He received a more thorough explanation of the pronouncement that had been given at his birth (Ge 28:13-15) and it had nothing to do with birthright or a father's blessing. It had to do with the decisions that God makes and the choices he needed to make about listening to God. In this explanation there were no promises that life would be easy, no promises that there would be shortcuts. There is no promise about when he would see the fulfillment or when he would be able to return home. Only the promise that God would be with him, and that God would carry out all his promises to Jacob and that he would bring him back to the land he had promised to give Jacob.

Jacob had a decision to make. Would he go back and try to claim the promise now or would he continue on the journey? To go back (another shortcut) might not bring the results promised. There was a subtle hint that God expected him to continue the journey when he said he would watch over Jacob wherever he went and would bring him back to the land. That meant that Jacob must leave, go on the journey, if he was to be able to come back. Go on the journey. That meant a lot of work and risk, likely more than Jacob had ever dealt with before. You can just imagine the tremor that

runs up and down Jacob's spine as he thought about that. He was afraid but saw no option but to go on the journey.

Then came the vow. "God if you will be with me, watch over me, supply my needs so I return safely then I will give you a tenth (Ge 28:20)." He was not quite ready to give all, but the training was just beginning and it was a step in the right direction.

Jacob's classroom was life itself. He had to deal with the same kinds of deception that he used against his brother and father. He had to work hard to gain a wife, years of joyous anticipation, only to be deceived; finding himself working another 7 years of labor that were not as fun. That was followed by more time of harsh labor to care for his growing family and gain the resources to stand on his own.

There was strife; his poor attitude towards Leah would cause friction. God would bless her one over Rachel so that Jacob had to reevaluate his attitude; there was strife with his uncle and the other family members. His wages were changed over and over. His wives brothers became antagonistic to the point that Jacob became afraid for his life.

In all of this God was working. He provided children to Jacob; he made sure that Jacob's flocks prospered. He protected Jacob. Jacob learned hard lessons about what happens when people try to cut in line, to get ahead without doing the work required, about the impact of cheating. He also learned that God was faithful. God used the hard situations to build up Jacob's position and wealth. They cheated him and his flocks grew. This went on until even his wives saw the danger and agreed it was time to leave.

Jacob and his entourage of wives, concubines, children, workers and a very large number of animals and possessions packed up and left. It was a risky move. But it was a move based on a knowledge of how God worked. Jacob had spent twenty years working, learning that God was in control.

The journey back home brought further evidence of that truth. God prevented Laban from forcing them to return. Jacob started the journey with a staff and now he returned with an immense amount of wealth. Jacob used that wealth to submit to his brother. Instead of trying to supplant him he now called him lord and gave him a gift worthy of that honor. He chooses to destroy all the gods, idols and symbols that represent his attempts at control and gave that place to God. NOW he was ready to carry out the next phase of God's plan. There would be difficult times ahead but Jacob would no longer be seen as a cheater and trickster. He would be given a new name, Israel, prince with God.

All of us have a desire to find the shortest way, the easiest way to accomplish our goals in life. Often our ideas on how to do that become the greatest barrier to being truly successful in life and in the work God chooses to give us. Why? Because we can only see what is possible by human efforts. We do not know what is possible when God is permitted to be in control.

There are no shortcuts when dealing with God's promises or his will for us. Trying to get the work done by any means (shortcuts) will cause division and strife. The result of our efforts may require the investment of many years of retraining and repair by God before we will be allowed to proceed. We will have to learn to trust God and learn to wait. It will be so much simpler and less frustrating when we let go of our desire to be in control and learn to depend on God. If we don't be assured God is ready to do what is necessary to send us on whatever journey is necessary for us to learn the lessons that are necessary so that his work will move forward as planned.

Joseph

Joseph – Humbled and prepared

Joseph received a vision. He was young and spoiled.

Spoiled because his father loved him and Benjamin more than his other sons. He was the son of the beloved wife. His father gave him special gifts. He put Joseph ahead of the others. When the others were sent out to care for the sheep Joseph was not required to go. The other brothers were constantly compared to Joseph. Joseph could do no wrong and received praise, honor and preferential treatment.

Over time Joseph became proud and arrogant. He would tell his father about his brother's mistakes and failures. Day by day he grew more aloof. Yet his father was oblivious to the growing hatred of the brothers towards Joseph.

Then Joseph received a vision and the situation became almost unbearable. The vision suggested that the brothers would bow down and serve Joseph. They were already disgruntled over the preferential treatment he was receiving. They were jealous of the beautiful gifts that he received. The multicolored robe became a constant reminder to them that they were unacceptable in their father's eyes. The vision only deepened their anger. They were almost willing to believe that Joseph had not received a vision but

had made up the dream to increase his status and influence over their father.

Then Joseph received a second vision. Now Joseph's father was included in those who would bow down and serve. The imagery was powerful. Sun, moon and stars bowing to Joseph, the spoiled brat, the arrogant son who only thought of himself and his position. How often had he reported his brother's errors to their father? How often had he treated them as inferior? How much longer would this unacceptable situation continue?

The seeds, no, the tree of vengeance was huge now. It simply waited the opportunity to produce its fruit and release a stream of poison in the direction of the one who had been given so much and cared so little. So when Jacob sent them off to care for the sheep they began to think about what could be done to silence Joseph, anything to shut him up and gain some relief.

So when Joseph showed up they knew exactly why he was there. He was to spy on them and report back to their father on their activities. And they already knew what he would tell their father. They knew he would criticize them and they would have to suffer through another session of rebuke from their father.

The plan formed quickly. They would kill him, bloody his coat, claiming a wild animal had killed Joseph. They would be rid of them. So they grabbed Joseph and were about to kill him when one of them had a moment of conscience and suggested they not kill him but sell him to slave traders and make some money in the process. So it was done. Joseph went from his world of luxury and preferred position to slavery

Sold to a prominent official in Egypt Joseph probably began working in some lowly condition. We are not told what his work was or how he moved from a lowly position to the manager of the household. But what is clear is that something has changed in his attitude. Joseph could have become despondent and depressed,

barely functional as a person; only useful for the most menial of tasks. Or he could have been arrogant and proud. This would have resulted in many beatings and punishments, continuing until he changed his attitude or was broken in spirit. What is clear is that a change occurred and he became a trusted servant in the house. He proved his worth until the master placed him in charge of everything.

Now Joseph was faced with a great challenge. While he was not ruler of the universe, as was suggested in the visions, he was in charge and could have almost anything he wanted. He could even have had the wife of his owner if he desired; it was clear that she was willing. But deep within Joseph, God was present. He considered his options and knew that this was not the way for the vision to be fulfilled.

His rejection of the sexual advances of his master's wife infuriated her. Quickly the situation became dangerous and again Joseph's life was at risk. But once again he was spared. This time he disappeared into an even deeper isolation. Before he had freedom of movement. Now he was not just a slave but a prisoner. His world was limited to the size of the cage they had placed him in. As before, a change occurred. Again we are not told all that happened, but Joseph was put in charge of the operation of the prison. He was elevated to prisoner in charge of prisoners. The others obeyed him and he cared for them and the jailer left everything under his control.

As before, Joseph did not fall into depression nor did he give up and become a broken person. There was something about those visions that helped him overcome the situation and move from the bottom to the top.

Then two prominent officials were placed in his care. Interesting. He was now telling important people, servants of the pharaoh, what they were allowed to do and when they were permitted to do it. He was sympathetic to their situation and they came to trust

him. They even trusted him with their visions. God gave direction to Joseph and he was able to translate them. However, even though he was successful, he was forgotten.

Joseph had learned many lessons. He had learned the cost of pride and arrogance. He had learned how to serve others as a leader. He had learned to be patient and trust the vision of God. He had learned that he was not the one in charge of his destiny. He had learned the value of humility and service and how they functioned in effective leadership.

When the day came for him to stand before the king, Joseph was quiet and respectful. He no longer claimed nor expected any special privileges. He was not seeking to advance himself at the cost of others. Instead of recommending himself, he suggested they search the nation for the person needed to save the nation of Egypt. Suddenly everything the visions represented began to happen. He was promoted from slave/prisoner to second highest ruler of the nation. Only Pharaoh did not have to listen to Joseph, yet perhaps, it is very likely that Joseph was his closest counselor.

In a short time his second vision was fulfilled. His brothers arrived and bowed before him. This time was different. He remembered how they had treated him and he remembered how he had treated them. He was within his right to make their lives miserable yet he chose a softer path. He realized that all that had happened was seen by God and watched over by God. While what his brothers had done was wrong, the events were necessary so Joseph would be ready to lead a nation and save his family.

We are often quick to place ourselves before others and expect them to serve us as leaders. We are more than reluctant to go through the lessons necessary to correct this error in our thinking. We are quick to give up and complain when life is difficult and unfair in our eyes. Most will never learn or even accept the lessons prepared for us in times of suffering and struggle.

But if we are willing to learn humility, to learn servanthood, God will place us in positions of responsibility and those we serve will learn who God is and of his great love for us all.



Moses – From the good life to real life

Moses started at the bottom of society. He was one of those sentenced to death for just being born. A twist of fate (the hand of God) turned that all around. He went from a slave on the executioner's to a member of the household of Pharaoh in one swift act. He would spend the next 40 years living in luxury, enjoying the finest education, free to do whatever he wanted. He would not know the real meaning of working for his daily bread, or sweating because of hard work under the sun. He would not know hunger and pain. He would never be subjected to punishment and control of others. Instead he would feast on the best, be provided with everything he needed to be comfortable, and have ultimate control over the lives of everyone around him. He was, after all, a son of Pharaoh, and no one could change his life. Except God.

There came a day when his perfect little bubble burst. He was confronted with the viciousness of the taskmaster's treatment of

the Jews. He was stunned by the inhumanity of what he saw. The people tasked to provide his every need, to make his world perfect; all through the enslavement and inhuman treatment of others. What shocked him more that day was that in an attempt to protect and save one of those slaves, he killed another human being. No discussion, no command, just quick and decisive action. An action that was seen by others and given a damning evaluation. “You are just like them and will probably kill one of us to settle the dispute we have.”

The future lawgiver of Israel had failed on two occasions to resolve simple situations. His solution was to resort to violence. That action would lead to serious consequences and loss of his privileged status.

Driven into the desert he began a new period of training. Here no one provided for his care and comfort. Here he had to learn to take care of himself, protect himself and adapt to the world around him. He learned the meaning of sweating for his bread. Instead of being entertained he learned solitude.

He learned a whole new vocabulary and how to read a very different type of book – one written in the sands of the desert and on the winds of the clouds. There were no servants and workers to command. He was not shielded and protected but had to learn how to use his life and abilities to shield and care for those infernal stupid sheep who always seemed to be getting in trouble.

Life was no longer simple but it was real. It was no longer built on the suffering and enslavement of others. Life came from personal contact with the dangers and realities of the world. Food that once tasted good was forgotten and replaced with a new flavor. A flavor that represented a new found value. This value was based on the feeling that comes when one has done the work and earned the right to enjoy the fruit of that labor.

Law and freedom were redefined. Before, Moses' decisions were based on how he felt and what he wanted. Now he learned to discern the difference between wants and needs. That meant listening, watching, investigating and being patient. Those stubborn, stupid sheep provided years of training in knowing what was really needed to keep the flock healthy, well cared for and safe. Safe from outside attack and internal carelessness.

Moses had received 40 years of training in the good life which came at a devastating cost to others. Now he was receiving 40 years of training in the real life. It cost him personally in ways he could not have foreseen. But the lessons learned here during this period of training would allow others to benefit and receive blessings in the future.

It is interesting to make the comparisons between the two periods of Moses' life. The first period involved a miracle of God that rescued him from being murdered by the soldiers of Egypt and placed him in the house of Pharaoh. The second involved an act of murder that drove him from that environment, rescuing him from how own personal slavery, and placing him in the hands of God.

Moses received the best education available in the world and yet had no idea how to handle a dispute involving an Egyptian slave master and a Jew which resulted in ridicule. Later Moses received the best education in survival skills. He learned the skills needed to lead people by learning to lead sheep.

Formally, Moses had all of his needs and desires met. There was nothing denied him as a member of Pharaoh's family. There was no price too great to pay, no limits. But the hidden price in the lives of others was immense, however this fact was shielded from him or he chose to deny it. Later he learned the difference between what one needs and what one wants and the cost involved in having each. He also learned the cost of focusing only on what one wants and the cost others may have to pay to make that possible.

He learned how to care for the needs of others first and in that education learned the best way to provide for one's own needs.

In his early years, Moses was a person respected - not for what he had done - but because of his membership in the family of Pharaoh. People deferred to him, pushed him to the front, not because he deserved it but because of the fear of what would happen if they didn't. It was not a fear or respect of Moses but of the Pharaoh and what he might do if their actions displeased him. Later Moses learned how to earn respect. He learned first how to gain the respect of his sheep; animals that only follow, only listen, to the ones who care for them, keep them fed, and keep them safe. He learned how to gain their respect and trust. They would follow him because they had learned they could trust him.

When Moses finally returned to Egypt he was unrecognizable to the people who had known him. The man of the good life was gone. Here was a man who could be followed not out of fear but out of respect. Unlike Pharaoh, who only cared about himself and those close to him, it was clear this man knew the needs of others and was prepared to care for them who would be there for them in the events that were about to unfold. This man was about to ask his people to risk everything, yet there would be no whips, no threats, to convince them. They would follow because of the words he brought them about God's love and his deep rooted faith in God.



Learning to follow to lead – Joshua

He followed Moses. He followed because he wanted to know the God who spoke to Moses. He followed so that he could serve God and others. He received practical preparation for a time somewhere in the future when God would want him to be the person others would follow.

A question that is often in the back of our thinking is, “how will I learn what I need to know to be a good leader, a good servant in the kingdom of God?” A second question that hides in the shadows of the first, “is how long will my training or preparation take?”

The second is only a question God can answer. Too often we try to interfere with the process, some try to rush things because they don’t want to wait. Others unnecessarily delay the point of taking responsibility because of a fear of failure or not being capable of carrying out the tasks that lie ahead.

The first question is one in which we can have some input. It relates in many ways to our willingness to enter into the training, accept the direction of others, and how quickly we learn the lessons we are given. Joshua reveals to us a key aspect of the

process of training, and how it affects the process of preparation, and helps to determine when we will be ready.

He chose to follow.

The first thing that we learn is that Joshua chose to be in a place where he could learn. He chose to follow Moses and in that decisions made himself available to be taught and was able to receive the instruction that God had for him through his servant Moses.

He followed Moses out of Egypt. He followed Moses up the mountain. He followed Moses' instructions. In that process he learned why Moses followed God and learned to follow God as well.

He chose to Remain

On the mountain, he remained where Moses told him to. He remained there until Moses returned 40 days later. He remained at the entrance of the tabernacle when Moses entered to meet with and speak with God. He remained at Moses side in every situation, good and bad. As he stood at Moses' side, he learned what it meant to follow God and he learned how to remain in God.

He accepted any task given to him.

He learned the importance of being committed and finishing the task, no matter what others might say or how the work appeared to be going. The success or failure of the moment did not determine the final outcome. This was especially clear the day he lead the army of Israel against the Amelakites (Ex 17:10-13). There were times when they were winning, and times when they appeared to be losing. The battle depended on two factors. It depended on the strength of Moses and those with him who kept his hands lifted up to heaven, and it depended on Joshua's ability to follow Moses' instructions until the final victory was won.

He learned faith instead of fear.

Over and over the people attacked Moses, threatening to revolt and kill him. But Joshua learned faith from Moses' example and saw how God honored Moses' faith and protected him. He learned the lesson so well that when he was sent to spy out the land, he saw the possibility, not the problems, not the difficulties, and believed God could not only protect the people but could take care of any obstacle and give them the land. He was prepared to follow God's instructions. Even when he was told to do the impossible (walk across the Jordan at flood stage) he did not hesitate (Jo 3:1-15).

When the day came for him to lead, there was no hesitation. God took him and gave him a portion of the spirit resting on Moses (Dt 34:9), then gave him the responsibility to lead the people. He was ready to follow God just as Moses had followed God.

The day before he gave his first order God came and spoke to him. Joshua received the instructions that would guide the rest of his life (Jo 1:7-8). The key word that formed the core of those instructions was "obey" which included a decision to follow them in every aspect of his life. God told him to learn and study the words that had been given to guide the people of Israel. He was told to be careful to follow all of them. If he followed those instructions he would know what God wanted and he would succeed in walking with God and in making it possible for God's people to follow him.

This goal – following God – had guided his training and would guide him in his time of leadership. Joshua summarized his goal with words that revealed the depth of his commitment to following God. "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord" (Jo 24:15).

The epitaph recorded of Joseph's life reveals the power of one life committed to following God. "Israel served God throughout the lifetime of Joshua" (Jo 24:31).

Deborah

Deborah - a mother of Israel

Judges 4-5

For many of those who are known for their Biblical leadership we have some idea of their history or information of God's call on their lives or at least some report of the events that led up to their becoming a leader. For Deborah there is nothing.

We know that she was a prophetess, a wife, and by inference, a mother. At some point she became a judge and the people came to her to settle their disputes. So how did Deborah, a woman, come to be a prophetess and judge, and have the ability to summon Barak and the people to war?

Let us begin with her marriage. There is a great deal of discussion about the significance of what her husband's name means. Apparently it relates to the production of wicks. Traditions suggest that her husband was involved in the production of wicks for use in the temple and that she had a part in that work. There is some validity to this concept as the location of the tabernacle was not far from her home and from the place where she established her court. That means she would have been well known to the leaders and workers of the tabernacle. This contact would have allowed her to hear the teachings of the law and observe the people in their

worship, (at least those involved in the worship of Yahweh). And when God began to speak to her there would have been those readily at hand to observe her life and confirm the accuracy of the words she received. As she began to receive God's words and speak them she would have had to pass several levels of approval, first that of her husband, then her tribe, and then that of the priests and Levites.

The next step involved being accepted by the people of other tribes. There existed two possible responses. First, they might have just ignored her. They would not have cared what she had to say. That would happen because no one cared about God, serving God, or hearing his word. That meant she was free to say whatever she wanted without fear of punishment or judgment. She might attract the attention of a few, mostly because people were looking for any source of help. This is not likely for obvious reasons. The people were coming to her for the very purpose of hearing from one they knew that God spoke to and wanted to have an answer from his representative regarding their questions and differences.

The second possibility though is more likely, and that is that she was receiving messages from God, messages that struck home and were verified by the events that occurred around them. When she gave them a message from God it was possible to verify its accuracy. As the years passed a level of respect grew until all came to believe that God had called her. This belief became part of the foundation that resulted in her being called a prophetess and assuming the role of judge.

Deborah's choice for her courthouse helps us understand a little about the woman and her astuteness about the human condition, and her need to guard against the rumors and attacks that face anyone who assumes the role of judge. This would be even more of an issue for a woman. To avoid being accused of misconduct she conducted all of her activities in the open. Not only that, she had people near her to watch and listen. She made sure that she

was clearly visible to all, even those passing by, by carrying out her work, in the open, under a palm tree.

This location also added to her credibility. The specific tree she chose for her activity was known to all as the Palm of Deborah. Not because her name was Deborah but because according to tradition the nursemaid of Rebecca was buried nearby. Jewish traditions connect the two locations. This would be a wise move in helping people make the connection between where they came from and their present situation. It would also bolster confidence in Deborah.

We assume that Deborah was a mother as well. In her poem she calls herself a mother in Israel. As a mother she was fully aware of the issues that everyone faced. She knew intimately the struggles that existed between the members of a family, the struggles to survive in a time of oppression. She knew what it took to care for a husband, raise children and carry out all the duties expected of her as a member of the community.

She used this background to care for those who came to her for advice. Her treatment of others was built on this experience. This made it easier for the people to come to her. She was not one who lorded over others and declared what should be done. She was a mother settling a dispute between her children. She was firm and direct when necessary. She was clear when clarity was needed. She was diplomatic when there was a need to help both parties grow and discover the answer through cooperation. A true mother and so much more.

Deborah was a woman in a male-dominated society. Her relationship to her husband and his to her would be critical to her ability to gain the respect of the males around her. At this point all we have is tradition to help us make an educated guess. It is said that she and her husband produced wicks for the temple, not ordinary wicks but wicks that were especially bright. Their ability to work as a team and gain the respect of the priests and leaders of

the tabernacle would further validate her among the men. Her husband respected her and considered her part of his work. This partnership was observed by others. Where there is a successful partnership there is an openness to sharing and accepting the advice and counsel of each other. People would have seen this. Deborah was an obedient wife and more. This would suggest that her husband's treatment of her both in private and public, would have been one of respect which opened the doors for her to share her wisdom with a broadening community of men.

Not just the women came to Deborah for help, even the men sought her out. As a mother of Israel, as one who was clearly receiving messages from God, as one who knew how to resolve the disputes brought to her and as one who was respected by her own husband, it is not hard to see how she gained prominence among the people. She, unlike so many others, was not concerned about personal gain. She was a mother who cared for her people. Even men know the wisdom of their mothers and listen carefully to them.

There is one more factor to consider. She was a faithful believer in Jehovah during a time of apostasy and idolatry. She was among the few who refused to be caught up in the apostasy of those around her. She remained faithful to God. As the oppression grew, the people began to seek out an answer, one that would free them from oppression and restore their freedom.

Because of Deborah's contact with the tabernacle she would have known the words of warning written down by Moses. She also had access to the stories about other times of apostasy (she refers to Shamgar and Ehud) and how God responded when the people admitted their sin and called on God once again. She would have been an accessible source of all of this information. As a prophetess she would have been in the position to proclaim the truth and explain what was needed.

Then the word of the Lord came and she called Barak. She told him what needed to be done and he did it. The extent of her influence is seen in the fact that he would not go to battle without her. He may have been uncertain of his ability to lead or he may have been uncertain of the people's willingness to follow him into battle. Of one thing he was certain, the people would follow Deborah.

Remember much of the above is supposition. Some of it is based on uncertain traditions and on personal interpretation. Still, in all of this, there is one clear truth. Deborah was prepared by God to overcome all of the obstacles that would exist for anyone called to serve in difficult times, even a woman called to lead a nation.

Her life as a woman, as a mother, as a spouse would pave the way. Her call by God to be a prophetess and the accuracy of the messages she received would build the foundation. Her effectiveness in settling the disputes among the people would build the confidence needed. Her faithfulness in following God no matter what others thought would create in her a indomitable faith.

Sometimes it is not about unique training but about letting everything that is part of life be used by God to prepare us for the moment we are called to serve. It is about being faithful at all points of our life and in every aspect of our life that will be the preparation God uses. We must build a life that none can discredit. A life that draws everyone near us to God, a life that leads the people to God and the victory he has for us all.

Are we letting God prepare us? Do we understand that in everything we do, in everything that we have God seeks to be present so that he can accomplish his purposes and draw others to him? We are so busy seeking those incredible moments of enlightenment we often miss the profoundness that is reflected in every aspect of life. God wants to teach us at every moment and in every setting. Are we ready to receive the teaching?

Gideon

Gideon and the burden of proof (Judges 6, 7)

Have you ever wondered how much proof is enough? What will I need to see, hear or feel before I am willing to put my life at risk or attempt something that appears very difficult, even impossible? What are the requirements that need to be met before I will trust God and depend on him?

Gideon represents those of us who require proof before we act. These people have a number of issues that hinder their ability to hear God's word and then take the steps of faith needed to obey that word. These people may lack confidence in themselves and have a low self-esteem that comes with that lack of confidence. They are afraid to trust the people around them, even God. They may be people who find it almost impossible to stand before others and speak and as a result would find it impossible to lead anyone in anything. They may be afraid of the possibility of failure and the impact any failure would have on them. They may be just plain stubborn, refusing to do anything without absolute proof that what they are being asked to do is guaranteed to succeed.

In many ways Gideon represents all of the above. Each of his encounters represents God at work to teach him two things. First, that he has value in the eyes of God. Second, that when God

commits to working through someone and asks him/her to serve God in specific ways, God will provide everything necessary to accomplish the task that person has been given.

Gideon is a fearful man. His fear causes him to hide his activities and plans. When God approaches him, he is thrashing wheat in a secluded location, hidden not just from the enemy but even from neighbors and others. His responses are those of a man whose fear has resulted in lack of trust and blame; blame that usually falls on others. He blames God for abandoning them, while ignoring the truth that they have abandoned God.

God first proves to Gideon who he is. He receives that evidence when his sacrifice is destroyed by fire and the angel representing God disappears. Now Gideon has a new focus for his fear. He could hide from the others but he cannot hide from God nor the order that God has given him -destroy his father's idols. Gideon obeys this command but as secretly as possible.

The attempt at secrecy doesn't work and Gideon is discovered which leads to the second proof. The people want to kill him but God is working. Gideon is saved by the wise words of his father, "if Baal is so powerful let him defend himself." The people find this to be a challenging concept. God's provision of protection for Gideon and the obvious failure of Baal to act become the basis for future development. This is the second proof that God is working and that God is calling Gideon.

Gideon is a man with little self-confidence and self-worth. When God calls him a mighty warrior and tells him that he will defeat the Midians, Gideon only sees his condition and the lack of importance of his family. God tells him not to worry, to simply go in what strength he has and save Israel. Why is this possible? God's answer is obvious, it is not because of man's strength but the promise that God is sending him. God reinforces this idea with the next event.

The enemy has arrived. (The enemy is always arriving, always looking for a way to enter, destroy and ruin our lives.) Usually Gideon runs and hides, but today God sends his Spirit to Gideon and Gideon blows the trumpet used to call Israel – to call them to meet before God, call them to war. Gideon receives the next proof as he watches in amazement, because 32,000 men respond to the trumpet call. You would think this would be enough to convince Gideon that God is serious and (based on past history) is fully capable of using Gideon to destroy the enemy. Not so. Gideon now asks for and receives proofs numbers four and five, the test of the fleece and the dew, which God carries out in patience and perfection.

Now it is time to deal with Gideon's fear of leadership. Leading a family is one thing, but leading an army of 32,000, this is a terrifying concept for a man like Gideon. So God reduces the multitude. First all those who are afraid are told they are free to go home. 22,000 men pack up and leave. It is almost amazing that Gideon didn't join them. The next step is to find those truly ready for service, those who are alert and will be able to obey orders. The test is based on how they drink water at the river. Only 300 drink in a way that allows them to be ready to react to any threat or event that might suddenly appear. Now Gideon has a group that he may be able to lead.

This sets the scene for the final issues hiding in the recesses of Gideon's heart, a combination of fear of failure and just plain stubbornness. God gives Gideon the option, if he is still afraid, still unwilling, to receive one more proof that God has chosen him and that God will give the victory. Gideon doesn't blink an eye and he heads to the Midian camp so he can see that final proof. There he hears about a vision God has placed in the minds of the enemy, a vision that tells them Gideon will attack and they will lose.

Finally Gideon is stirred to action and obedience. He quickly forms a plan and gives the necessary orders and provides the key equipment needed. It will be an unusual attack. It will not be based

on the ability of man but on faith in God. They will win the battle. It will be a great day and give them freedom from the oppression of the enemy. But at what price?

God is willing to teach us faith. God is willing to lead us step by step to a position where we will be confident in his word and be able to do what seems impossible to us. But at what price?

What is the cost of constantly making excuses for our inactivity, our inability to move? Of constantly seeking one more proof, setting up one more challenge? There is a great risk in constantly testing God. We may become dependent on always wanting proof, of always needing one more confirmation. We may become so dependent that we do not depend on God but on having our hand held. We never stop being babies. A baby will never truly learn to walk until we take away the hand that supports it. We may help it back to its feet when it falls but quickly remove that help so it will learn to trust its ability to walk and gain confidence in the reality that it was meant to walk.

Training, in any form, is meant to help us learn to do the work we are being trained for. It is not about becoming self-centered and independent. It is about being confident in the training received. The truth is no matter how proficient we become, that ability would not exist except for the training received. As Christians, God wants to provide what is needed so we can serve. He will provide all the proof needed to overcome our weaknesses and inadequacies. And the only reason we will be able to serve effectively is by remembering the basis for that ability, the proofs given, the victories gained. We are liberated from our fears, strengthened for the work assigned, and reminded of what makes it all possible - our relationship with God.

SAMSON

Samson – Understanding the training Judges 16

How many of us knew what job we would have when we were children? How many of us had that decision made for us from our birth?

This may sound like a strange idea to us but in Old Testament it was a very common occurrence. In Israel, all Levites knew from birth they would serve in the temple and all shepherds expected their children to be shepherds. That meant that from birth most children knew what they would be doing as a career. If one had a special gift or talent, society expected him/her to apply that gift to their occupation or do it as an extra activity on the side. The key idea was that each person was expected to fulfill his/her responsibilities to family and society.

Let us focus on one particular aspect of this situation - the service rendered to God. Most of this was done by the Levites. They were marked by God to care for all of the needs and activities of the temple and the religious life of the people. Yet on occasion there would be those who felt they wanted to share in some way in this ministry. God made this possible through the Nazirite vow, where individuals could make a promise of service to God for a specific

time. This vow included certain guidelines about lifestyle, food and activity. Failure to follow the guidelines often meant giving up or having to start the entire process over. This was not a decision for permanent service but a personal choice.

The Bible mentions a person who, not by personal choice, was to take a Nazirite vow that would last for his entire life. God informed the parents about this unique event and so Samson began his life as a Nazirite. In fact, his mother had to observe the guidelines during her pregnancy as well (Judges 13:14).

This meant that from birth Samson was taught the rules he was to live by. He was never to eat or drink any product from a grapevine. He was never to touch or come near a dead body, even those of his parents when they died. Most importantly, he was never to cut his hair. These were just some of the guidelines, given by God he had to obey.

It is not clear how well Samson responded to this instruction and the restrictions during his childhood. When we pick up the story in Judges it is clear that something is not quite right. Somewhere along the way the training has not taken root. The story begins with Samson wanting to marry a Philistine girl. This was forbidden to all Jews. It also includes a story about Samson eating honey from a dead lion, (also forbidden) and a big party, which would have included many products from the grapevine, another forbidden item. Samson is not doing very well at keeping his vow. The only rule being followed is the one about not cutting his hair.

Samson's wedding is a disaster. He creates a situation that ends in murder and theft, which leads to revenge, which leads to retribution. Samson is the key person but he seems out of control and unaware of how to act. God comes suddenly to give him strength to conquer his enemies, but the end result is a bit of a surprise. Instead of creating unity among his own people to gain control of the enemy they become afraid of Samson. They bind him up and turn him over to the Philistines to protect themselves. Something is very

wrong here. Samson is supposed to be the judge, the person who unites his people to defeat the enemy. Instead he ends up fighting them alone.

At this point in his life there is little that is wise or honorable about Samson or his actions. Even his attitude seems askew. He doesn't appear to understand what God wants to do. So God must act. Several times in the text it states that suddenly God came and gave Samson great strength to defeat the enemy. This strength creates a state of fear and means that Samson leads from a position of fear. The Philistines see what happens when they make Samson angry and they fear him. The Israelites see the strength but also see the life. They follow, not out of respect, but out of fear.

Samson was trained to live an extreme form of life. But he appears to have missed the point. When it comes to understanding the true source of his strength, he doesn't connect it to God but to the length of his hair and the fact that it has never been cut. There is no relationship with God, only the hair. There is no commitment to service, only the hair.

It is little wonder that after years of self-deception he falls prey to the deception of a harlot, a person more interested in financial gain than relationship. She is with Samson because he is powerful and feared. But, if she can trick him into revealing his secret, while profiting from that action, why not? So Samson is deceived, not by the woman, but by the deception he has created in his own life. Samson believed that he could break all the rules and still be safe, as long as he didn't cut his hair.

Samson paid dearly for this error. He cut the last tie he had to God for the sake of a woman's attention. He lost his sight; he was humiliated and forced to do the work of an animal. (Interesting! He was still strong enough to do the work of a animal much bigger than him). He was surrounded by his enemy, laughed at and shamed.

Samson's hair grew back, but he was still a prisoner. The long hair didn't rescue him. As he pushed the bar to grind the wheat he had time to reflect on his life. He had time to wonder why his strength had not returned as his hair grew back. It was in this time of weary repetition that he began to realize the significance of the training he had received as a child. All the lessons he had previously ignored were being taught in every step he took, every turn of the mill stone. He realized it was not his hair that had brought him strength. What he thought was success, was really failure. His strength had not brought freedom for the people, simply a new form of fear. As a judge he had maintained the peace because they were afraid of him, not because they had learned how to revere God.

His heart began to change. He began to talk to God. He began to renew the vow of the Nazirite, a vow of service, a vow to honor God. This time when God's strength came it would be different. There would be no reason for retribution against his people as before. There would be no confusion about why Samson was attacking the Philistines. The Philistines would provide the context to reveal the weakness of their gods and the power of the only true God. The hair did not matter. What mattered was that this time, Samson looked to God, depended on God for the opportunity and the strength.

God responded as Samson finally learned the lesson of the Nazirite vow, as Samson placed his all in the hands of his God. He brought down the house. He brought down the power of the Philistines. He brought down the name and power of the gods of the Philistines. A moment of true faith, of true commitment, of true service, reversed all of the past.

What Samson had failed to learn as a child and young man was learned as a prisoner. His last act was his greatest moment. It was an act of faith, faith in the true source of strength.

There is a lot to learn from this story about God's plans and training. God used Samson to reveal the condition of, not only Samson, but of all the people of Israel. They were maintaining appearances in the hope that God would still care for them even when it was obvious they had little interest in a true relationship with God. They were more afraid of what the Philistines would do and the trouble Samson would cause than in how they may be angering God and risking his punishment.

Fulfilling vows means nothing if they are done for the wrong reason. A true vow grows out of a relationship with God, it does not create a relationship with God. Samson spent a lifetime in self gratification before he learned the difference. When he did God responded and in his last act Samson became the hero God intended him to be.

Samson reveals to us that it is not the training we receive, it is not the actions we perform, it is the relationship with God that is critical if we are to serve and draw the people to God.



Ruth – Serving through submission

So often we believe that service is best accomplished by having a person in charge who gives direction and focus to our activity. We even use Jesus as an example of a true servant. One who directs through their teaching and their example. This may not always be the case.

In the book of Ruth we have the story of a person who never was in charge. She looked to others to provide her with the information and direction for her life and activities. Then she served.

Ruth chose to marry a Jew. She chose to enter a relationship that in her time and culture had as its key focus service. She was expected to care and serve her husband. This caring and serving was made easier when the husband had a similar idea and cared for his wife. It is not clear if there was a significant difference between the way men from Moab and the men from Israel cared for their wives. Something was different because both Ruth and Ophra were ready to leave their country and families and go back to Israel with Naomi. Only with persuasion did Ophra go back. Ruth refused to leave.

Ruth chose to follow Naomi. In many cultures the mother-in-law has a great deal of power and control over the lives of the wives of their sons. This control can be oppressive or it can be beneficial. Knowing our culture there are many stories and tales about mother-in-laws who seek to control and direct the lives of their sons. While we have no clear indication of what was the cultural norm from the information in the story, it is clear that the relationship between Naomi and Ruth was not based on fear but on respect and possibly even love. Ruth refuses to abandon Naomi, refuses to go home to what would have been a simpler life. Chooses to go with Naomi and help in whatever way possible for them to both earn a living.

Ruth chose to follow the God of Israel. This one may be easier to understand. The descriptions of the gods of Moab are not pleasant. They demanded sacrifice and the worship was filled with

corruption and vile practices. The God of Israel could be harsh in judgment as well, but it is clear that Ruth also had learned about how the God of Israel loved and cared for his people. This decision to serve was probably easier to make than the others. Serving a God who loves you and promises to care for you is simple. This would also be apparent as she participated in the worship of the God of Israel. She would have seen a very different type of relationship which would make it easier to choose to serve the God of Israel. Her declaration to Naomi is clear, your God will be my God. This was a declaration of service.

Ruth chose to follow the customs of the new land she had traveled to. She was responsible to help provide for herself and her mother-in-law. To do this she had to learn what behaviors were appropriate so as to not cause further problems. She was a Moabite, the sworn enemy of Israel, to succeed in finding food and other needed resources she would need to learn the customs of her adopted people and what she would and would not be allowed to do. She learned her role and her place and served well in this role. We know this because of the comment made by Boaz. He states he is aware of all she has done for her mother-in-law and what she has given up to do so. Boaz is impressed and responds to her by allowing her to continue to glean in his fields and provides extra.

Ruth chose to obey Naomi in relation to finding a husband and redeeming the family land. She agrees to do what she is told to do. The story is a fascinating one. We do not understand if Boaz was in love, or even attracted to Ruth. What we do know is that her obedience and desire to serve and provide for Naomi truly impressed Boaz. He wasted no time in settling the matter and making Ruth his husband. The story quickly tells us that Ruth gives birth to a child which resulted in further praise for her servants heart and her submission to others.

Ruth's service brings joy back into the heart of Naomi. She who has lost her husband and sons and wanted to change her name to Mara or bitter now is blessed. The statement is that her daughter,

who is worth more than seven sons has given birth to a grandson. They pray that he will become great and famous in all of Israel. Obed was not himself famous but his grandson David became the greatest king of Israel and father of the Messiah.

Ruth's lessons came at great cost. God caused a famine that forced a family to relocate. For lack of Jewish women the sons married Moabite women. This could be costly if they returned to Israel. It was not highly approved to do so. The marriages would end in death. Even worse before there would be a chance to produce offspring. To further compound this there were no other brothers to raise up families for the deceased as required by Jewish law. The cost of this would be multiplied further as the husband and father died as well.

With no hope for a future in Moab and no real hope for much more in Israel, Naomi chooses to pay the price of returning back to her home in Israel. This would cost Ruth as well as she left her family, her people and her country. It mentions leaving her gods but to me that was not a cost but a great gain. A gain that would pay dividends that would more than recompense Naomi and Ruth all that has been lost, all that had been risked.

But none of the benefits, the blessings would have been possible if Ruth had not been willing to submit to her husband, her mother-in-law, her new culture, and her new God. It was as she learned and lived a life of submission and service that others would be encouraged and taught. She has become an example to every one through the ages of the value of submission to and obedience of those in authority over us and to the law of God.

Sometimes we become so focused on our position, on our level of influence, which is in turn based on our position, that we really miss the power inherent in true service. We miss the depth of how we can impact others simply by doing what we have been told to do. Not in anger or resentment, but out of love and respect.

It is as we learn a true servant attitude that we can truly lead and help others. This lesson does not come without a price. Ruth paid dearly, as she lost her husband, then willingly gave up her life to find God's best for her. She served so that others would be honored and blessed.



Samuel – Child of the Promise – Dedicated to God

In our world today freedom of choice is a critical right. A great deal of effort is invested in giving people the opportunity to choose. Chose the life they want to live, the leader they prefer, etc. The concept is, when people can choose, their lives will be better.

Samuel was not given this chance. His life was promised to God before his conception. The oath taken by his mother was kept and so Samuel arrived at the tabernacle at the age of three.

The pattern of his life was determined by the rituals of the temple. Rituals established by Moses generations before. These rituals were designed to remind the people of their need for God and the

need for obedience. There were daily rituals and Sabbath rituals. At various times during the year there were special rituals to remind people of all God had done and all that he provided.

The scripture says that Samuel served wearing the clothes of a member of the family of the priests. That meant he would learn not just the rituals but the purpose of each and would be expected to help the people understand both the importance and function of each. To be effective in his service meant learning to obey those who taught him so that he would be able to carry out his responsibilities and so that God would accept the sacrifice and gifts of those who came.

The first words Samuel received from God focused on Eli's failure to honor God and his son's evil behavior. They would be judged for their failure to obey and serve God.

This became the heart of Samuel's message to the people. He called the people to obedience and told them to abandon their false gods and truly serve God (7:24). He learned that God was watching and was concerned about what he saw in the heart and not about what people did to impress others and give the impression that they were obedient.

Samuel was called to install a king (10:21) and then reveal God's rejection of that king because of a failure to obey (15:27-29). God then called him to anoint a second person in spite of the personal risk involved (16:13). The focal point in all of this would be obedience. Each event involved rituals, a ritual designed to reveal the person's obedience to God.

Samuel spent the early years of his life surrounded by the rituals of the tabernacle. Through the help of Eli, he learned the purpose behind the ritual. This knowledge helped him to learn the importance of obedience. This became the focus of his life and the people quickly realized they could depend on Samuel to tell them the truth and lead them back to God.

They saw the cause and effect of his investment in keeping God's word. They saw it because of his concern for a proper attitude towards God; the attitude of obedience which resulted in God's presence and blessing.

Samuel never abandoned his focus. This reveals to us the value and purpose of the ritual, to give us the opportunity to express our faith and obedience to God. This expression will open doors to service and a greater ability to honor God through our lives and our activities.



David – Learning to Wait

Remember what it was like when your parents promised you a special treat as a child. You could hardly wait to get what was promised. Sometimes the time between the promise was short and it was not too hard to wait. At other times there was a long time between when the promise was made and when it would be fulfilled.

We all know the great stories of David. He defeated the giant Goliath when just a teenager. He became a captain of the king's

army and was praised by the troops for his great feats of valor. He killed a hundred men to win the hand of the king's daughter. He was specially chosen by God to be the future king of Israel.

What we often don't hear about is the struggles he faced on his way to becoming king. His anointing as king was done in secret. His own father did not consider him worthy to present to Samuel for consideration. When he declared that he was willing to face the giant, his brothers ridiculed him and the king tried to shame him.

Even while serving as a captain of the king's army, Saul tried to kill him on at least two occasions and tried to get him killed through circumstances on one other occasion. Only the love of Jonathan saved him from being caught and turned over to Saul.

Finally David had to flee. He went into hiding and was declared a renegade. He had to live the life of a bandit and marauder to survive. At one time, to escape his enemies, he had to act as though he was insane. Those who helped him were threatened and attacked. On one occasion their aid resulted in the death of an entire group of priests and Levites. Even some he provided security for would insult him and be ungrateful.

Many of the Psalms reflect the frustration that David experienced as he dealt with the opposition that he faced from Saul and others. He cried to God for help, protection and strength to continue. In all of these trials and struggles, David was learning two important lessons about placing one's faith and trust in God. He was learning to be patient and learning to consult

How does one learn patience? That is only possible when one sees the value of waiting. David knew he was to be king, Samuel had come and chosen him. He knew that he had been marked by God. His victory over Goliath and in the battles that followed were proof of his leadership abilities. His friendship with Jonathan (who was willing to give up his right to be king to protect David) was further

proof. Yet, as long as Saul lived and the people accepted him as the rightful king David needed to wait.

Patience was essential if he wanted to be the real king. Learning to wait for God to fulfill his promise would make it possible for him to rule. He probably had heard the story about what happened when Saul had refused to be patient and wait for Samuel to present the sacrifice. This impatience and failure to obey God's directions cost him his place as king.

This knowledge may have guided David's decisions when provided with the opportunities to capture Saul and kill him. On each occasion his men urged him to kill Saul and bring an end to the life of exile and take what had been promised him. On both occasions he rebuked his men stating that only God had the right to remove Saul. Saul saw the truth of the situation and stated that David was more honorable than he was. This decision and the patience would later provide a bridge for unifying these men as a single nation.

David also learned the importance of consulting God. This was a lesson that he needed to learn. History records for us his courage and his ability to inspire loyalty in the lives of those who followed him. This could easily have created a problem and become a trap. With each success David could have focused more on his role and his ability in gaining the victory. In that process he would have lost sight of who was the true source of all his skill and ability; the One who selected him and had promised to be with him.

This is a trap many have fallen into with disastrous results. Instead we see David constantly calling on God to help him make key decisions. Whether the decision related to who, when, where and how to fight a battle in time of war or how to govern the people, he consults with the priests and prophets to be sure what he was doing was approved by and guided by God's plan.

That is not to say he would not make mistakes along the way. But each time he did, he returned to God, sought forgiveness and consulted God about how to correct his errors and maintain his relationship with God. This patience and desire to keep God as the center of his life resulted in him being honored by God. God called David a man after his own heart and promised David that he would receive a special honor, the messiah would be born to his family. The lessons of patience and learning to consult God would bring blessing to the people of Israel and one day to the world.

Learning to keep God in the center of one's plans requires that we learn to wait on God. Waiting for his guidance, his direction and his timing. When we learn this then God will bless and will be able to accomplish his plans to bless others through us.



Elijah – Hearing the whisper in the storm

It is not known how or when Elijah became a prophet. We do not know about his family background or have any information about his life. Elijah simply appears on the scene and becomes bigger than life. He is called on by God to make astounding declarations

and live a life of faith, trusting in God's provision far beyond anyone else in the Bible.

Elijah's first act is to pronounce judgment on King Ahab and the faithlessness of the people of Israel. The pronouncement includes the declaration that there will be no rain in the country until further notice. Then God sends him into isolation to a remote spring where he is told to wait. During this time God sends ravens with sufficient food to care for his needs. How long he is in this remote location is unknown, but it is long enough for the spring to dry up.

Later, God sends Elijah to a nearby nation noted for its idolatry. Here he is told to meet a widow and tell her to feed him before feeding herself and her son. It appears like a very selfish request. Yet it contains the next amazing declaration. If she will feed him, then there will never be a shortage of flour and oil until the drought ends. Because we know the end of the story, we know that those two containers provided flour and oil for about three years.

What we are not told in this part of the story is how the unending supply of oil and flour affected the lives of the community where the widow lived. It is hard to imagine that no one noticed that this woman and her son always had bread, when no one else did. How could this be with a drought and no harvest? It is much easier to believe that even as she willingly shared her last loaf of bread with Elijah, she shared her blessing with those around her.

The three years of the drought contrast the difference between obeying God's words and directions and disregarding His Words. Disregarding them results in judgment; a judgment made evident to all by the drought. Obeying them results in blessings; blessings that provide a clear message of God's care for us and provides us the means to bless others.

The next event is the reappearance of Elijah in Israel and the challenge to the death on the mountain. It would appear to be a lopsided contest. The 450 prophets of Baal and Astaroth stood

against the lone prophet, Elijah. The day begins with an unspoken declaration. No one is allowed to attack Elijah; the very one who is seen as the source of their suffering. Yet no one even hints at grabbing him or taking out their anger and vengeance on him.

Then comes the challenge. 450 against one. Baal against God. Actually this is really round three of the contest. God has already attacked Baal twice and Baal has lost both times. First, Baal was the god of the weather and God has shown clearly who is in control of the weather. Second, Baal had an army of servants who could have quickly brought an end to Elijah's life. But nothing happens and Baal loses round two. Now comes the challenge to call down fire and prove the power of Baal and God.

We know who wins this round and all the prophets of Baal are killed.

Now to round four. Elijah begins praying and the rain falls. Then comes the next declaration. God empowers Elijah to outrun the storm and the chariot of King Ahab. What a race that must have been. He should have been at the ultimate level of his service and his faith. But without warning it comes crashing down. Jezebel threatens to kill him. Elijah wilts. and runs into hiding. In spite of all the great victories and events he decides he is a failure and there is nothing left for him but to die.

And that is part one of Elijah's story – a story filled with declarations, loud declarations of the power and will of God. Now comes part two, the whispering that must be heard over the storm. The whispering that contains the greater truth the greater understanding of God and his purposes.

Elijah is in hiding. Twice an angel comes and basically forces Elijah to eat and then convinces him to begin a much longer journey, or race. A race against himself and his concept of what God should be doing. Whether he runs or walks is irrelevant. But for 40 days he travels, he competes with himself, and eats nothing.

He is so disconnected, so despondent, that he is not aware of what exactly is happening. He does not realize what God is doing in his body.

Elijah arrives at the mountain of God. He arrives and is ready to hear the reality of God and what God is trying to accomplish in his life and how he wants to use Elijah to influence the people of Israel. There is a lot of thunder and crashing, ground trembling and violent blowing of the wind. These attack the mountain and cause Elijah to fear for his life and safety. None of these reveal anything new about God. None of these change Elijah's state of despondency and failure. There is nothing new here. He has seen all of this before, the drought, the unending food supply, the fire raining down and now the thunder

He has lived his life in the belief that only when God shakes the earth, thrashes the world, strikes down the enemy that people will listen. He has done all of these, seen all of these, lived all of this and in a moment, lost all of it. Here on the mountain it is presented again for him to review. Wind, fire, and destruction. But as he watches, he strains to hear God speak. He expects God to speak. He knows God will speak and when He speaks it must be in a thunderous, powerful voice that will cause all to fall down in fear. Instead all he hears is silence. In the midst of all the tempest around him there is no voice.

Can you imagine how Elijah must have felt? He had seen it all and nothing changed. He had just traveled 40 days on the strength of two meals, for what? God did not speak, did not reveal himself, did not fulfill his expectations. And then the most potent event occurred; an event that completely changed the attitude of Elijah.

A still small voice spoke and took time to discuss all of Elijah's feelings, emotions, sense of right and wrong, his feeling of failure. At that moment Elijah knew something he had not known before. He knew he was not alone and never would be alone. He would not have to wait for great events and miracles to happen to be aware of

God's presence. He would not need to do great and mighty deeds to gain God's approval. God would always be present, always be near, always be ready to speak to his servant.

The directions God gives Elijah do not involve the performance of great and mighty deeds, yet they result in a much more powerful reality. Before when Elijah acted, he ran away to safety and those who served God went into hiding. They all were afraid of what the king and queen would do to them. Now Elijah begins his public ministry. He publicly anoints a new king, he publicly calls a successor, and he lives publicly in Israel, for all to see. Now the others, the prophets and believers, no longer run into hiding. Instead a number of prophets stand up and proclaim God's truth and judgment.

God has revealed just how powerful he truly is. Droughts, unending food, and raining down fire are simple matters for God. They take only a small amount of faith. Living an open life in service to God, in the face of possible death, that represents true faith and more than any other action by God, reveals his true presence and his true power.

We all must learn this lesson. Faith in God that is based solely on a steady flow of miracles and earth shaking events is a weak faith. When they stop, we easily become lost and become cowardly. Faith that is based on a real knowledge of God and his presence is actually the greatest revelation of truth, and the greatest miracle is that we, a lowly creation, can truly have a relationship with God. That is true power, a power that will change the world around us. When will we learn that all the miracles cannot change a person's heart? Only a relationship with God can do that and that is a far greater miracle than any other act or activity.

Elisha

Elisha – Committed to service

Elijah exploded on the scene with the judgment of God and incredible acts of power. Elisha begins his ministry with a long period of service. He then duplicates in many ways the ministry of his mentor, Elijah. He raises a dead person, multiplies food, pronounces God's judgment and much more. All of this to maintain before the people the reality of God's presence, power and expectations. It is not an easy task.

Elisha serves the same group of people as Elijah, with much the same results. Most people do not have any interest in hearing, much less adhering to the words God is sending them through the prophets. Yet, Elisha continues the ministry of his master. He maintains the presence of God before the people. He is respected for his connection to God.

What does it take to be able to serve faithfully for almost sixty years? What does it take to have, what appears to be, unlimited access to the power of God? What does it take to face the constant opposition of those who will not listen, will not heed the truth and

so place themselves and those they lead in a constant state of uncertainty about what God will or will not do for them?

Elisha's ministry began one very unusual day. Unusual for Elisha. Until that day he was busy doing what we would call normal. Fulfilling his responsibilities to his family; carrying out his normal tasks, plowing his farmland. Nothing strange about that. He is behaving like he always does. Nothing unusual there. He was living a plain ordinary life, until...

Elijah arrived and, throwing his mantle on Elisha, called him to be his successor. Here began the sequence of unusual events.

1. He leaves his responsibilities behind – not acceptable behavior to abandon caring for ones parents or family.
2. He killed his oxen – definitely not a very good idea if one hopes to farm feed themselves
3. He used the yokes to cook the oxen – a further destruction of valuable property. Not what one does if they hope to return and resume their responsibilities and live normally
4. He left his standard, safe life and its responsibilities – to follow the wild and dangerous prophet Elijah

Consider this. We have no indication about the nature of Elisha's relationship to God, no indication that he had ever considered being a prophet. For all appearances, he was an ordinary man trying to survive and carry out his duty to family and others. Yet in a moment, Elisha abandons, no, severs himself from all past commitments to fully commit himself to be the helper, servant, successor to Elijah. Based on past events and the reactions of key leaders this would not be a wise career change to make at this time. Yet he does so and does so in a dramatic and unusual way.

To further reinforce the point Elisha killed, destroyed and rendered useless anything that could be used to draw him back to his former life and responsibilities. His declarations and actions made it absolutely clear that he was renouncing his life, renouncing who he was to become whatever it was God had told Elijah he would be.

Elisha entered into seven years of probation. Seven years of watching, waiting and serving. Seven years of hearing what Elijah had heard from God, seeing how it has changed the life and attitude of Elijah, experiencing the impact of the life and commitment of Elijah on those around him. Seven years of opportunity to review his actions. Seven years of learning what it meant to be a prophet of the true God. Seven years of dealing with people who refused to heed the words sent by God. Seven years of preparing for the day of God's choosing.

The day was not kept hidden. Everyone seemed to know. Everyone was ready to warn him and challenge him. Elijah, told him to go home. The prophets said it was time, and he chose not to leave Elijah. Then the question came, "what do you want from me?" The answer, 'a double portion.' The response, "only if you see me taken away by the Lord." And he did. The proof, he crossed the Jordan on dry land, just as Elijah had done only hours before.

Total commitment. Total service. Nothing less would do, nothing less was expected, nothing less was offered. The result would be a life of service, revealing to all the power and presence of God.

It did not matter who came: a widow about to lose her home and sons to the creditors, the school of the prophets needing food and healing, the general of the enemy dying from leprosy. The commitment of Elisha became the standard and became the guide by which each would be tested. Gather all the jars you can and fill them. Bring salt, dig ditches; wash yourself seven times in the river Jordan; strike the ground with the arrows; always an action required to gain a response from God.

Elisha made such a commitment when Elijah called him. He made such a commitment to stay with Elijah until God took him. He desired only one thing, to be in the service of God and to be fully equipped to carry out that service. He would make the commitment and allow God to prove that commitment.

Elisha's life was one of service, one of faithful life the presence of God. He was given the ability to carry out miracles, to see the proclaiming through a army of God, to reveal God to others. Always, in every situation, his commitment remained firm. God first, above all others, and all other considerations.

What are we willing to surrender, even sacrifice, so that we can follow God? What is the true nature of our commitment to obedience, to knowing God intimately? What proof will we give that we will follow no matter where the road takes us, until we receive the blessings available to those, only those, who are fully committed?



Isaiah – Called to live

Isaiah's book is filled with judgments on Israel, Judah and the nations. It is also filled with prophecies about the coming Messiah

and forgiveness; what God will do to restore the broken relationship with man.

Isaiah will begin his ministry as a young man and continue preaching and teaching for over 50 years. He will stand in the courts of the kings and pass judgment, bring warning, and challenge them to trust only God. He will convince Hezekiah to defy the king of Assyria and his army; an army that has destroyed nations much stronger and greater than Israel. God will respond and destroy that army because of Isaiah and Hezekiah's faith.

Isaiah will give his children unusual names. Names that reflect the coming judgment and the coming hope. Their names will be a constant reminder of Isaiah's focus on God's word to. It is said that he wears garments of the materials used to make sackcloth. This attire will make him a constant reminder to everyone that God is not pleased with their attitudes and that only a total commitment to the word of God and service to God will be sufficient to regain the blessings that they have lost. It will remind them of their need to repent and humble themselves before God. Isaiah is even married to a prophetess to indicate to all that every aspect of his life is focused in and for God.

He will begin his service as a prophet during the reign of a good king, defy the next two weak kings, help another king make the commitment to serve only God, and be killed (according to tradition) by the most evil king to ever reign over the people of God. He would see the best and the worst, and know that in the end the people would be judged and exiled. Yet he would be allowed to see beyond all of this to the promised Messiah, but this picture would not be one of military triumph and reestablishment of the kingdom of old. The view would be of a Messiah who would come miraculously, but be rejected and suffer horribly so that the deeper truth of God's love would be revealed. The deeper truth of the real cost of disobedience, the real cost of restoring people to a true relationship with God.

Isaiah will write and write. His writings will cover the entire landscape of his time and of the time of the Messiah. He will judge the nations, he will judge the people of God, and he will judge the kings. He will write and write, but except for a few, no one will listen. For a short while, there will be a time of hope during the reign of Hezekiah, but that is short-lived. It is said his poetry and writing are the highest and best examples of Hebrew literature, but even that will not be enough to convince the people to listen and see their sin.

He maintains his focus, he knows his purpose. He is resolute and nothing will move him from doing all that God calls him to do. Why? Why does he risk his life? Why does he willingly face the challenge? Why does he defy all those who refuse to listen?

The answer is simple. He has met God. Well, maybe it is not that simple. He has met the all powerful, righteous, holy creator of the universe. He has seen the angels, the six winged seraphs hovering and proclaiming the majesty of the Almighty. He has seen the depth of his unworthiness, his sin.

In that moment he knows his lostness, the hopelessness of his condition. He cries out in shame. He cries out in desperation, confessing his sin and the reality that all he is and all that is contained in his life is unclean. His life, his history, his future, all are unclean, all are doomed to be judged and lost. He crumbles in a heap before this throne convinced that his life has come to an end, for he has seen what no one can see and expect to live.

Then the scene changes. As Isaiah cowers in abject despair, one of those angels takes a burning coal from the fire under the altar. He brings it to Isaiah and places it on his lips. The very phrase used by Isaiah becomes the basis for a cleansing action (Isaiah 6:5-6). He calls his lips unclean and so it is his lips that are purified. The lips are symbolic of the filth within, the lies, deceit and deception that proceed from an unclean heart and mind. Now they are to be purified because God needs a person willing to speak the truth. A

person who will not bend, will not bow, will not yield to the influence of others but will be wholly committed to one thing, proclaiming the truth.

Through the pain, through the tears, he hears the question God is asking. He hears the plea of God to find one who is willing, one who will be faithful. Though there is an intense pain, through those burnt lips Isaiah responds. He is willing. He will go wherever God sends.

Why is he willing; when others are not?

This was not the first time God presented himself and his majesty. Not all responded so positively. On Mt. Sinai when God appeared to the people, and the leaders they cried to Moses to tell God not to speak to them again (Exodus 20:19). They were shaken and overcome by their fear for their safety. They preferred others to meet God and then tell them what God had said. How often does it happen that when God speaks we are more focused on the fact that we survived and not on the fact that we have met God?

Why is this so often true? Probably because when we truly meet God we will be expected to follow his words, to do what is asked of us. It is always easier to deny the words of a person than the words of God. It is easier to ignore the words of another, claiming even though God is speaking through them the words may not be for me or do not require that I respond. We don't want to have to deal with the truth of the words and we want to be allowed to do as we please.

Then there are those like Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah. God had spoken, there was no other option but complete and total obedience. To do any less was to lose something so precious, so vital that without it there was no life, no purpose. But such a decision, such a response, is based on a deep desire to know God. A life lived in search of an absolute that can only be found in God.

Once found, it profoundly redefines life, and all other activities are placed in subjection to this redefining moment.

Isaiah knew of God, knew the scriptures. On this day he knew God. His only question was how long? Not how long will I need to go? How long will I need to serve? He was already committed to serving God. If not, he would not have been in the temple. He would not have been at a point in his life where he could receive such a vision. His question was, how long will it take before people will listen? How long before you are restored to your position of honor and glory in the world.

The answer would discourage most. Basically it was, “Isaiah you will not see the day in your lifetime.” The people will not listen. That is of no concern to you. Preach the word I give you.”

This meeting changed Isaiah. He would never look back from that moment on. He would face the opposition, he would deal with the hardened hearts and he would proclaim the words he was given until the day he died. So that we today would learn of God’s plan for redemption and the coming of the true Messiah.

Isaiah sought out God and when God met him he did not turn away from the vision. Are we willing to truly seek out God and be changed? Are we ready to serve until the last breath? Are we willing to speak and preach and teach, though no one responds, until our last breath? Only when we truly meet God and submit to his claim on our life is that possible.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah – never a dry day

Gloom, doom and despair. If it wasn't for bad luck I would have no luck at all.

This could easily be the theme song for Jeremiah who has been called the weeping prophet; a man who lived at a time when the world was literally falling apart around him. The Babylonian army was on its way. The people no longer listened to the word of God. The king was an insolent man, laughing in the face of the prophet and of God, ready to listen to anyone who told him what he wanted to hear - anything to avoid the truth.

Even when everything Jeremiah told the people was fulfilled, they continued to refuse to heed the words given him by God. Only a few of the older men who had been part of the reform under Josiah sought to protect Jeremiah from the attacks of the king and other rulers; attacks designed silence him. Death may have been a kinder end than what Jeremiah was asked to bear.

He was a youth when he began his service. He cried to God that he was too young, unprepared and certainly unable to speak clearly the message he was being asked to proclaim. God set aside his objections with swift strokes. "I have chosen you since before your

birth.” He said, “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”

In the meantime Jeremiah cried. He cried not for the unfairness of his situation; not for the unfairness of what God expected of him. He cried for the people. He cried for his people and what God revealed was going to happen to them. He cried for the suffering that would come before the arrival of the hope and future promised to him, before the messiah arrived. He became an example to all of the painfulness of our sin to God. He revealed to us the level of Jesus’ sorrow when he cried for Jerusalem.

Jeremiah was called on to watch the fall of his people. A fall that was made more painful because only a short time before he had been part of a great revival of faith in God. He had been part of Josiah’s attempt to revive the worship of God in a time of apostasy. The revival was moving forward but then the king died and it became painfully apparent that the change in the people had been very shallow. There had not been enough time to affect a real change of heart, mind and soul.

His life became a living parable.

Jeremiah saw and experienced the revival under Josiah and then watched it all fall apart under the next king. He wrote down the words of God and heard of the excitement that it caused among the people only to have the king burn the scroll. He redeemed a piece of land as a symbol of hope for a future, only to be imprisoned when he tried to leave Jerusalem to examine the land. He was not allowed to marry and have children as a warning to people about how severe the judgment would be. He chooses to stay with the remnant and not go to Babylon only to be ignored and kidnapped and taken to Egypt.

No matter how many times his words and actions were accurate and fulfilled. He was attacked and derided. He was treated as a traitor to his own people. Under normal circumstances a normal

person would have had an emotional breakdown and descended into the pits of depression. If that were the case then Jeremiah would have become nonfunctional, a broken tool that God could no longer use.

Every message Jeremiah proclaimed carried the sentence of judgment. Every message proclaimed brought more anger and frustration, both at the people who would not listen and from the people who did not want to hear the truth. There seemed to be no end to the downward spiral that Jeremiah and the people were caught in. Yet in all of this, Jeremiah remained faithful. He continued to proclaim the truth, he continued to deal with the depression that sought to destroy him, to prove to deceive him into believing that there was no hope and that placing one's hope in God may be worse than having no hope.

Yet from Jeremiah came some of the most vivid images of God's presence and working: the image of the potter and his right to shape the clay into any form he desires, his image of the uselessness of serving gods carved from wood (wood taken from a log in which part is used to fuel the cooking fires and another portion to be carved into a god image). Image after image poured forth from Jeremiah, good and bad figs, the broken pot, the yoke of wood and then of iron, the buried rag that rot - all given to show the inevitable destruction and exile of Jerusalem and the people.

Day after day Jeremiah spoke. Day after day no one listens. Yet Jeremiah continued.

One wonders how a person could continue to teach, preach and live in the face of such opposition, of such defiance of God.

The key reason is that while everyone else was abandoning their faith in God, abandoning the truth, God was not abandoning Jeremiah. Day after day God revealed and reminded Jeremiah that he had been called, not by man, but by God. He was not speaking the words of a false prophet filled with lies and deception. He was

speaking the word of God, the living word of God, the word that is always true. Day after day God fulfilled his promise to make Jeremiah a “fortified wall of bronze” (Jeremiah 1:18; 15:20). Day after day he saw the evidence that God’s protection was sufficient for every attack, every accusation, every affront to the truth.

God did one other thing to help Jeremiah. He gave Jeremiah a friend, a companion who stood by Jeremiah in every situation and even went to prison with him. He gave Jeremiah a unique secretary to record the prophecies, to record the anguish, to record the searing of the prophet’s soul that came from watching the people as they refused to listen and march blindly into destruction. He gave him Baruch.

Baruch was ever present. He listened intently to the words. He records them. He risked his life to read them for all to hear in the temple. He watched over the prophet. He comforted him and followed him to Egypt when the people forced Jeremiah to leave with them.

Baruch made life bearable and provided the balance and hope Jeremiah needs. When no one seemed to listen, no one seemed to understand; Baruch was there. He was God’s representative. God’s reminder that no matter what happened, God was present. When Jeremiah was prevented from speaking, Baruch stepped in and wrote it down and the read it to the people.

We are not told much about Baruch. We are not told how he and Jeremiah met or the circumstances that surrounded that meeting. What we do know is that God did not forget the needs of Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s message brought isolation and loneliness. Not every person can handle that type of reality. Not everyone is an Elijah or a John the Baptist. God knows that and is ready to provide fellowship and encouragement to those who are responding to his call to service. The training process in this setting is unique. Two people are being prepared. Two people are being taught. Jeremiah is from a priestly family and is learning about God, his law and the

meaning of true faith and worship. He learns this from within the context of the temple and its culture.

Baruch was being trained as a scribe. He was being taught the letter of the law. You see the main task of a scribe in the land of Israel was to copy the word of God. When he was not writing down the words of others for letters, legal documents and key records he was employed in the reproduction of new copies of the word of God. He would have had a different knowledge of the word. This knowledge would have given him a sense of the validity of Jeremiah's words based on all he had learned as he copied the text. He would have been well prepared to see the truth of what Jeremiah was teaching and so prepared by God to be more than a friend, more than a coworker. He became a partner in the work of proclaiming this truth to all.

God brought these two men together to form a unique team. Each was taught key knowledge, each was uniquely prepared to carry out the task.

Jeremiah needed Baruch and his skills to be sure what God was saying was recorded and proclaimed. Jeremiah's voice may have gone unheard or be less well known without that partnership. Baruch helped Jeremiah proclaim the word and helped him steer away from the depression that could so easily have swallowed up the voice and the man.

There is wisdom in finding another who can validate our lives, who can be used of God to strengthen us, encourage us and console us. But how many, in the name of egoism, or in fear of a loss of prestige, have avoided seeking out such a person, rejected the person God sent to us, or simply failed to believe anyone could understand and so isolate ourselves, or in many cases, the message.

God is uniquely preparing people who can help us. Are we willing to see the contribution they can make? Will we allow ourselves to

be vulnerable so we can receive the benefits God has prepared for us through them?

Ezekiel

Ezekiel – the iron hammer of God

Considered one of the great prophets, Ezekiel was among a group of exiles taken captive to Babylon eleven years before the fall of Jerusalem. He was a contemporary of Daniel and Jeremiah. We know that he was married and that his wife died suddenly after nine years of joyful marriage. We also know that he owned a house and lived near the river Chebar. He was also the son of a priest. The other fact we know about his life is that he was highly respected and was often visited by the leaders who were seeking some word from the Lord about the end of their exile. He is the prophet. He was receiving visions. He was speaking God's words.

Beyond these bare facts we know little about the man who received incredible visions, was commanded to perform highly unusually living parables and be the clarion bell (ringing out for all to hear) of the judgment of God against the sin of Israel. What was it about Ezekiel that gave him the strength to carry out the mission God had given him? A mission to pound out the flaws and failures of the chosen people much like a smith pounds out the iron to

remove its flaws and shape it into a tool of worth for the work to be done.

Based on the records, we know that Ezekiel was contemporary with two other great prophets. Before his exile he would have known of Jeremiah and heard the messages of judgment and impending doom for the people because of their idolatry and sin. Many of the metaphors and ideas found in Ezekiel revealed knowledge of the words and message of Jeremiah. His visions and prophecies anticipated the ministry of Daniel. It is interesting to note that God call on Ezekiel to stand in the gap to protect the people from His wrath and to rebuild the walls of truth. He was to help restore and reestablish the people in the truth.

Ezekiel would have heard Jeremiah's warning to yield to God's judgment. He would have heard Jeremiah's judgment on the country's idolatry. Imagine with me for a moment the impact those words would have had on Ezekiel. As a son of a priest, Ezekiel may have often visited the temple. He would have seen the sacrifices and been taught the rituals. He may have even heard some of the words of Jeremiah as he spoke against the leaders, the king and against the falseness of the worship occurring in the temple. He may have heard the warnings of the coming judgment that God was bringing through the Babylonians.

Those words may have been what motivated him and others to accept an early exile to Babylon. They were taken years before the destruction of Jerusalem. That means they would have been able to watch as God carried out the words given to Jeremiah. They would have seen the results of the rebellion and disobedience. They would have seen,, with clarity God's judgment against Israel for its worship of false gods.

Ezekiel was taken on a journey to Jerusalem, to see what the priests and leaders were doing in secret. God provided the evidence so that Ezekiel knew exactly why the judgment had fallen. God revealed the depth of that sin in a vision of Jerusalem

and the idolatrous actions of its leaders. Ezekiel, as a priest, would have known the seriousness of their sin because he had been taught the law and understood the purpose of the sacrifice. He now saw and understood why God was so angry. Now he would be used to teach the people how to live and serve far from home. He was forged into the person God used to instruct the next generation, to help them understand and change their hearts.

Ezekiel continued the message of Jeremiah from exile. His call began as the attack on Jerusalem began. He carried the message to those in exile and, as did Jeremiah, warned the people that it would be a long time before they returned home. He echoed and supported the words of the letter sent by Jeremiah to the people of exile. He had seen the truth, he had heard the words and was ready to hammer it home. The message was made vivid in the life of Ezekiel and it impacted the people. He was uniquely positioned to help the people understand all that God had done to fulfill the words of prophecy given first by Isaiah and then Jeremiah.

We also know that Ezekiel was a contemporary of Daniel. They may have been taken into exile at the same time. In this group the best were taken to serve in the house of King Nebuchadnezzar. The rest were set free to work in the fields and other areas of service for the government. This meant he had contact with the servants and workers who were sent by the government to supervise their work. He was able to gather news about what was happening to those who were taken into the very court of the king. He was there to observe the life and events that surrounded the early years of Daniel's rise to prominence. He watched and saw that, in fact a person could live effectively in the service of a pagan without sacrificing their belief in and obedience to God. He heard and may have seen the events of the fiery furnace. These events would have given fire to his words from the Lord and filled them with the strength of steel. Daniel's commitment to obeying God and his law at all cost became a beacon of hope.

Daniel's life may have provided encouragement to Ezekiel as he boldly spoke God's word to those in exile. Ezekiel could point to Daniel and state with certainty that God's plan was true; that the people could serve God no matter where they were. He could declare with certainty that if the people would serve God, and not their rituals, God would be faithful and watch over them. The land was not the true measure of God's blessing. God was present everywhere and the true follower of God would never be abandoned and need never fear the future.

Ezekiel was a man who stood between the two realities and proclaimed the truth. He was the hammer that God used to forge his people; the hammer to finish the process of removing the impurity of idolatry and make the resulting product useful to God. He would be used to temper the steel and make it strong. The words given to him were like an anvil which was used to forge again the metal, to reshape the people, to prepare them for the plans God has for them in the future.

Ezekiel was able to observe the lives of those already in exile and saw clearly the difference between those who changed their behavior only because they hoped to return to the promised land and those, like Daniel, who changed because they wanted to serve God. Because of God's instruction and his own experience his words (the hammer strokes), were guided with precision. In this process Daniel was the template that gave him clarity in guiding the strokes of the hammer in the shaping of the iron, the structure of the future people of Israel.

Anvil and hammer- Ezekiel was called to hold the people between anvil and the hammer. The truth of God: as solid as the anvil. The words of God: the hammer through which the prophet would shape the lives and future of the people. Ezekiel was used to prepare the people for God so that they would become the people of God no matter where they were, no matter what their condition.

Ezekiel lived a life of revelation of what God was doing and what God expected of his people. He was used to reveal God's intentions and goals. His early history of watching the people and their failures and listening to the words of Jeremiah shaped his awareness of the truth of God's judgment. His life in Babylon gave him the opportunity to observe the results of the life of Daniel and his impact on the court of Nebuchadnezzar and the decisions to stand firm. These created the pattern and direction for his prophetic work.

Ezekiel was uniquely trained and uniquely placed to be able to do the work he had been given. He learned to watch and he learned the benefit of carrying out directions exactly as given. He was the hammer and God wielded this hammer with force and direction to forge and shape the future people of God. They became a nation committed to serving one God and no other.

God often places people in pivotal locations and gives them key insight through experience and training to see what is happening and be able to interpret that for the people around them. He also provides the tools need to help those same people understand what God will expect of them in the future. This was the role of Ezekiel. In many ways, it is the role of all of us. We are all called and prepared by God to stand in a pivotal place for the people we come into contact with. Are we ready to interpret the world around us so they will understand what God is doing? Will we then help them understand what God expects of us and how he wants us to live our lives for him in the world?

Every one of us has, in our history, the tools and training that represents the preparation of God for a specific work and ministry. God provides for each person, the events and experiences that will help define what God can do and reveals His promises for us as the future unrolls before us.

The key is being willing to seeing what is happening around us, studying the truth in God’s word and applying that to ourselves and the world around us.



Daniel – Committed to serve

Daniel’s life starts out as a young man in Judah who is taken into exile while still a teen. He then receives the finest training in all the knowledge and wisdom of Babylon. At a key point he chooses not to accept the lifestyle and laws of his captors and this decision determines the path that he will follow the rest of his life. At the end of that path he will receive key visions and make another key decision that anchors his life at both ends to God, as a youth and as an old man.

It is easy to see aspects of the life of Moses and Joseph in that of Daniel. All three were taken from their homes by force. They all received unique training and experience in the customs and knowledge of the host people. They all rose to positions of authority and power. They all chose to follow the road God laid

out for them no matter what the consequences. One a slave, another an exile and fugitive, the last a prisoner of war. Each of these men had to make a key decision that meant the difference between fading into the background to avoid conflict, or take a stand and risk their lives. One was a moral decision, one a decision of justice, the other a decision of obedience.

The changes for each were incredible, from a free man to a slave to second only to pharaoh; From a slave to a member of the family of pharaoh to exile and then leader of God's people; from a member of nobility to a captive to second-highest leader of the land. Huge swings in status. Huge swings in lifestyles and existence. Huge changes in what they were allowed to do and their relationship to authority.

The key questions are these; What was it that gave them the courage to take a stand? What made them place God and his truth ahead of everything? What was happening in their lives to choose to risk their lives to do what was right?

For Daniel the questions are not easy to answer. In comparison to the lives of Joseph and Moses, we know nothing of Daniel's life and his family. We know the background of the others and how their families likely played significant roles in the development of their understanding of God and who they were. With Daniel we have nothing.

We can make some assumptions. He was born towards the end of the reign of Josiah. Based on the year of his capture and deportation we can estimate that he was about 16 when that happened. That means that he would have been part of the revival that occurred during the reign of Josiah. He could also have heard some of the early warnings of Jeremiah about what was about to happen. He would have seen the changes in religious practice; the loss of commitment to all that Josiah had accomplished. He would have seen the falling away and the falseness of many who had given the appearance of fidelity to God's Word and now had

abandoned all of that for a life of liberality and sin, of self-gratification and selfishness.

Then the armies of Nebuchadnezzar arrived. Those unfortunate to be away from Jerusalem were captured and began the long journey on foot to Babylon; a journey that would provide more than ample time to reflect on all that happened. A journey that would have allowed Daniel to review the words and life of Josiah, to review the idolatry and renunciation of Jehoichim, to review the words and the warnings of Jeremiah. Ample time to determine if in fact the people of Israel deserved the judgement of God and to decide how he would respond.

Many around him on this journey sought to blame God for all that happened. They avoided any responsibility for their actions. They reviewed the promises of God to protect them and claimed he had failed. Few of them wanted to hear the warnings of what would happen if they disobeyed God. Whether slowly or quickly, the truth became clear to Daniel. The people were wrong. They had tried to deceive God and he had seen through their deception. They had been warned but refused to listen. The judgment was correct.

The next step in this process was related to how Daniel would respond to this truth. Would he hang his shoulders and fade into the earth, another victim, another failure. Or would he choose to change, to follow God's word no matter what the cost. Would he seek to be worthy of the God who was clearly in control of the world? Step by step, mile by mile, Daniel reviewed all he had seen and learned and step by step, mile by mile, his back became straight, his stride more confident. He realized that he served the Almighty God and there was nothing more important than serving this God. He would never again set aside the truth of God for the truth of others.

The test of this decision came soon enough. He and three others were selected for service in the court. They were sent to a special school to learn all they could about the life, culture and teachings

of the Babylonians. As part of this training they were to be fed from the king's table and dress like the Babylonians. They were even given new names to further separate them from their past and identify them with all things Babylonian.

Much of what they did was not harmful but in other areas they found themselves being asked to deny their heritage and God's teaching. Daniel decided that God would not bless them unless they refused to comply with these requests. The stage was set. Whose God was really in charge? God responded and Daniel's life and appearance impressed the manager of the school. So much so that he changed Daniel's diet permanently. This became the benchmark for the rest of Daniel's life. His choice influenced his friends and their decisions not to bow before the idol and risk death in a fiery furnace. His choice gave him the courage to face every challenge that would present itself.

Daniel survived the conquest of Babylon by the Medes and Persians. His status as one of the most important leaders passed from one conqueror to another. His was an unheard of situation, making a member of the enemy's court one of your top advisors! Incredible!

Daniel became a beacon of hope to the people. His faith became the evidence many needed to finally abandon the worship of all false gods to serve only God Almighty.

It is likely that Daniel played a significant role in influencing the king of Persia to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem. It is also likely that Daniel played a role in the preservation of the holy scriptures. We know to day that Babylon was one of the locations that maintained a copy of the old testament writings. Many believe that he had a copy of the writings of Jeremiah. The existence of the magi of the east who came to worship the new born king may owe their existence and knowledge to the faithful work of Daniel.

Daniel looked at the truth of God's word and let it speak to his situation. He allowed God's word to fill his life with hope and courage so that he could fearlessly follow God's law. His life challenges us to let God's word speak to our lives and situations; to learn to trust what God says and obey that word no matter what the risk may be.

As we are plodding through our life it is God's word that can revitalize us. It is God's word that can reveal the truth to us about every situation. It is God's word that helps us understand God's promises and power for every challenge we will face.



Ezra - Preparing for the fullness of time

Do any of us know the true consequences of our actions and decisions? Do we know what impact our faithfulness to God will have?

Ezra is an example of the value of being faithful and allowing God to use us to build a foundation that will stand the tests of time and be useful to God in preparing people to receive the truth.

We know little about Ezra before his trip from Persia to Palestine. We are told that he was a teacher and a scribe. This meant that he had been trained in the process of copying manuscripts and in

preparing documents for communicating the decrees of the authorities. Accuracy, and maintaining that accuracy, was a critical issue in his work, no matter how many copies were to be made. Even more so when the document being copied was the Holy Scriptures.

It is also clear that Ezra was a man of integrity. His life and work had brought him to a place where he was recognized and respected by the king of Persia. This further opened a door of ministry to the king and leaders. Ezra had the opportunity to share with them and maybe even teach them about the God of Israel. What exactly happened is not clear but this teaching had a profound impact on the king and on the future of the people of Israel.

Ezra was commanded by the king to go to Jerusalem. He was further encouraged to take any Jew who was willing to go with him and was given both the resources and authority to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the King and the people of Persia. The king further authorized Ezra to take whatever steps necessary to establish a system of instruction in the law of God. He was to "appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates — all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them." Ezra 7:25

Let us back up a bit and consider something of interest. Ezra's group of people was not the first to return to Palestine. There had been a previous group who was sent back with the specific instructions to rebuild the temple. Based on the remarks about their failure to keep some of the law of Moses it is clear that either their return did not include a plan for instructing the people in the law, or it was not effective in guiding the people in how they should live.

During this time God was preparing a person who would know the law and also would understand administration and organization. Ezra would not have had access to the court of the king of Persia if he was not a capable person. From the king's letter we see that he

was aware that Ezra was a capable person and a man with skill in organization and training. Ezra was authorized to appoint people as leaders and he is allowed the freedom to create the structure that would guide the people of Israel in carrying out their duties.

When Ezra left for Palestine he was a highly trained person in both the word of God and in administration. He probably was trained by the Persians to serve in some area of their administrative structure. He understood the need for clearly defined structures and knew the importance of clear instruction in the law.

Ezra is traditionally credited with making the synagogue a permanent fixture of Jewish life and a center for the teaching of the law. He was well qualified for this task. He had been well prepared.

The book of Ezra reveals to us that God uses many avenues to prepare us for the ministry that may lie ahead. It also reveals that our faithfulness in carrying out the task given to us can have long range implications. Ezra was placed in a unique place that would influence the development of a key , the synagogue, that God would use to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah and the Gospel.

One of the key dangers for a leader is only seeing the moment that he is currently living in. The world challenges us to live in the moment. To think of solving the current problem or need without considering the long term consequences those decisions and solutions may have. It is much easier to just deal with 'now.' To find the answer that will work in the long term often comes at a cost that we may be unwilling to accept.

Ezra faced such a situation. He was teaching the law and could easily have excused the past behavior of the people in order to make it easier to move forward. Instead he chose to deal with the issue, not by attacking the people, but by an act of confession and prayer before God and behalf of the people. He did not just create

structures and teach the law; he lived by them as well. The people saw this commitment and responded. They not only heard his words, they saw his life and they saw that they were the focus of his actions. He genuinely cared for them and for the future generations of Israel.

His life as a worker in the administrative world of the Persians probably revealed a key truth. Laws that only benefited the leaders or only applied to the general public did not work. They created resentment and rebellion. Laws that benefited everyone and were applied to all equally, created confidence and trust in the systems.

Do we truly understand how God is preparing us? Every experience, every period of our life can contain tools and information that God requires for a specific task he has for us in the future. The skills involved may require weeks, months or even a lifetime to acquire. It may not always take place in the church. It could be part of our general education, our work environment, or the experiences we have as part of where we live and who we encounter along the way. The process may be simple and clear or it may be complicated and require a great deal of effort.

The key is to be open to everyone we meet and every situation we encounter. It means to carry out tasks that may be unpleasant and difficult or just plain boring and repetitive. It also means living according to the words we speak. Ezra told the king that God was in control of everything. That meant he had to make the journey without the escort of the king or risk the implication that God was not as powerful as Ezra claimed he was.

Our lives are the classroom God is using to prepare us for his service, both now and in a yet-to-be-determined future. God also uses our lives and gives us the tools and skills needed to provide the next generation with the information they need to know God and develop a relationship with Him.

God is always in the process of training us. Are we paying attention to what we are being taught?

Consider carefully what is happening in your life right now, both the good and the bad. Let God speak to you and teach you how to use the lessons learned to help others know him. Let your life become the tool God can use to teach others.



Nehemiah - Dealing with danger - Nehemiah 2:1-4

Many sermons have been written about the man Nehemiah. For the most part they focus on his administration of the building of the wall of Jerusalem and of the people of Judah. I would like to shift that focus a little and look at another key issue that Nehemiah had to deal with. As you read the story various threats and dangerous situations are mentioned.

The word had reached Nehemiah that the city was in ruin and the people were greatly disheartened. They were living on the edge of despair, struggling each day to survive; a people being ground underfoot by those in authority. They had little motivation to live as the people of God. Nehemiah heard of this and God placed on his heart the need to do something to restore the people, to help them regain a sense of pride in who they were as the people of God and to help to lift them out of a pool of self-pity and depression, to help them see themselves as people of value and not the underlings of everyone who passed by.

A recurring theme or topic in this book are the threats and attacks that Nehemiah faced in attempting to carry out his plan to restore Jerusalem and strengthen its people. Threats that would destroy his credibility, his access to needed resources, and to his life. It may be useful to look at these threats in the order in which they appear. This will help us understand the environment in which he lived and what he had to deal with in carrying out the task given him.

First we need to understand a little about Nehemiah and especially his work. We know little about how Nehemiah found himself part of the court of Artaxerxes. Maybe the past history and effective work of previous Jews, like Daniel and his friends, opened the door to future generations. But to gain the position he had meant that he grew up in the courts of Persia and was well known and respected. Only the most trusted people would receive this appointment.

An appointment as cupbearer was one of privilege and danger. This person oversaw the preparation of the food of the king and was expected to taste it in the presence of the king and the Queen to prove that it did not contain poison. This position also meant that Nehemiah was in the king's presence more than most. He knew details of the king's life that others did not because he served the king in public as well as in private. He had to be a person of high integrity who knew how to keep silent and serve without hesitation.

Now let us look at the threats that Nehemiah faced in his desire to carry out the mission God gave him.

1. As cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah was to maintain a positive disposition when serving the king and when in his presence. Appearing before the king in anything that could be interpreted as a foul mood could result in loss of position or life. Nehemiah became preoccupied with the condition of Jerusalem and became so distracted that he failed to control his demeanor before the king. When the king queried Nehemiah it says that Nehemiah became

afraid. He knew what could happen and probably had seen the results when others had made a similar mistake.

2. Embarking on any type of long trip was inherently dangerous. All caravans were open to targeting by marauders and bands of thieves. Choosing to make such a trip to Jerusalem meant dealing with the threat of attack along the way.

3. By its very nature, Nehemiah's mission to Jerusalem was one that would be filled with any number of threats and areas of opposition. No doubt there were others in the court that would love to see Nehemiah fail and would help to encourage such an event in the hopes of taking over his position.

4. Those that he replaced in the province where Jerusalem was would not be happy. They did their best to discourage him; he was taunted and mocked. They hoped the threats would undermine the confidence of others in his leadership and his confidence in his ability to move forward.

5. During the construction of the wall there was a constant threat of attack by people who opposed the rebuilding of the wall, especially by those who were not Jewish.

6. Internal strife became a serious threat as people complained about mistreatment by various leaders. The people doing the work had to sell themselves into slavery or take on high debts to carry out the work. Those who brought supplies took advantage of the situation to their own benefit.

7. There were a number of attempts to get Nehemiah to leave his work to meet with his opponents. The intent was to ambush him on the way and murder him. One time the goal was to get him to enter the temple and, by his actions, humiliate and discredit himself

8. Several of the leaders of the area threatened to send a report claiming that Nehemiah was planning on leading a rebellion against the king.

9. Several of the prophets and a prophetess sought to influence Nehemiah and intimidate him. This action could have been a result of jealousy regarding the success that Nehemiah was having both in building the wall and gaining the support of the people.

10. Many of the nobles reported his every word and action to Nehemiah's opponents. They tried to encourage them to come and stop Nehemiah, maybe they thought they would be given more land or other special considerations for their reports.

11. The people themselves violated of various laws. Disciplining them represented a serious threat; however ignoring the issue could also undermine Nehemiah's credibility and effectiveness.

12. Not enough people physically lived in Jerusalem to maintain what had been accomplished. This could open the door to future attacks on the city and an inability to defend itself from such attacks. Nehemiah took a bold decision and forced the relocation of one tenth of the population.

13. People did business on the Sabbath. Jews and non-Jews. The threat here was a more subtle one and yet possibly the most dangerous of them all. God had made it possible to accomplish the task of rebuilding the wall. Failure to obey the law about the Sabbath could bring down God's wrath on them all.

One could quickly ask how Nehemiah was able to deal with this constant flow of threats from all sides and still function. Most people struggle to deal with one or two threats and as the feeling of being under attack grows, our effectiveness diminishes. We began to withdraw and avoid contact with those who are threatening us, or the situation that makes us feel threatened. We generally are not

good at handling an environment that is overloaded with threats to us personally or to what we are doing.

Yet, if we go back to the job Nehemiah had in the court of King Artaxerxes we may gain some insight into Nehemiah and why he was able to handle this situation.

Imagine with me what it would be like to live in the court of a king. There were constant threats to his rule and his person. Nehemiah's very presence and job represent a concession to that reality. There were people willing to murder the king and use his food and drink to do so. This meant that every time Nehemiah tasted the food and tested the drink he dealt with the possibility that someone somehow had managed to place poison in that food and drink, even though he had personally supervised its preparation.

Nehemiah held a position of privilege and power that allowed for a unique level of intimacy with the king and queen. Nehemiah may have learned of threats against himself, of those who intended to lie about him to the king. He also probably heard about the threats against the king and other nobles of the court. It is also possible that there were attempts to bribe him and so undermine his integrity.

As the person in charge of the king's food and drink he would have been responsible to oversee all that was involved in purchasing and preparing them. This meant dealing with any number of individuals and groups and being sure they complied with the guidelines involved in that process. A wrong attitude towards these people, poor relations or a lack of awareness about each person and their needs could have opened the door to problems, some simple and some potentially deadly.

Nehemiah was surrounded by an environment that was filled with the reality of threats, both from outside and from inside. He saw what happened when the threats were carried out and a person's

life and position were lost. He saw what happened when those who made a threat failed in their attempt to undermine or remove an opponent. He learned how to read the signs and he learned how to deal with those threats. He learned when to take a threat seriously and when to ignore it, when to take action and when to do nothing, when to speak out and when to be silent. He learned how to act when faced with a threat.

When he made the mistake of letting his sadness be seen by the king he was rightfully afraid. Yet, his faithfulness in service over the span of his life. The king's confidence and knowledge of Nehemiah made it possible for him to make this mistake and survive. Actually to do more than survive, to be given the means to act on his prayer to God.

Nehemiah was uniquely prepared to deal with the conditions and threats he faced when he arrived in Jerusalem. He knew exactly what to expect and what his options were in dealing with each threat as they presented themselves. He had the experience to be able to read people and know how to interpret their words and actions.

Not everyone has the capacity to deal with what Nehemiah faced. But there are lessons we can learn from Nehemiah and how he acted in each situation. The one thing that becomes absolutely clear is that Nehemiah did not allow anything from interfering with carrying out the work that God had given him. No matter what the threat, or the form it took, Nehemiah continued the work. And each step of the way he prayed to God for strength, protection and vindication.

Every one of us will face threats to our faith and to our work. God reveals in the life of Nehemiah that through the events of our life he is preparing us to face those threats. God also reveals that He will provide the strength we need to carry us through those difficult times and that He is always at our side. Our task is to be victorious and let the world see God through us.

The key question is one of focus. When surrounded by difficulty are we focused on the threat or opposition or do we focus our attention on the task and allow God to deal with it? Do we take time to review all that God has done to prepare us for this moment and this task or do we spend our time crying for new information and new revelation? So often we forget the promise given by Jesus that we are not to worry. Why, because we will have what we need when it is needed from the Holy Spirit. Do we truly believe that and move forward to carry out the work?

Esther

Esther - Hearing our parent's voice

Esther - the book

Esther's story has several features that are unique when compared to the stories of other leaders. She is living in exile, has been doing so all of her life. That could lead a person to be bitter against God. She is also an orphan. She not only loses her home country but at an early age her parents die. It would have been easy for her to feel that she had been abandoned by God and every one.

But there was one ray of light in this darkness and that was her cousin Mordecai. Mordecai knew all the pain and loss that Esther experienced. He knew her before her parents died. He knew her

character. Based on the story and the response of others it was one of grace and charm. As a result of their relationship and her character, Mordecai chose to adopt her and became her father.

This relationship had a profound effect on Esther and how she comported herself before Mordecai and others. She was a dutiful daughter seeking to obey the counsel of her adopted father. She also was concerned that he should benefit from all that she received as well.

A quick summary of a few points in her life will help us see this truth.

a. her adoption by her cousin suggests a deep and abiding relationship between the two families. Esther's attitude upon the death of her parents would be a key factor in the decision to adopt.

b. her selection as one of the beautiful women of the land would not be enough to gain the opportunity to access all the resources available to one so chosen. She gained the approval of the Eunuch in charge, was given special attention, and then moved to the best place in the harem

c. her decision not to reveal her origin was in obedience to Mordecai's instructions. He knew how the court functioned and she wisely heeded his instruction.

d. her attitude revealed her ability to see what was most important and heed the advice of others. She won the favor of everyone who saw her.

e. her selection by the king again revealed the quality of her personality. Her beauty was not enough, the king had seen one beauty after another. He was attracted to her more than any of the others. Esther won his favor and approval.

f. her report of the assassination plot revealed to her by Mordecai showed that she did not forget who was responsible for her place. She gladly gave credit to her cousin.

g. her submission to her cousin's direction to approach the king revealed her confidence in his advice and counsel

h. her decision to approach the king revealed a confidence in herself and in the prayers of others

i. her plan revealed a person who has an understanding of politics and much more.

Over and over Esther made critical choices about how she should behave and respond to the people around her based on the counsel of others. Along side of this is placed the constant presence and concern of Mordecai. He cared for Esther, enough to adopt her and treat her as his own child. He cared for her, enough that regularly he sought out information about her and how she was doing. This could have been risky. It was not always wise to take too great an interest in a woman who was part of the king's harem.

He cared for her and was always near at hand. He was regularly found sitting at the gate, a gate that was accessible to Esther so that she could maintain contact with him directly or through others. But he was wise in that no one suspected the relationship between them.

Then the critical day came. A day that required her to accomplish the impossible. She needed to approach the king without his invitation or permission. Then she needed to create a situation that would allow her to present the issue in such a way that the king would take her seriously and choose not just to protect her, but all of her people.

Over the years she had learned how to respond to people, how to overcome her fears, her doubts and connect with those around her.

It was a critical skill. Too much interest would push people away, too little and they would not be drawn to her. It was not just enough to be nice, one must genuinely care and truly be interested in those around them and make them feel truly valuable. The years of learning and listening to the counsel of others were about to be tested.

Let us look at her key example of dealing with others, her uncle. Mordecai was a Jew in the king's court. He was from one of the conquered nations. His acceptance in the court and appointment were dependent on his skills and his ability to overcome the prejudices of those who were Persian by birth. He shows us that he genuinely cared about those around him. From his adopted cousin to the king. His goal was to care for them and make it possible for them to trust him and his judgment.

We do not know anything about his parenting style, how he disciplined his children or anything else. What we do know is that Esther learned to trust his insight and learned how to use that insight in her relations with those around her. They responded and became her supporters and advisors in key areas. She treated people with respect and they responded by providing the resources and insights she needed to do more than just survive but to gain control of her situation.

The lessons learned from her adopted father, and the example of his life became the core of her life. It gave her the courage to trust herself and the instructions given to her by Mordecai. She knew what it would take to help the king see beyond the intrusion, the interruption, and the breach of protocol. She knew what would be required if she were to change the king's heart and gain his protection not only for her, but for her people.

Mordecai's faithful service in reporting the men who plotted the king's assassination would be a great help to her as well. It would raise confidence in herself and the plan she had designed. It would

give her the courage she needed to carry out her plan. Then, wisely, she would let things move at their own pace.

Esther's actions help us see how God provided her with direction at key points in her life through Mordecai. And how she learned to do more than just submit to others. She chose to enjoy the benefits of that relationship and learned how to use the lessons in all aspects of her life.

How often do we see the direction and admonition of our parents and others in this way? Not as a burden or oppressive but as an opportunity to learn. How often is our submission grudgingly given as the price we pay to continue to receive the care and protection and support of our parents and others? Not as a condition that must be met before we receive more but as the avenue through which we can learn about ourselves and how to grow and mature?

The lessons and opportunities are there. Are we alert enough to take advantage of them?

John

the Baptist

John the Baptist

A life in the shadow

John the Baptist son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. That alone tells its own story. John's parents were a unique couple in the story of the Messiah. Elizabeth was a relative of Mary and also of the lineage of David. Zechariah was a priest of the line of Aaron. John was related to Jesus. This means there is the distinct possibility that Jesus and John knew each other and may have spent time together during their childhood.

There is the very real possibility that as John grew up his mother and father would have told him the stories about his relative's birth. Imagine the impact those stories would have on his thinking and choices. But, before we consider that, let us review the stories he would have heard from his parents.

His father, Zechariah, would have told him about the unique events surrounding his own conception. This would focus on the coming of the angel Gabriel, the promise of a child, and how he had been

struck dumb by his doubt regarding the possibility of his wife, Elizabeth, having a child in her old age.

His mother would have told him about the events surrounding the day Mary, Jesus' mother, came to visit and how he had jumped in Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's voice. She probably repeated to him the song that Mary sang at that time; a song filled with prophetic hope.

His father would have talked about the day of his birth and the circumcision eight days later. He would have learned that the moment his father wrote down his name, which his mother had chosen, he could speak again.

His father would have told John the prophecy that he was given in that moment, how he would be a prophet who would prepare the way for the one to come.

He may have heard from his parents and others the story of the day Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to be circumcised. About the words that Simeon spoke over the baby Jesus. About the words of Anna and how Jesus would be the one who would bring salvation to the people.

There is one event that John could have witnessed. Remember his father was a priest and would have been in Jerusalem for the festivals and especially for the Passover. It is very likely that John was in Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve and debated with the teachers. He would have heard Jesus questions and answers.

We have no idea how often these stories were repeated. But one of two things could have happened as a result of having them repeatedly told to him and to others.

1. He could have become angry about them. Most young people don't like others telling them the direction their life is to take, even more so when the expectations are set very high. The more the

stories are repeated the higher the expectations. Any failure in life, any mistake would be frowned on and he would be reminded that he must behave because he was chosen.

2. He could have accepted them and the guidance they gave him in his decisions and direction. He could have allowed them to open his mind to study the scriptures in depth. He would ask questions of his father and mother to gain a better understanding of the events.

The impact of those stories depended greatly on how they were told and how his parents treated him. It is clear that they handled the situation well. Luke states that John grew strong in spirit. The stories created within him a resolve to commit himself to the path they required him to follow. The stories opened his mind and heart as he immersed himself in the study of God's word and prepared for the day that he would take up his work.

That is phase one of the life of John. The life that he lived while a child and a youth. The life he lived in submission to his parent's authority and the teaching they gave him. The life that allowed him to make a key decision and head for the wilderness.

The first part of John's life allows us the possibility to suggest what was happening that would prepare the way for him. His life, for the most part, was public and visible for all to see. To remain living with his parents may, in time, have created an unbearable situation for the young man. There would be many questions from the community about when he would begin his work, how he would know who the Messiah would be and so on. So he left. As much for his own sanity and possibly for the sake of his parents, who would have to deal with all of this as well.

The second part of John's life is shrouded in mystery. He disappears into the desert. Many assume that he joined the Essenes or a group like them. These were people who took serious the teachings about the Messiah and organized their lives so that they would be fully prepared for his arrival. They also took very serious

the judgment of God against those who failed to heed God's word or sought to twist it for their own purposes and spoke in the most severe terms about what was going to happen to them.

What we know is that when John reappeared he was in lonely isolated places. His appearance is compared to that of Elijah. A man living off the land. Some called him a wild man and yet there was something different about him. So instead of living in the city where people would shout and laugh at him, he went to remote places and began speaking. He had one message, the messiah is here and you need to get ready for his appearance.

John had a unique confidence not found in the others. The people avoided the others, maybe even tried to drive them out of the city. But with John it was the opposite. They flocked to him and sought him out in the desert. It is hard to say why they did. It was a God thing. They wanted to be his disciples. The message spread until the authorities became concerned and sought him out. His voice was strident in its judgment, as he called them a brood of vipers, destructive and selfish. The people loved watching the confusion and discomfort he caused them. The leaders spoke only of the law and made it a heavy burden. John spoke of a coming lamb, one who was gentle and will forgive and take away their sin.

John was unique. John knew it. He had been uniquely prepared. He grew up with the truth and then applied himself to study the word to verify it all. He was not a wild man. He was a prophet. He had received the message from God in a very unique way and that made it even more powerful. He backed down for no one, Pharisees, soldiers, tax collectors. God had revealed the truth and it was the time for repentance, to prepare the people for the day the Messiah was to be revealed.

John knew in his heart that his parent's stories were true. John knew the words of the prophets, every judgment, every promise. He knew he had been chosen and he accepted the call of God. He even knew when his time was past. When Jesus appeared he

pointed the people to Jesus. He must decrease so Jesus could increase. (John 3:30)

There would only be one moment of doubt. It came at a low point in his life and ministry. He had proclaimed the truth and Herod had taken exception to his words. Yet Herod was afraid of John and the fact that he spoke the truth deepened that fear. He called John and spoke with him. He was fascinated by the truth but fearful to be seen as weak. He could not let John go, yet he could not find a way to end his life without the people rebelling. John knew he would not be freed; it was only a matter of time. In this moment he began to doubt and sent a messenger to ask Jesus one question.

Did I misunderstand all that I was told, all that I have learned? Are you the one or do we look for another? Did I fail to get it right and only succeed in confusing the people? Did I falsely raise their hopes only to have them dashed again? If you are not the one then my life has been a failure. I am in prison and will not be able to continue my work. Are you the one? Did I get it right? (Matthew 11:2-3)

Jesus' answer was simple and direct. "Tell him about the miracles. Tell him about my teaching. Tell him what you have seen and heard. He will know." We don't know what happened when John received their answer but it would appear he was satisfied. After he died Jesus called him the greatest prophet that ever lived. He was the voice crying in the wilderness. He prepared the way for the Messiah.

John paid attention to what he was taught as a child. He listened to his parents. He listened to those who knew the truth and lived according to that truth. He took seriously the words spoken about his life. He took it all in and became the man he was supposed to be in order to do the work he was called to do.

So many of us receive the teachings of God as children. We go to Sunday School. We go to church. We listen to our parents. We

watch them live their lives as servants of God. Do we realize that in all of those settings God is teaching us and preparing us? Are we listening to what people tell us as children about what God has done for them. About how God has revealed himself to them?

Any person who accepted Jesus as a child, has available to them an incredible resource that can guide them in what they believe and how they apply that knowledge to life and to becoming the person God wants them to be. Reflect back and think about your life. What did God teach you that has become the foundation for your life today? What are you doing to bring honor to those who faithfully served so that you, as a child, could know God's word, so that you could know God?

For so many of us the most important training came from those around us when we were growing up. Parents are you doing everything you can to be sure your children and those you come in contact with will know who God is and what God has to say to them? Will they grow up knowing God and be confident in what his Word says? Will the life you live as an adult be an encouragement to them to follow and serve God when they become adults?

The power and influence of godly parents, of godly adults, who take seriously the training and instruction of children should not be underestimated. Let the children come, he wants to bless them through us and prepare them for service.

Simon Peter

Peter - bold and brash

Simon/Peter represents a grand enigma. At one point he is the person who is seeing the truth and declaring that truth for all to hear. In the next moment he is falling all over himself making foolish comments and impossible promises. He knows enough to understand and declare what he sees with clarity. But he has no idea where to go with what he has discovered. He has been a leader and sees himself as a leader, but he has so much to learn before his words will make it possible to share with others what he knows and who he is.

Simon's history is filled with anomalies. He is a big, brusque fisherman. Yet he has taken his skill and successfully built a business. He owns a large house, big enough to host Jesus and the crowds that follow him. He has moved from a lowly post to one of social standing. He is able to hire servants and workers for his business. He is considered a rough man, he calls himself a sinful man and yet it is likely that he is a follower of John the Baptist (John 1:35-40). He makes bold statements only to crash and burn moments later.

How does one move from Simon the successful yet rough and brash fisherman/businessman to Peter, the rock, the one who will eventually be the spokesman for the church? How does one survive their own foolishness and brash declarations to become the trusted

leader of the apostles? How does one go from hiding from the truth to boldly facing the Sanhedrin over and over again?

We have little information about his early life, mainly that his father was a fisherman and that, as was common at that time, he was taught his father's trade. He learned this work so well that he was able to afford a house, a partnership with another group of fishermen, and have hired servants. This would have made him confident in his ability to see what needed to be done, what was possible, and then do it.

His success would have given him access to a crowd of people who, though more educated, could not avoid him. They had to do business with him and so had to socialize with him. This would allow him to learn about the world beyond his community. Maybe this was the way he heard about John the Baptist and his teaching.

There is no information on how this rough fisherman came into contact with the prophet. How his brother Andrew and possibly Simon became followers of the wild prophet. Maybe that same wildness, that same readiness to go against that stream that made Simon a success attracted him to John the Baptist. Simon too was on the edge socially, as was John. However it happened, Simon accepted a new name and abandoned his business, to risk all.

Simon knew about risk. Every day was a risk for a fisherman. Every day they had to read the signs of the weather and the season. If they got that wrong, any number of things could go wrong. The least dangerous would be a day with no fish. The worst would be caught on the sea in a storm. That could result in loss of equipment and even a person's life. The better one was at reading the signs the more successful they would be in catching fish and providing for their family. Simon knew about risk and he knew how to read the signs; as long as it had to do with fish.

When Jesus changed his name he became Peter the Rock. But this rock found himself in uncertain waters. His ability to see the truth

remained, but his ability to act on what he knew became uncertain or inadequate. Here is a short list of some of his insights and the blunders that followed.

1. He clearly saw the truth of Jesus' identity. But tried he to prevent Jesus from going to Jerusalem. Jesus' response of “get behind me Satan,” would have unsettled him greatly. (Matthew 16:23)

2. He saw the power of Jesus in nature. But his faith was not enough to keep him afloat. He only managed a few steps on the water before he lost his focus and began to sink. (Matthew 14:26)

3. He proclaimed he was ready to go to Jerusalem and die with Jesus. But he did not clearly understand what this meant and found himself denying his relationship with Jesus. (Matthew 26:35)

4. He was ready to defend Jesus in the garden. He took a sword and cut off the ear of a servant. But when faced with the accusation of a maid he bumbled and blunder swearing he never knew Jesus. (John 18:10)

5. He made the decision to abandon everything to follow Jesus. But he did not understand what he would gain by this decision. He asked Jesus what he would get in return, thinking possibly of a position, or power, or wealth, as a good friend of the future king. (Matthew 19:29)

6. He rightly identified the men with Jesus at the transfiguration. But he missed the point of the event thinking only of a way to freeze time. (Matthew 17:4)

Peter would go through many lessons in the process of learning how to use the insight he had and turn it into an appropriate response as a leader, actually in learning how to be a servant in his Master's kingdom. At the empty tomb we begin to see a change in Peter. He arrived saw the tomb and said nothing, only pondering the meaning of this. Jesus would take time to meet with him alone

after the resurrection. Then Jesus would query him in the presence of others about the sincerity of his love for him. It would cause Peter great anguish but he would begin to learn.

While Peter saw much, he also misunderstood much of what he saw. Yet there is one thing we need to keep in mind. Peter did not run away from being corrected or admonished. He did not allow his personal embarrassment to prevent him from staying at Jesus side. Think about it. He could have felt very foolish, and become intimidated by these failures. Overtime he could have given up and left.

For a moment, let us look back into his past to possibly gain some understanding about why he didn't run away and hide. Remember he was the son of a fisherman. You can be completely convinced that you will catch a fish and then catch nothing at all. Then at another time when you believe you will get nothing the fish are there. It is part of the learning process of fishing.

Fishermen also love to brag and are noted for telling fish stories. Stories designed to make them look better than they may really be. It is usually about the "one that got away." A story whose sole purpose is to cover up their failure or the meagerness of their catch. Actually none of that matters, as long as you catch enough so you can eat. But if a fisherman catches nothing, that would be an embarrassment for him. Yet, they go back into the sea no matter what happened the day before, to once again study the weather, the season and make a decision about where to fish, how to fish and what to fish for.

This was exactly what happened on two occasions with Simon Peter. All night with no catch. Then a stranger, who is not a fisherman, says to cast on the other side of the boat. To go all night and then have a novice tell you how to fish! He could have refused because he knew better. He could have been haughty and rude, throwing the net just to prove the foolishness of the stranger. Whatever the reason behind his decision may have been, he threw

the net and it came back overflowing with fish. The first time Peter cowered and confessed his sin telling Jesus to leave. The second time he rushed to the Lord and accepted his admonition and restoration.

The big brash fisherman with a head for business had changed. He was still big, but his brashness became boldness. His head for business let him see the truth of all he had experienced and gave him the courage to stand before all and proclaim the most incredible miracle in all of history and to proclaim for all its significance. He saw, he understood, he acted, but this time his words were not those of a foolish man who acted without thinking. His words were filled with power and truth. His words focused not on himself and his situation but on helping the people see and know how to respond.

One of the biggest barriers each of us face is ourselves. We often think too much of ourselves, too much of our ability, too much of our ideas. We get in the way of making the connection between what we know and what is an appropriate response for us and others. We think we know what we can do when we don't.

Over and over Jesus worked with Peter to help him learn, to help him see beyond himself. He never let Peter's failures become a barrier to future teaching, future assignments. Actually from Peter's life we have an example of how one can use experiences for the purpose of training. We can also see the process of bringing a person from depending on his knowledge, ability and ideas to one who lets God open their eyes and lets God show them what to do.

We also have been given a pattern for those involved in mentoring and discipling others. A pattern of patience and strength. A pattern of confrontation when needed and tender discipline in other moments. A pattern of restoration and forgiveness. A pattern of trust and support.

So many of us represent one or the other. Struggling to understand our own weaknesses. Or struggling with how to help others overcome their weaknesses. What is clear from this example is that God is committed to providing the lessons needed for us to learn the one and the guidelines necessary for doing the other.

Are we ready to overcome our embarrassing mistakes?

Are we ready to be patient and help others work their mistakes?

James & John

James and John - Thunder tamed - Mark 3:17

James and John worked for their father in his fishing business. Jesus called them the "sons of thunder." They were individuals with bold and energetic behaviors. This could have resulted in sometimes heated responses to events and people. They once asked Jesus to call down fire on a Samaritan village that refused to allow Jesus to stay there. (Luke 9:54)

James and John were selected by Jesus, along with Peter, to be part of the inner three. As members of this group they saw Jesus raise

Jairus' daughter to life, then witnessed the transfiguration and were included in Jesus' time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. They were also part of an inner group that questioned Jesus about the end times. Only on a few occasions were they referred to separately. John was given the special place of honor at the last supper. Later, at the cross, Jesus tells John to take care of his mother.

There are some notable omissions of James. Normally wherever Peter and John are, James is with them. But this changes. He is not with them when they heal the lame man in front of the temple. He is not arrested with them. He is not with them when they go to Samaria to review the work of Philip. And he is only referred to once by his brother John in his gospel, and then not by name, but only as one of the sons of Zebedee

There are only two more occurrences of his name. The first relates to the story about his martyrdom in Acts 12:2. The second is in 1 Corinthians 15:7. Here is a reference to Jesus coming and meeting with James alone. This reference is surrounded with uncertainty. For it could easily have been James the brother of Jesus that is referred to. Yet it could have been James the son of Zebedee.

It is also clear that he has not disappeared from the scene. He is present when they choose a man to replace Judas to complete the number of 12 apostles. When the elders are appointed in Acts 6 it states that the twelve gather to resolve the issue. He is present at the ascension and in the upper room. But from this point on there is a large gap until his martyrdom, which most historians believed occurred 14 years after the resurrection. Tradition suggests he left Judea to minister to the Jewish colonists in Spain, but there is little to support this idea.

John as well seems to fade into the background. After the trip to Samaria we do not see his name again in the book of Acts. John will not reappear until the very end of the New Testament. All the rest are gone, even Paul. John is no longer in Jerusalem, he is now

in Ephesus and under attack by the Roman authorities and is banished to the isle of Patmos. He receives the closing comments from God for the church.

In many ways James and John form bookends to the ministry and life of the apostles. James was the first to die and John the last. When they first appear, we quickly realize they are some of the youngest in the group. They are also the most emotional, they seem to have limited control of their tongues and motions. Very typical of youth. They are quick to speak without considering the consequences of their words (call down fire on the Samaritans, Luke 9:54) and the feelings of those around them (Give us the seats besides your throne, Mark 10:35). They are quick to judge, quick to take offense (tried to stop the actions of those not part of their group when using Jesus name Mark 9:38).

What is their relationship to Jesus? Some think that they may have been cousins, that Salome, their mother, was a sister to Mary. There is no way to be absolutely certain, but it may explain the temerity of the mother to approach Jesus and ask that James and John be given seats at Jesus' right and left hand. It could also explain some of their boldness on other occasions. They might have thought they had special rights as relatives of Jesus.

Jesus rejects the request and then tells them they will participate in his ministry and his suffering. When they are out of line he rebukes them. If there is a family tie it will not be allowed to influence Jesus. They would not be given special treatment, at least not the kind they expected. James would be the first to be martyred and many years later John would be exiled for his faith.

What is interesting is that their boldness did not diminish. But it clearly became refocused. In the beginning they focused on themselves and their situation. They were reluctant to let anyone else be ahead of them. They didn't want to let others share in the blessing or have access to the power they enjoyed as disciples.

They were quick to judge and respond negatively. They were bold but in all the wrong ways.

As we near the end of Jesus' ministry we hear less about them, at least in this way. Now they are part of the inner three. They, along with Peter, have been told they will share in the master's suffering and pain. And they do. All three are martyred. Yet these two fade to the background and support Peter as the leader instead of themselves. John becomes the beloved one and love towards others becomes a central theme in his writings.

Yes they are still bold. John follows Jesus right into the courtroom of the Sanhedrin. He follows Jesus to the site of the crucifixion. James does not run away because his life is being threatened by Herod. They are still bold but they have been changed.

Jesus has helped them to refocus their energy and how it is to be used. The rebukes, the corrections are tempered with generous servings of love and patience. Jesus does not alter their personality, simply the direction they are taking. They will need to be bold. They will need to stand firm. They will need to be confident in who they are, not because of their position or rights but because of their relation to Jesus. And not as relatives, but as children of the kingdom of God.

Jesus sees the value of who they are and teaches them how to serve him and use who they are to be channels that God can use instead of barriers that exclude others from entering the kingdom. Instead of seeking their rights and benefits, they work at helping others find their place in the kingdom. Instead of wanting to judge and punish they become advocates for love and forgiveness. Instead of restricting the activity of others to protect their name and positions they encourage others to come and share in all that they have received.

Because we have John's gospel and his letters we have a better idea of the profound changes that took place in his life. It is likely that James experienced a similar change.

The key to their change was their willingness to let Jesus reveal to them their errors, their misconceptions about being a servant in the family of God. They become humble so that God could change their hearts and they could learn how to let God work through them to reach others. They remained themselves but now had the ability to use who they were to draw others into the family.

Do we understand that the change God wants to bring about in our lives is not about making us look like everyone else? It is not about learning to behave like everyone else? God really wants you and I to be the best person you and I can be; a person uniquely created who can serve from our uniqueness. God is ready to accept us as we are and help us use who we are to serve him.

The key is to be willing to let God reveal to us our mismanagement and selfish use of who we are, to let God speak to us honestly about our attitudes, to let God change what needs to be changed. Are you ready for some honesty? Are you ready for a little truth about yourself? Are you ready to become truly you?

James

the brother

James -

A brother come lately

Matthew 12:46; 13:55; Mark 3:21; John 7:1-5; Act 15

There are three James's mentioned in the New Testament. Two of these were disciples of Jesus. The best known is James the brother of John. The other we know almost nothing about except that his name is James and he is the son of Alphaeus. The third person with this name is considered to be a brother of Jesus.

The first few times Jesus' brother appears in the story he is critical of Jesus. When Jesus is attacked by the people of Nazareth, he and his brothers do nothing to intervene (Mark 6:3ff. James dares Jesus to go to Jerusalem to show off his miraculous abilities (John 7:4). He and the family try to remove Jesus from a house because they think he is crazy (Mark 3:21). Then everything changes.

After the resurrection James is present in the upper room (Acts 1:14). Later we see him as a leader of the council of Jerusalem. Paul meets with him privately on two occasions. In the first meeting Paul seeks to convince James of the change that has occurred and to gain the leaders' approval for the mission to the Gentiles (Galatians 1:19). The second time occurs when Paul returns to Jerusalem and James and the others meet with him to discuss the impact of his work on the Jewish Christians (Acts 15). That last word we have from James is in the form of a letter, which became part of the New Testament.

So how does one go from considering their brother to be potentially insane to a key leader in the church after the resurrection? Actually a more interesting question might be why James and his brothers have such a struggle accepting their brother as a miracle worker, prophet and Messiah.

Let us take a moment to consider what it might have been like to live in the same house as Jesus.

Jesus was the perfect child. Obedient to a fault. Respectful of his parents as required by the law. He knew what was expected of him and did it even without being asked. He learned quickly and was able to apply those lessons to other situations. He made friends with everyone, old and young. Everyone who knew Jesus liked him, no one ever said a bad thing about him. When he did something he did it the best he could possibly do. There just wasn't anything wrong about him, his attitude and what he did.

On the other hand Jesus' siblings were typical children. They made all the mistakes that children make. They were less than perfect in carrying out the tasks assigned to them. They could be careless, inconsiderate. They would not get it right the first time. They did only enough to get by. They were normal.

Jesus was exceptional and an exception to the norm. Human nature, being what it is, could easily result in the development of a

number of problems in the relationships that Jesus had with his siblings. They could have been jealous of the praise and attention he got. They could have been frustrated by the fact that he did everything better than they did. That he never got punished, because he didn't disobey, didn't fail to listen, wasn't careless and so on. They could have become angry and resentful. Imagine how James would have felt if even one person said, "why can't you be more like your brother, Jesus?"

Then they begin to grow up. Jesus, as the oldest, learns the trade of his father. Again the process is repeated. Jesus is fair, honest and does good work. When there is a job to be done the people come to Jesus. If the brothers are also working as carpenters this could also create issues. They know he is better and resent the fact that he gets the best jobs and they get the leftovers. They see people willing to pay him more than they would get for the same job. Jesus usually turns down the extra but that only adds to the frustration. If he would only accept the extra the family could use that to buy better clothes, have a better house, and so it goes.

Then comes the issue of marriage. Jesus is not interested in getting married. Now they begin to wonder if there is something wrong after all. They were always looking for a way to explain his behavior. Always trying to find some way to make themselves look better than their brother. A lack of interest in marriage might suggest there was something wrong with him mentally or in other ways. It also would cause concern for the future care of their mother and the family name. Jesus would be expected to provide for their mother as the eldest son. He was also expected to produce an heir to maintain the family name.

Then one day Jesus just takes off. He hands over the shop and the home and he leaves. He heads out to the wilderness and finds John the Baptist and is baptized. John calls him the lamb of God that will take away the sin of the world. This opens a floodgate of emotions for Jesus' brothers. They now remember all the stories surrounding their brother's birth. This further fuels their frustration.

They don't see it. They have lived with him and he is human like them. Yes he seems to behave perfectly but there is nothing God-like, Messiah-like about him. He has never been involved in political issues, just a quiet man living in Nazareth.

So the resentment has grown.

As the next eldest everything now falls on James. He is now in charge of the workshop and now must care for his mother. Jesus has abandoned them. At least that is how it appears. Even when he sees the water changed to wine he can't see what is happening; only that Jesus is more concerned about other people than caring for his own family. His anger peaks when it is time to go to Jerusalem and he basically challenges Jesus to prove who is and reveal himself to the people. If he is the messiah then he should behave like one and then they would never lack anything again. "We will be royalty, if you are who you say you are."

Can you imagine how James would feel if every time someone came to him it was with the hope of being introduced to his brother? Always the focus was on Jesus, no one was really interested in knowing James. James was an angry man and had no interest in believing in Jesus, because to admit that would mean he had ignored the truth all of his life. It would make his life, at least in his eyes, empty and meaningless. He would have to submit to his brother.

Then came the day Jesus called everyone who obeyed his words his "true family," (Mark 3:31-35). This declaration came as he, James, his mother and the other siblings were waiting for a chance to talk to Jesus. It is hard to know what was happening in the heart of James. Clearly it caused him a great deal of pain and a reason to stop and review his life.

The turning point may have come the day of the crucifixion. Jesus is on the cross. James is probably not there. So Jesus, as the oldest son, makes the decisions to turn the care of his mother over to

another person. James is supposed to be the one but he is rejected and that honor is given to another. This would cause one of two possible responses. Fury or shame. Fury at the presumption of Jesus to belittle him in such a public way. Shame and embarrassment as he realized that he had not been there to care for his mother as she watched her oldest son as he was crucified.

James is a man lost in his emotions and confusion. Because of his attitude he has alienated himself from his brother and likely from his mother. One wonders what his thoughts might have been during those three days between the crucifixion and the resurrection. Based on the records it would appear that James spent some time in deep reflection and review of his life. It is also possible that Jesus met with him to help him work through all those emotions. 1 Corinthians 15 mentions that Jesus met with James. Unfortunately it is not clear which James this was. Still it is likely that Jesus saw his brother and spoke with him.

The change in James was dramatic, from one who criticized his brother and had little respect for what his brother was doing to a central figure in the church. He, who could say nothing nice, now is the leader of the mother church and chairman of the council that will determine the future direction of the church. His insolent behavior is now one of sensitivity and concern for the impact of the gospel on the lives of others. His abusive behavior now searches for the means for people to understand each other and be able to serve together in the church. He knows exactly what it means for someone to say, "why can't you be more like ...?"

He is especially equipped to see what is happening and give direction to the church at this critical point. His words of wisdom bridge a critical gap that is growing. He sees the need to allow both groups to be allowed to do God's work as God directs them. He also wants to be sure that both groups understand and respect each other. Here we see wisdom born from experience and the cost of making the wrong choices.

God knows exactly where we have been, what we have experienced and how we have responded. He knows the value of those experiences and how they can be used to help others avoid the mistakes we have made. He also knows the value of experiences in helping others deal with what has happened in their past and how it is impacting their present.

Are we willing to deal with our past and let God use it to guide us and others in the present? Do we realize the wealth of knowledge and counsel that is contained in our past, especially when God is allowed to work in us and bring forgiveness and healing? Training involves much more than preparation. It also involves restoration and renewal.

James 1:2-5 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

James 1:19-20 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Saul/Paul

Saul - about face - Paul

Acts 8 and on and on

Saul began his life in the city of Tarsus. Born to a strict Jewish family who were also Roman citizens, he received two names, Saul reflected his Hebrew heritage and was his circumcision name. Paul reflected his status as a Roman citizen. He began his life as the child of a tentmaker and merchant. His life may have been one of privilege and opportunity. Saul was sent to the best schools and then sent off to Jerusalem to study the law under the guidance of Gamaliel, the greatest teacher of that era.

His knowledge of the Greek classics and his skill in the use of the Greek language suggests that he went to the finest school available in Tarsus. History records that there was a famous university located there. His parents were Jews but they knew the value of a good education within the Roman empire. It was a door to success and to much more. They also knew the value of a good education in relation to their business and so Saul was trained as a tentmaker.

It is likely that he also went to the local synagogue and received training in the law as did all Jewish boys.

As a strict Jew and one whose business was quite successful Saul's father probably had many contacts within the sect of the Pharisees. It is likely that he himself was a Pharisee. Along with that fact, his financial status allowed him to travel to Jerusalem for Passover. Saul's father would have heard of Gamaliel and possibly met him on one of the trips to Jerusalem. He may have used the opportunity and his status as a Pharisee to arrange for the finances and related matters that would allow his son, Saul, to become a student under the master.

Saul for his part was an intelligent lad. It is likely that he was enamored with the study of the law as a child and young person. He may have shown a clear aptitude for understanding the lessons he was taught. I say this because why else would the father spend the money needed to send his son so far away if he didn't think he had the ability to bring honor and much more to the family? There may have been the hope that when Saul finished his training he would return to Tarshish to become a Rabbi for the local synagogue; a further source of honor to the family.

It is clear that Saul was intelligent, that his family had the money to send him to Jerusalem and that he had the focus needed to succeed in becoming all that his father hoped he might be. Saul would make them proud, he would be trained as a Rabbi and be able to work in the family business.

With his future secure and the opportunity to study at the feet of Gamaliel Saul left home and came to Jerusalem and began to study under the great teacher. His days were filled with the study of Scripture, memorizing, listening, responding to questions, and hearing the wisdom of the ages. It was a heady time for such a young man. He was in the city where the temple stood that represented the center of his faith. He watched the people come and present their sacrifices. He lived and breathed the scripture.

It is hard to know if Paul was present when Jesus appeared and took control of the temple. But it is clear that at some point during that time (or after) he was present in Jerusalem. As a Pharisee he was allowed to be present in the meetings of the Sanhedrin. There he heard the reports regarding the new sect that was forming. In the temples he saw and heard the apostles as they taught and the people gathered around them to listen. He had access to the private meetings of the priests, scribes and Pharisees and their discussions regarding what the apostles were teaching. But unlike his teacher and mentor Gamaliel, who took a moderate view of what was happening, Saul became incensed at what he perceived was a violation of the law and blasphemy of the truth. As a strict Pharisee his tolerance reached the breaking point when Stephen, a man from his home region of Celicia, began his defense and attack on the people Saul respected the most.

That day the flood gates were released and Saul was freed to vent his anger against all who claimed to follow Jesus. Stephen was stoned and Saul stood there guarding the clothing of those who carried out the sentence of death. His action was the same as a vote in favor of the Sanhedrin's decision and approval of the sentence of death by stoning. An action set aside specifically for those who blasphemed against God and the law, and for those who spoke falsely in God's name.

This opened the door and Saul took advantage of the moment. He lashed out at all those he considered to be followers of Jesus. It mattered little to him if they were male or female, rich or poor, members of the priesthood or outcasts. All must be silenced, all must see the error of the teaching of the apostles, all must learn that Jesus was not the son of God but just another false prophet, a liar.

But his attack had just the opposite effect. The harder he worked at stopping the Christians from speaking and influencing others the more they spoke and even larger numbers of people responded. The harder he worked at limiting the scope of their activity the

further it spread. The more it spread the angrier he became. He became so angry that he was willing to stretch the limits of his authority and dare to travel to Damascus. Damascus was a city completely outside of the jurisdiction of Jerusalem and the Sanhedrin and their political influence. It was a bold move, one intended to strike fear into the hearts of believers. If Saul could succeed in this endeavor then there was nowhere they could run that he could not reach. No place that they could go that he could not find them. This highly educated man had become lost in his anger and lost to all hope of reason, UNTIL..

On the road to Damascus he met the very man he refused to believe could be the Messiah. And he met himself and saw what he had become. With that one encounter his entire perspective was clarified. He learned that he was not attacking people but the person they followed. He did not want to believe but now was forced to believe.

Only one thing had changed. Instead of a Messiah with no name who had not yet come. He now met the Messiah and saw all the errors in interpretation that he had made. His hate was converted into unconditional love. A simple act of healing confirmed all the information. His hate had led to blindness at several levels. Now his newfound faith gave him back his physical sight as well as a new spiritual sight.

What happened next forced Saul (now Paul) into another period of training. His decision did not bring immediate acceptance by the believers, but it did bring a quick response from his former colleagues. The pursuer became the pursued. He experienced firsthand what his anger had created. His early attempts to tell others what he had experienced were rejected by both groups, those he had pursued and those he had led. Only one person saw the truth of what had happened, Barnabas. He alone had the faith to believe God had changed the heart of their greatest enemy. But it was not enough and so Paul had to depart for his own safety and for anyone who might associate themselves with him.

So Paul headed out into the desert for a period of time, some say as long as three years. He disappeared from the story. It is hard to say what all happened during this time, but we can make a reasonable guess. Paul had spent all of his life, up to this moment, studying the law and prophets from a specific point of view. It is possible that one aspect of his difficulty in convincing others of his new found faith lay in the fact that he didn't know how to articulate it and defend it effectively.

So there was a need to get away. To study the scriptures again. To fill in the blanks and review the lessons that had been taught from one perspective and now see them from another. He needed the time to review and clarify what the vision meant and how it impacted all the teaching he had received. So off to the desert for three years. Time enough to do a thorough review.

The next step makes sense as well. After the review he returned home. He went back to where things began. Went back to his roots to see if he could communicate what he had learned and experienced with those who knew him best, his family and friends. It was a great place to test what he had learned and how it would be accepted by others. It was likely that he was successful to some extent. Twice family members are mentioned. Once in Acts, when his sister's son helped rescue him from being assassinated (Acts 23:16). The other is a reference in Romans 16 where he mentions relatives and other believers who have been in prison with him.

These years of review and sharing became the basis for his ministry. When Paul reappeared on the scene it was because Barnabas had not forgotten Paul and seemed to be aware that in Paul God had prepared a teacher. A teacher who would be uniquely used by God. So Paul accepted Barnabas' invitation to go to Antioch. Together they taught and God used them to prepare the church for the next phase of the mission. The rest is history.

Paul's heritage; Paul's training; Paul's passion; they became the foundation that God used to prepare Paul for the ministry, for the

mission God had waiting for him. Paul's ardent anger became ardent love. Paul's extensive training became letter after letter of insightful teaching for the church. Paul's history as Jew, Pharisee, and Roman citizen, became the basis for opening doors to everyone he met. The enemy becomes the greatest, most deeply committed follower the world has ever seen.

God knows exactly what is happening in our lives. He knows exactly how those experiences, those events, those relationships will be useful in reaching specific people and groups with the gospel, with the message of his love and his forgiveness. There is nothing in our life, our past, present or future that God cannot use to build a bridge to others. If we let him. If we allow ourselves to encounter the risen Lord. If we let ourselves be blinded to who we are so that we can see who he is.

What is blinding you from God and all that he can do in your life? What are you angry with God about and will you let God confront you about your anger so that you can see his love? What have you learned in your life: Do you believe that God can use who you are and what you have experienced to help you reach others?

God's training is to be found in all of life. Will you give him access to all of your life?

The encourager - Barnabas et al

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So often God sends someone to provide encouragement and support at key times to those who are called to serve. These people fill various roles in each situation. But the key thing they do is provide support and encouragement. This encouragement can take many forms. They may be used to motivate a person, helping them to him a key decision. They may act as a witness of God's presence and activity, confirming to others that God has spoken to the one called to service. They make act as a spokesperson, representing and speaking on behalf of those called to ministry. They may be a goad used to

spur another person on. They may also act as a go-between to help others accept the one God has called.

What is interesting, as well, is the variety of settings and types of people used by God to encourage and support those called to serve. They often are in the background serving quietly. They are included in the story but usually in a secondary way. They don't seek to influence nor upstage the one they have been called to serve and encourage. They represent the truly humble who are there because they desire to see God's name honored and glorified.

Here are some examples of such people.

Aaron - He became Moses' spokesperson proclaiming to all the words that God was giving to Moses. He also filled the role of confidant and coworker.

Purah - He was a servant of Gideon's father. He became a witness to others of the vision that Gideon heard in the

enemy's camp. He was also present at other times in the call of Gideon. He could testify to others about what God called Gideon to do.

Lappidoth - He was the husband of Deborah. Without his support and encouragement his wife might never have been allowed to serve as a judge. Husbands had a great deal of power over what their wives could and could not do outside of the home. It is very likely that his support and encouragement were critical for her to gain a hearing among the people.

Naomi - While we might not think of Naomi in this role she did have a profound influence on Ruth. Because of her faith, Ruth chose to follow Jehovah. Because of her advice Ruth made the correct decisions. Naomi's words helped Ruth understand what she needed to do and how to respond to the events that resulted from her decisions.

Eli - He was Samuel's mentor and teacher during Samuel's childhood. He encouraged Samuel to speak God's message clearly and without fear. He accepted and supported the words that Samuel spoke, treating him with the respect due to one whom God has spoken through.

Jonathan - His love for David likely filled a critical need in David's life. His willingness to renounce the throne to the one chosen by God saved David's life on several occasions. In those times of deep struggle and loneliness David had the love of his friend Jonathan to lean on and help him continue on. The value of this relationship can be seen in David's care for Mephiboseth the only surviving offspring of his friend.

Elisha - He was both student and successor to Elijah. He was arked by God to serve and encourage Elijah after Elijah returned from his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai.

Elisha refused to leave the side of his mentor and was always there to support and encourage.

School of prophets - Many of the stories surrounding the life of Elisha involve a group of men who have gathered around the prophet to be taught and to be available to serve. They are there to care for the needs of the prophet. They work to provide housing and gather food for his care. They are present to receive his words and communicate them to others.

Barak - He was the encourager and voice for Jeremiah. He accepted the risks involved in being the friend of the prophet when Jeremiah was designated persona non grata by the king and court. He fearlessly read the words of Jeremiah to the people. He faithfully wrote down the words and even went to prison with his friend. He stayed at the side of Jeremiah to the end to lift and encourage him.

Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego - These three were the friends and compatriots of Daniel. They joined Daniel in his decision to only eat food approved by Jewish law. They likely stood by Daniel when he made other difficult decisions. What a blessing it would be to have such a group of friends who understood your thinking and reasoning and could support you when you had to stand before the king.

Mordecai - He challenged Esther to not hide or run away from her responsibility to her people. He was actively involved in raising her and in watching over her. He maintained his contact with her even after she became queen and did so in such a way that did not cause others to misunderstand his interest in the queen.

Andrew - While Andrew is listed as one of the disciples what is interesting is the role he played in helping his brother Peter make the decision to follow the Lord. It is

Andrew that goes and tells Peter that he has found the Messiah. He paves the way for his brother to meet Jesus.

James and John - Two brothers. They seem to be together all of the time when we first meet them. They are followers of John the Baptist, they are fishermen, they are called the Sons of Thunder. Dare we consider the possibility that they encouraged each other in their decisions and actions? It is a common thing to see two brothers challenging each other, helping each other and encouraging each other when making critical decisions about their lives and career choices.

If we think about it, it is likely that everyone that has been included in this study on training had someone; a parent, a sibling, a friend or another person who was used by God to help them at various points in the process of becoming one of God's servants. They may have helped in preparing them to see and understand that God was calling them. They may have helped them understand what God was asking. They likely were there to encourage them in difficult times. Often they became the interpreters, repeating what God has said, explaining to others what God was doing, even challenging others to pay attention to what God was saying through that person.

There is one person who is often highlighted when we talk about the work of encouragement. His name is Barnabas. He is a Levite whose name was originally Joses but he is renamed Barnabas, Son of Encouragement. The first time he is mentioned we learn that he is from Cyprus and that he sells a field and gives all of the money to the apostles. We are not told when or why he has come to Jerusalem. But it is clear that he is committed to the young church and is concerned about the needs of others.

The second time we see Barnabas is when he brings the newly converted Saul to the apostles. They doubted the truth of Saul's conversion until Barnabas encourages them to accept him. He tells

them the story of Saul's conversion. Again there is little information about how Barnabas came to know Saul and what convinced him of the truth of the conversion. Some traditions suggest that both of them had come to Jerusalem to study. This meant that they had met each other before and, according to some, has been in Gamaliel's school together. However they met it is clear that Barnabas has the courage to take the risks involved and is focused on encouraging the apostles and Saul to accept and trust each other.

This confidence is further expanded when Barnabas seeks out Saul, now Paul, to come and help with the work in Antioch. Barnabas was sent to Antioch to encourage the church and look after its growth. He sees the extent of the work and asks Paul to help. Then both of them are selected to form the first missionary expedition. During that trip Barnabas yields the leadership to Paul, another act of encouragement.

It is the issue of encouragement that brings about the separation of the two on the next journey. Barnabas wants to take John Mark, who had failed them the first time, on this journey. Paul refuses and they part ways. The testimony to Barnabas' ability to encourage and draw out the best in others is noted in the fact that later Paul asks them to send John Mark to him, for he is useful. Barnabas has helped the one who failed to recover and be reestablished in the ministry.

Barnabas is also a critical part of the team that travels to Jerusalem to discuss the future of the ministry to the Gentiles. The report he and Paul bring, along with Peter's reminder of past events, are the encouragement the council needs to make its decision and smooth the way for the entry of the Gentiles into the church.

Whatever his past was, it is clear that Barnabas has learned the value of encouragement. It is very likely that he had a good example during his childhood. It is also clear that he has taken seriously the words of Jesus to love one another as they have been

loved by God. Because of his background and his habit of seeing the possibility that exists in others Barnabas was available at critical times in the life of the church and key individuals to encourage them and so make a difference.

We need to remember what it feels like to be encouraged. Also what it feels like when there is no encouragement. It is always easier to do the work when there is someone to encourage us. It is always easier to be accepted by others when there is someone to speak on our behalf. It is always easier to serve when we know there is someone who is always ready to give us a word of encouragement.

We may not be the key person God needs to carry out a specific task, but we may be the one God wants to use to encourage those who are called. We may not be the one who leads the way but we can all be those who help others follow and put their trust in those God has called.

There will always be a need for more 'sons of encouragement.' Will we allow God to use us to encourage someone today? Will we allow God access into our lives and resources so that they will be available for His use in moving the church forward, or to lift and carry the church during difficult times. Will we allow God to use us to bridge the gaps and overcome the barriers that exist, so that a new level of trust and relationship can be reached? Will we be a Barnabas to those we meet, to those who are serving, to those called by God to give their lives?

Timothy

Timothy - always growing

It is believed that Timothy, along with his mother and grandmother, became a Christian during Paul's first missionary journey. We know for certain that his mother was a Jew. We also know that his father was Greek, but by the time of his conversion his father appears to have left them or has died. The fact that Timothy was not circumcised until Paul required it tells us that the father was not a believer. With the departure of the father, his mother and grandmother made sure he was well instructed in the word of God.

By the time Paul returns to the area Timothy is an active leader in the local church. The fact that the local church leaders recommend him to Paul indicates that he has been diligent in the study of the Word and is a capable teacher and leader. Timothy has had to overcome a significant barrier to receive their approval. Why? Because he is the child of a mixed marriage. A marriage prohibited by the Jewish law. By law he is considered an outcast to most Jews. But the Jews also had a saying that anyone who was a wise student of the law was better, in theory, than an ignorant high priest (Lightfoot). It is clear that Timothy has overcome this barrier by the fact that this same group, which was probably a mix of Jews and Gentiles, willingly laid hands on him, ordaining him as an evangelist.

Timothy became the faithful companion of Paul and is with him through most of his travels. He is frequently given special assignments by Paul. He is left behind in Berea to help establish the people in the word of God. He is sent to Philippi by Paul to encourage the church. He is sent to Corinth to deliver Paul's letter and help the church correct various errors in preparation for Paul's visit.

From the letters and comments of Paul, we can learn a number of things about Timothy. He is somewhat timid in his approach to others, especially when there is a need to discipline and correct those he is called to lead. He has a tendency to be fearful and sensitive about his age. This results in a certain amount of hesitation in his ability to teach and lead. Also, he can become so focused on the needs of others he forgets to care for his own health.

Through all of this we see one other important factor that is critical to Timothy overcoming all of these limitations. According to tradition, he is appointed by Paul to oversee the work at Ephesus as his representative and is eventually selected as the first bishop of that city.

What makes this possible is a key focus on mentoring and accountability. The focus of the letters of Paul to Timothy are just this, the mentor speaking to his pupil and coworker. Their conversations focus on many areas, areas of personal growth, personal holiness, personal relationship and areas of ministry and responsibility. These letters are probably the clearest example of the processes involved in mentoring, accountability and ongoing development in the Bible.

They are by no means the first such examples. There are many examples of such events. Jethro advised Moses in key areas of administration and maintaining a balance in one's life between personal needs and the needs of others. Samuel, on several occasions, meets with Saul to try and guide him. In this case the

student (Saul) is reluctant to listen and the results are disastrous both to Saul and the people.

Paul submitted himself to the review of others on several occasions. He met with the apostles early on to be sure he and they were in agreement regarding the ministry he was being called to and regarding the content of the message. He reported to the council of Jerusalem regarding the results of this work and to further clarify the direction it was going. We are also told that he had a private meeting with James at one point, perhaps for mentoring purposes.

No one is exempt from the process of mentoring, accountability and ongoing training. Paul corrected Peter when he began to alter his behavior and began to show partiality for one group (Jews) over another (Gentiles). When the leaders of the early church queries Peter about his visit to Cornelius he was required to correct their attitude and teach them what God had taught him. In reality most of the Biblical letters focus on mentoring, maintaining accountability and encouraging the process of continuing education in ministry and service.

A key focus of the second letter to Timothy is to maintain this process. Timothy is told by Paul (2:2) that he is to select others to train who will have the skills to teach others what they have learned. He is to follow the example given to him by Paul and be sure that they understand their responsibilities and the fact that they are accountable to the church for all they have learned.

Paul repeatedly talks about the need to continue growing, and learning. He states that he has not arrived yet. Paul frequently uses the word "example" when talking to others. He tells them to follow his example and to be an example. This means we are to allow others to evaluate who we are and what we are doing, not with the purpose of criticizing and ridiculing but to become the best example we can be and help others to do the same.

Paul uses many examples in the letters to Timothy. He talks about "fighting the good fight," "holding on to faith," phrases that imply an ongoing process of review and evaluation. Timothy is told to watch his life and doctrine closely. Paul further challenges Timothy to guard what he has received. What is interesting is that he challenges Timothy to be a good soldier, a competent athlete, and a hardworking farmer. Each one of these faces a regular process of training, evaluation and challenges to be responsible. Timothy is commanded to remind others of what they have learned, even as Paul is reminding him of all he has been taught.

In all of this we see a key concern of Paul's. He wants to finish the race as strongly as he began the race and he wants Timothy to be able to do the same. This is not possible without the help, admonition and encouragement of others. Paul's letters in many ways are written with this in mind. Here is what I teach, here is what I believe. It has been approved, tested and I have accepted the responsibility given to me to remain faithful through all of life to proclaim it to others. You observed my life, you saw my heart, you were those who confirmed my work and helped me become all that God intended.

The training process never ends. We must always be ready to give the reason for our actions, our words and our hope. Our word and deeds must be in agreement with our faith so that all, believers and unbelievers, can evaluate and know the truth found in our lives. We are called to be faithful to the end. For this to happen everyone one of us needs others who have access to our lives and the right to evaluate, advise, correct, admonish and teach us.

God prepares us by many avenues for the work he calls us to. But even more important is the promise to be with us and to continue the process of teaching, preparing and strengthening us. This was the promise of Jesus to the disciples. He said he would send the comforter and he will instruct you in everything. He will guide you in all truth. This is a lifelong process.

Everyone of us, no matter what task God has given us, needs to be in a relationship that allows us to be taught, held accountable, and guided us in carrying out the responsibilities given to us. The fact that Timothy had been trained and approved at one level did not mean there was nothing more to learn and that he did not need others to observe and guide him. Paul knew this and did everything he could to be sure Timothy had the encouragement, teaching and supervision he needed to continue growing so that he would be able to carry out the work he was given and have the needed skills to train the next generation of leaders.

Consider today what is happening in your life. Are you seeking out others who can be your mentor, your coach? Are you open to them correcting, evaluating and reviewing your life? Are you ready for what God wants to teach you about yourself and what you need to do to grow in your relationship with him and with others? What will you need to do to make it happen?

The name "Stephen" is written in a large, stylized, cursive font. The letters are filled with a gradient of colors, transitioning from yellow at the top to orange in the middle, and then to red at the bottom. The text has a 3D effect with a dark red shadow or outline around each letter.

Stephen - the lightning rod

Stephen, like many who are mentioned in Acts and the letters simply appears. Their past appears to have no value. It is who they are now because of their relationship to their savior that is what defines them and gives direction to the events they follow. Mostly what we know is their name, where they are and brief comments about their service in the church. Sometimes even less. But what is

clear is they have made a definite decision to leave the past behind to follow Jesus and that they are people of value in the work of the church.

Based on his name and the name of the synagogue he was part of (synagogue of the freedmen) we know that he was a Greek speaking Hellenist Jew. Like many from these communities spread around the Roman Empire he came to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the great Jewish festivals. In this case it was the festival that took place 50 days after Passover. He as well as a great number of others were there to hear the sermon of Peter. He was one of those that came forward, repented and were baptized.

Over the next week, months or however long is involved grows in the depth of his faith. He becomes an example to all. He was clearly seen as one deeply committed to his new faith and was chosen as one of the seven deacons who were to care for the needs of the widows and administer the funds that were received.

He was one of only 2 or 3 outside of the apostles who are mentioned as performing signs and wonders. But that was not his greatest area of strength. Yes, he was seen as a servant and one who cared about all those around him. True he was a man of great faith, so much so that he was able to perform signs and wonders. Even more important was his ability to articulate his faith. He became the first apologist and saw far beyond those around him. He saw the true direction of the gospel.

All of the reviewers point to the fact that the true focus of his preaching was that the message was much more than a renovation of the current religious structure, much more than a reformation of the current traditional system. It was to be a complete change. The temple would no longer be critical to worship. The law would not be the determining factor in defining one's relationship to God. They would not be eliminated but they would need to take on new roles in the new restructuring.

What made his opponents so frustrated is that his logic was so solid, his arguments so well formed that they could not resist his arguments. They could not escape the truth of what he said and they could not find a weakness to attack. This created a frustration that developed into anger which opened the door to using whatever means available. Even if it meant bribing people to testify falsely against Stephen. Even if it meant murdering an innocent man.

Finally they had him before the Sanhedrin and they thought they were in position to destroy their enemy. Stephen stands before them. The record says his appearance was that of an angel. He was not afraid, not dismayed. He was much like the lightning rod. It is calm, unperturbed by the storm that rages around it. It absorbs the bolts that strike it and continues on in peace and calmness. It does not matter how big or little the bolt is, the lightning rod attracts them all. Absorbs all the energy directed at it and remains unchanged.

Stephen has absorbed all of their attacks. He is ready for what comes. He faces the lies. He states once again the truth. When they refuse to listen he states the truth about their attitude. When the stones began to fly he is unaffected. His gaze was steadfast. It locked on them one and all, including Saul, especially Saul. A look that could not be avoided, one that could not be escaped. Then the words that absorbed all the power of their hate and reduced it to impotency. "Forgive them."

They had done their worst and it had failed to silence him. In fact their actions had completely the opposite effect. Instead of slowing the growth of the church, or driving them into silence out of fear of the persecution that arose. Their action causes the sudden expansion of the gospel. Now the people scatter to the surrounding area of Judea and in the person of Philip into Samaria.

Stephen's message has born fruit. He proclaimed the future of the gospel and by his life and more importantly his death brought the church to the next level of ministry. His fearless defense of the

faith gave the church the courage it needed to take the next step of carrying the gospel to all the nations.

Let me explain by using an example. When we were living in Sierra Leone we would have lightning storms on a regular basis. During one of these storms we learned that a friend of ours was sleeping in his house when a bolt hit the building. It knocked him out of his bed. Thankfully he survived. We lived on the edge of town and had a metal roof on our house. This meant it was a natural magnet for lightning. But on our roof we had several lightning rods which were properly grounded. In all of our six years we never experience an event like our friend.

People, by nature, are afraid of lightning, are afraid of death and suffering. But when we know what to do to reduce the risk then we know what to do to eliminate or negate that fear. Persecution was a real issue for those who chose to follow Jesus. The apostles had been put in jail, beaten, and threatened and survived. That may have not been enough. They were, of course, the inner circle of the Lord's followers. The people could easily have believed they were in a special category and being given special strength and resources.

But with Stephen that would all change. Stephen was a new believer like them. He was not one of the inner circle who had followed Jesus before the Crucifixion and resurrection. He was part of the new generation of followers. He revealed that God was not selective in giving his blessing and strength. Stephen stood before them all and stood strong. He not only defied the enemy and absorbed the worst they could produce. He stood before the entire church and revealed the power that God had for them. He revealed that weakness of the power of death and Satan, he revealed the incredible presence of God that was available to all. It was not just for the apostles, it was for all who walked in faith and were forgiven.

If Stephen could face the lightning, absorb the worst they could produce, forgive those who hated him and see God on the throne then nothing was impossible for anyone in the new kingdom of God. And that is just what happened. The persecution began and they not only absorbed the fury but took the gospel on the road. They took the peace and love of God to those who were part of the commonwealth of Judaism and then took it to the forsaken, abandoned, rejected brothers, the outcasts were welcome. They too could know peace and do more than survive.

The outsider became one of the inner group. The greek hellenists were Jews but somehow inferior to the Jews of Palestine. Yet he found a place among the apostles. His own group sought to prove his new faith to be flawed and they could not. Even Saul, the student of the Gamaliel had nothing to say. He chose to agree, to let the lightning strike. No matter that the trial was a lie. This too failed as Stephen looked at him and spoke forgiveness. It was an image that would haunt Paul and maybe the standard Paul himself would use to guide his life and ministry.

Lightning strikes and the rod remains. In truth the gospel is the lightning rod. Stephen is the mount that holds it. The gospel can absorb the worst the world can bring and remains constant. God's love and forgiveness remains constant unchanged. God is seeking people who will allow him to use to carry the gospel into the firestorm. People who will enter the storm that is the world and bring God's calm and peace to end their struggle and torment.

Do you know the gospel well enough to have the confidence of Stephen to speak the truth, absorb the storm that will come, showing God's love and forgiveness to them?

Appendix

Solomon

Solomon - the problem with having it all

Solomon is considered the epitome of wisdom and wealth. When we want a standard, he is the standard. People came from everywhere to hear him and to see his wealth. But by the time he reaches the end of his life something has gone seriously wrong. So wrong that his son Rehoboam makes a foolish decision, thinking that he can do what he wants and get away with it.

This fact makes me hesitant to include him in the list. Solomon has been given much but squanders it all. He fails to teach his son some basic wisdom and analysis, and just like that, it is all gone; the wealth, the fame, the control. Rehoboam is left with a remnant and in short order is attacked and the treasury is emptied by the king of Egypt. The golden shields of the temple, a symbol of the power and wealth of the king, are replaced with bronze ones.

How does one who started with so much of everything end up as the butt of the joke?

To understand this we need to review the early life of Solomon. First as a child of the king and potential heir, and then as one who benefits from the foresight of a wise father.

Child/Heir

Solomon's mother was an adulteress. That was not as much her fault as it was a result of King David's lust for her. Their first child died because of this sin and that David arranged for the death of her husband (murdered by fiat). Solomon is the child of the marriage that followed. It will be hard to understand what affect this background may have had on Solomon as he grew up in the house of the king; a house filled with intrigue and in fighting among the children of the king.

Absalom seeks to supplant his father by treachery and arranges for the death of many of the king's offspring. Solomon survives this. Then his position as heir to the throne is then threatened by another older brother, Adonijah. He convinces some of the advisors to join him in his bid for the throne. They organize a reception with the intent of putting him on the throne. Except for the quick action of Bathsheba, the high priest, and the prophet Nathan he would have succeeded and Solomon would not have been king.

Benefactor

While Solomon is considered a wise man, this wisdom was not inherent in him but the result of one very smart choice on his part. He realized that he was not smart enough to administer the kingdom or to be effective as king. His great wisdom came from God and not from him. Why did he make this choice and not ask for the riches, wealth, and fame that so many others would have sought?

Actually most people didn't realize what Solomon was about to inherit.

His father David was an incredible administrator. He set into motion most of the structures and plans that were the basis of Solomon's wealth, power and administration. A significant portion of the two books of Chronicles record all that David put into place before his son actually was crowned king.

1. David amassed an incredible amount of wealth in the form of gold, silver, bronze, iron and precious stones.
2. While he was not permitted to build the temple David had all the plans drawn up and ready for the construction of the temple. He also had begun the process of quarrying the stone needed for the temple and had accumulated a great store of materials that would be needed for its construction.
3. David organized the army with a complete leadership structure. Each divisions was assigned is a specific length of service.
4. David established the guidelines for the administration of the government and appointed its first officials.
5. David organized all aspects of the work surrounding the temple. He dealt with everything, from who would stand guard at its doors, supervise the offerings, organize the worship and music and much more.

When it was time for Solomon to be crowned his father had set everything in motion for the construction of the temple and for the administration of the country. No wonder Solomon asked for wisdom. He needed it. It would be the wisest act he ever performed.

But all of what his father did may have become the basis for what happened later. Solomon had little to worry about, because of all his father had put into place. This could have made Solomon lazy in some key areas. Solomon did not have to create the structures he merely had to administer them or at least be sure he chose the right people to do so. Solomon did not have to build more fortifications. His father had already secured the peace. All he had to do was expand on them. Actually, what Solomon did was more about being impressive than about being necessary.

Solomon didn't have to decide how to build the temple. His father had taken care of that. The plans were drawn the structures were in place. All Solomon had to do was make sure those in place were free to do the work. He did conscript the non-Jews as part of the workforce needed to accomplish the work. The key people were already in place. He did arrange with Hiram to obtain the lumber that was needed to finish the work. But in many ways that action was based on the relationship that had been developed by his father.

There is one other factor that could have caused him to become careless about maintaining his relationship to God and a focus on right living. The promise given to David about the future of his family. God promised David that there would always be a descendant of his on the throne. With such a promise one could depend on the promise for the future and not worry about the condition of their relationship to God in the present. This mistake may have been more damaging than any of the other possible sources of carelessness.

None of this reduces the incredible nature of what happened during the reign of Solomon. He made the right choice and was given wisdom. The wisdom he received allowed him to wisely use what his father had started as the basis of his rule. As a result he had the time needed to pursue the study of wisdom and much more.

The problem in all this was the potential development of complacency. Everything was working so smoothly. So much so that he began to pay less and less attention to his responsibility to the people he was to rule and his role as the highest example of one who faithfully serves God.

Then there was the problem of the promise. David receives the promise that there would always be one of his descendants on the throne. In those early years Solomon is keenly aware that this promise was based on his father's relationship to God. But over time this could have shifted. The challenge originally was to

maintain a close walk with God to continue to receive the blessing. The shift could have been very subtle, forgetting to carry out a simple duty and then another. With each event and no one to query the error the door opens for greater errors and indiscretion.

Then there was the increased wealth and attention of the leaders of other countries. Everyone wants to be his friend and part of that involves creating treaties. However, in those days, a key way to seal a treaty was to give a daughter in marriage to the king of that country. They are not under the same bans as Solomon. They are not required to worship the God of Israel. Instead they bring their gods and patterns of worship with them. This is allowed because of the treaty and the careless thinking that comes with such agreements. There was no need for treaties and no need for the addition of more wives.

This process continues and the scripture records that it is Solomon's many wives that turn his heart from the path of Wisdom, not the world of philosophy. If we accept that most of the proverbs and Ecclesiastes are written by Solomon, it is clear that he is a wise man in the knowledge of the world and of human relationships. The path that he loses sight of is the wisdom that comes from walking close to God. Ecclesiastes reveals the reality of this situation. Solomon wanders far from this path, seeking wisdom and insight in the world only to find himself frustrated, pursuing what cannot be caught, trying to change what cannot be changed. In the end, he is forced to return back to the source of truth. All the rest is vanity, empty. It is the fear of God and pursuing a relationship with God that matters.

Unfortunately his recovery does not come in time and he fails. Unlike his father David, he fails to see what is needed in the future to keep the country on the right track. He fails to teach his son enough about God, his expectations as the king and what God can do to help him make wise choices. Rehoboam does not come before God when it is time to make a critical decision. He doesn't listen to those who have walked the path and known God. Instead

he places his confidence in his friends and their belief that they deserve the right to live at the top of the heap, that everyone else exists to make their life one of ease and pleasure, that it is their inalienable right to live in comfort no matter what it costs others or how much suffering it may cause.

We could continue this discussion but it is unnecessary. It is clear that in the end Solomon's wisdom has failed in two critical areas. He has failed to see the wisdom of maintaining his relationship with God and protecting himself from outside influence. And he has failed to teach his son the true responsibility and position of a king, as God's representative, who serves the people.

We can learn much from Solomon, and much more from his mistakes. We need to teach our children that the promise of God is not something a person inherits. It is each person's responsibility to develop a personal relationship with God. That is the true basis for the fulfillment of all the promises given to our forefathers. We can learn the danger of becoming too involved in the life and ways of the world around us. In the end they will draw us away from God and we will lose the presence of God and all the blessings that come when one is truly close to God and nothing is allowed to interfere or intervene. We can learn that real wisdom is not found in the scope of our knowledge and depth of our perception but in our dependence on God, because we know our limitations.

Solomon had a lot of preparation and training. Yet he lost sight of what he had. His life is a warning to us all to make sure we keep our eyes clearly focused on God. God is working to prepare each of us for service. But we can misuse that preparation if we lose sight of the source of who we are, what we have and what God has prepared for each one who is faithful and obedient.

REVIEWS

God has focused on training people to serve him throughout the history of man's existence. We have records of the lives of those God used in a special way to carry out key tasks as part of his mission to redeem man from sin.

In all of these cases, God took time to prepare the person and deal with key issues and flaws in their personality or character. These stories help us understand the issues that we face in training people today to become involved and carry out that mission in our generation. The stories also help us understand some of the excuses we use to explain why we are not involved, and what we need to do to correct our attitudes.

To begin with, let us look at a list of people and briefly examine their lives, the issue they faced, and how they relate to us. Let us be careful not to become overwhelmed by the list and issues presented. Remember in each and every case God provided what was necessary to overcome the barriers that were faced and empowered that person to carry out the task assigned.

Adam – While he had no specific task assigned to him by God, we can assume that as the one person who actually walked in the garden with God, he was expected to help other generations understand who they were and lead them to God. It is reported that, after many generations, people finally began to call on the name of the Lord. It is clear that Adam did not hide from his responsibility.

Potential issue – Adam could have gone into hiding. He could have focused on his past failure of opening the door to sin and bringing death into the world. He could have become absorbed in self-condemnation. Instead he maintained his relationship with God and obviously let others know what had happened and what they needed to do.

Query – How many of us would prefer to hide from our responsibility?

Noah – During Noah's day, the testimony of Adam had faded into the distance. Those who knew Adam were dying and life was becoming difficult. People were no longer seeking God. When God came to Noah there was little hope for the world and only his commitment to God made the salvation of his wife and family possible. In the midst of this, God called him to build an ark and to warn the people.

Potential issue – Noah could have easily looked at the situation and said to God "no one will listen," especially since he had been asked to build an ark, and to build it far from any water. But Noah overcame this: he built the ark and preached the message for 100 years. In the end only his family listened. What if he had not obeyed and no one had survived?

Query – How often do we look at the task and give up because it seems bigger than what we can do?

Abraham – God called him to leave his family and go to a foreign land. He was promised great wealth and a large family. He also received a promise of a permanent place to live. So Abraham left his home and family. He risked everything in order to obey God's word and bring God's blessing to the world.

Potential Issue - Abraham's life was comfortable and going well. He was known and respected. God asked him to give all of this up for the unknown. He was probably already aware that his wife was barren and would not produce an heir. Leaving his extended family would not be an easy task. There was a very real fear that there would be no one to care for him and Sarah in their old age, no children, no family to share life with. He could easily have been too afraid of the isolation and separation to leave.

Query – How many of us, out a fear of being alone and isolated from those we love, refuse to go where God sends us?

Jacob – Jacob was a cheat and a liar, always looking for the easy way. In the end this costs him dearly. He didn't like having to pay the price for what he wanted. He was always looking for a way to move to the front of the line. It is interesting to note how many times in his life he had to spend extra time to earn what he desired, pay more than intended, and have to place everything at risk to receive what he was seeking. This theme was repeated in the lives of his son and the blessing fell, not to the firstborn, but to others of his sons. His final blessing of Joseph's boys reflected the lessons learned.

Potential issue – Jacob lived his life by using shortcuts, always trying to obtain what he wanted by any means possible. He bought a birthright, stole a blessing, and paid dearly for those actions. He received the same treatment from others. Learning how to earn the right and pay full price were not easy lessons for Jacob to learn. It affected his marriage and the lives of his children. Others suffered because of his actions.

Query – How often do we try to cut to the front, avoid doing the work needed, and falsify information so that we don't have to do all the work that is necessary to be properly prepared for what we will be asked to do? Do we threaten to quit if we don't get our way?

Joseph - He was not popular with his brothers. He was his father's favorite. This combination created a highly combustible situation. His brothers were angry enough to do the unthinkable and they almost killed their brother. Fortunately one of them kept his head clear. Still it didn't stop them from selling Joseph into slavery and lying to their father, telling him that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. After this event Joseph's attitude is markedly different. He became the humble slave until falsely accused. Then he was the diligent prisoner caring for others,

forgotten until God orchestrated events to place him in a position where he could save his family from the famine. He eventually landed on top and on his feet and had learned key lessons in order to be a wise administrator.

Potential Issue - Joseph was given preferential treatment by his father. It appears that he used this situation to rule over his brothers, report their indiscretions, and make himself a nuisance. When he was chosen to receive visions that suggested they would have to submit to him, even bow down to him, life for the brothers became unbearable. Joseph's behavior and attitude did not help the situation. Even his father began to question the truth of the vision or if it was just another ploy to gain more control and special treatment. This resulted in the brother's plotting to get rid of their brother, which almost succeeded. It took drastic measures for Joseph to learn humility and become a tool useful to God.

Query - What does it take for a person to learn to be humble? Why is pride such a difficult barrier to overcome? What are we doing in our lives that prevents us from being able to serve effectively?

Moses – He spent his early years in the palace of Pharaoh. He had everything he wanted and more. He was given the best training and learned how to organize and run a nation. Then he forgot everything he had learned and killed a man. He thought he was saving another. He thought. Well it is not clear what he thought. In his exile Moses received another level of training. He learned what the books and classes could not teach. He learned to be a leader.

Potential issue – When God met Moses and talked to him in the burning bush Moses chose to refuse God's call to lead. He made excuses based on past failure. He said "I can't do it." He lamely said that he didn't know how to speak. This was partially true since he resorted to violence instead of using his knowledge and training to verbally resolve what had happened. As one reads through the Pentateuch it becomes clear that along the way this

inability was overcome and Moses became an effective communicator and leader.

Query – how often do we use excuses about our lack of ability, our weaknesses, or our fears as a means of avoiding doing what God asks us to do?

Joshua – Joshua spent his life in the shadow of a great leader. His activities and decisions were directed by Moses. He had watched Moses deal with the failures of others and had many opportunities to observe how Moses depended on God for direction and guidance. But Moses' time as leader was coming to an end. Joshua learned from Moses that God had selected him to be the next leader for the people of Israel. Quickly he would be put to the test - crossing the flooded Jordan, destroying Jericho and then facing the failure of Ai. In the end Joshua became a great leader and was highly respected by the people.

Potential issue – When there is a transition it is easy for the newly appointed leader to lose his way. This can be especially true if the new leader, like Joshua, was the assistant of the former. They are used to being told what to do, and now, without that support they can have great difficulty in moving forward. They have always been the helper and are lost when the responsibility of making decisions and leading falls to them. God took special time to encourage Joshua in the days of transition. He gave Joshua special challenges that would build his confidence and the confidence of the people toward Joshua.

Query – How often do we fail to move forward because we are waiting for others to lead or are afraid to take the lead ourselves? Do we think of ourselves as just a helper?

Gideon – Gideon lived during a time of fear and frustration. Nothing was going right and it appeared that God no longer cared. Everyone was hoping that God would send another great leader, another judge to save them and help them defeat their enemies.

Gideon was not expecting to be chosen and had little confidence in God's decision. Over and over he asked God for one more proof, one more evidence, that God was in control and that he would succeed. In many ways, the victory was won in spite of Gideon. Though in the end, Gideon did obey and the people were freed from the oppression of their enemy.

Potential issue – in life there is the danger of never having enough. Never enough answers to prayer. Never enough proof that it is God directing us. Never enough faith to move forward and do what God wants us to do. Even when we read the Bible and know that God is speaking sometimes it is not enough and we seek special signs like Gideon did. We want a special revelation to do even the simplest things that God has commanded. This then prevents us from hearing God when he has a special work for us or needs us to respond in a special way so that others will hear the truth of God.

Query – How often do we hinder God from working because we want more proof, more information before we do anything?

Samson – Samson was marked from birth to serve God in a special way. His parents were to pay close attention to his training and preparation. Samson needed to understand that God was going to use his life in accordance with God's directions. Yet most of Samson's life was about doing what he wanted to do. God used him, often in spite of Samson's failures, to follow the guidelines that had been established for him. Eventually this resulted in humiliation and suffering for Samson, until the day that he began to understand what he had given up to live life his way.

Potential issue – In life we will be asked to make many decisions between what we think we want and what God wants. We will have to choose between having what everyone else has, living like everyone else, doing what we want, or serving God. What is often misunderstood in this process is that there is nothing

that can adequately replace what we lose when we fail to follow God's directions and live according to His guidelines for us. Many people do like Samson did and chose the joys and the pleasures of this world. They are a poor substitute for the joy waiting for us when we fully commit ourselves to serving God.

Query – How often do we give up God's best for us to hold on to something we don't want to let go of?

Ruth - Ruth worshipped the gods of Moab until she met a Jew and married him. She learned to love Jehovah and willingly sacrificed her family to stay with Naomi and relocate to the land of the Jews. She had learned through observation the reality of the true God and her faith led her on a journey that placed her in the line of the Messiah.

Potential Issue - Many times a desire to serve God will result in conflict with our family and our culture. It will require us to make unpopular decisions, unpopular at least to those who follow a lifestyle and belief system that we are rejecting.

Query - How much are we willing to risk in order to gain what has eternal value? Do we understand that unless we take that risk we may make it more difficult for those who feel we are rejecting them to find God? Do we realize what we are risking when we attempt to hang on to the past and still follow God?

Deborah - Deborah lived in an era where women had little if any rights. Even though many of the laws and ordinances given to Moses opened the door to a new level of respect and opportunity, it was not easy for a woman to assume any kind of leadership role. When you read through the Bible you will quickly note how few were allowed such positions. Deborah was called by God to a position of authority and respect. To reach that place meant dealing with a lot of cultural bias and probably rejection in the initial phases. She overcame these and was instrumental in leading the people back to God and in victory over the enemy.

Potential Issue - Each of us may face opposition from our culture and others. There may be few who understand what God is calling us to do and even fewer who will take the risk to encourage and support us. This is especially true when those around us see little, if any, value in serving God.

Query - Are we ready to move forward and deal with the opposition? Are we ready to work in such a way that wins over those who oppose us and God's call on us? Are we willing to keep trying until the day God proves the truth to all of what He called us to do?

Samuel – Samuel was dedicated to God even before he was born. At three years of age, his mother took him to the tabernacle and placed him under the care of the priest Eli. There his life was filled with learning the rituals and serving in the temple. As a child God called on him to deliver a very difficult message; a message of warning, judgment and punishment for the very person who took care of him. But, he gave the message and, over the years, gained the trust of the people of Israel. Samuel was given the task of appointing the first kings of Israel and helping in the transition to a monarch.

Potential issue – So often the young people among us are not given much respect when they seek to serve God. Their service and insights are not treated with the same value and respect as that of older people. It would have been easy for Samuel to simply say “I am too young to do this work” or “I am too inexperienced to understand what God wants me to do.” Or “no one will listen to me because they will only see how young and inexperienced I am.”

Query – How often do our words and actions discourage the children and youth among us from doing what God asks them to do? How often do we reject their words and insights simply because they are too young?

David – David seemed to be living a charmed life. He was chosen over his brothers to be anointed as the next king. He successfully killed the greatest enemy of the people of Israel and became a highly successful captain in the king's army. Besides that, his best friend was Jonathan, the king's son, and the king's daughter was in love with him. Then everything changed. The king wanted him dead because he had become a threat. Forced to flee, he had many opportunities to rid himself of the king and gloat over the misfortunes of the king. He chose rather to trust God and wait. For this God would later call him a man after his own heart.

Potential issue – When we are doing well and encounter obstacles we can make the serious mistake of believing we can solve the problems ourselves. We make our own solutions and expect that God will give us what He has promised. Success (or the lack of success) can also cause another type of problem. We may be unprepared to deal with failure and opposition. Instead of being patient and waiting, instead of trusting God and waiting, we simply give up. Over and over David chose to wait on God to provide the answer to each situation.

Query – How often do we fail to understand God's timing and try to do the work without seeking God's direction? How often do we simply give up when faced with a failure and opposition to what God is asking us to do?

Elijah – Elijah exploded onto the scene. He predicted a drought. He defeated all the prophets of Baal in a dramatic and decisive manner. He predicted the return of rain. Finally, to top all of this, he outran the horses back to the capital city, no small feat. Yet all of this power was not enough to protect him from his own frailty. When Jezebel threatened to kill him he ran and hid, calling on God to end his life. He, who had succeeded in performing miraculous deeds, was lost in self-pity and self-defeat. God called Elijah to another amazing feat, 40 days of travel without bread and water, so that Elijah would learn the true source of his power and how to live victoriously no matter what happened.

Potential issue – Fighting the opposition is not easy. And believe me, there is plenty of opposition out there. Opposition from Satan, from those who serve Satan, from those who don't believe, from those who don't want to believe, from everyone who is unhappy with their life. Yes, there is a lot of opposition. Like Elijah, we can face a great deal of opposition successfully in the power of God and then suddenly cave in. We forget all that God has done and become focused on the fact that people aren't listening, on how it seems like nothing we do is enough, or how everyone seems to be attacking us. We can become afraid and forget who we serve, what we already have, and the fact that it cannot be taken away from us.

Query – How often do we get blindsided by unexpected opposition or difficulty and decide to give up? How often do we forget all that God has done and can do because of a fear of the opposition of others?

Elisha – Elisha had spent a significant portion of his life hearing about and watching the activity and life of Elijah. He was working in the fields plowing when Elijah told him that he was to be his successor. Elisha quickly realized the significance of what had happened and sacrificed the oxen to indicate he was ready to follow Elijah. Later he was again tested to see if he was ready to begin the work of a prophet. As a confirmation that he had been approved by both Elijah and God, he parted the Jordan River and crossed on dry land. This became the signal to all that he would follow in the steps of Elijah.

Potential issue – Elijah was considered by many to be the greatest prophet of his day. He had defied the king and performed incredible miracles in God's name. Elisha could easily have decided there was no way he could follow, much less fill the shoes of Elijah. He could have given up and gone home and believed that he was unworthy.

Isaiah – Isaiah was a youth during the time of Hezekiah and was a part of the royal court. He received a unique question from God. He was asked who would go and proclaim the truth to the people. He responded and told God he was available. He told God to send him. He would be called on to speak to the kings and rulers of the earth. He would be called on to tell the nations of God’s judgment. God would use Isaiah to proclaim the truths about the ministry and life of the coming Messiah.

Potential issue – When Isaiah received his heavenly vision and the call to service his first words related to his condition as a sinner. He clearly stated that he was a man of unclean lips. A sinner. He was unworthy. At this point Isaiah could have run away. He could have used his past as an excuse to say that he would never be worthy to serve God. He could have turned away and rejected the cleansing act of God. He could have chosen to focus on the sin of his past, and not on God’s forgiveness and provisions.

Query – How often do we use sin as an excuse to avoid service or as the means of rejecting others from service in the kingdom of God and the church?

Jeremiah – Jeremiah was called to give an unpopular message which brought abuse from the king, the leaders and other prophets. He is called the weeping prophet. He wept for his people, and he wept because of how he was being treated by those around him. Few listened to him, even fewer responded to the instructions God was giving them through him. In all of this, God promised him that he had a plan for Jeremiah and that God would prosper him, maybe not in the earthly world but in the kingdom of God. God understood the struggle Jeremiah dealt with and so God provided Baruch, to be his friend and to encourage him.

Potential issue – It is never easy to share an unpopular teaching with others, especially when we feel like we are the only ones speaking. Condemning sin, disobedience and rejection of God are never popular topics. So often people respond negatively and

lash out at those speaking the truth, like they did to Jeremiah. It would be easy to give up. The risk is that we will quit or change the message in order to avoid being unpopular; to avoid the pain and frustration of being rejected for simply telling the truth. We all need someone like Baruch to help keep us focused and to lean on.

Query – How often do we refuse to tell the truth about what others are doing and warn them about God's judgment? How often do we fear the ridicule of others and fail to obey God? Do we believe that there are others who see the truth like us and that God will bring others into our lives to encourage us?

Query – How often do we give up before we start because we think of ourselves as unworthy or incapable to carry on the work that others have started?

Ezekiel - Alone and far from home Ezekiel was called on by God to live an unusual life. No, not just unusual, but extreme. His life was to become a living parable, visible for all to observe. To strengthen him, he was given unique visions of what was happening and what would happen. He was called on to reveal the extent of God's judgment and what God expected of the people before they would be allowed to return home or to receive once again the blessing and protection of God. Some of the actions he was told to perform required great discipline and focus. Not anyone can lay on one side like he was told to do for such a long time. We could easily find many aspects of Ezekiel's life that would be very unappealing to us. Yet Ezekiel chose to do exactly as God instructed him. God was able to use him to help the people clearly understand what was at stake and make a clear decision about their relationship to God.

Potential Issue - Sometimes it takes extreme measures before people will hear clearly what God wants to say to them. This may require us to be ready to go where we don't want to go, to do what we don't want to do and tell people what they don't want to hear.

Query - How valuable is a soul to God? Now how valuable is that soul to you? Consider what price you will pay and what action are you are willing to take so that they will hear the message God has for them?

Daniel – He was only a teenager when the enemy came, destroyed his country, and took him as a captive to a foreign land. Early on, he had to make decisions about whether he would simply do as he was told or walk a different path from everyone else. This choice become the beacon that kept him on course throughout his life and be a source of direction and strength for others.

Potential issue – Daniel was young. He was in a foreign court. His country had been destroyed along with many friends and family. He was in a hostile environment which promised punishment and retribution if he failed or stepped out of line. Daniel could have easily given up out of fear. He could have let the threats, spoken and unspoken, force him to cower and not stand up for his beliefs. He could have let fear be the focus of his life.

Query – How often do we fail to proclaim the truth, to do what is right, because we are afraid of what may happen to us?

Ezra - Ezra was well trained and had reached a level of recognition and favor so that he was able to speak with the king about the state of his people and his homeland. The discussion resulted in Ezra's to return to Israel and do what needed to be done to reestablish the people in the word of God and organize the region so that it could care for itself and provide for its needs. Ezra was an able administrator and cared deeply for the state of his people. He set in place the foundations that would maintain the people in the study of God's Word and prepare them for the coming of the Messiah.

Potential Issue - Ezra was just one man and was faced with an incredible task. First he had to convince the king that he should be allowed to go home. Second he had to make a difficult decision,

a decision of faith, that will convince the king and others of the validity of his faith in God. Then he had to effectively deal with the disorder that existed and the disregard for the law that he encountered. Choosing the wrong response with destroy all he hoped to accomplish. Choosing the right methods and maintaining the right attitude gave him the respect of the people and the mandate needed to enforce the law in such a way that the people repented of their sin and obeyed the Word.

Query - Are we convinced that God's Word is truly the guide for every aspect of our life? Are we willing to stand on that truth and confront the sin that exists in others? Are we clearly living by the laws and guidelines that God has given us so there will be no question about our right to speak?

Nehemiah - Nehemiah was no stranger to danger and intrigue. He was the cupbearer for the king. That meant that oversaw the preparation of the kings food and then taste it in the presence of the king to be sure there was no poison present. He was aware of what was happening around him and who might have reason to harm the king he served. If he did his job well and was astute then he could live fairly confidently. If he did not and was careless he would be the first to die.

Potential Issue - Life is filled with so many details. It is easy to become lax and careless believing that it won't matter if one does not care for every detail. We fill that it will not cause a serious problem if this is overlooked as long as the key needs are addressed.

Query - How many relationships and jobs have been destroyed, ruined or lost because of failing to pay attention to the details? How often have we allowed unessential items to distract us from the business at hand and then failed to carry out the task given to us or failed to do it to the best of our ability? Why is it important to pay attention to details and getting others involved?

Esther - Esther lost her parents and was raised by a relative. She was then selected as a candidate as the future queen. She made critical decisions related to the advice given to her and won the favor of key people in the process. Because of her willingness to listen and take the advice of others seriously she also won the heart of the king. Later this same ability opened the way for her to save her people.

Potential Issue - We often find ourselves in difficult positions and settings; places where we do not have the knowledge and skills needed. We can either fight to do things our way or choose to seek out those who have the knowledge we need and can advise us as to the best way to proceed.

Query - How often does our pride get in the way of listening to the advice of others? How often does our resistance to what is happening blind us to the possibilities before us? How often do we lose an opportunity to serve because we don't like being in unfamiliar settings?

John the Baptist - Called to the desert, to a life of isolation and privation, John became the voice crying in the wilderness. He did indeed prepare the way for the Messiah. He did so without compromise. It did not matter who came and what their status was, they all needed to hear the truth, confess their sin and yield their lives to God. He baptized them because they needed to perform an act that publicly expressed their decision. His boldness was his greatest asset and drew the people to him. Yet he knew that the day would come when he would fade into the background and yield the stage to the one he proclaimed.

Potential Issue - When one chooses to speak the truth there will always be those who are offended and will seek a way to attack and destroy them. It is easy to let that threat impact what we say and what we do. In time it can cause a person to alter their message until it loses its power and purpose.

Query - When faced with the cost involved in proclaiming the truth, what do you do? When it is clear that there is a risk involved in telling others the truth how does that affect what you say and do? Do you have the courage and confidence required to tell others exactly what God wants them to hear? What will happen to them if you don't?

Peter – Peter was like one of those people we never expect to amount to anything. He was rough, crude, uncultured; a misfit in the world. This kind of person may work hard and is able to provide for their family but in general, no one thinks they will amount to much. They falter, fail, and often say the wrong thing. Yet it was Peter, and his willingness to risk everything to follow Jesus, who became the cornerstone of the church. His faith, his desire to do what Jesus asked, caused a fundamental change in him. He was the one called on to present the first sermon; he was the first to carry the truth to the Gentiles. He was the rock whose faith is the foundation of the church.

Potential issue – Often we feel it is only those who have been properly trained that can be successful in doing the work of the kingdom. We often create standards and expectations that exclude many from service. When Peter first encountered Jesus he tried to use this idea as a way out of obeying Jesus' call. He said he was unworthy. He was not prepared, he was not trained, and he was not sophisticated or wise.

Query – How often do we use this excuse to avoid serving or to prevent others from serving?

Query – How often do we refuse to trust those who were our enemies and have been changed by God? How often do we exclude them from the fellowship and so prevent God from using their lives to bless us and reach others?

John and James – James and John were like beacons. One became the first martyr and the other was the last of the Apostles

to die. They were called the "Sons of Thunder" and attracted attention for the wrong reasons. Jesus worked on their attitudes and helped them to look beyond getting what they wanted to making sure that others found what they needed. John became the one beloved by Jesus and his gospel and letters focus on the need for love. James sacrificed his life and gave up everything to receive the ultimate gift of love.

Potential issue – In the beginning James and John tended to focus on what they could get from following Jesus. They were quick to attack and quick to judge. One of the things we need to be careful about is how we attract the attention of others. We can be bold and judgmental and people will notice us, but in the end, reject the gospel.

Query – How often do we only focus on the benefits we can receive and not on what we can give? How often does our attitude drive others away, thinking we are protecting the truth when in reality we are preventing our access to God's blessings?

James - the Brother - James grew up in the shadow of his brother; not only when Jesus became popular but throughout his life. He had a brother who always obeyed, always did what was right, always did the best work and had time for those around him. This could easily have made him bitter and resentful, especially when Jesus suddenly left home to live the life of an itinerant teacher. Then James became responsible for caring for their mother and the needs of the family. It is not clear at what point there was a change in his thinking but James was there in the upper room at Pentecost and soon became the spokesman for the church in Jerusalem.

Potential Issue - When those who are close to us, our siblings, good friends, classmates and coworkers have a different approach to life and become more popular, it is easy to react negatively to what is happening. We see them in a negative light, reacting with jealousy, criticism and more.

Query - Are we truly pleased when others gain attention and are honored? Are we able to be a source of encouragement to them and continue to be supportive? Or are we jealous and seek to undermine them? Why do we have such a hard time when others are successful?

Paul – Paul was the enemy. He had put people in prison, had them flogged and even approved of their execution for being followers of Christ. He had been so sure that he and the others like him were right and that Jesus, and those who followed him had to be destroyed. Paul's definition of truth was to be protected at any cost from any who didn't agree with him. Until the day he met the truth. From that day on Paul willingly suffered everything that happened so that others would know the truth he had so diligently sought to destroy.

Potential issue – Early on, Paul was faced with the problem of dealing with those he had called his enemy but now he wanted to befriend, and with those who had been his friends who now became his enemies. He could have easily given up, believing no one would ever trust him or believe him. He could have quit because of the hatred of those who considered him a traitor.

Query - How much do we allow our past to affect and influence our present? Do we truly believe that Jesus has forgiven us and can use us no matter what we have done?

Timothy - Timothy was a young man who quickly gained recognition for his commitment and energy in serving the Lord. Those around him saw the clarity of God's call and recommended him to Paul for further service. But, as in most cultures, youth is not always accorded the same level of respect as those who are older. Timothy struggled with his responsibility to teach and admonish those who were older than him, especially those who we would call "senior citizens" today. To deal with this sense of inadequacy he continued to be mentored and encouraged by Paul. The truth is, all of us need to keep in mind our limitations and seek

the training and support we need to grow and develop in those areas.

Potential Issue - No one is adequate to every situation and need. No one has all the skills needed to deal with everything that happens in the life of a church. It is the wise person who is willing to seek out the advice and instruction of others to gain and refine the skills needed.

Query - What limitations do you have in your life? Are you willing to admit that you don't know everything? Are you willing to seek out the opportunities and the people who can help you learn to server more effectively? Are you open to the counsel of others in your areas of weakness?

Barnabas - helping others - Barnabas was one of those special people. We don't know where these people come from but they are always there to encourage and support us. They are the ones who are the bridges and help those on the fringe to find acceptance and become part of the group. They know the right thing to do and the right words to say. Sometimes all is needed is their presence to help open the way to understanding and reconciliation. Barnabas was such a person. Always at the right place to help through selling a piece of land or acting as a go between for Paul and others

Potential Issue - Every day in our lives we will encounter people and situations where there is a need for someone to act as a go-between. There will be a need for those who can see both sides of an issue, understand the position of both sides and be able to help bridge the gap between the two. There is a need for those who can help us make the right decisions for the right reasons.

Query - When confronted with people who are on the outside, do we take the time to help them be accepted? When caught in the middle, do we help those around us find the common ground? When there is a decision to be made, do we understand

how it will affect all those concerned and be able to help the group make the best decision possible?

Stephen - the lightning rod - Stephen was an outsider, a foreigner. Yet he saw the issue at hand better than anyone else. He was defiant in the defense of the truth and the need for people to see what they had done. He was the lightning rod that drew the fire and absorbed the angry response without being affected by their anger and vengeance. When it was all done, his words of love were what people remembered.

Potential Issue - Every era, every generation needs to be reminded of the central issue. We are the ones that have sinned. We are the ones responsible for the death of Jesus on the cross. It is our insolence, our pride that he had to pay for. It is his love for us that made it possible for him to pay the price. Can we do any less?

Query - When people attack you for speaking the truth, how do you respond? Do you lash out at them or do you find a way to love them and speak words of forgiveness? Are you part of the problem or part of the solution? Do you help others see the nature of God's love for them by your attitude toward them when they attack you? Are you a lightning rod, able to absorb the fire directed toward you, yet remain unchanged in your love for others?

Additional

Solomon - Training misused - Solomon had it all. His father had prepared everything for the temple. He had laid the ground work for the materials and drawn the plans. David had set in place an organizational structure that was phenomenal. Even more than that, David received a promise that there would be an heir of his on the throne forever. Solomon had been chosen as the first of the heirs to benefit from this promise. One more thing needs to be mentioned. When Solomon came to the throne all of the enemies

of Israel have been conquered and everyone else had treaties of non-aggression. Solomon did the smart thing and asked for the wisdom needed to run what his father had set in motion and be a true king for the people of God. But somewhere along the way it all went bad. The Bible says Solomon became enamored with the ways of his wives and his harem. It is said that they influenced him until Solomon began to allow them to build temples and places to worship their gods and idols. His great wisdom failed him and he became a fool.