



BOOK OF
EXCUSES

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Moses – I can't speak because I stammer

Very few people don't know my story. It is a staple of all Sunday school teaching for children. The boy who was placed in a basket in the Nile by his parents with the belief that God would protect him. The boy who later grew up to be the greatest leader of the Chosen people. The boy who would talk to God and receive the 10 commandments. The boy who defied the Pharaoh and led his people out of captivity. I could go on.

But you may ask why I use the word boy and not man? It is simple. When you are dealing with God, you need to forget and leave behind many of the concepts underlying what it means to be a man. Your pride, your ego, your independence, your self-esteem, and so on. Only then can you truly meet God.

It was my ego and self-esteem that got in the way when He called me. But let me back up and explain a few things first, sort of fill in the gaps.

Somewhere in my childhood, I began to stammer or stutter. I don't know why, I just did. Maybe it was all the pressure of being the son of Pharaoh's sister. There is a lot of pressure when you are living in the home of the most powerful man on the earth, who many consider to be a living god. That, and the fact that I was pampered spoiled, and almost unrestricted in my activities. A nod of the head, a facial expression, a finger pointed, and all the servants responded. I learned that they would do everything to provide what I wanted and the less conversation the better.

They were truly afraid that if they were to hear me stutter, they might laugh, snicker, or make a face trying to control themselves. A dangerous reaction and potentially costly, if Pharaoh should ever hear. Only the most serious people dared interact with me as a child, and so I spent a lot of time alone.

The one group that did manage to control their reactions were my teachers. Actually, with them, I had the least amount of struggle to communicate. I can't explain it, but while in class with them I generally managed to speak somewhat clearly. Maybe it was because during those times no one was watching, observing, or spying on me. The guards were sent outside, and it was just me, the teacher, and a topic.

Because of that, I excelled in my studies. That made Pharaoh very pleased and helped me to relax somewhat in his presence. During that time, I discovered I had a knack for spatial relations. My favorite class was military strategy. It was fun for a couple of reasons. One, I did not have to speak much, because we used a type of sandboard to map out the geography and position of the armies and define a method of attack or defense. Through that, I did develop some confidence in speaking, but it was a type of shorthand or verbal signals. I developed keywords and phrases that were easy to say and very clearly understandable.

Two, I also discovered that I was pretty good in the use of weapons. Again, it didn't require much in the way of language to practice using swords, bows and arrows, spears, and other weapons. The master of the armory simply handed me a weapon, showed me what I needed to do, and then we practiced.

They also discovered that I was a good leader, as long as I didn't have to give long speeches. The master of arms set up a type of war games to test my skills. But before we started, he drilled all those whom I would be leading in my verbal shorthand of commands and the use of hand signals. Once they caught on, we began and finished far ahead of the others involved in the games.

My group quickly advanced in our skills, and the arms master saw that, because of my system of commands, my group could adjust and advance faster than the others. It was not long before we got our first real test and proved ourselves in the eyes of all. Before I realized it, I became the general of one of our armies. Only those willing to learn the system of verbal and non-verbal commands were allowed to be part of this army.

It proved to be an incredible time for me, and for a while I almost forgot about my fear of stuttering. We won victory after victory and were key to defeating an enemy in the south. This resulted in having my army receive great honors from the leaders and Pharaoh. We were brought home in triumph, and Pharaoh decided on a change in my life.

That change was based on my status as a member of the family of Pharaoh. There were many who felt that I was, or should be, the heir to the throne of Egypt. This was based, not so much on my bloodline, but on how I had arrived. Many believed that the god of the Nile had given me life and brought me to Pharaoh's sister. It mattered little that I did not look like anyone in the family. Still, there were a few who thought I was Hebrew, but they kept their thoughts to themselves.

It was very risky to suggest that a baby, who should have died by the order of Pharaoh, had survived and was now a potential heir to the throne of the greatest power on earth. For them, it mattered little that I had become a very successful and popular general. They only saw the fact that I could not be the next Pharaoh. I didn't have the blood of the living god or his ancestors in my veins. They could not accept the fact that an outsider could, or might somehow, supplant their dreams of power and control.

That became the focus of many private conversations, which began to affect me. All that I had gained in controlling my stuttering began to fade. That only encouraged more speculation. How could one with such a problem be one who could speak and lead as a living god?

No longer were there quiet lessons with the teachers and arms master. Now I had to respond to their issues and those of the kingdom. I became silent and withdrawn, quietly wishing for some way to go back to being just a general.

In the midst of this frustration, I began to search out information about my true origins. I began to study the history of the Hebrews and slowly realized that, in fact, that is where my origins lay. I was one of those who had been doomed to death by the very person I esteemed more than any other person. I learned about their god and came to realize that I didn't belong in the courts, at least not as an heir apparent.

In the midst of all this, a desire to somehow ease the situation of the Hebrews grew in me. Then one day I came across an Egyptian supervisor beating a Hebrew without remorse or reason.

Without thinking, I fell back on my training as a warrior, and when he didn't respond to my signals (he obviously did not know them); I reacted as if he were the enemy. He had no chance. He only knew how to terrify those who could not defend themselves. It was over as quickly as it began.

I told the Hebrew to leave quickly and to keep silent. I then buried the body, where I believed no one would find it. But such acts cannot be kept secret, and I was discovered. Those who opposed my becoming pharaoh now had exactly what they needed to be rid of me. A true Egyptian would not be concerned about the welfare of a slave, a Hebrew. A friend, from my days as a general, warned me, and I fled in fear of my life. Even Pharaoh could not protect me from the wave of rage and hostility that quickly developed.

And so, I ended up as a shepherd, wandering in the wilderness. I had a wife and two sons and was quite happy. Sheep don't mind if I stutter or stammer, and those near me were patient and kind with me when I struggled to communicate. I had no interest in becoming a leader or having to stand before others to speak.

That all changed, however, when I found myself confronted by God speaking from the burning bush. He didn't accept any of my excuses. I tried at least four times to tell Him that I was the wrong person. Even though my enemies had died, I knew others would quickly take their place, if I returned. That didn't seem to matter. When I said they would not listen, He gave me miracles to perform. That shook me up a bit, but what good is a minor miracle, if in the end they still kill you? I complained about my speech problem and He shrugged it off, saying He was the creator of the tongue and could take care of that. My next attempt made Him furious, so He told me Aaron would do the speaking, but I would be the leader and dared me to deny Him one more time.

At that point, my fear and awe of God took over, and my own fears and doubts faded away as I realized I was not talking with just another god. I was talking with The God. The God of my people who wanted me to serve Him and rescue them.

Did my fear of stuttering go away? Not really, but as I learned more about God and His greatness, it was amazing how my stuttering and stammering faded away. That, and any remnant of fear that remained. I now am the servant of One who is greater than all those I had feared. Regarding my army, I came to realize what was possible, and that I could lead. That helped me believe that I could do what was asked of me, as long as God did all He had promised.

Now I stand here looking over the Jordan. I have seen and talked with God for 40 years now. Much has happened. As I look back, I am so grateful that God did not allow me to let a minor problem prevent me from walking with Him and showing others the way to know God and to live in His presence.

Study Time

Read the following scriptures and summarize what they say in your own words.

Exodus 4:15-16

Jeremiah 1:9

Mark 13:11

Luke 12:12

Luke 21:15

John 16:13

What has been promised to us by God?

Read 1 Co 2:10-13

What knowledge has God given to help you share his truth with others?

Noah – I can't do the impossible

Do you know your limits? Do you know what you can and can't do?

If you are like me, you have an idea and are more than happy to say no, when it is clearly beyond your ability, resources, and interest. We don't like to commit ourselves to anything that would result in failure. It doesn't look good on a resume, and no one enjoys failing.

All that makes sense, and everyone understands this concept. But what would you do if someone asked you to do the impossible? I am not talking about a project that involves something you know how to do but is way beyond your resources, time, and interest. I am talking about being asked to do something that has never been done before, something that you do not understand, something that will make everyone think you have lost your mind.

Even worse, is the fact that you are asked to carry out this project in a place that makes absolutely no sense. That is because you are nowhere near a place where what you have to do could be of use or function. Or the fact that you know it will be an uphill battle all the way, and it is highly probable that no one will respond to you.

When God told me the first task, I balked. How can you tell everyone the world is going to be destroyed? How could that happen? I had heard the stories of what happened in the garden, about Abel's murder, about Enoch, and how God took him to heaven. And yet as I watched, I saw those, who believed the stories and sought God, disappear one by one with no one to take their place. Finally, I decided that I could not be silent, that no matter how impossible it seemed, I needed to speak out and remind people of their origins and how they had abandoned the truth.

When I finally told my family, they thought I had lost it, and yet they, too, realized what I said was true. It took a few days, but they finally decided that I was not crazy, and I should do as God asked.

That is when God hit me with the impossible. I had no idea what a boat was. And then when I realized how big it was to be, and that it was supposed to float on water, I was stunned. No, that word doesn't even begin to explain what I felt. If you combined the words, dumbstruck, bewildered, baffled, and disconcerted all together, they still would not even come close to describing my reaction.

I mean, who builds a boat that big in a place where there is no water? Think about it. I didn't even know what rain was. How could water fall from the sky? Why would water fall from the sky? And enough water to cover all the ground. Again, I just could not begin to fathom what God wanted me to do.

I am not even sure why I finally agreed to start building this thing He called an ark. I understood the first request, impossible as it was. But this, to build an ark over 400 feet long and so on...I was not ready to be declared insane or give them a reason not to listen to me.

At last, I did start preaching about how they were behaving, and that God was not pleased with them. And that is what changed my mind about the ark. It didn't take long for me to realize just how wicked the world had become. It took a little work to convince my wife and sons, but as they carefully listened to the message God had given me, and watched how people responded to it, they decided that it was not such a crazy idea after all.

None of us had any idea what this would look like, and what it really meant. The idea of rain was hard to grasp, and enough rain to cover all the earth was beyond what our imaginations could conceive.

What amazed me is that during this time all my sons found wives. Why they chose to listen to a crazy man, a man the world thought was irrational and beyond stupid, was hard to understand. Love can move people when nothing else can. But love might not change what you think of your husband's father. The commitment of their husbands was critical for them to move beyond tolerating me, to listening, and then to believing.

The work went forward. It was immense. And then God explained why this ark was to be so big. He was going to send animals from all over, a pair of most and seven pairs of a few. Not just that, but we had to gather food for all of these animals and create spaces for them, while we worked and waited. Now I was to become a zookeeper! I had never seen many of these animals before.

And then there were the ones I feared...lions, jackals, bears...they came too. We were more than a little frightened by their presence, and yet they were calm and peaceful. They didn't seem to worry about us, and in time we found they were gentle, at least with us. But, if anyone else came by to laugh and cause trouble, their demeanor changed rapidly from gentleness to a ferocity I had never seen before.

I thought that all of this might impact some of the people, at least. Perhaps create some level of curiosity? But no, it didn't. The ark and all the animals seemed to solidify their belief that I was crazy, and what I had to say was the foolish talk of an insane man. What it did do, thankfully, was to solidify the faith and confidence of my family in my vision and the message.

How could it not do that? I had told them about the animals before they began to come. Then they saw them and observed the difference in how the wildest animals behaved toward us in contrast to those who refused to believe. They also recognized the ark was more than an impossible feat. It was now nearing completion and had exactly the space needed for us and all the animals. In fact, there was enough space for almost a year's worth of food for everyone, too.

That fact scared me more than all the other pieces, the warning of judgment in the form of a flood, rain from the sky, (I still could not conceive what this was), and the animals. The size of the space and the amount of food we could store suggested we would be inside this ark for a pretty long time, as much as a year. That is a long time, and none of us were used to being in enclosed spaces. Remember, the world was a beautiful place. And while it took work to provide for our food and clothing, in general, it was a pleasant life we lived. But to be locked in a box for months was a little disconcerting.

Then all the fear, all the worry, all the confusion, and all the attacks and laughing of the people changed. At least for us it changed, because water began to fall from the sky. Clouds formed, clouds like we had never seen before. Dark and foreboding. Filled with lightning and sound that shook the earth. The animals knew what to do before we did. As soon as it began, they began moving towards the ark, and then God told us to finish loading everything, get the animals settled and get ourselves inside.

As soon as we got inside, He closed the door. And as soon as the door was closed the rain became torrents, no it was like rivers falling on us. Like being at the bottom of the largest waterfall you can imagine and being inundated by water. As this happened, we heard the cries of the people who finally decided that maybe we had not been so crazy after all. And then we could no longer hear them. There was a new sound, a roar that deafened us and drowned out the sound of the waterfall of rain and the crying of the voices. And then, within moments of that roar, the ark moved!

It was a scary moment. If you have never been in a boat and have no idea of what it feels like to float on water, then you would be frightened too. We grabbed each other and anything available to avoid falling. At first, the movement was somewhat extreme as the ark lifted off its supports. Then slowly it lessened, and we could walk about without losing our footing.

Well, you know the rest of the story. For me, it resolved all my doubts and helped me overcome any residual uncertainties about questioning God and what He had asked me to do. I learned quickly that if one tells God that something is impossible, that person doesn't believe or understand who God really is. I also learned that if we let God lead and provide, we can do what, to us, looks impossible.

For Further Study

Read the following passages, and record what impossible task was given or accepted.

Joshua 3:1-17

Judges 7:1-25

1 Samuel 17:1-55

1 Kings 18:1-42

Matthew 14:25-33

Mark 6:35-44 (John 6:1-13)

Luke 18:18-27

Luke 24:1-12

Answer the following questions related to each passage:

What did they have to do to succeed?

What happened if they doubted or rejected the task?

How did their decision and action affect others?

Do you feel like being a disciple of Christ is an impossible task? What have you learned from this lesson and scripture passages that can help you accept the task and be successful in doing what God has called you to do?

Joseph – they hate me

There was a time in my life when I thought that everybody hated me, and I would spend the rest of my life in prison. And I probably would have, if my attitude had not finally changed.

I was an egotistical spoiled brat. My father had some responsibility in my being that way, but I used his attention to get what I wanted, and to degrade my brothers, thinking that by spying on them and reporting their failures, then I would remain my father's favorite son.

I didn't really understand that my status of favor had little to do with me, but everything to do with the fact that I was the first-born child of his favorite wife. There was another son born to her, but that birth did not carry the same joy, because she died giving birth to my brother Benjamin. So, while my father loved him dearly, there was always a sadness tied to his birth, and Benjamin was a reminder of what my father had lost.

So I became the privileged son, not based on anything I did, but because of his love for my mother. While I was not the firstborn of my father, I got the best, the first choice, the special place of honor, because I was the firstborn of his beloved wife. This meant I was also likely to receive more inheritance and blessing than the firstborn of the other wife, even though he was older than I was.

And every time I got another special gift, like the coat of many colors, my brothers became more jealous and angry. My attitude did not help the situation. In my pride and ego, I tried to behave like an elder brother. I tried to control them. The evidence of this was how I reported their failures and errors to my father. That often resulted in punishment for them and/or another special gift or blessing for me. I didn't realize how angry they were, or how my father was beginning to wonder about my behavior, until it was too late.

Then I had the two dreams about their bowing down to me. The first involved only my brothers, and they did not take it well. My father let it pass. But the second one included him and his wives as well, and that made him wonder. He questioned the idea that he would bow down to me, his son.

I didn't realize at the time, but now that I look back on those events, I realize that they refused to listen because of my egotistical, proud attitude. I already believed I was a special person and that I had special

rights and privileges. So, when I shared my visions, it was with this attitude that I spoke. You know, I am better than you, you should serve me, you are lowly people, and I am the one you should listen to. Can you hear me? Can you see how I acted?

Little wonder that, when my father sent me off in search of them later, they could think only about how to get rid of me. They already knew that whatever they did or said, I probably would make them look like irresponsible failures. It didn't take them long to decide my fate. They knew that without me around they would have some peace and maybe more attention from our father.

Fortunately, the original plan to simply kill me was abandoned, when they saw the possibility of receiving some revenue while getting me out of their life. So I was sold into slavery in far away Egypt...a place, in their minds, that was as good as killing me.

Now comes the interesting part. The truth is that I am an intelligent and perceptive person. My reports about my brothers were accurate and useful to my father. The problem was that I never considered talking with them first and helping them correct whatever the issue was. I just brought the report to my father and told him what needed to be done. I did it to make me look good and to degrade them in my father's eyes.

Now I began to learn how to use my skills, not for my direct benefit, but to benefit others. Well almost. I was a good worker, and my owner quickly saw my skills and gave me more and more opportunity to care for his estate, until I was the one in charge. I was learning about humility and caring for others before myself.

I still had much to learn, as was seen in what happened with his wife. She was constantly after me, trying to seduce me. And while my answer to her was correct, I could not consider such behavior, because it would have violated his trust in me and so on. But I was not smart enough to anticipate what could happen as a result of my rejecting her advances. In the end, my master did not believe me. He believed her lies.

Not hard to imagine, if one considers that a slave will do what is necessary to gain the favor of the master in order to improve their situation as a slave. I imagine he saw me as a person who did just that, created a great opportunity to advance my position and then abused my position for my own purposes.

It is hard for me to completely reject that possibility. I had done so before. And I probably subconsciously was acting in the same way. I was looking out for myself more than anyone else. My success benefited my master, but it also benefited me. But in all honesty, I was not as proud or self-centered as I had been. Still....

Well, I found myself back in prison. And as before, I used my skills to help the warden improve his operations. And again, I received special benefits and privileges, until I was the one running the prison. Actually, this was a special prison for those sent to jail by the nobility. Conditions were better here and only got better as the warden allowed me more freedom in its operation. We had fewer riots, conflicts, and as a result, the guards treated the inmates better. It was a win-win situation.

Then two key servants of the pharaoh were sent to our prison. They had done something foolish and as a result found themselves being punished. This is hard for someone who has enjoyed the benefits of the court with all its prestige. Not long after they arrived, they both had dreams. I am not sure why they

shared them with me or how it was that I could understand what the dreams meant. Other than my two dreams and my interpretation of them, I really had not thought much about dreams and their meanings.

Anyhow, I listened and told them what I thought. Incredibly, what I thought, or my interpretation of them, is exactly what happened. I pleaded with the one, the wine taster, to present my case before the pharaoh. Here again, I tried to use the situation for my benefit. If I could just convince someone I was innocent and that I shouldn't be in prison, then I could restore myself to some level of respectability, and maybe use all I had learned to build a better life for myself. But he didn't remember my request, so I resumed my work as the administrator of the prison. I was free but trapped in a jail. And finally, I began to learn some humility. To think about others and not worry so much about myself.

Then one day they came for me. It was unexpected and a bit terrifying. They told me that the pharaoh wanted to see me, and that I would be expected to interpret a couple of dreams. So, they had me bathe, shave, and gave me clothes so that I would be somewhat presentable, then took me to the court.

To say I was nervous would be an understatement. How could I interpret the pharaoh's dreams when all of his wise men couldn't? It was at this moment that I finally realized that my life was not truly my own. It belonged to God. I had failed miserably in my behavior and in using the skills I had been given. I had focused on me first.

So, as I stood before pharaoh, I finally gave credit to the correct source. If I was able to help him it would be not because of my skills and abilities but that God would reveal the meaning to me. As I listened, I clearly understood what the dreams meant, and it became clear to me what needed to be done. But this time, instead of thinking of myself, I spoke with a level of humility that I had never realized before. I did not suggest that I could solve the problems. Instead, I gave a recommendation to the pharaoh and encouraged him to find someone to carry it out.

At that moment, I learned the blessing of humility and the power of service for others. I was ready to go back to my cell in peace, because I had done what was right. I had not bargained for my safety or any benefits. I shared what I knew with no expectation of payment or compensation. And that is when the pharaoh and his court caught me off guard. I was to be promoted to second in the land, and no one even objected or complained.

What a lesson to learn! When we are humble, people are more willing to listen to what we have to say and the ideas we have to share.

To be honest, I am still learning. I think that is why I put my brothers to the test. I wanted something, some payback for their treatment. Well, maybe a little, but they did have a lesson to learn as well. We all had put our own desires and needs first in the past. I had paid dearly to learn my lesson, and it was important for them to be willing to submit to me, as had been revealed in the dreams they had rejected.

Now, our father has died, and they are still concerned about whether or not I have learned how to treat others. We had a great time together today, as they realized that I have truly changed. I was not the self-serving, selfish person I had been as a youth. As proof of this, they have agreed that when we leave Egypt and return home, they will take my bones to be buried with our father.

I could say so much more. My excuse could easily have been that nobody liked me and ended my life in despair, blaming others for my problems. I am so thankful that I learned that the problem was within me, and that I was able to learn the wonder of true humility.

For further study

David states on a couple of occasions that he felt others hated him without reason. Read these scriptures and decide if this is possible. Ps 38:17-22; Ps 69

The same thing was said of Jesus in John 15:25

Jesus warns the disciples that the world will hate them because of Him (Mt 10:22). Why would those who follow Jesus be hated?

Are there good and bad reasons for people to hate you?

Make a list:

Good

Bad

Read the following texts and decide if the reason for the hate is good or bad? Also, consider who is hating whom.

Mal 2:16

Mi 3:2

Ps 31:6

Ps 50:7

Ps 119:113

1 Ti 3:12

Lk 6:35

What actions on our part can cause others to dislike, even hate you? 1 Pedro (1 Pet) 2:19-25

Read 1 Pedro (1 Pet) 3:8-17 – How should you handle the hate of others?

Jonah – I don't like my job

How many of you have found yourself in a job you didn't like? How many of you have found yourself working with people you didn't like, maybe even hated? And how many of you discovered there was no way out, you were stuck and were being forced to do the work with no way out?

It was not about the hours. It was not about the boss. It was not about the location. I simply found myself assigned to a task, a job, and I didn't like what I was asked to do, where I was being sent, and who I would have to work with.

You would think my boss would know better than to send me. It was not as if the task was that hard to do. The message was pretty clear. It was not like I was going to get lost. Everyone knew the way to my destination. There was always someone to provide directions and, like the words of a later saying, 'all roads lead to Rome,' in my world, all roads led to this place as well.

So, tell me what excuse would you use to avoid doing something you really didn't want to do? And before you answer that question, let me clarify a few things related to my work, my profession. My line of work is demanding. You need to have a tough skin to deal with people who won't listen and are quick to ignore you and reject what you have for them.

As for my boss. Well, he is the greatest. He always provides everything I need to carry out my assignments. He really understands me and the work he asks me to do. He is incredible at encouraging me when I am frustrated and knows just what I need to keep going and to find joy in my work.

But this time the task he gave me was horrible. He wanted me to go to a place I hated, to a people I hated, and give them a message they didn't deserve to hear.

So now, what would you do to avoid going to work? Would you call in sick? That wouldn't work with my boss. He already knows if I am going to be sick before I know and can heal me if needed. Would you say your transport broke down, or traffic was a problem? That wouldn't work either, since he already knows about anything that could happen and will have it resolved even before you can think about it.

Would you decide to be unreachable? I mean, not just disconnected but out of town, a long way out of town. I am not sure why I thought that might work. My boss is literally everywhere and knows everything. And yet, I made it to the coast and onto a boat bound for Tarsus. Yes, you finally know who I am and what my job is. I am a prophet of God, which explains why I can't use being sick or getting stuck in traffic or any of the standard excuses we use, when we don't want to do something.

My only hope, at least in my thinking, was to go far away. So far away that there would be no way to carry out the job I was asked to do. He asked me to go to the capital of our greatest enemy and proclaim His judgment on them and their destruction. Sounds like a great opportunity to get rid of the enemy of

my people, and yet I knew better. God always warns of judgment and then allows the people a chance to repent, to change their lives and listen to Him.

I had not seen this happen often. At least not on a national scale. But I had seen individuals respond and how God blessed them. That is not something I wanted to see happen with even one of our Assyrian enemies. I would not go and risk having one of them repent and have God save that person, plus many more. God had been willing to save Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of 10. I could not imagine anybody responding to my message.

You would think I was afraid of having God send me into the heart of the enemy's country. Not really. When God sends, he also protects and strengthens. Actually, I was more afraid of their responding and having to deal with forgiving them for all the destruction they had caused to my people and my country.

So there I was on a boat to Tarsus, as far from Nineveh as I could get. But that didn't work. Not too long after we were out to sea. I mean really out to sea, with no hope of swimming to shore or being rescued, the storm came. It was so bad, the crew was terrified. They prayed to their gods, and then when they saw me standing in silence, they asked what I had done.

I told them I had defied the one true God, and that the only way for them to survive was to throw me off the ship. They did not like my answer and decided to try other means to save themselves. But every time they tried something, the storm only got worse. Finally, in desperation, they did what I told them to do and threw me overboard. The moment I hit the water, two things happened: the storm ended, and a giant fish swallowed me whole.

In that moment, I thought it was over. My life was forfeited. The only cheering aspect of my situation was that now I would not have to carry out the work I had been assigned. I soon realized that I was not going to die after all. However, after three days in that fish, I knew I had no other option. I had to submit and do what I had been told to do. I had to go to Nineveh and risk having those people hear God's message and then repenting.

It took only three days to complete my task. It was amazing. Or, it would have been amazing, if my heart had not been so filled with hate. I didn't want them to hear. I didn't want them to respond. I wanted them to be punished. Then, foolishly hoping that He would not see their acts of penitence, I went up on a hill overlooking the city and waited.

It was blistering hot, but I sat in the sun anyway. God saw this and caused a plant to grow rapidly, which give me some welcome shade. I was thankful for the relief, but still, I wanted those Assyrians to be punished. Then the plant died, so I complained about what I had lost. I had missed the point. I didn't care about the plant any more than I had cared about the city. I hadn't cared who would suffer, or who was at fault. I just cared about what I wanted.

Why should they get another chance? Why would they listen when my own people won't? I hate my job. But the truth is that I have a message to give, and I don't get to decide who will respond. The good news is that God understands and wants us to realize that it is not our job to convince people. Our work is to tell them the truth. How they respond, is up to them.

I have that same choice. I can either hate my job, or learn to love the fact that I serve a God who is bigger and more loving than we can imagine. Even someone like me, who is only beginning to learn what that really means.

Further Study

Who could have had, or did have, an assignment that they may not have wanted to do, because of fear or hate or anger? What could be the reason they did not want to do what was assigned to them? How did they respond? What happened?

Acts 9:10-17

Hosea 1:2-3; 3:1-4

Jer 16:2-4

Consider the life of Paul. How often could he have chosen to hate instead of obeying? Read the following scriptures and consider what might have happened, if Paul had chosen hate, fear, or anger, instead of love and obedience.

Acts 13:45-52

Acts 14:19-22

Acts 16:17-40

Acts 18:7-11

Acts 27:9-26

Read Ph 1:12-26. What are the key points here that help you understand why Paul behaved the way he did?

Make a comparison between the response of Jesus and the response of the disciples to the event in Luke 9:51-54

It would be useful for you to do a word study on the word "Love" and how Paul uses it in his letters.

Write down two passages and what you learned from them.

Saul – I am too shy

I am bigger and taller than everyone. And I mean everyone. I have met only one person bigger than I am, and that was Goliath. You'd think that fact would give me courage and confidence, but it doesn't. Instead, for most of my life, it has been a source of feeling awkward and exposed.

How would you feel if you were always bigger than everyone else your age? Not just a little bigger. I mean as big as the kids 3-4 years older than you are. That caused so many problems for me. Adults saw me and expected more of me than from other kids my age. They expected me to have the same abilities and understanding of the children that I looked like.

When I failed to meet their expectations, it created all kinds of issues. They were disappointed and became critical of me. And the children my age were jealous that I would be chosen by older kids. But when I failed, they mocked me. You can imagine how that made me feel.

While I may have looked like the other children my size, I was not as coordinated as they were. I was not as strong, and I didn't have the skills and knowledge they had. That 3-4 year difference provides a lot of learning and experience, which I didn't have.

As a result, I avoided spending time with kids my age, because I stood out. I avoided the kids that were my size, because they expected too much, and when I failed, they too mocked me. So, I learned how to be invisible as much as possible.

By the time I was a teenager I was wary of the adults as well. At first, it felt great to be included in their activities. But I was included, not because of my age, but because of my size. And again, it created problems. The adults didn't laugh as much, but they criticized more. At first, they just thought I needed to try harder, but trying harder resulted in my making bigger mistakes, which made a failure look even worse.

By the time my age caught up with my size, I was totally afraid of being around anyone who might expect too much of me. As proof of this, when my uncle sent me looking for some missing donkeys, he also sent a trusted servant with me. If you read the story, you will note that, even though they were my uncle's animals, he was the one who was guiding me. And when I was ready to give up, he is the one who suggested we visit the seer.

I made excuses. I said we couldn't go to him because we didn't have a gift. But my uncle had something we could give. So we went. When we arrived, everyone was quite helpful in giving us directions, and then the seer, Samuel, actually met us at the gate. He had been watching for us. He told us the lost animals had returned home. Then he told me something that made me very nervous. He said I was the person all Israel wanted. What did that mean? Why did they want me? Was it about my size again?

That comment almost created a panic attack in me. It had taken years to overcome my fears and lack of confidence. Now I was to be put on display and once again have everyone expect something special from me, because I looked like someone who could accomplish great things. So, I tried a different tack and suggested that I was not worthy of such attention. I was a member of the least important clan in the smallest of the tribes. Surely, he didn't want me.

But he ignored my objections, took me to the head table, and gave me the special cut of meat set aside for special guests. By now my head was spinning. I was not comfortable with all that attention. He must

have sensed my unwillingness to accept such acclaim. So, he proceeded to list some things that would happen as I returned home. The strangest one was that I would encounter a group of prophets and would join them in prophesizing. And, would you believe it, every one of the things he predicted would happen, did happen in exactly the way he had described them.

When I met the prophets, something else happened. I was not afraid of how people would respond. I became, for a little while, unashamed of my size and joined freely in the activities of the prophets. I even felt proud that people were shouting about my suddenly becoming involved in the activities of the prophets.

But that feeling didn't last long. Once we got home, I made the servant swear to keep quiet about what had happened. And I told no one about being anointed by Samuel to be king. I told my uncle just enough to satisfy his curiosity about why it had taken so long to return home. He was a bit perplexed about why Samuel would have such an interest in me and the donkeys, but he finally shrugged his shoulders and let it go. At that point, I was relieved and believed I had successfully managed to escape another potentially embarrassing situation brought on by my size.

But, as promised, Samuel summoned all Israel to come and hear the word of the Lord regarding our desire to have a king. And of course, our family went to hear what he had to say. I was not excited about this. I had no desire to have Samuel call me up and make me stand before everyone and declare me as king. So, I hid in the baggage hoping that, if he couldn't see me, he might realize he had made a mistake and would find someone else. But no, as soon as he called my name, someone exposed my hiding place.

Imagine how I felt, to be caught hiding in the baggage, and then be called to the front like some truant child about to be punished. You might not think of it as punishment, but for me, being put on display and dealing with everyone's expectations was the worst you could do to me.

When they saw how big and strong I was...yes, now I am both bigger and stronger, compared to everyone else...a huge man, head and shoulders above the tallest person in all of Israel. Yes, my physical development had finally caught up with my height, and I was indeed a strong man. I had the strength to do more than anyone else, but I just didn't want to do it in front of anyone else.

Now there was no escape, and I became the first king of Israel. Slowly, things improved, so that I grew in confidence. The people willingly followed me, and we began to defeat our enemies. On the surface, I had finally become the bold, confident person I had dreamed of becoming, and that people had assumed I should be.

That is, until Goliath and David entered my life. Goliath was huge. He made me look small, and my old fears and inhibitions returned. If I faced him and failed, then what would people think? And while I was trapped in this conundrum, David arrived. He was a teenager. He was handsome. He was fearless. All I could see was being myself at his age, and all my fears and panic rushed back.

If he were to succeed it would be worse than if I had fought and failed. I tried everything I could think of to discourage him. But he was not dissuaded. He threw off my armor, grabbed his sling, and with a single small stone, killed the giant, Goliath! I did the only thing I could do. I made him one of my generals. It almost looked as if I had planned it. Saul, the great leader, had the greatest general at his side!

David was incredible. He could not be defeated. He was fearless, and the men loved him and followed him everywhere. And so my jealousy began to grow. And when everyone declared that he was better than me...you know, David has killed thousands and Saul only hundreds, or something like that...all my inadequacies and uncertainties took control. I did everything I could think of to get rid of him, but nothing worked. He was everything I had wanted to be and more. More so, because he did it without having anyone determine what he should do, by looking at his size.

Then my son Jonathan became his best friend and even renounced his rights to the throne. I became insane over this and did everything possible to capture and destroy David. Nothing worked, though, and finally, after David spared my life on two separate occasions, I gave it up. My worst nightmares became a reality. My size and position meant nothing; I could not hope to equal David.

In an effort to recover some honor, I attacked a defenseless people, who were promised by Joshua that they could live in safety among us. I ignored that promise and used them as scapegoats for my failure. It was a great victory, but no one celebrated. They all knew what I had done.

And so here I am again, living in isolation. My size has gained me nothing. I want to go back and tell them that I had been right in the beginning. I was not the one they wanted or should have chosen. However, I know that using my old excuses now would be a lie. I have made many bad decisions. I chose to hate the one person who could have helped me be a great king. I also isolated myself from the prophet who could have guided me.

In the end, instead of being a man, the king, and making the right decisions, I chose to consult a witch, who only confirmed everything I already knew: It is not about size or ability that makes a person great. It is about trusting God and obedience to his Word that matters. That is my only excuse now; I didn't trust God or obey His guidance. And that was a choice I made on several occasions. That cannot be excused, just because of who I was as a person.

The people got it wrong. They sought a person who could impress them physically. What they needed was a person who could serve them spiritually.

For further study

Being timid can be a real problem. Why?

God describes the battle horse in Job 39:19-25 as not being shy. Why was it important not to be shy?

How could being shy create problems for a leader?

Another word for shy is "timid." Paul was described as timid by the Corinthians. 2 Co 10:1-11. Why do you think they felt he was timid, when in fact he wasn't?

Paul admonished the Thessalonians to encourage the timid (1Th 5:14). Why did he need to tell them that, and how can a person encourage the timid? Consider Ro 14:1 and 15:1-3, as you answer the question.

Answer the same question after reading 1 Th 2:6-9.

Answer the same question after reading 1 Co 9:22

Jeremiah – I am too young

I was barely a man when God called me to be a prophet and to declare the end of the kingdom of Judah. I believe in God, I am a faithful follower, and I know why we are having so many problems in our country. But I am a very young man. I just turned twenty, and I am not married. Nobody listens to a person as young as I am, especially if he is not married and has no children. Those two things are critical aspects of what it means to be a man and someone who others will consider listening to. Even so, I am way too young to be telling the priests, the advisers, and especially the king what they should be doing.

In fact, I was too young to be included in any census. You aren't counted until you are twenty-one. Until then you are not to be called to military service or to serve in the temple either.

And still, God chose to call me. When he called me, I cried, "I am too young, and I don't know how to speak to those where you're sending me. They won't listen to me, because they will say I am too young to understand what is happening and the politics involved. And they are right."

But my excuse didn't work. God told me he would send me, and he would give me the words I needed to speak and the authority to speak. All that was comforting, but when he told me I would not be allowed to marry, my heart sank. It meant I would always be alone. At least if I were married, I could cry to my wife, and she could hold me. It also meant I would forever be seen as immature and lacking insight into life, and much more. Single men are just not respected in this culture.

I struggled with God's call. How does a young person gain the respect and confidence to speak in the name of God? As I thought about this, God used a number of means...people talking to me, hearing the stories of the past shared by parents to their children, and so on. Through these circumstances, I was reminded of others who were called by God. Some of them were younger than me. Samuel was only seven when God spoke to him, and he began his ministry as a prophet. In fact, he was only three when he began to serve in the tabernacle. Then there was David, who was anointed to be the next king while he was a teenager. Joash became king at eight and with the guidance of the high priest led his people to restore the temple. And here I was, called to serve during the time of Josiah who had become king at eight, and when he turned 16 began a great reformation both in Judah and Israel.

In the early years, things seemed to go well for me. Josiah had been king for 13 years and was not much older than me. He listened to my words, in spite of the counsel of others, and began a great

reformation. I think the fact that God called me as a youth was a big encouragement to him. It was a good time.

Still, it was not easy to be a prophet in those years. People were reluctant to change more than their surface behaviors, but that changed when they found a copy of the scriptures in the temple. I wish I could have been there when that happened. But unfortunately, I was on a journey to my home. Thankfully, Huldah was there and could respond. They listened to her because of her age and the fact that her husband worked in the palace.

Imagine my delight when I returned and could read the scroll and show them the basis for the words that God had given me. Many still chose not to listen, but because the king was absolutely convinced of the truth of God's words and warnings, they concluded they had to listen. With the king's insistence, the words of the scroll, and Huldah's words, they finally became serious about doing what he told them to do. And for a while they also listened to me.

But it was only superficial. I feared they weren't really listening to me. I saw their response. They listened to the king and did all he wanted. People don't like to be too critical of the king. So, they accepted my words, but still considered my age and the fact that I was not married. So, while on the surface they appeared to listen, they had already decided from the beginning that I could not understand the world around me and gave my words no value.

When I warned them that God was going to fulfill the punishment he had promised, in spite of the good things the king was doing, they completely ignored me. I just didn't fit their concept of a true prophet...years of study, a married man, and so on.

This attitude would be a constant issue for my ministry. I was always seen as inexperienced, no matter how much I studied and proved that I did understand. It didn't matter how accurate I was in what God told me to say. If they didn't want to listen to the message I had been given, or it criticized them or put their position with the king at risk, they could always say, "He is too young, he is not married, so what does he know?"

That may seem insignificant, but it is a serious issue in my culture. Not being married or being too young both have the same impact. It will restrict your influence on others and their level of respect. It was almost as if God intended this as a way to be sure people would not listen, and it hurt to be ignored. It also hurt to realize people would not listen and would face God's judgment because of such a silly concept about one's age and marital status.

You know the rest of my story. I was attacked over and over, banned from the temple, threatened with death over and over. Even when everything I had told them came to pass; they still didn't listen. I wanted to stay in Judah, but they kidnapped me and carried me off to Egypt in defiance of God's word.

I am called the weeping prophet. That is an accurate name for me. I wept because no one listened. I wept about the messages I was given. I wept when I saw the results of their unwillingness to listen. I wept over all that I suffered. I could find little about which to be positive. My messages were filled with doom and warning. If it had not been for God's clear call, I would have quit and run away.

My only joy was in the certainty that God had called me. It was my only relief and my only hope.

And yet, I was not the only one who had struggled. It took some time for me to realize this. My rejection was not really about my age or my marital status. The people of Israel had rejected the messages of Elijah and Elisha, too. Isaiah was murdered by a generation influenced by the evil of Manasseh. Ezekiel was living in exile and told to do even stranger things than I was. He was told his wife would die, but he was not allowed to mourn her death.

No, my problems were not regarding any circumstances about which I had complained. It doesn't matter who you are, or what your age or status is. If people don't want to listen, they won't. So, let them try to say that I was too young when I became a prophet. Let them try to say that I don't understand because I am not a true man, unmarried. I know the truth. They have rejected God, and their hearts are like stone. And while I have had to deal with great suffering and rejection, I am blessed to have something they don't have. I have access to God, and I know Him.

For Further Study

How young is too young?

When were the following people chosen to begin their ministry?

David – 1 Samuel 6:1-13

Samuel – 1 Samuel 2:18, 3:1-19

Josiah – 2 Kings 22:1; 2 Chronicles 34:1-7

Tell me what the following individuals did? How old do you think they were?

Slave girl – 2 Kings 5:1-6

Young boy – John 6:5-13

What did Paul tell Timothy about his age? 1 Timothy 4:11-16

What guidelines did he give Timothy to help him in carrying out his ministry?

Reflect on these passages. What guidelines are provided for those who are young and called to serve?

How old do you think Daniel and his friends were? Daniel 1:1-20

What did they have to decide? How did God respond?

Is age a factor in serving God? Why?

Ezekiel – They will think I am weird.

Where should I begin? Let me start with the first exile. Babylon came and attacked Jerusalem. Many people died. But many of us who had been listening to Jeremiah and others decided to heed their words. They had told us to surrender to Babylon. Over and over they said that if we didn't, destruction was inevitable.

Many of us did just that and were promptly taken to Babylon as slaves, workers, and a few like Daniel into service in the court. As we trudged across the miles, we all expected to be placed into demeaning roles and hard work. The lowest of slaves. Instead, we were given land where we could build homes and were given a great deal of freedom. The king, Nebuchadnezzar, had a fair amount of respect for our God. Maybe Daniel and his friends, who stood firm in their faith, had some part in this. We are not sure, but we are grateful for the freedom we have, and that we also have been allowed to continue worshipping God in this foreign land.

I was only 25 when we arrived. As a priest, I was given a special place among our people. But then God began to speak to me, and what He wanted me to do frightened me to no small degree. In fact, I began to worry about what would happen if I were to obey His directions, and how I might become an outcast among my own people, or worse, seen as a lunatic.

Let me explain a little why I might have this level of paranoia. When we chose to surrender, many called us traitors. They went so far as to accuse us of being complicit in making it possible for Jerusalem to fall to the Babylonians. So many cursed us. My ears still burn at the words they spoke and the ugliness of their manner towards us. Even when we arrived in Babylon, we soon realized that the distance between us and Jerusalem didn't change their attitude.

Not everyone carried into captivity had gone willingly. Many were selected and taken because of their skills and potential usefulness to our enemies. As a result, there was a mixture of both groups, and so their reviling and cursing us continued. Over time, it began to subside, as they began to realize how good things were here compared to reports about how horrible it was for the people back in our promised land. And slowly the leaders began to consult me as a member of the priestly caste.

Now you can imagine my reaction when God came and called me to serve as His prophet. That call caused such a mixture of emotion. It scared me, because the general opinion of the prophets was not a positive one. The true prophets had promised doom and destruction, and we were here experiencing the truth of the words from God, which they spoke. The false prophets had led us down a false road, giving false hope to all. In the end, but too late, we saw the depth of their deception.

Not only that, but the nature of what God was revealing to me, such as visions of strange creatures and incredible images, made me feel I was going crazy. If I were to share any of this, I believed I would be laughed at, ridiculed, and would lose all the respect and acceptance I had worked so hard to gain. I wanted to tell God, "No, they will think I am strange and have lost all connection with reality!" But how does one deny God?

To deny God would mean my not giving people the truth they needed. To deny God would be to repeat the lies of the false prophets and to deceive the people once again. Not because of what I would say, but because I would be hiding God's truth from them. They might assume that God was silent with nothing to say to help them live in His truth.

And as if to confirm all my fears, God shut my mouth for seven years. The only time I could speak was when I was given a message for the people. As I had feared, the people began to wonder if I might be losing my mind. And yet they could not deny my words.

The visions were hard to share. People were amazed and confused, but that was only the beginning. Then came the direction to act out the words of God: Lie on one side for so many days, to represent the sin of Israel, then lie so many days on the other side, for the sin of Judah; shave my head and have a fake fight with 1/3 of my hair; then act out the final destruction of Jerusalem. The hardest was when God told me I had to prepare my food, using human dung. At this I balked! Thankfully, He understood how hard all of this was for me and allowed me to use animal dung.

The toughest moment was when God told me my wife would die suddenly. She was the joy of my life and made it possible for me to do and say all God was asking of me. And then she died suddenly, but I was not allowed to mourn her death. That was almost impossible to bear. But it helped me better understand the pain God was experiencing, as He watched first Israel and then Judah abandon Him.

God had told me early on that He was going to harden me, so He could use me to forge the people. That promise helped me realize early on, that what was happening was because of the sin of the people, especially their idolatry. My wife's death further reinforced my resolve to do all that God required of me. Their sin had brought us to this land. Their sin had created the pain I was experiencing.

But I also learned that if I brought only my anger and hatred for all that had happened, then I would fail to carry out my role as watchman for the people. I saw this truth as I listened to what God told me. I saw that He was more sad than angry. He was more loving than I could imagine. He didn't have to care. He didn't have to explain himself, yet He did.

As I saw and learned this truth, it helped me to be more open to carrying out His instructions and giving the people His message. I knew many would not listen. That was not the point. The point was to tell them, so that those who would listen could choose to obey and return to God.

I think the last visions were as much a reward for my faithfulness as they were meant to give the people encouragement and hope. They got to hear only my words of description. I had the privilege of walking in the vision and seeing all that God had prepared for those who would listen and be faithful.

For further study

Can you think of anyone else who was asked to do something strange or unusual?

Review the following stories. What were they asked to do? Why was it strange or unusual? What could have prevented them from obeying the directions? What was the result of their obedience?

Elijah – 1 Kings 18:22-38

Naaman – 2 Kings 5:1-17

Widow of Zarephath – 1 Kings 17:7-16

Elisha and the widow – 2 Kings 4:1-7

People of Israel – Jericho – Joshua 6:1-19

Priests – Joshua 3:1-17

Philip – Desert Road – Acts 8:26-40

What is God's promise, if we will do what He asks of us? Ephesians 3:20; John 14:12.

What could prevent you from doing what God asks you to do?

Gideon – I am of no importance

Do you know what it is like to be considered a person of no value? To be someone they never pick, because to them you are basically invisible and have nothing of value to contribute?

Well, that is my life. My family is at the bottom of the totem pole. If we get anything it is what is left over after all the others, you know, the important ones have taken what they want. If there is a decision to be made, the leaders never even think about including my family in the discussion. In fact, it is more likely that we will not even be informed that there is a meeting, or what was discussed, until those who are important have made a decision.

We got the worst land, the worst conditions, and so on. About the only benefit we have, from being so low in our social system, is that our enemies almost ignore us. I say almost, because unless we find a way to avoid them they will find and take what we have.

So that is why I found an old winepress and made some changes so I could thresh our wheat in it and not be seen. We paid our tribute but only based on a portion of what we harvested. Just enough so they wouldn't suspect we might have more hidden away. They usually didn't question us, because they knew we were the dregs of our family and social structure and had been given the worst land, etc.

That is why, when the angel came, he found me hiding in that winepress, threshing the wheat we had managed to hide from the enemy.

You can imagine my surprise when he called me a great warrior. Great warrior? He definitely wasn't from anywhere around here. And I told him as much. I clearly stated that he was talking to the wrong person. That he needed to go find one of the leading families if he wanted to find a leader, or even more so, a warrior. I had little hope of that happening. You see, I knew they were just as weak and afraid as I was. They did everything they could to avoid offending our enemy. The difference was that we had to do both. We had to avoid offending the enemy and those who were farther up the social ladder, which was everyone.

The angel insisted, but I couldn't accept what he said. So I decided to test things. I offered to make a sacrifice. I expected us to sit down to eat, so I could ask more questions and see if I could find a way to escape his order to save my people. Only, instead of eating he touched the food with his staff, and both

he and the food disappeared in the fire. Then I realized I was in trouble. This was not just a man trying to trick me but an angel from God.

He reappeared later that day and told me to go tear down the altar to Baal and destroy the Asherah pole. Then I was to build a proper altar to God, using my father's bull reserved for this purpose and the wood from the altar and pole. I decided to do it but in secret. So in the night, with the help of a servant, I did as I had been directed.

Nobody saw us, and I thought I had successfully carried out the task without being caught. I didn't. The people found out. I suspect my servant turned on me or said something to someone. The people were mad and wanted to kill me. But my father, surprise, surprise, defended me. As a result, it turned out really well. In fact, the end result was that people began to fear and respect me. My father's words challenged the attitude of those leaders who had treated us like trash. He made them stop and think about who really had power. If Baal was indeed so powerful, then why hadn't he protected his altar?

They saw the truth of his words. That was a first. And our status grew.

But it is not easy to overcome feelings of inferiority. Over and over I challenged God to prove that, in fact, he wanted me and not one of the leaders that everyone had approved and accepted. There were the two times with the fleece.

In the midst of my testing, there were other events that unsettled me. When you have felt inferior for most of your life, you don't want anything to happen that may result in your failing and ending up worse off than when you started. So you can imagine how I felt in those first days, when people began to come and the number grew into the thousands. They had heard how I had destroyed the altar of Baal and the fact that nothing had happened to me or my family. I felt excited and began to think that maybe all would turn out good.

Then my joy got a severe jolt when the angel came and told me there were too many men. Everyone who was afraid should go home. Well, that made sense. Who wants cowards in the army? Men who might run at the first sight of danger. I forgot how afraid I had been and how I had been obedient but tried to hide what I did because of fear. But now over 2/3 of the army left!

And then the angel told me there were still too many men. If they won, they might think the victory was achieved by their own strength. I knew better. What were these few against the huge army of the enemy? But I did what I was told. I took them to the river to test them and see how they would get water to drink. By the time that test was done, I was left with only 300 men.

Now everyone was talking about how foolish I was to attack Baal and call people to fight in a hopeless battle. I was back at the bottom. They were convinced that Baal was responsible for all my failure. I was once again seen for what they all believed, a member of the least of the families of my tribe, someone who could not be depended on for leadership.

I am still not sure why those 300 men didn't join the others and leave.

In the midst of my insecurity, though, God provided me one more proof. He sent a dream to the enemy and allowed me to sneak into their camp and hear what they were talking about. That dream and their interpretation convinced me to go forward with the plan. We won! Amazing, right. 300 against thousands.

But the proof of how insecure I am was evidenced in what I did with the spoil. I took some of it and made an ephod. Something that people could see and be reminded of all that had happened. How an outcast man from the lowest classes had been called to save them. But my action was foolish. I wanted to be remembered. That part worked. But what didn't happen was to cause people to remember that God had called. As long as I was alive, I could remind them. But when I died, they forgot that fact and focused on worshipping the ephod, forgetting the One who made possible the victory that provided the material used to make it.

Well, my excuse didn't work. God did use me anyway. I learned that being used by God is not about your social position but only on your disposition to serve.

For Further Study

Do we realize how often God has chosen those rejected by others?

Think about these, who were rejected by others or their actions were not valued:

David – 1 Samuel 16:1-13

Sinful woman – Luke 7: 36-48

John Mark – Acts 15:36-41; 13:13 (2 Timothy 4:11)

Gadarene – Luke 8:26-39

Samaritan woman – John 4:7-30

Poor Widow – Mark 12:41-44

Tax collector – Luke 18:9-14

Why were they rejected? How did Jesus treat them? What was the result of their meeting Him?

Could God use you as you are? What needs to happen in your life, so God can use who you are today?

What negative attitude about yourself needs to change? How will that happen?

Amos – I am just a shepherd

I have never been what you would call an intelligent man or a thinker. And I have never aspired to be someone who teaches others how to understand the truth and how to live correctly. I am, in fact, a very simple man, and I love what I do.

What do I do? Nothing special. I take care of sheep and have a small orchard. I am pretty good at what I do, but I know that I will never be wealthy or highly respected for my work. I really don't want much more than to live comfortably and in peace.

That means I raise enough sheep to feed us and have a few to sell, so I can buy the things that we need. The orchard has the same function. It is not a large orchard but again big enough to provide for our needs, with enough extra so we can buy or trade for what others have that we need, things like flour, and so on.

My world is small and that is fine with me. I am not interested in what is happening in the outside world. My only concern is with what is happening in my small world and living quietly. People get frustrated with me when they ask me to do something that is outside of my comfort zone, I answer by saying I am just a simple shepherd and tree keeper from Tekoa.

Oh, just so you know, Tekoa is a very small village in an isolated part of the country. Its location and anonymity help me to be what I am, a simple man with little interest in the affairs of the world. Well, to be honest, it is isolated but it also serves as a lookout or security post for Jerusalem. Isolated, but in the right place for an outpost. So while we have little to do with the outside world, we do have enough traffic to be aware of what is happening beyond our little world.

About the only other time I have anything to do with that world is when I take my family to Jerusalem for the major festivals, especially Passover. Being there makes me really uncomfortable. So many people, so crowded, and so much noise. Did I say I don't like noisy crowded places? No? well I don't. I love my work, because it is just right, very quiet and very few people.

Jerusalem, to me, is a madhouse. Again, the only reason I go is because I believe that it is important to obey God. I believe that it is important to go to the temple to present my sacrifices and offerings. More important than my discomfort at having to be in such a crowded and noisy place. There is another source of discomfort for me. Whenever I am in Jerusalem, I see the hypocrisy of the people. They mouth the words of the Law, but their lives reveal the emptiness of their declarations.

I am also willing to deal with all of the crowds and hypocrisy because it is one of the few times that I get to hear the Word of God and be taught. Being a shepherd makes it a challenge to get to the synagogue on a regular basis. But when I am in Jerusalem, I have the opportunity to spend hours listening to the teachers and absorbing the Word of God.

I have learned the importance of knowing God's Word and living by it. It is not a complicated process, and people in my community see my devotion to His truth. But that means that when I get back from Jerusalem, I have to tolerate a few days of people coming to me and asking what I have learned as a result of my recent trip.

I must admit I enjoy sharing what I have learned. People's desire to learn about God is about the only thing that will draw me out of my isolation. It seems that my simple life has given me the ability to make truth easy to understand for others. But there is a limit to how much time I am willing to spend with others, before I must escape back to my place on the quiet hillside with my sheep and in the isolation of my small orchard.

So you can imagine my surprise and my discomfort when God decided to speak to me. Not just that, but the fact that he wanted me to go to the city of Samaria and confront the king, court, and everyone else with their sin. The first words out of my mouth were, "I am just a shepherd and tree keeper from the insignificant town of Tekoa." As soon as I said it, I knew the true value of my excuse. It meant nothing to God, and He let me squirm awhile so I could think about what I had just told God, you know Yahweh, Creator of the universe, Creator of all that I enjoyed. That silence was not what I wanted. And that fact made me realize that I would have to obey.

Silence in contemplation of God's universe, so God can speak, is incredible. But the silence when God refuses to accept our excuses and cuts us off from hearing the universe talk is painful.

That fact made me realize that I was more than just a shepherd, a simple man. God had watched me and led me and prepared me to be so much more. It was not my career that was the issue. God chose David, who was a simple shepherd boy from another unknown town, Bethlehem.

He had seen my faith and love for His word. He had seen how I shared what I had learned with others. And as I realized all of that, I knew that what God wanted was not a highly educated, talented person but a simple person with a profound faith.

People will often reject the high-born, the powerful, the well-stationed just because they come from a different social group. They don't understand our world and so have nothing to say to us. All too often those people come and use a form of communication that reflects their high level of education and privilege. That kind of communication shuts people out.

But when a simple person, a person who lives in the same world, comes and speaks, it is interesting how people respond. They listen because you talk and act as they do. They hear the evidence that you live in their world by the nature of your stories and the words you select. They are words and thoughts that reflect their world and make it easier to enter into what you are saying.

They see that you are a person from their world and can see how God has touched your life. All this helps them to stop and listen. But, as I found out, it does not guarantee they will change. What it does create is an inability to reject your words from God because you are not part of their world and don't understand all they deal with in living.

Sadly, most people still chose to reject the message. Few listened. Eventually, I was forced to leave by one of those high-born snobs, a priest named Amaziah. He was irritated by my words. So irritated that he twisted them to mean something I had not intended: a personal threat against the king. As a result, it became dangerous for me to stay and say any more.

Thankfully, God made it clear that my assignment was over. I had delivered the message he had sent me to deliver. I was free to return to my quiet life of tending sheep and my orchard. I returned home with mixed emotions. I was proud, not in a bad way, that God had called me, a simple person, to proclaim His truth. And I was sad that so few were willing to hear the message.

I am back here now with my sheep and enjoying the quiet. But I am more willing than in the past to share the truth God has given me. I do so because maybe, despite my simple life, people will hear the truth. Maybe they will hear the truth in my simple words.

Yes, I am just a shepherd from Tekoa and I have a small orchard. But God knows me, and I know Him. That is much more important than social standing, education, or any other status when being called to speak His truth to others.

For further study

How many people use this excuse, "I am just...", to excuse themselves from serving? The other version of this might be "I am not...", which is really the same thing.

Does God look at what we are, or what we can be, if we trust Him?

Review these scriptures and comment on what you learn from them:

Proverbs 6:6-8

Matthew 6:26

Luke 12:7

Luke 10:21

Luke 18:16-17

Does God promise to provide what we lack so that we can serve?

Lk 12:12; 18:16; Jn 14:26

Acts 1:7-8

Jeremiah 31:33-34

Can you think of a promise or two that God has given to assure us that He will provide what we need when we are willing to serve Him?

Thomas – I need to see it for myself

I made the mistake of doubting my friends. But that is how I have lived my life, not trusting what people tell me. How does one explain why they choose not to trust others or believe what they say?

It is not hard, really. You see, I am a realist. If I can't see or touch something, then I struggle with believing what I am being told by others.

How does one become a realist? That is a more interesting question. There are a number of elements involved. A key one is having people make promises and then failing to keep those promises. Parents can create this type of thinking in their children. They paint a false picture of the world; they promise happiness or some other reality that in the end doesn't exist.

It can happen as people interact and place their faith in what they are told by leaders and those they believe are trusted sources, only to discover it is a dream that is not possible. Leaders make promises, describe a rosy future, and so on. Then when it doesn't happen, reality takes control and we learn the real truth and grow to doubt the words of others.

This doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. For me, a key was watching the Pharisees. They make a great show of their faith. They act like they are better than others, because they keep the law. But as you watch them and are observant, you will see the falseness of what they are doing. They are hypocrites, and such hypocrisy breeds realism in others. The reality is, if they are so good why are they such fakes?

They treat others with disdain. They create rules to isolate themselves from the pollution of contact with others. They use their rules and interpretation to judge others and create prejudice. They control access to the best of everything just to prove that they are better and so deserve better. They act so righteous and yet are so wicked in their treatment of those they think of as inferior.

It is this that has made me a realist. The real world is filled with falseness. If there is truth, it is so buried in the hypocrisy of the leaders that it cannot be seen, much less found. And this kind of realism leads to pessimism and a deep doubt in anything that one is told.

I believe there is truth, but the reality of the world around me makes it hard to believe that anyone can be trusted to lead me to it. The Romans have control of our world and bleed us of any hope of freedom. The priests have control of our religion and use that to take from us in order to make their lives better, which make us wonder if God cares. The Pharisees and Sadducees have control of our social structures and use them to keep us at a distance, so that they can remain pure. They are all false and only focused on themselves and what they want and leave us to doubt if love for one another exists.

Yes I am a realist. Words have little value unless I can actually see and experience for myself what they are and what they represent. An apple is not an apple until I can actually hold it in my hand and eat it. Love has no meaning because I no longer believe it is possible. Philosophy is empty because it is constantly changing and adapting to suit the person's desires and world.

Yes I am a realist. And you probably don't think what I am saying makes sense. If you do then you are like me, wondering if you will ever find someone who can be trusted, if there is really a truth that can be tested. You are wondering if hope has any value. You are wondering why everything appears so senseless and empty. You are wondering, and this is the dangerous part, why God created us.

Well, that is how realists think. If you can't see, or hold, or experience something for yourself, then it is not real. No matter how many words are used to convince you, no matter how many people tell you it is true, it is not true until you can see it for yourself.

Here is the flipside to being pessimistic and a realist. Once you do know something is real, you make it the center of your life. But you may ask, and rightfully so, if I am such a doubter, how did I become part of Jesus' inner group?

There are days when I wonder about that myself. And then I realize how blessed I am to be included.

But as to how that happened, that is the mystery. Like any doubter/skeptic, you never trust what people tell you. And if you hear something, your immediate response is to ignore what they say and to go on with life. But if too many people are saying the same thing, then you feel obligated to investigate it and bring an end to their foolishness. There is nothing better in my world than to see first-hand if what they are saying is true or is some kind of scam being foisted on people.

And that is just what happened in relation to Jesus. At first there were a few stories about a new teacher or rabbi. Then there was a steady stream of them, and they included amazing stories about healing and miracles. At first, I thought some really smart con man was doing a great job of fleecing the people. I thought that until I learned that he asked for nothing except that they would listen to what he had to say.

So, the next time he was in my neighborhood, I followed the crowd to learn what was happening. Like any good realist/skeptic I made sure I was in the back of the crowd and made sure I kept a low profile. No pessimist wants to be seen and become identified with a fake.

So, there I was, and something changed. His words were very clear and so different from all the other teaching I had heard from all the hypocrite leaders, Jewish and Roman. He clearly was not from that part

of our world. His language was, well it was applicable and real, it spoke to me. I felt drawn to this man, but like any skeptic, my defenses were strong, and I walked away.

Now I knew the words were reasonable and had potential, but I needed to clarify all the miracles I had been hearing about, so I went back and watched. It wasn't long and they began to come, all kinds of people with all kinds of physical issues. He healed them all. All of them, and there was no show, no magic wave of the hand. He just touched them, and they were healed.

This unsettled me. My world of pessimism and doubt had been shaken. Here was a man that I could believe in. Here was a Man who actually could do what He said He could. Actually, He never talked about promising healing and such, He just did it. It was the people who told others what had happened. It was secondary to His focus, and that really got my attention.

Skeptics and doubters create huge walls to protect themselves from the risk of commitment and the disappointment we believe will always follow. Over the next few days, my way was systematically stripped away until I had no more reasons or excuses not to believe. And slowly I had moved from the back of the crowd to somewhere at the side and near the front.

That is when my world was really flipped over. That man Jesus looked right at me and called me to be one of His disciples. I did the "who me?" thing with my face and my hand, but even as I did so I realized that I had no more excuses, no more barriers. He had satisfied them all, and so my attempt at avoiding His clear call became a release from my fears and a door into the hope I had always believed could not exist. Then began an incredible journey into faith and belief. I grew in my belief in this Man. So much so that when He decided to finally go to see the family of Lazarus, I was the first to tell the others we need to go as well. They had been hesitant, because the leaders were threatening to kill Him the next time He came into Judea.

I only wish my faith had been as strong later after the crucifixion. I had had my hopes destroyed. This Man, who I believed was our only true hope, was dead. The very people who had made me a pessimist had found a way to kill the One who had finally given me something to believe. I was so depressed and discouraged that I abandoned the others and fled into my own private inferno, reliving all my despair and hatred of the world.

And yet I could not hide from the others. Why? Because someone had told me an incredible story which I had to hear from their lips. I found them hiding from the authorities...a wise move in my way of thinking. When I saw them, what I saw was not fear, and that surprised me. Instead, I saw a new and more powerful hope and joy. I looked at them with my face of doubt, and they quickly told me what had changed their fear into joy. They said that Jesus was alive and had arisen from the dead!

Now all my defense mechanisms went into overdrive. A dead man coming back to life, impossible. It didn't matter that I had seen Him raise Lazarus and a few others. I had seen that, and He was there to make it possible. But He was dead, how could He raise himself? So, my response was out of my mouth before I could think, "I will not believe in this nonsense, this wild grasping for hope in the face of reality. You are all insane and fools. I will not believe unless I can touch Him, unless I can put my hand in the wound in His side."

Those words were the base of proof that I would need. In fact, they are the doubter's motto: If I can't see and touch it for myself, then I will never believe. And I made them the basis for judging their fantastic hallucination, which was the only possible explanation for what they were telling me.

But having nowhere else to go, mainly because of my fear of being caught and killed by the leaders, I chose to stay with them until I could plan my escape. It was only a few days later that He appeared. He came right up to me and almost repeated my challenge word for word, as if He had been present and listening. It was then that I understood and experienced true faith. But it came at a price.

I fell at his knees and admitted my lack of faith. I then spoke the truth that I should have said when I first heard He had arisen. The truth that I should have believed, because people I knew and trusted had told me. And in that moment, I saw myself for what I was and knew that I was forgiven and would go and do whatever He asks me to do.

And I fell to my knees and proclaimed him My Lord and My God. The words that followed hit me like blows from a sledgehammer. I believed because I had seen and touched Him. But the greater blessing would be to those who would never see and still choose to believe.

Still choose to believe. Those words ring in my ears. They have changed how I think and how I live. I am learning to choose to believe, because it is that level of faith that brings true understanding of what God can do. It is that level of faith that produces life and hope that others can see.

I am thankful these days that Jesus saw me, picked me, and taught me to trust Him, believe in His words, and learn to live a life of faith instead of living in a world of doubt and no hope.

For further study

How serious is the issue of doubt in our lives and our faith?

How did doubt affect Peter? Matthew 14:29-31

Naaman struggled to believe the directions he was given to be healed. What did it take for him to overcome his doubt? 2 Kings 5:11-14.

What did Elisha's servant struggle with, in the area of doubt? 2 Kings 6:13-17. What did it take to overcome his doubt?

What was the disciples' first reaction to seeing the risen Lord? Luke 24:38-43

Review the following scriptures about doubt:

Matthew 21:21-22

James 1:2-6

Hebrews 11:6

Matthew 13:31; Mark 4:31; Luke 17:6

Review all of the above, and think about what you could do to overcome doubt in your life.

Solomon – I can't do this

My father is an incredible organizer. He should be. He led our armies to victory after victory. He has the ability to see all the factors in a given situation and come up with a plan. And if thinks he is missing something; he is not too proud to ask others for their opinion.

He also knows his limits. I have seen him consult with the prophets and the priest on many occasions about making sure he is doing what is right. I have seen him make mistakes as well. We all do, but with my father I have seen something not as common. He is a humble man and when shown his error he confesses it and apologizes for what he has done.

Having said that, he has been busy in recent years planning a number of things. A key focus has been creating the structures to govern this country. There is so much involved in caring for the people's needs, providing for the administration of the king and his officers, and dealing with all the countries that are under his authority. Just thinking about all that is going on makes my head hurt.

Besides that, he is very focused on the planning for the temple. Every day he is working on the plans. This, in spite of the fact that he has been told he is not to actually build it. While he is not to build it, there was no message saying he couldn't prepare for its construction. So he is working with architects on the design of the temple, its courts and so on. I have seen the plans, and they are incredible. It will be a magnificent building, and all the related rooms and courts will be just as magnificent.

That has added another layer to all he is doing. He has been gathering the materials and resources for its construction. He has gathered an immense amount of gold, silver, and bronze to be used in the construction and manufacture of all the furniture and instruments. Besides that, there is the iron for nails and all the stone that is already being quarried. I think he hopes to have everything in place so that the work will begin when he dies and the new king is on the throne. That person will inherit an incredible program of administration to oversee, as well as the construction of the grandest building ever conceived.

And today I learned that I am to be the new king, the one to succeed my father, David. I am reeling at the mere thought of all that is involved. I will be responsible for oversight of the vast administrative structure for leading our country. I will be responsible for dealing with all the foreign leaders and representatives that owe us allegiance. I will be responsible for the construction of the temple of the God of all creation.

And did I mention the oversight of all that happens in its administration? Yes, my father reviewed all the guidelines and requirements given by Moses for the Tabernacle and then expanded them to function adequately for the administration of the temple and all its ministries. While the high priest will have direct control of all of that, I will still be responsible for making sure it functions properly and that everyone is doing their job, as planned by my father.

Well I just can't do it. I am not anywhere near as organized and insightful as my father. I was almost ready to say so, when suddenly my brother tried to have himself established as the new king even while our father was still alive and without consulting him. That act on his part caused another system to kick in. This came about because there was a message from the prophet that a son of David was to be the

next king, and so a group of key leaders put into motion a plan that resulted in my being crowned in response to their actions.

Now I have to deal with an upset, angry, and potentially dangerous brother. He has quietly accepted what has happened, but I know he will not let go of the shame of what happened, and one day he may try to usurp me. I am also aware that there are at least three others who represent potential threats to my being king. Some were part of rebellions, and others supported my brother. I am scared and again wish I could have said “no, I can’t do this job.”

I decided to leave the city for a break and to spend some time praying and telling God that He had picked the wrong person. I wanted Him to understand that I just didn’t have the skills or ability to do all that was expected of me. I, in fact, was not the administrator my father had hoped for and needed me to be.

It was during this time of prayer that God came to me. He asked me what I would need, in order to be a good king and be able to effectively lead His people as king. I could have asked for anything. I could have asked for the power to control everyone and anything, but power has a way of creating problems. I could have asked for the wealth it would take to pay people to do the work, but money has its limits and can create problems of greed, and so on.

As I pondered this, I began to realize what I really needed. I began to think through all that my father had done and realized he was a wise man. He was not only a good administrator, but he was able to make informed and intelligent decisions. He was a man who gathered around him people he could consult when needed, especially in relation to what God wanted. And then it hit me, he was a wise man, not because he knew so much, but because he knew how to see what was needed, how something needed to function, and who could do the work.

Also, I realized that people responded to him and gave their best because he understood the importance of relationships. That doesn’t mean he succeeded in everything. There are always those who will oppose what is right, always those who are greedy, and so. But he knew how to respond to them as well, in ways that furthered his influence and popularity. And if he made mistakes, he was willing to admit them and learn from them.

With all that in mind, I realized that the real source of power, wealth, and relations was wisdom. I didn’t need more power or wealth. As king, I already had a great deal of both. What I needed was wisdom to know how to use it all properly. And that is what I told God. I admitted that I felt totally inadequate to run the kingdom and to lead His people. I admitted that more power and wealth would not make any difference in my ability to do so. What I really needed was wisdom. I asked God to give me wisdom. With wisdom I could do what was expected of me, run the administration of the country, build the temple, deal with the politics of other countries, and provide for the temple.

And God honored my petition, and more. He said that my request was the mark of a wise person, one who knows their limits and seeks help from those who can provide what is lacking. And because my petition was wise, He told me I would have incredible wealth and power, more wealth than anyone had ever seen and enough power to have peace during my reign as king.

Well, that is how I got from trying to reject becoming king, because I was convinced I could not do it, to being blessed by God with the ability to do all that was necessary to be the best king possible. But that

lasted only as long as I kept my eyes on God. My world fell apart, when I stopped focusing on God and what He wanted, to focusing on others and what they wanted, especially the desires of my wives. To do that, I stopped thinking about the needs of the nation in order to satisfy their needs and my own.

The truth is that in God we can do anything but only as long as we keep God at the center of all we do.

For further study

Reflect on what God asked the following people to do and how the task could have seemed impossible.

Moses – called to lead an exodus of slaves

Joshua – called to conquer a land filled with multiple enemies

Daniel – called to serve God in the court of the conqueror of his nation

Jonah – called to preach a message of judgment in the capital of the Assyrians

Nehemiah – called to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem while surrounded by enemies

Jeremiah – called to preach about the fall of Jerusalem

I have not given you the scriptures for these to encourage you to think about what they faced and why they might have refused to do what God wanted them to do.

Do you remember how each of these people responded to the challenge?

Moses

Joshua

Daniel

Jonah

Nehemiah

Jeremiah

Consider the following scriptures and God's directions:

Joshua 1:1-8

Exodus 3:11-4:17

Jeremiah 1

What do you think God would be willing to do to help you accomplish?

What you think is too big a challenge for you?

Nehemiah – I don't dare offend the king

I am a Jew. I am in exile because of the failure of our people to follow the true God. Most of my people live and work in difficult places. Some of us have been able to find a better life. That has been possible mostly because of the influence of Daniel in the lives of the various kings of Persia. He was highly respected, and that translated into the kings and leaders deciding to trust our people in very sensitive positions and roles within the government and even in the household of the king.

Many of us now serve in the house of king Artaxerxes. They have learned to trust us and even place their lives in our care because of that trust. I am one of those who serve in his house. My job is the royal taster. I make sure of two things, first that the food tastes good. That means I protect the king from poorly prepared food, and I protect the life of the cooks. You can imagine what would/could happen to them if the food they prepared didn't please the king. That also means I need to have a very clear understanding of what the king likes and does not like. So, each day I must consult him about what he and the queen would like for their meals. If I fail here, I could lose my position with all its privileges and even my life.

Yes, there are privileges. I am a trusted member of the king's court. Whenever there is food or wine, I am there. I am required to be there to supervise the food being brought to the king and those who both prepare and serve it. I get to enjoy all that is happening in the court, because so often the meals and wines are served when there are special activities or events.

I also get to travel with the king on any journey he plans. As a result, I have had the privilege of seeing some pretty amazing places around the kingdom. It also means that my housing and provisions come from the king's supplies. I eat what he eats and must dress in the manner of the court.

It also means my life is directly connected to the king and his schedule and desires, no matter when that might happen. Whenever he wants something to eat or drink, no matter at what time of day, it is my job to make sure he gets what he wants, when he wants it, and that he will enjoy what he gets.

My second responsibility as royal taster is to be sure that nothing contains poison. A king has many enemies, and one of the most common ways to get rid of a king or enemy is by poisoning them. It is a terrifying part of my job, to realize that if I have not succeeded at managing the staff and the supplies, I could die. In fact, such a failure would be a clear judgment that I was not a wise choice for this position. It would mean that I had allowed someone access to his food and drink at some point in the process from buying to serving.

As a result, the king has given me a great deal of freedom in the selection of those who work in the kitchen, buy supplies for the kitchen, and anyone else who may be involved in his care. The selection of these people involves a lot of work, and I need to know a great deal about anyone who is recommended. A single misstep by me or my second could be disastrous. (Yes, I have a helper, which allows me to have some time off when needed or if I am sick. This is very important in such a stressful position, and the king understands this as well.)

There is one other thing that I have to be constantly aware of, and that is my demeanor when in the presence of the king. Uncertainty and distraction must never show in any way...in my face, my voice or appearance. Such things create distraction for the king and what he is doing. And then he might start

worrying, if I am being distracted in some way that might affect how well I am doing my job, which then creates stress for him and will make him wonder if I may be a source of worry to his safety.

Fortunately, I have not had any problems with how I appear in court. I make sure that any issues are resolved to my satisfaction before I enter the king's presence. Until yesterday, I have managed all of the work, supervision, and my appearance satisfactorily. So well, that the king has become quite relaxed and amicable when I am caring for his needs. Just enough for me to feel okay and not enough to create any issues with others.

But yesterday, I received a message from my people who are still living in Israel. Well, I should say those who, with the permission of the previous king, chose to return. They were also to rebuild the temple of our God and resettle the land. I have heard that the temple has been completed, which was quite encouraging, but yesterday's news was unsettling. The city where the temple was rebuilt is still in ruins, and the people are suffering and living in shame.

This news was so distressful that I had to ask my second to fill in while I mourned the news and prayed to God for wisdom. How can we, selected to be God's chosen people, be an example to others if we cannot take care of ourselves? How will people believe in our God if this is what is happening? God had promised that if we humbled ourselves and confessed our sin, He would restore us. And He had made it possible for everyone who wanted to return to do so.

As I prayed, the answer became apparent to me. Among those who had returned there were few who knew how to be administrators. They knew how to farm, how to care for the temple, how do many things, but it was obvious that no one who had gone back was able to unite the people to provide for the reconstruction of the walls, and rebuilding of the city and our society.

The next thought that came to mind startled me and then scared me. The Lord made it clear that I had received this information to challenge me to be the one to go back and care for the issues affecting the city of Jerusalem and surrounding area. It was clear that if the key city were rebuilt, resettled and properly governed, the region would prosper as God had promised. What scared me was that this meant asking the king to let me take a leave of absence, something unheard of for a royal taste tester.

I tried to tell the Lord that what He was suggesting was impossible. I didn't think the king would ever allow a key servant to go, especially one on whom he depended for his personal safety. I also felt that the king might react in a very negative way. I had heard stories of people entering his presence in such a way that made the king unhappy. The stories were pretty clear about what happened to them, and it was one of three things: banned forever from the capital and the king's presence, put in jail forever (worse than being banned), or executed (the most common outcome).

For the next four days I argued with the Lord, explaining why I couldn't risk making such a request. I even suggested a number of people, who I thought could do a better job. And while that may be true, they would not have had access to the same resources as myself. Being a key servant in the king's house does open a lot of doors and create a respectful attitude in those you deal with. One might even say it creates a bit of fear when used correctly, smoothing the way to get done what needs to be done.

But after four days the king began to ask for me, and I knew I could not be absent any longer. I had to resume my responsibilities and hope I could keep my emotions from appearing in my countenance and behavior. For a while I was able to manage it. I almost lost control a few times as thoughts of what was

happening washed over me. But one day a piece of business relating to the region around Jerusalem was presented, and I lost control. Before I could escape and recover, the king saw me and noted how sad I appeared. It was notable in that, until that moment, I had never displayed any emotion other than what was required in the moment.

I turned back in fear but was met with a concerned king instead of the anger I had often seen. So, I decided that I would have to obey what God had told me and tell the king what was on my heart and the reason for my losing control of my emotions. He listened quietly and intently. He did not interrupt me until I had finished. Then he shocked me completely by asking what I wanted to do about the situation.

I was stunned and almost didn't respond. Fortunately, I had thought about what needed to be done and quickly laid before him a plan to deal with the situation. Then I had my second, or was it third, shock of the day. He asked me how long it would take me to do the work. I had not really thought about this but blurted out the first number that came to my head, and he agreed. Then I took the biggest risk yet and asked if he would give me letters authorizing my activity and the funds I would need to carry out the work. My fourth shock of the day...he agreed to everything and sent me away to make preparations and to make sure everything was in order in the palace before I left.

Well, now I am back, and my staff has done an excellent job of caring for the king. So good that I was immediately reinstated.

Was the task easy? No. Were there challenges? Yes. To better understand all that happened just read my memoirs. But take a moment with me and imagine if I had not listened to God and let my fear of the king and his response stop me from obeying. What would have happened to the city, the temple, and the people if I had not obeyed? Clearly, God had prepared, not just me, but the king as well to carry out this work. When we pray to God for direction, we are the ones who need to be ready to take the risks necessary and do what God asks.

In fear, we make many bad choices thinking that we are protecting ourselves, when in reality we place ourselves at greater risk. Which is worse, to disobey God and risk His wrath or to risk the wrath of a person or human structure? We don't like risk. And at the same time, we want approval. So what risk is worth taking and whose approval is most important when God calls?

For further study

Can you think of at least 3-5 ways that you could offend someone, and it would result in their rejecting you and what you want to do or recommend?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

What happened to the baker as a result of his offending Pharaoh? Genesis 40:16-22

Jesus shared a teaching that caused a strong reaction in many of His disciples. What was the teaching? Why were they offended? How did many react? John 6:52-69

This problem of being offended can go two ways; we offend others, or we become offended. How could each of these affect your ability to do what God wants you to do?

In Matthew 5:11 Jesus says that we are blessed when people insult us. Why would they do this, and why would this be a blessing?

As you can see, there are two sides to the idea of offending. How our actions could offend others and how the actions of others can offend us. How are we to handle each of these?

Father of sick child – I don't know what to do

I am a blessed man. I have a wonderful wife and some pretty incredible children. And like any family, we have our ups and downs, our bumps and bruises. If you have children, you know what I mean. All children fall down and scrape a knee or elbow. All children bang into things and get bruises. And like any parent on occasion we may be the ones who cause the events that can result in the bumps and bruises.

When our children are wounded, we are wounded. We want to know what happened. We want an explanation for why they got the cut scrape or bruise. It is part of caring for them. It is reality. It is amazing how much healing and help is given when we ask how something happened. Our child is suddenly aware that they have a caring mother and father. They may be crying and sobbing, but at the same time they are savoring the attention.

Let me explain. As you ask them what happened, listen to how they feel, and comfort them, there are two wounds being dealt with. You are caring for the physical wound by easing their fears about how serious the wound is. At the same time, you are easing and helping to heal the deeper wound that is underneath the physical wound. The emotional wound.

Whenever we hurt ourselves physically, it also creates emotional wounds. These create fear, worry, and uncertainty in our minds. The fear that we did something wrong, failed to do what was right, and so on. If not dealt with, this type of wound can create deeper wounds and fears. Without any care and encouragement, the fear of trying again may grow and in time immobilize a person.

If handled incorrectly, the pain becomes anger and resentment at our insensitivity, brusqueness, and criticism. This can also appear as disapproval of what they did, which can have one of two future responses; disobedience and repetition of the action, or the fear of trying again because they fear us and the possibility of more lack of approval.

The other critical situation, which is harder to deal with, is if we somehow by our actions or inaction have made it possible for our child to be injured. Our own carelessness is the source of the injury and if we don't handle this correctly, our child will learn not to trust us. They may even believe that we want them to get hurt.

A failure to confess our responsibility or seek forgiveness will create a deeper wound. A wound that will be much harder to heal. We have wounded their ability to trust us or depend on us to protect them.

To be honest, all of us as parents will at some point do something that results in our child receiving some kind of bump or bruise. It is just part of life. And this creates a point of pain in them and at the same time a great deal of pain in the heart and soul of the parent. At times it may be hard to determine who is suffering more, the child with a minor wound, or the parent who caused it. And that is as it should be.

I could say much more on this, and if you are a parent you understand all that I have said.

There is one kind of injury that creates a level of pain and suffering that is almost impossible to face or deal with. This is when your child becomes ill. Not ill from a minor accident or even one more serious. The kind of illness that cannot be fixed by washing it, patching it, or other physical treatment.

Watch a parent whose child, baby, has a fever. They are often at a loss as to what to do. Even a mild fever creates a sort of panic and disconnect. There is a sense of helplessness. Why? Because we cannot see what caused the fever, the diarrhea, the vomiting, or the pain below the surface. They say they don't feel well, and we don't have an explanation. Our children depend on us for answers, explanations, and help to relieve their pain. When we can't do that, they feel lost and confused. But not as much as the parent who is trying to find an answer, an explanation, and some way to make them feel better.

Most of the time these hard-to-explain illnesses do not cause a great problem. They usually pass quickly, and any number of standard treatments and medicines ease the healing process. You know the right soup, the right temperature in the room, the right aspirin or other tablet for a fever and cough medicine for a cough, and so on. Often the best source of information and understanding is from your own parents who have survived all these in caring for you.

If it is more serious, then you can consult a local authority who has a broader knowledge of the illnesses that affect people, especially children. They can often recommend herbs and other natural treatments. And most of the time it all works out. Now you might say that generally all that worry was a waste of time. But I am here to tell you it isn't. The worry one expresses about their child's health is a special balm and is often the most powerful medicine available.

A parent who listens to their child's fears and concerns gives that child strength. Your worry eases theirs. Why, because they know someone is taking care of them and making sure everything that can be done is being done. That emotional support can trigger many unseen forces in a person's mind. The mind has a lot of influence in the healing process and ability to deal with sickness.

If you are with me on all of this, by now you are wondering why I have felt the need to review what all parents already know? And you would be right, I have a reason.

I am dealing with something more serious than any of the above. In an effort to understand what is happening, I have been reviewing all that has happened in the past to see if I have missed something. To try and discover if anyone else has dealt with what is happening to my child and if they have any answers.

I am reviewing all the treatments and recommendations of my parents, my friends, the experts, and so on. The problem is that none of it is working, and no one can explain to me what is causing my child to be so sick and getting weaker every day. My wife is becoming emotionally distraught and almost refuses to leave our child's side. That is good, except she is crying too too much, and that is affecting both her and the child. As a result, my wife is drained emotionally and physically, and it is clearly impacting my child. You can almost feel her fear.

I try to spend time with her and talk about fun things. I talk about what is happening in my work, with her friends, and how we need her help with this and that. It works for a while, or as long as I can stay with her, but then I need to get back to work and that means she is alone, or worse having to comfort her mother.

This has been so wearying and discouraging and, if I am honest, I am truly afraid that my daughter is going to die. Her smile is fading. Her ability to eat and be part of any family time is waning. Actually, she can barely get up to do anything now. If I am not careful, I will join my wife and together we will mourn our child's death before it actually happens. That is terrifying. The mere thought that she will probably die and we can't do anything to stop it.

I was wandering aimlessly in town, well aimless in the sense of wandering, in the hope of maybe finding someone who might know what this sickness is and may have heard of a treatment. Wandering through the apothecaries and talking to another herbalist. Most of the time the answer was no, and the herbalists, if they saw me coming, disappeared out the back of their stand.

It was while I was wandering through the market in this dazed state that Jesus came through our village. A friend told me that he had performed a number of incredible miracles and that he was healing all kinds of sickness and disease with just a touch or a word. I was so desperate by now that even this craziness (I mean who can heal with a word or a touch?), made me go in search of this man.

As I started to turn to go where they said he was, there he was. He had entered the town and headed directly to the market, almost as if he were looking for me. As I turned and saw him, it was quite evident that he was the person they spoke of, and he was surrounded by a crowd.

Up until now I had been pretty courageous, or at least persistent, in my search for help for my daughter. But there were a lot of people, and how could I get his attention? He didn't know me, and I had no one to introduce me to him. While I was pondering this, I kind of lost it or glazed over. Next thing I knew was that this man they called Jesus was standing right next to me, looking at me and waiting, as if he knew I wanted to ask him something.

Before I had time to think about it, thinking too much can prevent us from doing what needs to be done, I blurted out my dilemma and then, courageously, no, more like audaciously, asked if he could heal my daughter. His face and concern had given me the courage I needed to speak.

The words he spoke struck deep into my heart and being. He asked if I believed he could heal my daughter. I so much wanted to believe. I was desperate to believe what the people were saying. I hoped beyond hope that it was all true. At that point I could have lied and said of course I believed or I wouldn't have even asked.

But as I heard the word and looked into his eyes, I knew I could not lie. I knew that there was very little belief or hope in my heart. So I told him the truth...I believe, I want to believe, but I am filled with unbelief. I wanted to hope for the impossible, but I had tried so many treatments and plans that there was very little hope left and so very little ability to believe at this level, that a man, by word or touch, could heal what no one else with all their knowledge and treatments could not explain or even provide relief.

His look told me that was the correct answer. In truth none of us, without sufficient experience, can truly believe the first time we are asked to believe. My answer was correct, I am filled with unbelief. I don't think this can be done, I want to believe but...

He looked at me again and said that I should lead the way to my child. That first step was my first step towards finding help in spite of my lack of belief. I chose to take a step believing he would follow and come to see my child. It was in that moment that my belief began to grow. His confidence was contagious. His presence was compelling, and so I trusted him to follow, and he did.

That step of belief allowed me to lean on His confidence, His compassion. Each step we took my belief grew. There was still doubt. But that doubt gave way to a knowledge that no matter what happened, I knew this person cared, and my child would be better.

When He arrived, He simply touched her body, and she was well. It was exactly as they said it would be. In that moment I learned so much more about belief and faith and its value. I learned that there is much we can learn and gain about believing that God loves us, even when things are beyond our control.

We had a private conversation, He and I. After that I knew that no matter what might happen in the future, God was always present, always caring, and if the answer did not come in this life it would come when I and others would be ushered into His presence in eternity.

Parents, know this. God loves your children. He cares about what happens to them. And He cares about you and your role as parent. He promises to provide everything we can't and more. Sometimes the answer will not always be what we want. But you can be sure that He will provide all that is needed for their care here and into eternity, if that is the next step.

For further study

What do we need most when we feel lost?

Hebrews 4:15

Matthew 9:36

How does God help us when we don't know what to do?

Romans 8:26

Psalm 10:17

How could knowing we are God's children help us deal with this issue?

Romans 8:16-17

What should we do when we see someone lost and confused?

Romans 15:1-7

Timothy – Nobody respects me, because they say I am too young.

My name is Timothy. I am from a very religious family. Well, my mother and grandmother are very religious. They are both Jews. My father is a Greek and doesn't have much interest in their beliefs. He loves my mother and so has allowed them to teach me all that they believe, as long as I am not circumcised. This was a difficult concession, but they agreed and since I was a child, they have been teaching me all they know about their belief, well our belief in God. Yes, I am a religious nut according to some people.

That meant that I was learning about God, the Torah, and other parts of the Jewish scripture every Saturday, every day at Torah school, and then they would review everything with me in the evening. Many of you would say I had no life, but for me it was great. There is so much to learn about the God who created this universe and wants to have a personal relationship with us.

The only sad part was that we could not go to the temple to fulfill our obligations related to the sacrifices. I must admit my sadness was as much about never getting to see the temple and its wonders, as it was a sense of shame for not doing what I was told to do. The descriptions of the temple were amazing. The description of the sacrifice less so. The building was great, but the way they described the process of presenting one's sacrifice sounded more like a gauntlet to survive than an encounter with God.

Then one day Paul and Barnabas came to our town and began teaching about the Messiah. I had read many of the passages they referred to, but they had an entirely new interpretation. According to my teachers, a day would come when the Messiah, a modern version of the warrior king David, would come and reestablish the kingdom of Israel. This would be a glorious day, and we would be specially blessed with wealth and power, respected and honored by the whole world.

They told us that the Messiah had come but not as a conquering king, at least not to conquer other kings and establish a renewed version of the United Kingdom. Instead, He had come to conquer something more important. He had come to conquer sin and its penalty. They said He would, as a result, be the king of a worldwide realm, but it would not have physical boundaries or an earthly form and structure.

Anyone could be part of this kingdom; Greek, Jew or mixed breed like me. Even Romans and anyone who desired to have their sins forgiven by this Messiah could be part of this new realm. As my mother and grandmother listened and talked, I decided to review all that we had been taught. I discovered that in almost every way their interpretation of the passages related to the Messiah was more accurate than what we had been taught. When I shared this with my mother and grandmother, they agreed with what I had discovered.

As soon as possible, we met with Paul and Barnabas to share our desire to commit our lives to the true Messiah of, not just the Jews, but of all the world, Jews and Gentiles. There were many others who joined with us, and there were those who refused to listen. They were mostly leaders in the synagogue and in the end forced everyone who chose to follow the teaching of Paul and Barnabas to leave.

As a result, we had to form our own group. This was a struggle. No one wants to be excluded from their friends and people. But we knew we could not continue to believe what they were telling us. For a short while we enjoyed the teaching of Paul and Barnabas, and then they had to leave. Before leaving, they selected a few members of our group to be the leaders to continue our study of the scriptures and learn better how to follow the true Messiah.

A few years later, Paul returned. By then I had grown physically and spiritually. The leaders allowed me to teach the children and some of the youth. They saw that I had a gift for teaching and helping others to understand the Truth. So, when Paul returned, they sought him out and told him that he should take me with him. I am not totally sure why Paul agreed but, with some heartfelt goodbyes to my mother and grandmother and to my father, I went with Paul.

I was unsure about all that was happening. I was barely an adult. I wondered who would listen to me. Young people are not highly respected, nor do people listen to a man who is not married. At least normally they don't. Paul was clearly an exception. I think it was because of his training at a highly respected school led by one of the top rabbis.

At first my job was to be a helper and to learn more about the truth of the message that Jesus had brought to the world. Over time I was given more responsibility. But I must be honest, my age, well my lack of confidence in myself, created problems. The real issue wasn't my age. The real problem was that when things became difficult, I would fall back on the excuse that I was too young and they should not expect too much of me.

Over time it became more than my excuse, because people seeing my fear or timidity and my behavior would use my own excuse against me. It was my own fault. I failed to learn to trust God and not worry about factors like age and compliance with key rules. To avoid further problems with this, Paul insisted that I be circumcised. The fact that I was part Jew and uncircumcised was creating some issues, and they were further amplified by my own lack of confidence.

That action helped reduce the reaction of people. They decided, rightly or wrongly, that I could now be trusted. I was given more responsibility, but I let myself get in the way and opened the door once again to the complaint that I was too young. I could have dealt with it, but it was easy to let that be the reason for my failures than to admit truthfully that I was not doing what I was capable of doing.

Finally, Paul, seeing the issue, wrote me a letter. It was filled with important teaching on key areas of being a good leader and doing a good job of teaching and preparing others for the work. In the middle of

one letter, he told me not to let others look down on me because of my age. I got the message very clearly. I was to stop allowing people to use my age against me. I also got the second message, to stop letting my own feelings and evaluation interrupt or damage the work.

He reminded me that I had been called by God. He also reminded me that I had received excellent preparation from my mother and grandmother. He mentioned the fact that as he wrote to me, he was reminded that he had seen my potential and agreed to take me with him. Paul had chosen me.

I got the message clearly. After that I had fewer problems because of my age. In fact, people sometimes commented that they were surprised at what I knew and understood, based on my age. Soon I was able to overcome the issue of age, both from my perspective and the reaction of others.

Let me be clear. Age can be an issue. A young person with gifts can become proud, even insolent and disrespectful of others. This is an issue that needs to be identified and dealt with. Such a person needs an extra dose of humility to avoid having others look down on them, not because of their age, but because of a lack of maturity. It is the flip side of the coin relating to age issues, a lack of confidence and an air of superiority and pride. Both of these need to be dealt with for a young person to be effective in fulfilling God's call in their lives.

I am so thankful that Paul helped me get past these issues so that I could be effective in serving others, no matter what their age is or the age difference might be. So many young people are being called to serve, and they have the strength and often the courage to do what older believers can't do.

So, I will repeat what Paul told me: don't let anyone limit your ability to serve based solely in your age. If God has called, then do what needs to be done to grow and earn the respect of those around you. If you are humble, they will listen, and you both will grow in God's love and power and ability to reach others with the message that changed your life.

For further study

How many people in the Bible began their ministry when they were young? Make a list.

Here is one you may not have known.

Saul (Acts 7:58). He was a young man when he served as a witness for the stoning of Stephen. Did his youth prevent him from doing what he felt was right? Why?

Read Paul's advice to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12. What was Timothy to do? In what areas was he to carry this out? Explain the importance of each and what it meant in terms of doing what Paul told Timothy.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

5.

What would it take to accomplish this change in his life? 1 Timothy 4:15-16

Are these lessons and directions only for young people? Why?

Elijah – They hate me and will kill me

This should be my day of celebration and victory. By now you should know why, but I will be happy to tell you and then you can join me in my misery.

God called me to be His prophet to Israel. That is not a job opening anyone should even think about exploring. It is a risky job at best and deadly at its worst. The kings of Israel hate anyone who talks about the one true God. This has been true ever since Jeroboam set up the two calves for the people to worship to avert their going to Jerusalem and eventually rebelling.

It didn't matter that every prophet who has arisen has attacked this false worship. Each one has been threatened by king and country as if they were a pariah or worse. The interesting thing is that not one of those kings has succeeded in stopping them from warning the people. Jeroboam tried and when he reached out his hand to order the prophet's arrest, it immediately turned leprous. He quickly retracted his order and pleaded with the prophet to pray for his healing. The prophet did, and he was healed.

It would seem like he would have been ready to listen to the warning, but he was not. Since Jeroboam, every king has followed his lead and led the people deeper into false worship of the calves. It seems to just get worse with every new king. If that isn't bad enough, there have been a number of assassinations and changes. Once in judgment of the family of Jeroboam, his entire family was killed. Even that was not enough to get the people's attention.

Things have only gotten worse. The latest line of kings has introduced the worship of Baal with all its hideous and carnal rituals. It was at the beginning of the reign of Ahab and his wife Jezebel that God appointed me to fill the position of prophet to Israel. I must admit I was not really excited about this.

Part of the reason for my fear was that I knew only a few who still chose to follow the law of God. My family was one of them, and I learned early about what God had done to rescue us from slavery in Egypt and how He reacted when the people disobeyed His commandments.

At first it was a challenge to get someone to even listen to me. They mostly laughed at my words and occasionally would threaten me. I spent a lot of time in prayer and study of God's word, and then as I was reviewing the punishments promised by God if the people chose to be disobedient, I noticed that one of them was a warning about drought. It is the first of the curses for disobedience in Lev 26.

As I read, God began to speak to me. He told me to go to the town center and announce for all present to hear that there would be no more rain until I, Elijah, announced it. God then told me to disappear. He knew that once the drought started, my life would be in danger. He led me to a small stream and sent ravens with food for me to live on. All went well for many months, until the stream dried up.

God then sent me to the home of a widow. By now you have all heard about the miraculous unending supply of flour and oil in her house. It lasted almost three years. At the end of three years God told me it was time to see if the people were ready to listen to the truth about their sin.

After three years of living on a miracle, I had become pretty confident in God and what He could do if a person obeyed Him. That reality had bolstered my courage, and so fearlessly I returned to Israel to confront Ahab, the false priests and the people.

As I returned, I met Obadiah a servant in Ahab's house. He was terrified of me and the fact that if he told Ahab where I was, I might disappear, and he would be killed. I assured him I wouldn't and that Ahab and all the priests of Baal and Asherah were to meet me, and we would have a test to prove who was truly God.

You should have heard that account by now. God won the test without question, and I killed all the priests of Baal and Asherah. The people shouted that God was the only true God. At that moment I was ecstatic, invincible. Things only got better as I then bowed down and prayed for rain. Finally a small cloud formed that told me rain was coming.

I told Ahab to hurry and hook up his chariot, and we raced back to Samaria. I ran and he rode. I beat them back to the city. We arrived just as the rain began. What a glorious moment for me and for God. The people cheered and welcomed me. I was enjoying the moment, when Jezebel appeared in a balcony above me. She was screaming and telling the people to seize me. She was furious and wanted me dead for killing her priests.

This threw the entire crowd into confusion. The panic was so great that the soldiers could not get through the mob in order to seize me. I escaped and managed to get far enough away that I felt safe. That is when the pity party started. You know, nobody loves me, everybody hates me, and so on. I was all alone and felt like a complete failure. I told God to just let me die. All the great things, the incredible results, meant nothing and now there was a price on my head.

The next thing I knew, I was being fed by an angel and sent on a forty-day journey. There on the side of a mountain God met me and tested me. He made me realize that great events only amaze people but don't necessarily change them. He also helped me realize it was not the great things that I had done that were critical, but the fact that I was listening to Him and being obedient. He also reminded me that I was not alone and that there were a large number of faithful still living in Israel.

By the end of this experience, my confidence had been restored. He also gave me a number of tasks to carry out, none of which were risk free. In fact, they were quite dangerous. It is amazing how your attitude can change when you realize you don't need a miracle to know God, that you don't need storms and explosions to hear His voice or sense His presence.

I obediently returned to Israel and carried out my tasks. Each time I did so, God provided for my security. Jezebel couldn't touch me. The reason for that was that, while the people had not changed their ways and were now following God, they were sufficiently terrified by the past events and my part in them that they prevented her from carrying out any threat.

Ahab was sufficiently terrified so that when I confronted him about taking Naboth's vineyard, he groveled and pleaded with me to reduce his punishment. God saw that he was sincere in his regret and

told me that the punishment would come during the life of an offspring. He was relieved but not enough to change. Jezebel had control of his life and he did almost everything she wanted him to, except as it related to me.

Later, one of his sons tried to arrest me and sent three groups of soldiers. The first two were destroyed by lightning because of their insolent behavior. The last group came and were very respectful, and so I led them back to the king. Imagine how that looked, a group of 50 sheepish soldiers following the man they were supposed to arrest.

What is more interesting to me is the question of what would have happened if I had given in to my fear and not listened to God? I realize that some would say that it would not have made any difference. I disagree. It made a great deal of difference, especially for those who remained faithful to God. It also kept the truth alive for all to see. They would have no escape and no excuse when the promised judgment finally came.

If you ask me if I am ever still afraid, the answer is yes. These are dangerous times, but I serve a God who is with me always, and no matter what happens He will be with me. He is not a God who cannot hear or respond like the false gods, Baal and Asherah. They are impotent and will always fail. God will not.

I was afraid, and I preferred to have God end my life instead of facing the threats of Jezebel, until I realized how truly powerful my God really is. He is so powerful that I can trust Him with my life and at the same time so gentle as to be able to help me face my fear and overcome it. Jesus later put everything into perspective: we should fear the one who can destroy the soul but not the one who can only harm me physically or even cause my death. Trusting God means life forever in His presence now and into eternity.

For further thought

There are a number of people in the Bible who had to make choices that could result in their death.

Read the following scriptures. List the name of the person, and explain what the risk was and why you think they were willing to take it.

1 Samuel 20:11-42

2 Kings 11:1-3

Daniel 3:1-30

Acts 7:1-60

What did Jesus say about the danger of following Him?

Matthew 10:21:31

John 15:20

What did Paul say about the risk?

2 Timothy 3:12

Philippians 1:18-26

What is the promise given to those who are persecuted?

Matthew 5:10-12

Read Acts 7 – Did Stephen realize the danger he was in? Why did he risk his life for the gospel?

Hannah – they all think I am out of my mind.

I have a great husband. He treats both of his wives with kindness and love. Yes, I am in a polygamous marriage. This is not uncommon among my people and at this time. The only downside to all of this is that for many years, I was childless. That fact created a great deal of stress between me and my co-wife.

She has had several children and doesn't let me forget this. I am the senior wife and have benefits, but not having a child creates a sense of emptiness. My husband tells me over and over that it doesn't matter to him. He married me because he loved me, and that he will continue to love me no matter what.

He is sweet and he does love me. Often, he gives me extra portions, especially when we go to Shiloh for the different festivals. Even so, he doesn't really understand the needs of a woman. I know he loves me, but in a way, like all men, he is just a bit dense about what really matters to a woman. The things that really bring fulfillment.

One of those is finding a loving husband. Another is having children. No woman in my culture feels like she is truly a wife and woman until she has given birth to a child. Motherhood is a core value of what it means to be a complete woman. The wife who doesn't give birth is looked down on, and people think that she must have committed a sin, a serious sin, of some kind to be punished in this manner.

Yes, this is what people think, childlessness is a punishment from God. I know better, because I know I have not committed any sin that I believe warrants such a punishment. Further, as a result of my

husband's faith and commitment to observing the law, I have had the opportunity to learn much about God's law and the consequences of disobedience. As a family, we do not fall into the category of those who could receive such a punishment, which is reserved for those who worship false gods.

Each year, as we returned to Shiloh for one of the many different festivals and celebrations, my anguish grew. My husband tried desperately to soothe me, but again, he is just as naive as other men about such things. I will give him credit for his efforts to ease my pain; he is a very good man.

Finally, one year, the pain became so great that I decided to enter the tabernacle to pray. I found a spot off to the side so that I would not disturb anyone, but once I started praying, I began to sob and sway. The pain was so deep that I could not avoid expressing my pain to God. In my anguish, I did the unthinkable. I promised that if God gave me a son, I would give him to God all the days of his life, and he would never have his hair cut. This meant he would be a Nazarite from birth.

I must have been a sight, sobbing, swaying and moving my lips but without sound. I didn't realize any of this until Eli came and started to scold me. I must have been pretty upsetting to him, because he thought I was drunk. This would have been very offensive, to enter the tabernacle drunk and make such a commotion. I assured him I was not drunk. He quickly realized that, in fact, I was not drunk but emotionally distraught.

I am not sure why, but the next thing I heard was Eli saying that God had heard me and would surely answer my petition.

This truly lifted my spirits. As soon as I could, I told my husband what had happened. He was very kind, but I could tell he thought I was living in a dream. He became concerned that I may have lost my mind and began to keep a close eye on me, to be sure I would not do something foolish. When the second wife found out, her abuse went into overdrive. What kind of woman promises to give away her child, especially if it is her first one? What kind of woman risks the disapproval of others, especially her husband, for making such a vow?

These fell hard on my husband. In our culture such a vow must be approved by the husband, or it becomes null. He was torn. He didn't want to approve such a vow; it was insane to consider doing such a thing. At the same time, he was very afraid that if I were becoming mentally unstable, then denying my vow would push me over the edge. He truly loved me and wanted me to be satisfied with his love for me.

In the end, he chose not to nullify the vow. When he saw that I finally relaxed and seemed to be at peace with my life, he felt good about that choice. Life returned to its normal pattern. Normal for me at least. My husband would sleep with each of his wives, per usual, and the other wife continued to constantly remind me of my failure as a wife. That is, until a few months later when I realized I was pregnant!

As a result, things changed quickly around the house. I was now truly the senior wife. I was obeyed and not belittled by the second wife. My husband became excited, and I had to be careful that he didn't overreact and shower me with too much praise and extra gifts. The one thing I didn't want was to let my pregnancy create a whole new cause for tension, as a result of preferential treatment.

All was going well until I reminded him about my vow. For a few days he was sullen and distant. I think he regretted his choice and again worried that if he tried to alter his decision, I could easily go insane. I truly believed that I was pregnant because God had heard my promise and responded. That belief was considered strange and abnormal by many.

Nobody could expect such answers from God. It had been so long since there had been any kind of miracle. When there were miracles, it involved the activity of a key leader and benefited large groups of people. No one, as an individual, could expect God to answer their prayers, especially one that seemed so selfish.

So, I was once again struggling. People were again thinking I was not quite right in the head. For the next few years, I refused to attend the festivals with my husband and family. I said that once the child was weaned, I would take him to the tabernacle and fulfill my promise to give him to God. No one said anything, but I knew what they were thinking...she is not right in the head, she will never go through with such a promise, and so on.

If I am to be honest, when that day came it was not easy. I had waited so long to have a child. And yet, here I was back at the tabernacle and handing my son, my three-year-old son, over to Eli. After that, I didn't miss a festival or trip to celebrate and see my son. I always had a new tunic for him. Those trips were so fulfilling.

Then came the unexpected blessing, another child, and another, and another, until I had three more sons and two daughters! Now I have so much joy at home plus the joy of having a son serving our God. What greater blessing could one hope for? And no one thinks I am crazy anymore.

For further study

How often were people in the Bible asked to do what seemed insane? Or at least impossible? Read the following scriptures and identify the person in the story and what they were asked to do.

2 Kings 4:1-7

Matthew 14:15-21

Hosea 1:2-3

Jesus' family thought he was insane. Mk 3:20-21. What was the explanation of the Pharisees for Jesus' behavior Mk 3:22?

How did Jesus respond?

How would you respond if people thought what you were doing was insane, even though you are obeying what the Lord has told you to do?

Festus said this of Paul in Acts 26:24. How did Paul respond to him, verses 25-32?

What was Herod Agrippa's evaluation of Paul's mental state?

Reflect on how you would handle having people think you were not normal because of your faith in God.

Lame by the pool – They will never trust me

Nobody cares. Nobody cares. Nobody cares! Are you listening to me?! Nobody cares!! 'Cause I have been lying by this pool of Bethesda since, I can't remember. Yes, I can, since the day my parents brought me here and left me.

They had grown tired of trying to care for me and so brought me here. But they told me about the story. You know the story. You must know the story. Just look at all the people around this pool. They all know the story, or at least those who brought them here do.

Everyone here knows the story and hopes it is true. Really you don't? Okay I will tell you. It is said that an angel comes and stirs the water. When that happens, the first person to get in the pool will be healed. The problem is there are many things that cause the water to be stirred. A sudden gust of wind, a brief tremor of the earth, even a large troop of soldiers passing by can cause the water to be disturbed.

But it doesn't matter, if the water moves there is a mad rush to the pool. The insanity that occurs is incredible as people fight, literally fight, with the person next to them to be first. I have seen one person trip another person, even tackle them if it means getting there first. I have seen family members interfere with others to get their loved one to the pool first.

One time I saw a group literally throw a person into the pool. She went flying over the others and landed in the pool with a big splash, kind of like a belly flop. Then they had to rush to rescue her, as they realized she couldn't swim and obviously wasn't healed. Such pandemonium!

I can never get anywhere near the pool. You see I am lame, and I have no one to help me. Remember, my family brought me saying it was because of the story and hope of healing. The truth, you want to hear the truth. They were tired of caring for me and basically abandoned me here. They hoped that I could beg for my bread and manage somehow. For a few years they would come by every few days and bring some food and give me clean clothes. Maybe once a year they would bring me a new robe. But it has been years since I have seen them.

It is a good thing this is a busy place, lots of people come here to get water and socialize. That is how I survive. Some of these people have enough compassion to offer us a cup of water and a piece of bread or other food. Just enough for that but not enough to stay here and help me into the pool if and when the water were to move.

I am becoming more and more cynical by the day. Can you tell? I am not sure I have ever really seen anyone with a serious medical issue, a handicap, actually healed. Occasionally, I hear someone celebrate, but they were well enough to beat everyone else to the pool. That suggests the possibility that their illness was not physical but mental.

If I am honest, that is a type of healing; those people were dealing with a type of illness and did need help. Searching for any way to gain healing.

But I am here and I have no one to help me. So, NOBODY CARES! Again, I will shout it NOBODY CARES!

Well, that is how I felt and in many ways, I feel the same way now, even though I have truly been healed. Let me explain.

So here I was, sitting next to the wall, like any other day. You can't just sit by the pool because of all the people coming to draw water. And if you were to try sitting by the pool, you would receive so much abuse from everyone else. You would even risk having someone physically drag you away from the pool. I tried it once, and they beat me and dragged me back to my spot.

So here I was, sitting in my spot, when this guy comes up to me and asks me if I want to be healed? Oh, the anger and frustration that welled up in me. What kind of idiot asks a lame man sitting by this pool that question? But I bit my tongue to avoid cussing and risking offending God. So, in my sweetest voice I said "yes, but I have no one to help me."

Then he told me to get up, take my bed, and walk. Now I knew he was an idiot and probably a lunatic as well. Who tells a lame man to get up and walk?

What happened next, I still can't explain, but I suddenly was on my feet and walking around with my arms wrapped around my bed. All the other sick people were in shock. Many wondered how it was possible for them to have not seen the water move, and how I managed to get there first. Those near me were even more amazed, because they knew I had not even been near the pool. They saw the man and began to reach out to him, but as quickly as he had appeared, he was gone.

I just stood there holding my bed in a daze. Finally, I decided to head home and see if my parents were still there and if, in fact, I still had a home. As I left the area, I encountered a number of priests. They were furious to see me carrying my bed, since it was the Sabbath and such activity was strictly forbidden. When they asked why I was carrying my bed, I told them who I was, about my healing, and about the man who had healed me and that he had told me to pick up my bed and walk.

They grew more angry and wanted to know who had healed me. I told them I had no idea who he was. That answer only made them more furious, and they threatened me and my family with complete exclusion from the temple and worse. That is the worst threat for a Jew. If they carried out that threat, I would not be able to find work, sell goods, buy food and would be treated worse than a leper.

Even though I was healed and should be celebrating, I was frightened. So frightened that I began to wish he had not come and had not healed me.

As I walked away completely confused, the man who healed me reappeared. He warned me not to risk losing all I had gained and commit other sins. This time I recognized him. But because of my fear of the priests and their threats I barely heard his warning and advice. All I wanted was for him to leave me

alone so I could go find the priests and answer their questions to protect myself and my family. They had said I would not be expelled from the temple and nation, and so on, if I brought them the information they desired.

I was relieved, as they listened and stop making threats. Relieved, until I saw how they persecuted the man who had healed me and, as I soon learned, had healed so many others. I began to wonder why such a generous and kind man was such a threat. And why was it such a big deal to carry my bed after being sick for 38 years?

Then it hit me. My fear of retribution had caused me to turn in Jesus to the authorities and caused Him to be persecuted and finally leave Jerusalem. My actions meant that many others who, like me sought healing, would not have the chance because He was gone. Soon I found myself trapped between those who accused me of stealing away their chance for healing and those who used me to judge and condemn Jesus.

In the end, I had to leave Jerusalem. The stress was too much to bear. I began to wander, hoping someday to find Jesus and ask Him to forgive me. If what I learned about his teaching is true, He may do that, and I might find some peace.

What a spot I am in. I had been crying over and over that nobody cared, and when Someone did care, what did I do? I stabbed Him in the back, betrayed Him to the authorities, and stole the chance of healing from others. My selfishness in caring for only myself meant I had chosen not to care about others. I broke the second commandment. Love your neighbor as yourself.

For further study

How often do we get in the way of receiving a greater blessing as a result of what we have received already?

How often do we prevent others from receiving a blessing because of our attitude? What kinds of behavior could cause this to happen?

Read Proverbs 18:1-2. What do you learn about trust here?

Read Luke 16:10-12. What do you learn about trust here?

Read Matthew 6:24. The focus is on two masters, God and Money. Why can't you serve both? What other things in life could prevent you from serving God and proving yourself untrustworthy?

Ruth – I am an enemy

I am a Moabitess. We are a strong nation today and have been raiding and wreaking havoc on the people of Israel for years. They fear us, and we take advantage of them at every opportunity. The reason is, according to my family and others, they are a horrible people and inferior in every way to us.

I believed what they said for many years. That is, until I talked to the ancestors who told me a story I had never heard. They told me how a former king named Balak had refused to let them pass peacefully through our land to reach their destination on the other side of the Jordan. I learned that Balak tried to hire a powerful wizard to curse them. The god of the people of Israel frustrated that plan, but Balak attacked them anyhow without provocation. We lost that battle and a fair bit of our territory.

That made sense to me. You don't attack a peaceful people with a powerful god and expect to escape unscathed. Besides, they weren't a threat to us. They just wanted permission to pass through our land.

Since I was a willing listener, the ancient ones began to tell me even more stories. Stories I had never heard before about the god of the Israelites and the miracles he performed in Egypt and how anyone who attacked them were defeated, because they were his chosen people. This amazed me, since our gods were only powerful within in our land, and this one had power over any god they met, wherever they were.

I also learned that a possible reason we were able to raid and create problems for them was because they had abandoned this god to follow the idols and gods of the nations around them. This created many questions for me about who the true god really was. As a result, I also began to question my own religion and realized how empty it was. It became clear that our god was powerless, and the idol in our house was an empty image.

So when a family of Israelites arrived in Moab because of the severe drought in their land, I was quickly interested in learning more about their god firsthand. They were distant and fearful at first. That made sense because of how our people were mistreating them.

It was actually their sons that smoothed the way for me. They had two sons, and both were single. The rest of that story is part of the mystery of love and life. I was attracted to one and a friend of mine to the other. Before long we were married to the two brothers. It was a marriage of love but not without issues. There are always issues when the children of two enemies fall in love and get married.

Slowly we overcame those issues, and everyone settled into a comfortable routine. I think my interest in their god went a long way to making that possible. Our marriages did in fact make their life easier among my people. For me, it opened the door even further to learning more about their god. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. Their god was truly worth worship and following.

Life was going well, but then disaster struck. First our husbands' father died of a mysterious illness, and then the two sons died. All through the area people were dying of this strange disease, both my people and any Israelites living among us. For us, their death was even harder. It all happened before either I or my friend were able to bear a child for our husbands. And Naomi, my mother-in-law, lost her husband and both sons. She was almost inconsolable. This was huge, because in our cultures a widow without children is a nonperson. She can't go home, and she has no way to provide for herself.

The three of us were distraught. We didn't know what to do, and for days we hardly could stop crying and bemoaning the unfairness of it all. To make matters worse, our food began to run out, as well as our resources. This made us even more distraught. It was at this point that Naomi decided the only thing she could do was return to her people and hope someone there would feel sorry for her.

That decision left my friend and me with very limited options. To stay meant one of two things, returning to our families and hoping they would accept us back (a very unlikely thing). The reason for this reaction is that it is normally the responsibility of the family of the husband to care for their widows. The other option was to become prostitutes to survive (not a pleasant thought).

Going might not be much better and could be worse, since the two of us would be seen as enemies. At first this seemed like the better idea. We would be together and could care for each other. So down the road we started, until Naomi stopped and tried to dissuade us from going with her. She was successful to some extent. My sister-in-law listened and turned back.

Her words created fear in my heart, too, and I almost heeded her words. Instead, I began to review why I had married her son. I realized that I was not really afraid of anything she said, because I wanted to follow her god, and that was not possible if I went back to my people. I would rather face the risk of the animosity of her people, as long as it opened the way for me to know her god.

Well, we got back to her home alright, but life was difficult. We survived because her god, now my god, had created rules and laws to help provide for people like us, who were in dire straits. It was possible to survive and not be forced to become a prostitute. It was still difficult, and I was truly fearful as I went to glean the left-over grain the harvesters missed or that fell to the ground as they worked. The laws were pretty clear, if it fell to the ground they were not to go back and pick it up. Those were to be left for people like me, no matter what their nationality might be.

As I worked, I became a bit excited and then somewhat alarmed at how much I was able to find. It appeared to be way more than there should be. Those workers were being very sloppy in their work for me to find so much in such a short time. It wasn't until much later I learned that the owner of the field had seen me and learned of my story and how I chose to stay with my mother-in-law to help her. He was impressed and told them to let extra wheat fall to the ground.

When I got home, Naomi was amazed and quickly asked me where I had been gleaning and if I had met the owner, and on and on. For the first time in months, she actually smiled. My answers told her that I had stumbled on to the fields of a relative. I say stumble, because that is how we are taught to think. The truth is my new god had probably guided me.

When I arrived the next day, I was told not to stay with the other gleaners. I was to glean right among the workers. I was told that this would keep me safe. Also, I was told in no uncertain terms not to go to any other person's fields. Again, it would be later in talking with Naomi that I understood why. I had forgotten that I was a Moabitess, and there were many who hated my people. In any other field it was quite possible that I could be attacked, beaten, and maybe worse.

My fear that I would be hated and rejected was real. But step by step, this new God I had decided to worship and follow, was showing me how He loved all who truly loved Him. I may be a hated Moabitess in the eyes of many, but to him I was his child.

The rest is a bit romantic for the men in the crowd, so I will cut it short.

The owner of the fields was attracted to me. He was what they call a “kinsman redeemer.” I did as Naomi recommended, sleeping at his feet until he took note of that. He then, with all haste, dealt with the issue at hand, to redeem the land of Naomi’s husband. Not a simple thing, since he was second in line for that right or privilege. The other person wanted the land, but when he heard that he would have to marry me, he backed out. He wanted the land, but not the responsibility of producing children who would then inherit the land.

That greed on his part was fortunate for me. As a result, Boaz, my love, bought the land and married me. I now have children, and Naomi is ecstatic. She believes without a doubt that God sent them to Moab to bring me back and restore her family and its pride. We are a very happy family, and I too believe that God had a plan, and it included me even though I am a hated Moabitess.

For further study

I find it interesting to note how many people, who were hated as foreigners, were selected and honored by God to serve Him. Review the following list and describe why they were an enemy and what God did in their life.

Rahab – Joshua 2:1-21

Darius – Ezra 6:1-15

Cyrus – 2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-8

Widow of Zarephath – 1 Ki 17:9-16

Keep in mind that these people were considered enemies, only because they were not from the tribes of Israel, the chosen people.

What is God’s attitude to those who are not from among the chosen people?

Galatians 3:28-29

In this passage, who are described as the chosen people?

What more can you learn about this from Romans 10:12 and 1 Corinthians 12:13

Who has now become the chosen people of God, and why is this so? Colossians 3:9-17

Sarah – I am too old

Have you ever had someone try to convince you, even argue with you, about something you know is not possible?

That is what was happening to me for years. Usually when someone does that, we react in a number of ways. At first, we let them talk, hoping they will finally give up and realize you are not interested or don't want to hear about what they are saying.

If they don't shut up, you may start avoiding them. You find different places to shop, different routes, and different times in an attempt to avoid meeting them. Your goal is to avoid allowing them enough time to regale you once again with their beliefs.

If you are truly desperate, you may actually attempt to do something that will convince them you are listening. You may accept part of what they are saying. You may even change what you do superficially, hoping they will be satisfied and finally stop talking about it.

When all else fails, you may finally risk being truthful and openly declare you don't believe them. This may be accomplished by laughter or any means of diffusing tension that will be communicated by your ...

The problem is that, in the end, none of it matters. You just cannot avoid them forever. Your attempts to convince or distract them will eventually be revealed, and you will be trapped by your own actions. In fact, what you did to deserve their attention can cause you problems in the future. If you laugh at them, they may challenge you and your disbelief. Then you may find yourself lying to avoid offending them. It is sad how afraid we are to be honest and admit what we really think.

Well, all of that happened to me.

I was finally making peace with my barrenness, when God called my husband and promised him that he would become the father of a great nation, even though we had no children.

How old do you think I was when all that happened? Don't answer that. My age doesn't matter. What was critical was the fact that I was well past the time or possibility of becoming pregnant. Yet over and over God kept saying my husband would be the father of a great nation. Each time God did that, it hurt. I knew I couldn't have children, and yet over and over I heard that promise.

There were a few times when I was glad for my barrenness. It possibly saved us when we were in Egypt and the pharaoh had an idea of making me one of his wives. We used a half-truth to prevent the potential death of my husband. Some of these men have no problem killing a woman's spouse in order to add her to their harem. I did mention I am quite beautiful?

If I didn't then... I am telling you now. I am quite beautiful, even in my advanced age. The proof is in the fact that, twice, powerful men tried to take me from Abraham. So we told them I was his half-sister, which is the truth. We just conveniently forgot to mention the fact that we were also married.

Well God didn't let that pass. He made those men pay for their jealous greed. They paid and then had to beg Abraham to pray for them. If I had been less beautiful or had children probably none of this would have happened.

By now we were getting desperate for Abraham to have a child. Abraham suggested that since we have no children that he could appoint Eliezer as his heir, and his children could fulfill God's promises. But God was not interested in this solution, it had to be a biological son of Abraham.

Then it was my turn to suggest a solution. I encouraged Abraham to accept my concubine Hagar as a minor wife. Minor, because I am THE WIFE. He was a bit hesitant but finally agreed. She soon was pregnant but became very arrogant. You know the behavior and attitudes, I mentioned before that I could not tolerate her presence. I told Abraham to get rid of her. He did, but I could tell he was not happy about this. I think he would have rebelled if God had not told him one more time that he was to have a child and this time I was the one to bear the child.

Hagar came back and became quite submissive and obedient. That pleased me, but I was still not completely happy about what was happening. Once her child was born, my place would be altered. It didn't happen, but I let it affect my behavior. So when God showed up to tell Abraham about his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah, He again mentioned the plan. He stated clearly that I would have a child. I laughed.

How could I not laugh? It was a ridiculous statement to make. The visitor...God, angel, whoever...asked Abraham why I had laughed. I heard that and came out of the tent to defend myself. But instead of defending myself, I lied and stated that I had not lied. How does one challenge God and tell him he is wrong? His response was blunt, yes you did laugh, and to make things very clear, by this time next year you will give birth.

And that is exactly what happened. I gave birth to Isaac. A miracle, but then we are talking about the Creator of the universe. You would think that by now I would be a little less prickly, but no, I was still easily upset. And I protected Isaac like a crazed mother hen. Don't ask me what that means. I just know I was very sensitive about any insinuations and slights. In the end, it resulted in Hagar and her son Ishmael being once more sent away. This time they did not come back.

Actually, when I think about it, I need to confess something. I did not handle that relationship well. Especially when you consider that I was the one who recommended that Abraham sleep with her as an attempt to fulfill God's promises. If you learn nothing else from my story, learn this: never assume you know better than God and can self-fulfill His promises.

I am old now, much older. It is my time to go. I have seen God fulfill so many promises and protect us from so many dangers, most of which we caused. He has been faithful in spite of our foolishness and floundering around. I am old, but in God I will be timeless. Don't doubt God, ever!

For further study

Why do we believe that when people become old, they are no longer able to serve or be useful?

Read about the following people and what happened to them. Describe what happened and how they responded. How did God use them?

Zechariah (Luke 1)

Simeon (Luke 2:25-35)

Anna (Luke 2:36-38)

Why were they included in God's plan?

Read Joshua 14:6-14

What was his attitude related to his age? What did he do?

What does God have in mind for us even in our old age? Isaiah 46:3-4

What can you learn about the value of both young and old people from 1 Jn 2:12-14?

Why is it important to have both age groups in the church?

Job – I have lost everything

I have lost everything. There is nothing left. Why should I keep on living, when there is nothing? Even my friends despise me and say it is my fault? Here I sit, a shell of my former self, and I have no hope, no reason to live. They dare to criticize me, one who has helped them and cared for them in the past. I would rather die than continue to live and deal with this feeling of loss and uselessness. How can I explain what has happened to me in a way that makes sense to you, when it doesn't even make sense to me?

I had everything. I had a beautiful family, I had all that I could ever need. I had the respect and approval of everyone I knew. And most important, I had a relationship with God.

And I made sure that I helped those in need and provided a good example to others of how to live. I was very concerned that people understood how to live right and honor God in everything and all of the time. To support this idea, I often offered sacrifices after my children had a party. I did this because it is easy to lose one's awareness of their actions and thoughts in such times. Those of us who are wise know that just a little too much wine, and our tongues become loose and then we do the foolish things we would never consider when sober. Really it is our minds that lose control, and the evidence is in our tongues and actions.

I never attended those parties. I wanted them to enjoy themselves. I think they appreciated that and the fact that I was so diligent in offering sacrifices to God on their behalf. They said so on different occasions. Now that will never be an issue again. That and the fact that I will no longer be able to help those in need, never can expect the same respect as in the past, and so on.

The reason is that I have lost everything. In less than 24 hours I lost all my flocks, all my camels, along with all my servants, and if that was not enough, I lost my entire family. The only ones who survived were myself and my wife and a few servants, and they ran off. Then, as if that wasn't enough, I was afflicted by the most horrible disease. My body became covered in these sores that itched and ached and leaked. My only relief was found by sitting in an ash heap and scrapping them with pieces of broken pottery.

My grief was inexpressible. My wife looked at me in horror. She alone had survived even this and had no words of hope or life. She said I should curse God and die, as if He were to blame for everything good and bad that happened in our lives. I know He allows all, but how could I curse Him. That was unthinkable. But in one point there was truth, my life has become worthless, because I have lost everything I held dear, even her love and understanding.

Then my four friends arrived and saw this fact and respectfully sat in silence for seven days. That was a relief, well only a little. It was good to have them there, but at the same time it heightened and intensified all that had happened. In desperation I cried out to God wanting to know why? Why such destruction? Why such suffering? I could think of nothing that I had done that could warrant such violence and destruction.

My friends heard me, and then began what I have come to realize was the real testing. The testing that would reveal what I had really lost or not lost.

They began to spew out all the ancient wisdom they could remember. Sadly, all of that was the basis for how life was to be experienced. The wisdom that explained why people suffered or prospered in this world. They spewed out all the platitudes they had accumulated that are used to judge, to encourage, to explain how they thought the world should operate. In all of this, they dared to state that they spoke on behalf of God.

Then it got more intense. They talked about having dreams, hearing a spirit whisper in their ear. They claimed that such things were further proof that they were right. That I deserved everything that had happened to me. Even the fourth one, who waited until I had silenced the first three, did much the same thing. His excuse for waiting was that he assumed that the other three, being older and wiser, should have silenced my objections. He did his best to rework all they said into a newer, better strategy to convince me they were all correct. In the end, his words fell silently to the ground, as empty as the others.

I, in my turn, argued that the evidence was clearly in opposition to all they had said. I challenged them over and over to reveal what they said was the grievous sin I had committed. I challenged them to look around and realize that many wicked people lived long and happy lives. Even their children benefited from the wealth they had accumulated as a result of their sinful actions. Not once did they even take a moment to review my life. Not one of them could contradict my claim about how the wicked were not always punished. In the end, I had silenced them.

What I had not succeeded in doing was to find an explanation for all that had happened. I had cried over and over about what I had lost and how I was suffering. I cried out, pleading for an opportunity to defend myself or at least hear the charges that had been brought against me and so resulted in such devastation in my life. Nothing.

I know God hears us, but nothing. I believe God knows the reason, but nothing. I know that one day I will know, but today, nothing. Until then I would remain nobody, one who had nothing, one who could not speak of God to others. I had lost everything and had been reduced to ashes and without meaning.

Then it was that God spoke. And I was totally unprepared for what I was about to hear. I had never given thought to all that I still had. Never considered what had not been lost. I had never considered the depth of my ignorance of all that was around me and His Presence in everything I saw and heard. I became aware of the depth of my rashness in the words I had spoken.

So when He asked me to respond, I said I could not. That only opened up another round of revelation into the incredible wonder of God and all of the creation that I enjoyed every day. My head spun with the vast amount of truth that I was given, and finally I realized that there was only one way to respond. I needed to confess my lack of knowledge of God Himself. I had assumed that I knew Him. I had assumed that I could challenge Him and force Him to explain to me, to bow to my desire for an answer.

Finally, I realized that I truly had no real knowledge of God before that moment. I knew of God and believed in His existence. I adapted my life to honor that knowledge and belief. And that was good, but none of that gave me the right to defy God, to challenge His authority. So I bowed and admitted that truth. And in that moment, I learned how much I truly had which had never been lost. I had thought that, in losing all the stuff, I had lost everything.

Yes I had lost much, but it was nothing compared to what I still had. There is no way to make a comparison.

God gave me back all I had lost, and more. But even more importantly, through what had happened, He corrected a lot of misconceptions about how life in this world works. The good and bad are not what determines our relationship with God. It is how we handle what happens that reveals Him in us and to others.

For further study

There are several passages that talk about this concept of the value of property, and how it affects who we are and what God wants to do through us.

Read the following and describe the issue and what is most important. Now define why this is true.

Philippians 3:2-11

Matthew 19:16-28

Read the following scriptures and explain what rich and poor mean in them.

2 Corinthians 8:8-9

1 Corinthians 3:12-15

Consider the following idea – a poor person can have more wealth to draw from than a rich person.

Why could this be true?

Esther – It's too risky

My uncle has just asked me to do something very risky. If I do as he asks, then I could be killed. That is because anyone entering the king's presence without an invitation risks a death sentence, unless he is in a good mood and holds out his scepter. If he does that, the guards will let you go instead of dragging you off to the executioner. I haven't had an invitation to see the king for at least a month.

And you may ask what would happen if I didn't take this risk. My people will be killed by royal edict. They have a powerful enemy, who has taken offence at my uncle. I risk doom if I go to the king, and I might escape the edict. Why? Because the king does not know that I am a Jew just like my uncle.

You are probably wondering how I managed to find myself in such a predicament. How did a Jewish exile become queen? Sorry, I think I failed to mention I am the queen of Persia, and my husband is the king. That would be the only reason I would even be able to approach those doors and enter the king's private rooms.

Oh yes, the background. You will forgive me if I am a little distracted.

A couple of years ago the king was having an especially grand party celebrating, oh, I don't remember what. He likes to celebrate and has the resources to do so. Does it matter? No. Well during this celebration that lasted months, he summoned his wife, the one before me. Be patient and I will explain.

He summoned her to show off her beauty to all the other men who had been invited to this long party. In this country, men and women do not participate together in certain types of festivities. So the men were having their party, and the queen and the women were enjoying their own party.

In the midst of this he summoned the queen to display her beauty. She got upset and refused to go. I have yet to discover what it was about; what he wanted that made her so upset. That refusal resulted in the king divorcing her. Sounds trivial, but the wise men made it a huge issue. They didn't want to lose control of their wives. They felt that if she were allowed to defy the king, then it would set an example for all the women and there would be rebellion. Sounds a bit extreme, but he bought/accepted their explanation, and the queen was dethroned, divorced, and disappeared.

No one talks about her and what happened. They are all afraid that if anyone heard them talking, they could end up with the same fate and be accused of dissent or worse. So no one is talking.

It all happened so fast, that the king didn't even think about the fact that by doing this he suddenly was without a queen. How could he be king and not have a queen? This fact had escaped all the wise men as

well. But they were quick to formulate a plan and the king loved it. The plan was to search the kingdom for the most beautiful women, bring them to the court and prepare them to go in to the king.

Each girl selected would be given beauty treatments and trained in the arts of love. I am not going to explain either of these. It is very personal. After the preparation they would be allowed to spend one night with the king. When the king found a lady that pleased him, she would become the new queen. And no, you don't need to know how many ladies were before me.

Well, I was caught by the search and sent to the king's harem for preparation. They asked no questions about race, social status, etc. They were only concerned about physical beauty. It was not important if you were educated, could think, or hold a conversation. In the harem I met a lot of girls who were only skin deep, if you know what I mean.

So they didn't discover that I was an exile from a conquered nation. They did not learn that I was a Jew, nor did they discover my uncle was Mordecai, a person who held an office in the king's palace. That was not unusual. The kings of Persia have always preferred Jews for key positions since the time and influence of Daniel.

My uncle advised me strongly not to say anything about any of this. I chose to listen and so found myself in the opulence of the palace, enjoying incredible treatment, food, and access to incredible riches.

It was during my time of preparation that two events occurred that would be the source of the disaster I was now facing and a key part in our salvation. The second was the fact that my uncle discovered a plot to kill the king and passed all the details to me. I secretly sent them on with his name attached, and the king was saved.

The other had to do with a vile man named Haman. I had had little contact with him, but each time I met him he made my skin crawl. The way he looked at me was very unpleasant, and I was truly glad I was in the palace and safe. He was the type of man who would do anything to advance his name and position, and I was about to learn just how far he would go.

My uncle is a humble man, but he is a proud and dignified man. Haman is a brute with an ego the size of a mountain. He expects everyone to bow and condescend to him, especially those who he feels are inferior. This brute of a man decided he hated my uncle. My uncle is a bit proud and stubborn, but also knows his rights as a servant of the king. And my uncle had refused to bow to Haman on several occasions. This infuriated Haman who decided to set in motion a plan to destroy my people, every one of us.

And that brings us back to where my story started. Well, I realized that my uncle was right and that to save my people I needed to risk entering in the king's presence without an invitation. Thankfully God responded to our prayers and the king welcomed me and accepted my invitation to dine with him as well as Haman.

In the end Haman and his family were destroyed and my people saved. If you want the details just read the book written about it. The key was taking a risk at a critical moment which made that possible. Now we are all secure and the state of my people has improved greatly. God is truly faithful when we do what is right even when there is risk involved.

For further study

Why do people take risks? Read the following stories and explain the risk being taken and why they took that risk.

2 Samuel 17:17-22

2 Samuel 23:13-17

Romans 16:3-5

Philippians 2:25-30

Joshua 2:1-13

Jesus told us there would be risk in following him. Read Matthew 10:17-42

List at least three of the risks mentioned.

Explain the hope Jesus gives us as we face these risks.

Does the passage explain why we should risk following Jesus? If so, what reasons are given?

Are there risks you take each day? Do you worry about them? Why or why not?

What is the promise given to those who risk following Jesus?

Rahab – I am a prostitute, a sinner.

I am a prostitute. No one will ever forgive me. When people see me, one of two things happens. The first is they look at me and scowl, then come actions and sounds that reveal their disgust of me. This is mainly the reaction of the women. They also do their best to avoid even being seen anywhere near me, and if they can't then they move as far from me as possible. A lot of men react that way as well.

The second response is from the other men. They look at me and though they may act like they despise me and don't want me around, their eyes tell a different story. They express desire. Sexual desire. They want to have sex with me, to do the forbidden, believing that it will be incredible and give them some

kind of inner satisfaction. There are also those who are just lecherous. They have the same look in their eyes but don't bother trying to hide their desire. They want me to continue in my questionable trade.

I am not going to try and explain the why and how of the path that led me to be a prostitute. I just am, and it has provided the income I need to live. Actually, I am doing pretty well. I have a house on the wall of the city of Jericho near a city gate. That is ideal for me and for my customers. They find it easy to slip in unnoticed and spend a little "quality time" with me and then sneak away. For some, since they are coming to do business, it is just really convenient to not have to go out of their way before they conduct their business. I am easy to find, and it does not cause a lot of disruption in their overall plans. But that is enough about my life and where I live.

There are a few who envy me. That seems so strange, but whatever.

All was going well until we began to hear stories of the Israelites and how their God was defeating all of their enemies. Especially frightening were the stories of how he had literally destroyed Egypt with a series of ten plagues. Then forty years of wandering followed with more stories of protection and provision. Most of that happened before I was born. But my clients have been a veritable fountain of information lately. They are very nervous about all that is happening.

Now usually I don't pay much attention to what they say, but this was different. I became curious and began to ask detailed questions about their God, their beliefs, and what they were hoping to do. Then I heard about the defeat of our neighbor who had tried to have them cursed. The god of this people was different.

I heard stories about their law as well. One that made me stop and think about my life and sin. Their God had punished them for being sexually loose. Something we didn't even think about. You did what you wanted as long as no one was hurt or offended. But not this God. As I listened to the stories from the traders, I began to realize that my life was contemptible. I began to understand why the women avoided me and judged me. Then I realized that if my own people saw me as offensive, then how would this God evaluate me?

There was another conversation that I began to hear, too. People were scared and wondering if there was any way to escape the wrath and judgment of this God. They had heard that He had ordered the complete destruction of a number of tribes and nations for their appalling practices. They said it was because of the sexual orgies and sacrifice of children that we did when worshipping our gods. If that was true, then now I was doubly damned.

I began to search for answers, and that led me to shutting my doors. I could no longer continue in my profession. My friends, the few I had, said I was insane. How would I survive? But I didn't care. If we were doomed to be destroyed, then the only way of escape that I could see was to renounce everything from my past.

The next few days brought a sense of peace I had never experienced before. I knew my decision was correct, and then to confirm that, the Hebrew spies knocked at my door. How they dared, I don't think I will ever know. Why I opened the door is another mystery, but I did. As soon as I realized who they were, I knew they were in trouble and I would be in trouble too for letting them in.

At that moment I knew what to do. I needed to protect these men. They served this God that I had come to admire. They needed to survive. I confessed my belief to them and they relaxed noticeably. I quickly told them where to hide...and not a moment too soon. For as soon as they were hidden, the guards came to my door. Remember, my house is on the wall near the gate, and the Hebrews had been seen in the area.

I said, yes, I had seen them, but I was sure they had left the city already. The guards did a quick search. They did not find the Hebrews and left. The next thing I heard was the city gate closing. That meant there was only one way out, through the window. Fortunately, I have a side job of knitting and had enough red thread to make a rope strong enough to let them down through the window. I told them to go to the woods and hide until the guards returned. Then they could safely leave the area.

As they started to leave, one of them surprised me. He told me to be sure I hung the same thread out the window when they came back. If I did that, anyone in my house would be spared. I did and my family, though reluctant, came and stayed with me. We survived the destruction of our town and became part of this people of God. Even more surprising to me was that one of them chose to marry me in spite of my history. This God is incredible. He is a fierce judge of sin and yet can be loving and kind to those who truly repent.

My past has been forgiven. I am at peace with the true God. I would never have believed that I, a prostitute, could have received such blessings. Yet here I am, and I will tell my story to anyone who will listen.

For further study

So often, we look at a person's past before we decide to accept them and allow them into our lives.

Review the lives of the following people. What can you learn about their past and what happened to them? Why would they be called an enemy? What changed?

Matthew

Simon the Zealot

Saul/Paul

Good Samaritan

Ruth/Naomi

I have not provided you the scriptures, so you will need to do a search to find that information.

What was Jesus teaching about how to treat one's enemies? Matthew 5:43-48

Paul provided further teaching in Romans 12:18-21.

Is it easy to overcome our fear of an enemy? Think about the above scriptures. What steps can you take to deal with the issues involved?

Peter – I am a vile and wicked man

How much do you know about fishermen? I mean really. We are a revolting lot and not because we smell bad. If you worked with fish all day long, you would be revolting as well. But that is not what I mean. Being revolting because you are odorous is not that serious. If it were, I would not have found a wife.

I mean, we tend to be revolting because we do and say the most revolting things. Our language is loaded with curses and cussing. We curse the weather, the fish, other fishermen, and anything else we have a mind to curse. We cuss at each other, and anyone who slights us in the smallest way. You don't want to cross a fisherman, or you may not get any fish. Offending one can cause a ripple effect.

We know all of this, and so we are crude, innocuous, have no manners, and care little about the feelings of others. Are you getting the picture? Now let me make something else clear. I am the head honcho for a group of fishermen. So we are nasty as a group, then I am the worst because I am the leader of a group of fisherman. And if you don't know how to cuss and swear better than your workers, then they will take you apart and flay you.

So, I am a vile man. Any decent person knows better than to come anywhere near me. That means I am a braggart as well. I can out-swear, out-cuss, and out-fish anyone. And no one messes with me, because they know they will get the worst end of the bargain for it.

Then one of my workers decides to take a day off and listen to the crazy prophet. Yesthe man, John. When he comes back, he is different. His language has changed, he is not as surly and bad-tempered as in the past. He starts telling me about that man's message and the need to repent and change. I almost took an oar to hit him over the head for that one. Who did he think he was, telling me what I already knew and that I needed to change?

I was so mad that I grabbed the fishing gear and shoved off to do some fishing. I left him standing on shore. He will get no share in whatever I catch this night! Let him sit on the shore and ponder his foolishness.

Me, I fished with a vengeance. Working like two men. I was furious to think that one of my own workers would judge me. He was no different from me. I was successful. I was feared. I had a wife. What did he have? Nothing without me. And that is exactly what I caught, nothing. All night and nothing. I grew angrier with every hour and more exhausted. By morning I was totally exhausted.

That is when this other man showed up. I vaguely remember my worker mentioning him as part of his story. Something about the crazy man telling my worker that this other man had come to change the world. Well, I didn't want my world to change. Except at the moment in the morning, exhausted as I was, I wanted one thing to change. I wanted to have a boat full of fish, so I could make my worker pay for his insolence in telling me I needed to change.

That is when the other man showed up. There was a group of people following him, and they kind of crowded him into the sea. He was knee deep when he turned and asked if he could sit in my boat while he talked to the group. What did I care if he had to stand in the water? But something checked me, and I let him sit down.

After a while he finished his teaching and then told me to push out and try one more time to catch some fish. I almost exploded. I had fished all night and got nothing. That had never happened before, to catch nothing. And then to have a person...someone who had no idea what had happened or knew what was involved in fishing... tell me to try one more time was enough to make me explode.

I can't explain why I didn't. I can't tell you why I threw the net one more time. I can't tell you why I didn't make his ears turn red with my cussing and swearing. Instead I simply said okay and did what he suggested. I threw the net one more time, fully expecting it to be empty. Instead of me pulling the net in, it almost pulled me in. I barely could hang on to the net and shouted for the other fisherman, who I had abandoned on the shore, to call others to help me.

The net was so heavy with fish, it almost sank my boat! In the end it was the greatest catch I had ever seen. Then it hit me. This man was the one my worker had talked about. The one who talked about repenting and changing. Now I was frightened. If he could cause fish to appear like that, then he could know just how vile I was. As soon as I reached the shore I told him to leave. I was too vile a person to be seen in his company.

The words rushed out of me as I fell on my knees, begging him to leave me in peace. He just looked at me. I could tell he already knew all of that and was not going to abandon me to myself and my sin. Not going to treat me like I treated my workers.

Then He looked at me and told me to follow Him. I was astounded, dumbfounded, and crushed. He wanted me and said I would no longer be a fisherman but a fisher of men. I knew He was right and abandoned all my gear to follow Him.

I will be honest with you. I have not been a perfect angel. I still like to sound important, make promises that I can't keep, and say all kinds of stupid things. But in all of that, I have learned that there is no one beyond the reach of His love and forgiveness. Yes, I was a truly vile man, but now I am a forgiven man who has been changed by the power of God's love.

Am I perfect? No. But I know I am loved, and that makes me want to grow and learn to be what God wanted me to be, planned for me to be.

For further study

How many vile and wicked people do you know about in the Bible?

Make a list of at least ten, men and women.

Why would they be described as vile and wicked?

Did any of those on your list repent and choose to follow God like Peter did?

I can think of one:

Manasseh – he was considered to be the wickedest king to have ever ruled. (2 Kings 21:10-18). And God sent him to prison, where he repented of his evil behavior. 2 Chronicles 33:11-13.

What effect did this change from enemy to friend of God have on the country of Judah? Keep reading in chapter 33 to see what happens.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were also enemies of Jesus. They were part of the Sanhedrin. What did they do that revealed a change in their status? John 3; 19:38-42

Do you believe it is possible for those who are enemies of God to change?

What do you need to do to help this process happen?

Daniel – They will think I am arrogant

Most of you know me best for the story of what happened when they threw me into the lion's den. But that story reminds me of the issues I had to deal with from the beginning.

From the beginning, my friends and I were different, and I made that even more complicated from the start.

Our life was not an easy one. We lived in a time of great danger. Our kingdom was being attacked by the newest world kingdom to come on the scene, Babylon. Many of us hoped that we would escape, as we had in the time of Isaiah, when God had destroyed the Assyrians. Now we had another great prophet telling us what to expect. But, unlike the time of Isaiah, when there was hope of escaping from being conquered, the message of Jeremiah did not bring hope. It was filled with warnings and a clear promise that we would not be rescued.

As a young person this created a lot of uncertainty. We could not fathom what it meant to be conquered and carried into exile as prisoners. We would soon find out, though, when Nebuchadnezzar came through in his first round of conquests of the region. He quickly overran the country, set up a puppet king and left with clear directions about paying tribute and serving his kingdom. To make his point very clear, he took a number of us as prisoners.

Some of us were to work in the fields and the construction projects of his empire. He has some incredible plans for his city. Another group would become servants of the rich and powerful. A few of us were selected for a totally different life. They did a very thorough search to find the smartest, most fit, and most attractive for special training. The goal was to have us work in key areas of government and administration.

From the first, I wondered how we would be accepted. How people would be willing to listen to us and believe what we had to say. Would they find our work acceptable? Would they treat us in a humane and just way? When you are an outsider from a conquered nation, it is hard to believe that those who conquered you will accept you. It is more likely that you will be treated as trash and ignored.

There is no way to hide. Your skin color, the nature of your features, your accent, and many other things cry out that you are an outsider. A person of no value. A person to be used and discarded.

You can imagine the surprise of my friends and I when we were chosen for a special training program. A program that would allow us to fill some positions in the administration of our conquerors. We were amazed, and a little terrified about what this might involve. Working in a field or as a common servant, one can fade into the background to some extent. As long as your work and attitude is satisfactory, then life will be at least manageable. Maybe even okay.

But if you are now under the scrutiny of others who will be examining your work in detail, that can be overwhelming and frightening. Why, you ask? Well these are your conquerors, and they believe they are superior. They want you to fail and will hunt out any reason to point out that you are inferior. If you are anything less than perfect, you will suffer for it. And even being perfect will not be approved. They will find a way to make you look inferior.

The last thing you would want to do, is to do or even suggest something other than what they want. But that is just what I did. I had decided from the start that I would not give up my faith in Yahweh, nor would I compromise in key areas of life and practice. You would say I was insane, and in a way you would be correct. No one who is trying to avoid abuse by a conqueror wants to stand out and make themselves known in a way that could be seen as offensive and critical of their beliefs and status.

But I did, and I asked the head steward to change our diet to one in accord with the law given by Yahweh. He shook his head and made it clear that I was asking for serious trouble. The food I was rejecting came straight from the king's table, approved by the king. Such an action would be seen as rejection and worse as dishonor. I understood this and nodded in agreement.

But then I suggested that maybe he could test my recommendation. If he would try it for two weeks he could then decide if it was appropriate. He agreed, as long as I agreed that if it didn't work then I would eat what was given to me. I bowed my head and agreed with his conditions.

So now I was in serious trouble. The only good thing in this was that my three friends were in agreement with me. That meant if my suggestion failed, I would not be alone in whatever punishment was given. No one wants to be an outsider and arrogant. No one wants to be mistreated for that reason. But it is easier to face if you are not alone.

So, there we were, four Jewish youth. Four young men, already afraid, already wondering what was going to happen, already wondering if we would have any kind of life that did not involve our being mistreated and prejudicial treatment. Everyone else in our cohort laughed at us and ridiculed us. They thought we were idiots for such behavior.

You all know the story. God honored our faith and decision. We did improve, noticeably, on the new diet. As a result, our diet was permanently changed. We also gained a level of respect from the others in our cohort of trainees. Many of them decided to ask for the same diet. But I think their decision did not impress the steward. They made their choice when there was no risk involved.

In the end, no one could match us in our ability to learn our lessons, learn the language, and adapt to other aspects of life and work in the court of our conqueror. In fact, we got the best positions and,

surprisingly, people did not ignore us or disrespect us. At least the majority didn't. You know there are always some who will.

We made a key choice, and God honored it. That choice also became the basis for many others: not worshipping the golden statue, not accepting advancement, and not bowing to the control of others when they tried to ban our worship of Yahweh. Even in the darkest times, they trusted us because they knew we would not yield to bribes, threats, or any other challenge. They knew we would be true to our faith and so true to our promises to carry out the tasks given. They knew we were honest, so our work could be trusted. We could be depended on for the truth, when others might lie.

Everyone will have to decide at some point whether it is more important to be accepted by giving in or take the risk of doing what is right and slowly gaining respect and acceptance, because you are an honorable person.

For further study

Paul discusses, quite extensively, the process of knowing when to say yes or no to what others offer us that might affect what we think is normal and right. Read Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8.

What were the issues involved in each situation?

What was Paul's central concern in deciding what was right or wrong?

Now read 1 Corinthians 9:19-27

What were the factors that Paul desired to guide his decisions?

Review Daniel's decision. Did he have the same reasons for his decision, as Paul did?

Think about this process and how you decide what is right for you to do or not do, and how your decision will affect others.

Jacob – no one will trust me

I love a good joke. I love it even more when I can trick someone into doing what I want. The best is when I can fool them and get them to give me something important. They call me a cheater. I don't see it that way. I see it as making the most of every opportunity to advance someone's position.

As a result of this, I have gained certain very important benefits from my brother. He is a careless man and easy to fool. Since we have been children, I have used his own words, actions, and situations against him. People would say he is easy pickings. They are the ones who see the craft in the process. There are others who are angry and see my actions as abuse of my brother.

For me, it is just an opportunity to improve my skills.

Finally, a day came when I could put them to use and give myself the best triumph yet. He was hungry. So I worked on him until he believed that he was going to die if he didn't get something to eat. As we talked, I upped the pressure on him. I began cooking a stew. I made sure that it had a strong and pleasing aroma. His mind and nose made his stomach groan with hunger.

I kept him focused on the idea that if he didn't eat something now, he would not make it home alive. Truthfully, he was not at risk of starving to death, but I didn't let him think about that. I just kept talking about what would happen if he died. What good would his birthright be then? What good would anything be if he died?

You see, even though we were twins, he was the older, and the birthright of the elder son would be his. He would get just about everything, and I would be left with almost nothing. I often told my mother that this didn't seem fair. That a few minutes difference in age meant I got nothing and he got everything. So I was intent on changing this by convincing him to sell me his birthright for a bowl of stew. It worked, and he agreed.

When we got home and he realized what he had done, he was not happy. My father agreed with him that what I had done was unacceptable, but my mother just smiled. She remembered that there was a prophecy that I would be the greater and my brother the lesser. Based on that, she agreed that I had done well in my attempt to guarantee the fulfillment of this message.

As my father grew older and lost his sight, she was the one who suggested my next move. She suggested that I try to fool my father into giving me the blessing of the first born. I thought that this would not be possible. My brother and I, though twins, do not look alike or sound alike. He is a hunter and loves camping. His voice is deeper, and because of his lifestyle, there is a wild campy odor about him. He also is hairier than me, really hairy, if you know what I mean.

Then I learned where I got my skill at trickery from...my mother. She had it all worked out. She had hidden some of my brother's clothes for me to wear. Then she prepared the skin of an animal that she wrapped around my arms and neck, so that if my father tried to touch me or smell me he would not realize who it was. My job was to speak like my brother and get him to bless me.

I succeeded and got the blessing. For a moment I was not sure, as he stopped and listened carefully to my voice. I was not as convincing as I needed to be, but the hairy skins and odor overcame his doubts, and he gave me the blessing.

When my brother found out, he was not just angry but furious. He told everyone he would kill me for what I had done. And he was mad enough to do it. So we put the last piece in play. My mother told my father that she didn't want me to marry a local girl but someone from our relatives. She encouraged him to send me to visit them as soon as possible. It worked. As I reflect on it, I think it worked for several reasons: first because my father was not happy that my brother had married a woman from a tribe they

did not approve, second because my father was aware of how angry my brother was and did not want to risk losing me, and third, and probably the most compelling, he was tired of my skullduggery and duplicity.

So off I went. To avoid my brother I had to leave in a hurry and so took little with me. I spent the first days looking over my shoulder fully expecting him to catch up with me. If he were to catch up with me, I knew I would not survive. What I didn't expect was to encounter God on my journey. Even more surprising was the vision I had and the message that he gave me. I, the cheater, the trickster, the person no one could trust, was given the same promise given to my grandfather and father: God's promise to bless the nations through our family would be carried out through me.

I reacted as I always did and made a promise. I am not sure if I meant it at the time, but it seemed the right thing to do. I promised, that if God would watch over me on my journey and bring me safely back to this place, then I would commit myself to His service. Even more, I promised to give Him a tithe of all that I earned.

When I finally stopped speaking, I wondered about what I had said. Would He believe me? Would I believe me? No one I knew would believe me, except maybe my mother. No one trusted me. I didn't trust me. I was so quick to find an angle, work to get the advantage of others and do whatever I could to get what I wanted. So did the words I spoke have any value?

I had many lessons to learn along the way. The first came as I met first Rachel and then her father. I fell in love. You know the head-over-heels type, the love-at-first-sight kind of love. And that is when I made my first mistake. I thought I was so smart in how I arranged for her father to agree to let her marry me. But I was to learn that I was not the only person who knew how to take advantage of others in a moment of weakness or confusion.

As a result, I ended up marrying her sister as well and was given two servants, who became my wives as well. Let me tell you that my mistake in not thinking through my plan resulted in a fair amount of stress, as my wives vied over access to me and producing children. I found myself in an uncomfortable competition, and I was the prize. Now I was the one being controlled and not the one in control.

After completing the contract the second time for Rachel, I decided it was time to head home. My father-in-law convinced me to stay. He hoped to benefit from my skill in caring for sheep. I was wariest this time, and we came to a unique agreement that gave me the sheep of certain colors. He got what he thought was the best, and in the end, I got more.

The challenge was that he kept changing the conditions of payment time and again. Slowly, I began to understand the truth behind my life and began to depend on God. I had asked him to protect me and provide what I needed. I would learn more of this truth when we finally chose to leave and return to my family. Even my wives were tired of the treatment by their father.

So secretly, we left. It took Laban several days to discover we were gone. He came after us with the intent to force us to return. He used a strange excuse regarding the family idols as his reason to follow us and require us to return. He didn't find them, and then I became furious over his behavior. I let all my frustration explode on him relating to his constant attempts to trick and cheat us. Then he surprised me. He acquiesced. God had met him in a dream and warned him not to impede our departure. Instead, we set up a marker to remind us to not abuse our relationships and to ask God to watch over both families.

The final proof that God was faithful was my encounter with an angel. Well, not the final one, but that event was critical in my final restoration and a confirmation that I had changed. The angel and I wrestled, and I was winning, or so I thought. Just like I always thought. I always believed I could defeat my foes one way or another. And just when I thought I had won, the angel touched my hip, and I lost my balance and all control. I lost **all** control. Do you hear what I am saying? I lost all control and fell. It was very humbling.

Then the angel told me that it was time for a change. My name was changed from Jacob, which symbolized a trickster, to Israel. The promise of a covenant relationship was repeated. My response was to have everyone with an idol, image, good luck charm, or any religious artifact, bring them to me, and I buried them all. I called the place *Peniel*, the place where I met God face to face and lived.

The last proof of how God had kept his promise was my encounter with my brother Esau. When I had left, he was beyond angry and ready to do violence, kill me. I was terrified of how he would respond, so I sent group after group ahead as gifts for him. Then I sent the families, hoping as he saw them he would relent. Then I came last of all, alone. If he were going to get revenge, I was ready to face him as long as my family survived.

It was there, in that lonely place facing my brother and his small army, that I learned to truly trust God. My brother had no ill will for me. He welcomed me back and said that in my absence he had done well and learned to forgive. It was hard to believe, but the proof came in that he moved all of his family and possessions to another region, so that I would be able to settle in the land promised to our father. He ceded his claims, birthright, and blessing to me.

God had kept his promise, and I kept mine. I still had much to learn about trust. But now I could become a person others could trust. At least, that is the possibility that exists because of what God has done in my life.

For further study

Think about why people do not trust others. Make a list of at least three possible reasons and explain why this would cause a loss of trust.

1.

2.

3.

Read the account about the lepers and the story they told to the people of Israel. (2 Kings 7:1-16)

What was the news they had to share with the people?

Did the people believe them? Why?

What was done before their story would be accepted as true?

The Bible is filled with warnings about false prophets. People who gladly tell you lies and try to convince you they are true. Why are people so willing to listen to a lie instead of the truth?

What do we need to do, to be sure we are not seen as frauds?

Pr 12:17

Pr 14:5

Pr 14:25

Jn 7:18

1 Pe 2:1-3

Do people like honesty? Why do they avoid the truth and prefer to be dishonest about themselves?

How will you deal with the need to be honest, not a fraud, in a world of deceit?

James – I rejected my brother

It was no fun growing up with Jesus as a brother. Not that he was mean or difficult. Actually, I need to change my evaluation a little. Jesus was a lot of fun when we were playing and doing what kids do. He was no fun in that he knew exactly when we had reached the limit of what was permissible and then stopped us.

If we didn't listen, he warned us and then left. He knew if he stayed and watched, he might have to report what we were doing or call our parents or an adult to stop us. That usually worked at getting us to reconsider what we were about to do. Yet it created frustration and tension. He was right, always right, and that wears thin over time. It also made us wonder a great deal about how he could know such things. How could he know what was right and acceptable all of the time?

A great example of this was the trip to Jerusalem when he was 12. We were not allowed to go with and had to stay with other family until they returned. But when they did return, we heard the whispering and talking about what had happened. He had gone to the temple and not left. Our parents assumed he was with others in the caravan. He was such a good child, and so they didn't worry about him. He never made mistakes.

Well after a couple days on the journey back, they realized he was not with the caravan. They had made a mistake in their assumption and now were both angry and worried. I liked the angry part. It made my brother somehow more human, more like me. That was a first, my parents being angry with him.

I was enjoying the story so far. But that was about to change. They finally found him still in the temple. And he was debating with the teachers. Do you hear me, debating with the teachers? We knew he was smart and seemed to understand God's word at a level we didn't, but to debate with the teachers, that was pretty daring, pretty crazy. For the first time I felt and thought that he had made a mistake and I relished the idea that he might be punished. Something unheard of for him.

Well, they were frustrated and on the brink of being angry. They took a breath and asked him what he thought he was doing, and did he realize how much worry and frustration he had caused them. He became perplexed and asked why? He followed that with the comment "didn't they know that he had to be about his Father's business?"

I thought now he is going to get it. He has really overstepped himself. For once he was not going to get it right and know the limits of what proper behavior was. Instead, they stood there dumbfounded and dazed. Then slowly they both began to smile and look at each other, as if they shared some kind of inside knowledge. Instead of punishing him, they hugged him and returned back to the caravan.

When they caught up with the caravan there were many who were upset at the delay. They, or at least some of them had to wait for mom and dad and Jesus to return. It is not safe to travel alone. But somehow my parent's explanation eased the tension.

I was so disappointed, and my frustration and ill will grew. While Jesus became an even better child and pleased all the adults, his behavior made me indignant and bitter, not a good basis for developing good relations with one's brother. I was not alone, and the other siblings felt my distaste and joined me in isolating ourselves from him.

And yet he did not respond in kind. If anything, he became more patient, more tender, more of everything you would want an older brother to be. He almost won me over, and then one day he just abandoned us. He was the head of the house, but he left. One day he was there, and the next he said he had to do his father's work and left. What perplexed me was that our mother did not react as I would have expected. She seemed at peace with his departure.

Me, all I could see was that now I had to take care of the family. I had to take care of our mother. It was not right, and he, the one who always knew what was right, should have stayed and fulfilled his obligations. When I queried my mother, she used the phrase from the trip to the temple, he had to be about his father's business.

Well, I didn't know what to do. I did try once to get him to come home. My siblings and I tracked him down. He was in the midst of a crowd, and everyone was fighting to get to him. It appeared to be very dangerous, and we suggested he was not thinking right to let such a crowd gather. It was dangerous for him to be caught in a mob and dangerous to attract the attention of the Romans, who could misinterpret this as an attempt to start a rebellion.

When we tried to reach him, we couldn't. When we sent word that his family was trying to reach him, he responded that his true family were those who listened to his words and obeyed them. Well that was

the last straw. After that, I did everything I could to undermine him, to ridicule him, to turn the family against him. And to some extent it worked. My siblings followed my lead. But my mother did not.

I was so effective in this process that when he died on the cross...something that did not surprise me based on his behavior and teaching...he didn't call on me to take care of our mother. Instead, he asked one of his disciples, the youngest one, John. I took it as an insult and went home. Bad enough to have someone else given the responsibility but to one who was at least 10 years younger than me. I was so furious.

But now things are different. And you probably wonder why. And you would be right to wonder how one so angry with their brother could become so convinced that He is the Messiah and agree to be a key leader of those who follow Him now.

Well His resurrection is a clear reason for the change. And I have had the chance to talk with my brother since then. And now I finally understand what my parents knew back at the temple, when He was twelve. Something I could not see then, because of my jealousy and doubt. Now I can see all that as lessons to be learned to help me be a better leader today. Instead of it's being a burden, as the brother of the Messiah, it has become a great blessing.

Though I rejected Him, He never rejected me. That has brought balance and peace to my life and knowledge of how to lead others when dealing with difficult issues. Yes, I rejected Him but He did not reject me.

For further study

Jesus warns us that we will be rejected. How will you respond to being rejected?

Luke 6:22

How would you respond to the scribes and priests who had rejected Jesus but later became followers?

Acts 6:7

The people of Israel rejected God over and over. What was God's response to them? Isaiah 32:37

Naaman almost rejected Elisha and His God. What did it take for him to not reject the directions given to him? 2 Kings 5:11-15

Consider this. Our sin has resulted in our rejection of God. What message is God sending us through Jesus about this rejection?

Reflect on Saul/Paul. He rejected the truth and sought to destroy the church. Read his comment on his life and what God did. 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Woman at the well – I am an outcast

Where do I begin? So much has happened. I have been in the midst of a whirlwind. One day I was the pariah of my village and the next its savior.

I am often asked how I could have become so despised that I could go to the well only in the heat of the day? What was wrong with me that I had been divorced and remarried five times, and why was I living with a man who was not my husband?

I am not going to tell you, but I will suggest a couple of scenarios. You can decide which is true and whether it was enough to result in the life I was living.

1. I am a barren woman. But I am attractive. There are societies where if a woman cannot bear children she is easily divorced. That may explain a couple of divorces and remarriage, but is that enough to explain it's happening over and over? Only if I was exceptionally attractive. In the end, there were no more men who wanted me as a wife but maybe as concubine. That would probably have been better than what the reality is. Let's be honest. If I truly loved my husband and treated him properly, then barrenness would not be an issue. If offspring were an issue, then he could take a second wife. But only if I loved him and cared about this concern of our culture.
2. I am a difficult woman. I have a problem with my attitude and don't know how to submit like other women do to their husbands. I know what a man wants to see and hear, and I am good at providing that. At least until after the marriage. Then I become manipulative and critical, and the list of issues goes on and on. My beauty and charm are not enough for my new husband to tolerate my intolerable behavior. So I win my way into a man's heart and then destroy the marriage in short order. I could repeat that process for a while, but now everyone is wise to my behavior. I have also learned, but now it is too late. I have burned too many bridges. The current relationship is one of convenience. I get a roof over my head and he.... Well enough said about that.
3. I am a flirt. I tell myself I can't help myself. I win them over, and then I don't stop flirting with other men. I love their attention. But husbands can be such jealous animals. One after another married me and then divorced me because of this. This works as long as there are enough men around, and the word has not spread to them all regarding my behavior. Even so, many men are not good at listening to the truth about people like me. And one more time I can trap another man into marrying me. Unfortunately, I have finally overextended my reach and they all know the truth. The man I am with now doesn't care as long as I do what I need to do to care for him and his needs. That is probably why he is not interested in marrying me.

Actually, I am probably a combination of all of the above. And I could be even worse. It doesn't really matter. Whichever scenario you might choose, the end result is pretty much what happened. The women and men of the village have decided that I am a pariah. They don't want to see me, hear me, or risk any contact with me. I have to stay pretty much hidden and in the shadows, or I get showered with abuse, curses, and attacks. Yes, when they see me they often throw dirt, stones, and sticks at me to make it clear I am to stay far away from them. I am truly a pariah.

Then came that fateful day. I arrived at the well as usual, around midday. No one goes to the well at that time, because it is usually too hot. If it is not too hot, then it is just not when people go to the well. You

need your water in the morning for cooking and cleaning and all the other needs for water around a house. Waiting until noon means you used the leftover water from the day before. You never do that.

Well, when I get there what do I find? A man. A stranger. But am I kind or friendly? No. I am finally tired of trying to be nice to men. Instead my difficult side kicks in, and I am discourteous, contentious, and angry. But every time I try to be difficult, he turns it back on me. Instead of getting frustrated, he becomes more patient and tender. Not tender in the way men can be when they love you or want something from you. Tender in knowing my pain and responding to my struggles.

After an interesting discussion...Heh, I may be a difficult woman or whatever else you may believe of me, I still know my people's history and will defend them. They are not the cause of my problem. They are reacting to what I have done.

Then he asks me to go get my husband. I don't know exactly why, but I chose to be honest with this stranger. Maybe I thought it didn't matter if he knew the truth, he was going to leave and go home. What did it matter if he knew what I was doing or not doing? So I told him that I was not married. Well some of the truth, okay.

But he turned that back on me and agreed that the man I was living with was not my husband. That, in fact, I had been married six times and was not married to the man I was living with. At this point the conversation suddenly shifted from religious belief to prophecy. I knew the Messiah was coming and he agreed. He stated that He was the promised Messiah. And I believed him!

How else could someone say they could provide living water? How could anyone else know my history with men, someone I had never met before and, as Jew, would have no interest in knowing? How could all this be happening, if he was not the Messiah? He knew my history, and yet he cared about me and was not repelled by the fact that I was a pariah.

My heart exploded as I realized that he had accepted me and had just helped me see the truth about myself. He had helped me realize my need to confess and listen to truth. The next thing I did surprised everyone, including myself. To this day, I am not sure what was going through my mind to even consider entering the town and publicly declare what had just happened. But I did, and even more incredible was the fact that instead of cursing me and throwing dirt and stones at me like they usually did, they actually listened as I declared to all my sin and my encounter with the man by the well.

They were amazed and convinced that something had happened in my life. Something that changed who I was and what my future would be. They believed me, because I was not hiding from the truth about myself and well... they could see the change and listened. The next thing I knew, I was leading them back out to the well, so they could confirm all I had been telling them.

As they talked to Him and realized that I had told them the truth, a surprise for many of them, especially the women, my status changed. I went from pariah to savior. Not savior in the sense of doing heroic deeds but in the sense of bringing them the truth, so they could be restored in their relationship with God.

The Stranger spent several days with us, and each day brought more changes. For me the greatest change was my decision to stop what I had been doing and work on being a respectable and productive member of my community. I stopped pursuing the men and misbehaving and found a small place where

I could live in peace. Yes, I left the man I was living with. It surprised many but also confirmed all that I had said. That action opened many doors to being restored and accepted again.

Did I find another husband you might ask? I am not going to answer that, because it has nothing to do with all that happened. I will only say that, for once, my life is not just tolerable but enjoyable. I have friends, and the women no longer fear or hate me. I am not the woman I was before. I have been forgiven and restored in so many ways.

God took a pariah and used her to help save her village and in that action be saved from her past.

For further study

What actions or events could result in a person becoming an outcast?

Reflect on the following individuals who were also outcasts. Why were they outcasts? What happened to them? What did they do after they were declared clean?

Demoniac of Gadarene (Mark 5:3-20)

10 lepers (Luke 17:11-19)

Man with leprosy (Mk 1:40-44)

Adulteress (John 8)

Woman with issue of blood (Luke 8:43-48)

What happened to change their status?

What should be your role in dealing with those who are outcasts or rejected?

John Mark – I ran away

Everybody dreams of adventure, of seeing foreign lands, of traveling and being part of a greater world. Well, I am no different. But you might say I had already witnessed and been part of so much. I was alive

when Jesus walked the earth, I was alive for all the events around the crucifixion, resurrection, and Pentecost.

I may have been a watcher when Stephen was stoned. But you didn't hear that from me. It can be dangerous to speak too loudly of such things when one is living in Jerusalem under the watchful and hateful eyes of the Pharisees and priests. The proof of that is the stoning of Stephen and the execution of James. Shortly after that, Barnabas and Saul arrived with a gift for the Christians of the region.

This was very much appreciated. As I listened to them tell their stories of what God was doing in Antioch, a desire to go and see for myself began to grow. I wanted to see and be a part of what they were doing. And the arrest of my uncle solidified my desire to go. As much to escape the constant danger of living here as to see and experience what God was doing there.

I consulted my uncle. Remember, God had sent an angel to help him escape. He agreed that it would be wise to leave the city. He was planning to do the same. More and more of the apostles were leaving. They had become targets and drew too much attention to the church. Better to leave and tell others, and let the local church grow under the leadership of James and others.

So with his approval and that of Barnabas and Saul, I joined them and traveled to Antioch. It was an exciting time of growth and seeing God work. Then the Holy Spirit called the church to begin a new phase, to send missionaries to others so they could hear the gospel. I was so thankful that I was there and quickly asked if I could join Barnabas and Saul as a helper. They saw the wisdom in that and agreed.

My dreams were coming true. First, I had managed to leave Jerusalem and travel to Antioch. Now I was going to get the chance to travel and be with Barnabas and Saul. To be honest, I could never have imagined this actually happening. The adventure I had dreamed of was actually happening.

And then reality made its presence known. The image we create when we dream of things like this doesn't always match the reality. When we dream, we don't see what life will be like, we don't see the struggles and challenges. We only see what we want to see.

Traveling was not easy. We did not have a lot of funds available, and so we walked everywhere. I grew weary of this very quickly. When we did use transport, it was usually a boat and rarely a very nice boat. It was whatever we could afford. That didn't seem to bother Barnabas and Saul. They didn't think it was a hardship but a blessing to be enjoyed. An opportunity to use to honor our Lord.

That was fine and good, but it was not such a blessing for me. I soon found out I did not enjoy walking everywhere. I especially did not enjoy boats. I still get queasy just thinking about being in a boat on the open sea. I never gained my sea legs. Worse, my stomach was in constant rebellion from the time we left the shore until we got back to shore. I made a lousy sailor. My dream adventure was becoming a nightmare.

I witnessed some incredible events, but every day became almost impossible to deal with. And that last boat ride from Paphos to Perga was the last straw. As soon as we reached land, I left Paul and Barnabas to return to Jerusalem. When I got there I received a very mixed reception. They were excited to hear the news about what God was doing, but my return created a sense of embarrassment. I was treated with respect, but I could feel their disappointment and sense of shame.

I finally was confronted by my uncle Peter, who explained it all to me in very clear terms. My personal comfort should not have been a consideration in deciding to abandon those I had promised to serve. He was incredibly gentle with me. I had been fearful of meeting him knowing what his temper could be like. I really expected it and truthfully deserved to be treated with disgrace. Instead, his words were soft and sad. That made his disappointment even harder to deal with. I cried. I bawled. He was so right and I was so wrong.

As he watched me, something changed in his attitude, and he suggested that he might have a task for me. A task that might help me understand my error and overcome it. He asked me to help him write his version of all that he had experienced as a follower of Jesus. My heart leaped within at the chance to listen and record his story. I was too young to follow Jesus when he was alive. But now, to have the opportunity to listen to all the thoughts and memories of my uncle was I was about to say another incredible adventure.

As soon as that word popped into my head I stopped and paused. The last time I had made a decision like this, I had failed because all I could see was the adventure and had no thought for the cost or work involved. After a short pause and a deep breath, I explained this truth to him. Instead of being disappointed, he smiled and said that I had answered correctly. Serving the Lord in any capacity was not about an adventure but about learning how to serve and submit to those around him. With that said, he reminded me that in order to write down his story I would have to follow him everywhere he went. I would have to overcome the issues that had caused my failure and decision to abandon others.

This was not going to be an adventure but service. Service that would require me to deal with my fears and false ideas about what should be the source of my joy in serving. It was not to be about the exotic places, the incredible events, or anything else that may stir a man to dream of adventure. I was to learn that real joy is in the service faithfully given, so that others will know what we know. Jesus is the Son of God who came to save the lost, of which I am one. As I processed this new truth, my heart grew calm and my soul found peace. I knew, with the help of my uncle and a desire to learn how to serve, I would not fail. Not because of who I am, a failure who abandoned his friends. But as one who is learning to trust our Lord.

It would take years to fully learn all I needed to learn. Much of my learning would come as a result of listening to my uncle tell me his story and all his failures. I would learn that he too had made great promises which resulted in great failures. I would also learn about true forgiveness.

Oh! I forgot to mention that Barnabas understood all this and wanted to give me another chance. Paul was not so forgiving. He was not convinced that I had learned what I needed to learn and had matured enough to face the kinds of challenges and dangers that lay ahead. He was right. I had learned much but I had more to learn, and thankfully Barnabas was as patient a teacher as my uncle. He helped me go beyond simply following someone and writing their story down to becoming part of a team and helping bring the story to life for others.

In time, my relationship with Paul was restored. We got to meet together on various occasions and he could see the change in me. He also learned about my progress from Barnabas. It was good to be seen as valuable. The greatest day was when I received word from a coworker of Paul that he had asked for me, because he believed I would be of use in the work being done. I had learned to serve. When we learn that truth, we become useful and a blessing in the Kingdom.

For further study

Do you believe that at some point you will be tested in your faith and commitment?

Why would someone be tested?

Read 2 Corinthians 13:5-10.

What does Paul say about being tested?

What kind of testing is he referring to?

God often tested Israel to see if they would be faithful.

Read Judges 2:22; 3:1, 4 and reflect on why they failed, and the testing continued.

Read Psalms 26. Why did David ask God to test him?

Read the following texts and explain who was tested and why?

Mt 19:3

John 6:6

Luke 10:25

Daniel 1:12

Galatians 6:4

1 John 4:1

What is the value of testing? What can you learn about yourself and your relationship to God?

Philip – I am a Hellenist

Many of you have heard of Alexander the Great, the famous conqueror of Greece. You also may have heard how he conquered a huge part of the world in a very short time only to be struck down by some unknown disease in the prime of his life. His sudden death left the world in turmoil, and his generals, instead of uniting and creating a wonderful empire, chose to divide it like spoils among themselves.

This resulted in centuries of conflict, as each one and their descendants thought they could conquer the other and create the world kingdom under Greek rule and structures that had been the dream of Alexander. It was not to be. Their constant bickering and fighting kept the world in a state of instability, which finally opened the doors for the Romans to step in and take over. Alexander's dream of a Grecian empire never came into existence, at least from a political structure.

What did happen was something different. Alexander had two thoughts in mind as he conquered the world. The establishment of an empire and the establishment of Greek philosophy, culture, and life in all the lands he conquered. This concept of a new cultural framework for life has been labeled *Hellenism*.

I will not try to explain all that it involves. Suffice it to say, it involved two critical elements on which the other aspects would be built. The one was the spread of the Greek language. Alexander wanted to replace the multiple languages with a universal language so that communication, commerce, and governing would be easier to accomplish. In many ways he succeeded in this. So well, that even though the Romans conquered the region, Greek remained the language of commerce, education, and politics in the eastern part of the empire and even affected Rome in some areas.

The other part was to create a whole new cultural framework for people to live in. This was the more complicated concept. To accomplish this, Alexander established key cities in the conquered lands to promote and demonstrate this Greek way of living. These cities were given Greek names, used only Greek for communication, and established a social and political structure based on what existed in Greece.

Again, He was quite successful to some extent. But while it is possible to create uniquely Greek communities, it is another matter to change the entire culture of a people. This fact created divisions in various cultures and groups. My people are an example of this. The Jews are a fiercely homophobic people. We have paid dearly in the past when we abandoned the faith and culture given to us by God. As a result, any change is viewed with a great deal of suspicion and opposition. We do not want to once again fall under the judgement of God for failing to follow the law correctly.

But some of us believe that following the law does not mean maintaining every aspect of our culture. You don't have to follow Jewish traditions to get married, as long as you are legally married any structure will be adequate. Learning to understand Greek philosophy does not mean you are denying the truth of God's word. Learning to speak Greek and even translating the scriptures into that language is not an offense against God. I could continue, but I think you see the point.

They call us Hellenists and believe we are abandoning our culture, our faith, and the truth. We tend to call them traditionalists, people stuck in the past, a dying breed headed for extinction. As you can imagine we have little patience with each other. This is even more evident when we arrive in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and other festivals. This is the proof, at least for us, that we have not abandoned

our faith and its truth. Just because we dress differently, live differently, and have an interest in knowing what others believe doesn't change who God is and our need to worship and honor Him.

So I am a Hellenist, and it creates tension for me whenever I am around the traditionalists. This is even more pronounced when I come to Jerusalem to celebrate the wonder of our God. It was during my latest trip to Jerusalem that I learned even more about how wonderful our God is. I learned that the Messiah had come. God had fulfilled His promise.

I learned about Jesus and all that He had done. I learned about His death and resurrection. I was there when Peter preached and I heard the truth in my adopted language. In that moment I knew that what he said was true. Jesus had come and He was the Messiah. He had died for my sin as promised and conquered death to confirm all that He had taught and what had been foretold. I repented and was baptized and joined the fellowship of those who followed Jesus.

But there was still tension. Even when everyone believes the truth, there can be conflicts based in culture and language. I am still a Hellenist in the eyes of many of them. I am still an outsider who needs to repent of abandoning their culture. This reality became more evident as we saw an unequal distribution of resources to the widows. The widows of the Greek or Hellenist culture were being mistreated. Not in that they were being harmed, but that they were not being given equal access to the resources available for their care. In fact, they were often overlooked when the distribution of materials for the care of widows was done. The widows of the Jewish heritage always received but not those of Hellenist background.

I, along with others, brought this to the attention of the apostles. They were chagrined by this information. And to their honor they responded immediately. The way they dealt with it was quite interesting. They knew they could fix the situation but also knew that if they did so then the solution would not be effective without their constant involvement.

Instead, they gathered the community, stated the problem, and agreed that it did not make sense for them to care for this issue, which would take away from their time of teaching. Instead, we needed new structures to adequately deal with the continued growth we were experiencing. The next recommendation really got everyone's attention. They told us to solve the problem by selecting seven men we all trusted to care for this concern.

The people got the message. If we were to truly follow the teachings of Jesus, we could not have such preferential treatment and attitudes. The message was clear, and the response revealed its truth. We all agreed to select 7 Hellenists, Jews from the Greek world. Incredible, you say. Not really. We are the followers of Jesus and have the Holy Spirit to guide us. This decision made it clear to all that God cares about who we are and what we can become in him, not what we are or where we come from.

I could tell you about how this became more evident in my life. How God sent me to open a new work among the Samaritan people. And how God sent me to meet the Ethiopian Eunuch on the desert road. God can reach us with the truth no matter what our cultural background is. And He will help us make the changes that need to be made in our lives to follow Him. Our culture is not the issue. The issue is letting Him change us so we can be an effective witness in our culture and to others.

For further study

We struggle with accepting those who are not like us and don't think like us. Read the following stories and answer the following questions.

Who was the outsider, and why were they an outsider?

What was done to get someone to accept them?

What was the result of those events?

Acts 10-11

Acts 2:5-15, 36-47

Acts 8:26-40

Read the following texts and explain how one needs to respond to those who are different culturally and in other ways.

Romans 10:12-15; Galatians 3:26-28; Colossians 3:5-14

Zacchaeus – I am a thief

I am a thief, and I am very good at taking people's money without their realizing what I have done. My special skill is playing with numbers. I know how to show them what I am doing without their realizing how I have manipulated the numbers in my favor. As a result, I always get more than I need to pay my commission to the Romans. That also means I need to manipulate the numbers so that, even if they think I am stealing, they can't prove it based on the information I give them.

I think they call this embezzlement or keeping two sets of books. I have my books to show me what I have done, and then I have the books that everyone else sees. It is an art form. Don't ask me to explain it. Even the other tax collectors are amazed at how my wealth has grown. They are thieves too, but they don't have the gift I have. I don't just understand the numbers, I can see them. I see them in my head and lay it all out, and no one can keep up or figure out what is happening.

But like all the other tax collectors, I am a pariah. I am hated because I am collecting the taxes imposed by our enemies. I can't see why that is a problem. If we had our own government, they would still need

tax collectors. Right? So why should I be ashamed of what I do for a living? And why shouldn't I think of my needs and desires?

For a long time that argument worked for me. But lately I have been struggling with the idea of "me first" no matter who gets in my way. My greed has grown, and now it seems alive and in control. I am having trouble looking people in the eye, as I strip them of what little they have in the name of the Romans.

Some of this has to do with the stories I am hearing about a man named Jesus. Stories of miracles and incredible teaching, which have confronted my lifestyle and my greed. He genuinely seems to care about everyone and anyone. One day he heals a leper and the next he heals the servant of a Roman. How can that be possible? Treating enemies equally.

Then there was the story about the young rich man who came to Jesus and honestly asked about what he needed to do to get into heaven. At first the discussion centered on the law, you know the Ten, the heart of our faith. At first, the young man sounded like he might earn the approval of Jesus for his honorable lifestyle.

Until they talked about his wealth. He had done so much, and then Jesus said there was one more thing he needed to do. That one thing and the man's response started me thinking about my life. Jesus told him, in essence, that he had replaced God with his wealth. He had converted it into a god and was using it to convince people of his good standing with God. It is what we all believe in one way or another. We believe that those who are wealthy, at least those whose wealth is gained honestly, are blessed by God. We believe that they will be at the front of the line to receive God's blessing and enter into paradise.

Well Jesus exploded that bubble. He told the man that if he truly wanted God's blessing and to follow him, he had to take his wealth, give it to the poor, and then he would be ready to follow Jesus. He would no longer be under the control of his wealth.

You may think that I am nothing like that man and that Jesus teaching wouldn't apply to me. How can a thief, a wicked man, even begin to think that he might have a chance to be approved by God or accepted as a follower of Jesus? And for a while I set aside thinking about what that story meant and went back to my thieving ways.

All went on as usual. I continued to collect taxes, take my cut, and enjoy my life. Well not exactly. In a subtle way, I started to become unsatisfied with my life and world. The things that had brought me pleasure in the past seemed to lose their luster. Conversation with my friends, yes I do have some friends, became, how can I describe it? Empty. Yes, that is the word, empty. And I began to lose my focus in collecting taxes. I actually didn't cheat an older couple the other day. Impossible but true.

While all this was happening, I learned that Jesus was going to pass through my village. As soon as I heard this, I closed my office. I can't explain why, I just did. I asked people if they knew when he would arrive. Their responses were not pleasant. They treated me like a leper and why not? I had treated them much worse. But finally I found out where and when.

Did I mention I am a short man? I mean, well below average in height. This meant that even though I knew the where and when, it was not going to be easy to even see him. If I could even get close, the crowd would most certainly block my view. But I had an idea that might give me my chance to see him.

If the information was correct, I knew about a tree along his route that I could climb. It would provide me two, maybe three possibilities to see Jesus. If I climbed that tree I would be high enough to see Jesus and out of the reach of the people. And maybe if I was quiet and in the right place, few would notice my presence.

Well I found the tree, climbed it, and then waited. It seemed like hours, but my plan worked. I was in the right place and could see Jesus coming my way. He was in the midst of a small crowd and walking slowly in my direction. I would get to see, watch what was happening, and even get to hear some of what he was saying. For the first time I felt a joy unlike any other. A joy that was not the result of my wealth and my possessions.

I became as still as I could and tried my best to be hidden. I thought I was doing pretty well at it. With such a situation, I was sure no one would notice me. But I forgot one thing that should have been obvious from the stories I had heard about Jesus. He noticed people, in fact, he seemed to focus on noticing what seemed hidden from others.

Imagine my surprise when I heard him call my name. How did he know my name? I almost fell from the tree limb where I was perched. Then I got a second shock. He told me to get down. He wanted to come to my house and have a meal with me. I almost broke my neck getting down from that tree. I can say I was more than a little nervous about standing in a crowd like this without my usual security. And yet in His presence everything was going to be alright.

I will not bore you with more about what happened. Everyone knows the story. I chose not to be like the other rich man who could not let go of his wealth to follow the truth and follow Jesus. I willingly proclaimed my readiness to change my ways and offered to pay back the money I had cheated people out of, with interest (an incredible amount of interest). I also declared I would donate half of what was left to help the poor.

Jesus looked at me. I will never forget that look. It was filled with love and approval. Something I had not received in so long. It was then I realized how hungry my soul was for the truth and to do what God wanted. I had tried to replace that hunger with money and power. Now I needed neither to be satisfied and happy.

Jesus declared me to be a true son of Israel. Wow. I mean WOW. I had gone from pariah to welcome son in an afternoon. Now my house is the center of much joy, and I have a lot of new friends. I am still a tax collector but probably the most honest one in the country. In fact, it is now the Romans who are wondering if they are getting a true tax. Let me assure you they are, but they are not used to having that happen. People come to me to report and pay. They do so, because they know I am honest, and they will be safe from embezzlement and over taxation.

Life is so much better now. I am no longer a pariah, and Jesus often passes by here and enjoys a meal in my house. We are truly blessed, because I learned, at last, what has true value.

For further study

Are there other famous thieves in the Bible?

Consider the following people. What did they steal and what happened to them?

Achan (Judges 7)

Thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43)

Judas Iscariot (John 12:4-6)

Are thieves any worse than other types of sinners?

Matthew was also a tax collector and likely a thief as well. Why do you think Jesus called him to be a disciple?

How many of us have committed some sin or done something we think is a problem that would cause us to be rejected by others?

What is God's response over and over to any and all of these?

Is any excuse too hard for God to resolve and help us overcome? Why?