

EAST CAPE BIBLE COLLEGE SINCE 2011

All welcome: Free of charge!!!

For further information feel free to phone any of the below:

- ☐ **Chris du Preez - 084 771 8765**
- ☐ **Johan Smulders - 076 297 6645**
- ☐ **Chester Woodhall - 082 327 1570**

ALL STUDIES PRESENTED BY JOHAN SMULDERS

- 1) BIBLE STUDIES ON THE BOOK OF ROMANS**
- 2) BIBLE STUDIES ON THE OLD TEST CHARACTERS**

Please Note: All Questions, remarks and your favourite verses, etc. to be directed to Johan direct on E Mail to Johan Smulders: jhsmulders@outlook.com

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THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

[illegible]

Romans Chapter 6

When Paul wrote this letter to the Roman Christians he anticipated what results his strong teaching on God's wonderful grace was going to bring. Some of the Christians would use it as an excuse to sin. After all, if God's grace is given freely then the more I sin the more grace I receive and so sin becomes irrelevant.

Human nature looks for gaps to take and in order to prevent this from happening Paul immediately squashes that thinking. Prevention is always better than cure. Paul had heard about poor decisions being made in the Corinthian church, so he wrote to them. In his letter the church in Rome Paul aimed to head off this problem before it began. In some of the false Gnostic teaching of that time there was a belief that the body and spirit were totally separated and so sin did not matter as it was a mere physical thing.

Paul starts this chapter with a strong statement on the matter. Grace must result in people turning away from sin. The new life that God offers us is marked by a rejection of what was done in the old life because the new master who we now serve demands it. While living in the world, sin rules and so the new life demands a rejection of that kind of life. Remember that it is a process that continues throughout the Christians life.

In an important statement in 6:3, 4 Paul describes how this new life starts. In agreement with Peter's statement in Acts 2:38 and Jesus' great commission as recorded in Matthew 28:18, 19 he reminds the Roman Christians that when they are baptized into Christ they move from one condition to another. Some of them were probably in Rome on the day of Pentecost where the Church started (Acts 2:6).

The new life is marked by obedience to the new master, Jesus Christ. In a world where the relationship between a slave and master was clearly understood, Paul draws on this understanding to draw a parallel for the Christian life. While faith brings us to Christ, faith then demands obedience and a new life as was so graphically illustrated in Paul's own life.

James, the brother of Jesus, in his letter explains that faith without works is dead. No one can earn their salvation as it is a free gift offered by God's grace. But once it has been accepted it changes everything, and this is the new life that Paul refers to in 6:4.

As Christ rose from the dead, so the re-born person rises from the burial of the sinful person in the waters of baptism to walk in newness of life.

What a gift and what a challenge! Jesus told Nicodemus, as recorded in John's Gospel (John 3:3), "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" and then explains it further in vs. 5; "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (NKJV). A rebirth means a new relationship with God and also a new relationship with the world, all possible through faith and God's abundant grace. With it come both the promise of a new life and its responsibilities.

Study Plan: Continue to read a chapter every week and then send your favourite verse or any verse that struck your heart plus any comments to me at jhsmulders@outlook.com This way we will keep the study going during lockdown.

Romans Chapter 7

All commentators agree on one thing about this chapter and that is, it is one of the most difficult to understand in the Bible. No wonder Peter writes that some of the things Paul says are difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:16). This also touches on a basic principle of Biblical Interpretation. Interpret difficult passages in the light of easier passages on the same subject. Keeping this in mind, several important facts come out of this chapter:

1. In the last chapter, Paul stated clearly that eternal life is a gift from God (6:23). He also stated that the wages of sin is death. He was writing to a congregation in his time where the influence of the Law was still very strong. Many of the Hebrew believers, like Paul himself, had grown up with a great respect for the Old Testament Law and even the interpretations of the law as made by the rabbinic teachers. Religious celebrations, circumcision, temple worship, animal sacrifices and other regular rituals were ingrained in their thinking. How could they now be convinced that all that was no longer necessary? So he used the example of the marriage law of that time, showing that if someone died, a relationship that had previously existed no longer did.
2. This is then followed by the statement that Christians had died to sin, a point he made in the previous chapter, where he stated that we died to sin when buried with Christ in the waters of baptism (6:3, 4). He can then hear the argument that many would make: "Of what value was the law then?" He answers that with an example of the fact that where there is no law people would not know about sin. Adam and Eve were given a law and then were tempted to break it. The idea of forbidden fruit being more tasty, comes to mind.

Paul then uses one of the Old Testament Ten Commandments, covetousness, as an example. Perhaps something that everyone had battled with in their lives. "Thou shall not covet". A temptation that moves in the lives of many a Christian. James says "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members"? (James 4:1 NKJV). John writes: "Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - is not of the Father, but is of the world" (1 John 2:16, 16). Satan even tempted Jesus with this in the wilderness. What Paul seems to be saying is that in every person there is a war going on between the mind and the body, between the spirit and the flesh. One draws us one way and the other in a different direction. Paul here describes it as a battle/war taking place in his being (7:23 cp. Galatians 5:17). A battle

3. that can only be won with the help of the Holy Spirit, as Paul will explain in the next chapter.
4. This passage can be referred to as a demonstration of inadequacies. 1) The inadequacy of human knowledge. Knowing what is right and what is wrong, is not enough but acting on that knowledge is another thing. 2) Inadequacy of human resolve. In the battle raging in every human life, the failure of Adam and Eve is also our failure. 3) The inadequacy of a solution on the basis of human will. We all need help to get right with God, and he took the initiative to provide the remedy in Christ Jesus.

References: NKJ of Bible

Barclay, W. The Letter to the Romans

Bruce, F. F. Romans an Introduction and Commentary

Romans Chapter 8

If one had to make a list of top ten chapters in the Bible, Romans 8 would be up there. After Paul showed in Chapters 1-3 that all have sinned, he then approached the important fact that the law cannot bring salvation. It can only identify sin and not bring forgiveness. It is only in Christ that salvation can be found. This gift of God comes by grace and not by works. Now in this remarkable chapter, Paul gives the readers important information about the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is mentioned 20 times in this chapter.

Like the apostles, when Jesus told them that he would leave them as recorded in John 14, the Christians in Rome must have had a difficult time coming to terms with their trials and tribulations. They were being persecuted by Judaizing teachers on the one hand and the Roman authorities on the other.

Now Paul reminds the church about the promises of the new life that they are living in step with the Spirit. The first fact is that there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. We are in Christ and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we repent and are baptized for the forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38), “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”. Paul then continues with this important fact: “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” (vs.11, NKJV). Now Christians are adopted children of God and can call Him “Abba”. In this, Christians also inherit what God owns, a magnificent thought! “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:1-3). Freedom from sin comes through the Holy Spirit. It is also the Spirit who puts to death the deeds of the body and so gives us life (vs.13). According to Paul we received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry “Abba Father” (vs.15). God, as our father and saviour in Christ, will never forsake us.

Secondly the Spirit then also helps in our weaknesses. Jesus prayed for the comforter to come as recorded in John 14:16: “I will pray the Father and he will give you another Helper” (NKJV). The Holy Spirit also helps us in our prayer life. When we do not even know what to say he makes intercession for us (vs. 27).

The encouraging verse (vs.28) reminds us that all things work to the advantage of those who belong to God, an important fact to remember when life seems impossible. Look for what is happening in the long term. In this chapter Paul also introduces the concept of glorification (vs.30). Earlier in the letter he had explained the terms justification and sanctification and now he refers to glorification as if it has already taken place. Paul’s faith is so strong that he sees something in the future as already being present.

The chapter is completed with the great promise of God’s everlasting love. No matter how difficult things are, if God is with us, who can be against us? With God on our side there is the knowledge that nothing can separate us from that love. We have the security of the promises of God and are “more than conquerors” in Christ.

References:

Scriptures from the NKJV translation of the Bible. Used with permission.

Barclay, W. The Book of Romans

Bruce, F.F. Romans

Romans Chapter 9

While Paul is writing this important letter to the church in Rome some things rest heavily on his mind. They come from his own past and present experiences, from his knowledge of the Old Testament and from what he sees happening in the time in the Roman Empire and in the Christian community. As someone who grew up in the Jewish Faith, he is painfully aware of how the Jews and himself in particular, had failed to understand God's message delivered by Moses and the Prophets. When Jesus came to fulfil the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, the decline in the Jewish religion had reached so deep that they failed to understand what Jesus came to deliver. The religious leaders in Judea and specifically in Jerusalem, had departed so far from what God wanted for them that they were in fact worshipping in vain. Jesus is recorded as telling them that in vain did they worship God, teaching the traditions of men rather than the truth from God (Matthew 15:8, 9). God's truth had not touched their hearts.

So the question then arises; did God fail in what he intended? The question must have rested heavily on the hearts of those who had grown up under the Jewish system of laws and regulations. This was not a new situation as it also existed in previous ages. Malachi, several hundred years before Jesus, wrote: "And now this admonishment is for you O priests, 'If you do not listen and if you do not set your hearts to honour me and my name', says the Lord Almighty, 'I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings'," Malachi 2:1, 2 NIV translation).

So steeped in a tradition of living under the law, and also the traditions of the elders, it was really hard for the Christians from the Jewish background to really feel free from those laws. In Jeremiah 31:31 the prophet spoke about a new dispensation that would free people from the restrictive conditions of the Mosaic Law. So then when Paul brings the message that the law cannot bring salvation, only Jesus Christ can, it was a difficult concept for them to understand. Even today religious leaders are inclined to make Christianity a situation where laws and regulations dictate, rather than changed hearts.

The problem actually was not with the law as such, it was with those who abused it and used it to control the religious population to suit their own ends. That was why Jesus drove the money changers out of the Temple because they had turned the Jewish religion into something it was never meant to be.

One of the difficulties with understanding what Paul is saying in this chapter and also in other places in this magnificent book, is that he makes statements at times that have to be understood in the context of the bigger picture rather than isolating them and trying to build a doctrine around them. So it is a good time to look at the outline of Romans again. In the first 3 chapters Paul is showing us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. In the next three chapters he presents the new life that Jesus came to deliver. Now he introduces the life in the Spirit and explains what the Jewish system was meant to provide and why it failed. He will then explain what being and living as a Christian means in a practical way in a life.

In short the Law failed because, as in every age, people rejected truth from God and replaced it with human greed and lies to suit themselves. Should we then blame God for the failure? Paul argues no! God put a perfect plan into place from the beginning and yet only a small percentage of people have heard the truth and taken it to heart. Paul quotes Isaiah as writing that only a small remnant of Israel will be saved (Romans 9:27). What he then is saying in this chapter is that we should avoid questioning God and in fact blaming Him for our situation. We should rather listen to the message of love and grace and let it change our minds and our hearts to discover God's will for us. In today's "Christian" world many seem to be making the same mistake as was evident throughout the ages, "I will use God to feather my own bed" is the sad message of the Prosperity Gospel. On the flip side there are those religious organizations which control their people by manmade teachings, rules and regulations that keep the leaders in power.

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Romans Chapter 10

As Paul continues with this great letter his concern is for the inability of his fellow Jews to accept the “Good News”. While historically they had been blessed by God with the message sent via Abraham, Moses, the prophets as explained in Hebrews 1:1 “who at various times and in various ways spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets” (N.K.J.V. used with permission) they had consistently rejected the message. Paul was a prime example as he rejected Jesus and persecuted the early church. So over the years they hardened their hearts and while they went through the outward show of being religious, they actually rejected the message of righteousness in their hearts.

So now Paul called on them to have a change of heart as he did, and to listen to the latest and final prophet, Jesus (Hebrews 1:2). The Jews had always rejected the voice of God and now, by and large, continued to do so. The Gentiles seemed more receptive as they did not bring to the opportunity the baggage that the Jews brought.

” Having a zeal for God but without knowledge” (Romans 10:2), has been the sad story of the past and continued into Paul’s time. So when Jesus entered Jerusalem he found a shell of religiosity and an inside of emptiness. He compared the religious leaders to white washed graves. This was always the case with Israel and now Paul was confronted with the same problem. It was not even a lack of hearing, it was rather a lack of taking it to heart and becoming what God intended them to be.

Paul described the fact that both Jews and Gentiles needed a “righteousness of faith”. This could not be substituted by the keeping of laws and rituals. He then made a far reaching statement that has been used out of context in modern times as being the way to attain salvation. Romans 10:9; “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved”. While that is undoubtedly a true statement, it does not tell a person what they must do to be saved. It is the foundation for a life in Christ but it cannot be used as a substitute for being born again in the waters of baptism as per the great commission by Jesus (Matthew 28:18, 19) and Peter’s answer to the question “what must we do to be saved? (Acts 2:37, 38.)

Making this into a “sinner’s prayer” and declaring salvation to have then taken place abuses the basic rules of hermeneutics. For a fuller understanding of what an individual needs to do to receive God’s great grace one needs to look at the examples of people being saved in the book of Acts and Paul’s explanation in Romans 6:3, 4.

Nowhere in the examples in Acts were repentant sinners told to state their belief and confess Jesus as Lord and so be saved. Peter told the Jews on the day of Pentecost to: “repent and be baptised for the remission of sins” (Act 2:38). Phillip preached to the Ethiopian Eunuch who asked: “here is water what is hindering me from being baptised?” (Acts 9:36). Ananias told Paul after his meeting with the Lord on the road to Damascus “arise and be baptised, and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16). And so we could go on. In chapter 6 of this letter Paul explains; “Or do you know that as many as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3, 4 NKJV)

The statement by Paul in Romans 10:9, 10 relates to what both Jews and Gentiles needed to do and continue to do to start their journey of faith. It was not how to be saved but rather what changes needed to take place in their hearts. Paul then goes on to emphasise the importance of the message and how it needed to go out into the whole world and still needs to today. The message needs a messenger, and we humans have been tasked with that responsibility. “How shall they call on Him in whom they have believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (10:14, 15 NKJV) Paul continues with an important statement: “So faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of God” (vs. 17).

This is exactly what the great commission by Jesus stated; “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19, 20 NKJV).

This is what Paul was doing with all his ability and that included writing this important letter to a congregation he hoped to visit soon. Paul took that commission seriously and so should we.

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Romans Chapter 11

As Paul continues to think and write about Israel's fate that obviously rests heavily on his heart, he gives a glimmer of hope to God's people who had depended on being right with God under the Old Testament covenant. The trouble is that the Israelites were never faithful and obedient to God. They rebelled continuously over the years and often depended on outward rituals and human made laws to rule their lives rather than sincere hearts (Matthew 15: 9 "In vain they worship Me. Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" - the words of Jesus quoting Isaiah 29:13 NKJV).

Jesus wept over Jerusalem as Isaiah must have done many years before. Strange how nothing changes. Think about today's world and how God must know that most people have rejected His love and many who practice "religiosity" are just like the people Jesus referred to in Matthew 15, quoted above.

But there was always a remnant as Paul explains in verse 4 using the example of the people in the time of Elijah as recorded in 1 Kings 19. God never gave up on his people even though they often gave up on Him. There were 7000 who were those who obeyed God during Elijah's time. So there still remains hope for Israel even now in the Christian age, but in order for them to receive God's promises there needs to be a change of heart. It is now the Gentiles who will lead the way as they accept the truth about Jesus and spread the Gospel message.

Paul then uses an example from the agricultural world in his time in the growing of olives, a vital part of the economy, to drive home an important point. Now it is Christianity that is leading the way but at the same time reminding Christians not to become arrogant about their blessings. God's blessings are not passed on by being part of the family that is obedient or part of a nation that is supposedly on God's side, or even by belonging to the "right" church but by a personal relationship with the Father. This is based on hearing the message, being reborn into God's family and then serving Him as Paul will go on to explain in the next chapter. Righteousness cannot be inherited but comes by grace as God pours out his love into the believers heart through the Holy Spirit given to the believer at baptism (Acts 2:23; Romans 5:5; 6:4).

The chapter is completed by an amazing passage where Paul pours out his wonder at how great God is and how we can never really understand the love of God and his grace because we, as humans, live in a different world. Paul in this letter goes from logical argument, to historical precedent, to gardening examples, to emotionally crafted and beautiful poetry to bring the important messages of this letter. Surely, while at times Paul's writings are difficult to follow as Peter tells us (2 Peter 3:15), the message is as clear as the sun rising on a clear summer morning: God wants all to be part of His great family and offers that opportunity to all in every age. This gift must be accepted in faith and then allowed to change a life that is suitable for service to mankind and so to God.

Yours in Christ,
Johan

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Romans Chapter 12

Paul now changes direction and deals with the practical side of being a follower of God. He has taught great truths in the first eleven chapters, but now he deals with what the Christian should do. Step one is to present yourself as a living sacrifice to God.

All those who have followed God's call have said; "here am I Lord!" Christianity was never meant to be a spectator sport as it has unfortunately become. We gather together for worship and then go back and live our ordinary lives, in many ways no different to the many people, both good and bad, who do not claim to be God's family. It has unfortunately always been like that. In Amos 5:21-24 the prophet has a message from God: "I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them. Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings.

Take away from me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. For let justice run down like water, And righteousness like a mighty stream” (NKJV used with permission). Jesus said: “And In vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9).

Christianity is meant to be men and women called to become living sacrifices, each using their God given gifts to serve Him in this world (Romans 12:3-8). Attending regular worship assembly is not Christian service but rather a time to encourage each other “to love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24).

So Paul makes it clear that Christianity is a movement of followers of Christ making a difference in the world. There are two ways this has to be done: firstly, in a changed life (vs. 9-21) and secondly, a life of service (vs. 1-8). The actions that are listed in this chapter are clear and easy to understand, but difficult to put into practice. Here is a list of some of them:

1. “Do not be conformed to this world” (vs.2). Therefore followers practice the principles that Christ introduced to them (Sermon on the Mount: Mt.5:1-8; Romans 12:9-21). In a world where selfishness and greed rules, the follower of Christ gives that up!

2. All Christians are gifted by the Holy Spirit (vs. 6). This makes all a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5;) “you also, as living stones are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (NKJV). In an abuse of God’s ordained and revealed plan, Christianity has hired a Priest, Pastor, Preacher to do the work that every Christian, under the leadership and encouragement of elders and deacons, should be doing. Each Christian, remembering that Christianity is not a spectator sport, should get out onto the playing field, and do what they have been created to do (Ephesians 2:10 “For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them”).

3. In a world that offers so much evil around every corner, Paul writes to Rome that it is the followers of Christ who can overcome evil (vs.21). They, like Paul, have to proclaim the Gospel that is the power unto salvation (Romans 1:15). Then being recreated to walk in newness of life in the waters of baptism. (Romans 6:3, 4) and then becoming servants who use their God given gifts to make the world a better place, day by day and moment by moment. Doing everything they can to be the light of the world that Jesus brought.

4. This is an amazing challenge that unfortunately in many instances has failed as it did in the time of Amos with Israel; in the time of Christ with the religious leaders in Jerusalem; in the Dark Ages as the church fell into apostasy; and today as so many abuses of Christianity continue to pop out their ugly heads.

Today it would be good to read this great letter again and again and then take up the challenges that Paul set up before the church in Rome. Only with the help of the Holy Spirit in our lives (Romans 8:1, 2, 11) and the love of God in our hearts (Romans 5:5) can this be achieved.

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Yours in Christ,
Johan

Romans Chapter 13

Paul, in writing to the church in Rome, mentioned a situation that affected every Christian in Rome and also in the wider Roman Empire and even in the rest of the world. The question was and still is; “Who is in charge?” The obvious answer to that question is God. But what then do the Christians have to do in relation to human leadership and government? Who do they need to obey and support? The answer is vitally important to people in Paul’s time and in every age and situation. Paul here is stating a basic principle and that is that God has instituted a world where order needs to be maintained and that means there needs to be a system of leadership and government at every level.

If Paul’s statement (“For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.” NKJV) stands on its own it can be interpreted that God micro manages every nation and society by personally appointing every leader at every level and in every age. So Herod, Nero, Hitler, Idi Amin, etc. were in charge because it was God’s will. This is obviously not what Paul was saying. What he was saying is that for a society to function, there needs to be some who take on responsibility for taking care of that society and working with a rule of law. This would include the paying of taxes for the provision of services like roads and water and also protection of citizens from dangers both inside and outside their society.

In the previous chapter Paul mentioned that one of the gifts of the Spirit is leadership and as we look at the church and society in large we see that this is true. In a flawed society however, where Satan rules the hearts and minds of many people who bow down to him, very bad leaders come into their position by election or by grabbing power. So many work in the leadership roles in ways that we can describe as terrible to say the least. Think about the holocaust in Europe as an example. History and even the present world, clearly shows that what is needed in every age are leaders who believe in God and who put into practice His principle of love.

Paul travelled to Rome under Roman guard because he had appealed to Caesar, using his legal rights as a Roman Citizen, to escape from the danger of being killed by the authorities in Jerusalem. He eventually, according to tradition, was put to death in Rome by Nero. In dealing with Onesimus, the runaway slave, Paul sends him back to Philemon because that was the right thing to do. The Christian in every age needs to respect the law because otherwise they promote the so called “law of the jungle”. The only exception would be when the law demands that the Christians do things that are contrary to God’s revealed will.

Jesus told his disciples when asked about paying taxes, something the Jews hated doing, “render unto Caesar what is due to Caesar and unto God what is due to Him” (Luke 20:25) Teachings in the New Testament clearly emphasise this principle. Christians should be law abiding citizens and when they are treated unfairly should turn the other cheek or walk another mile (Matthew 5:38-41). In 1 Timothy 2:1, 2 Paul states that prayers need to be given and thanks need to be made for all men, including kings and for all those who are in authority. Peter makes a similar plea in 1 Peter 2:13-17 and suggests that this will enable a person to avoid being punished as a law breaker.

Paul then continues in this chapter to exhort the church in Rome to apply the principle of love and this can only be successfully achieved by putting on Christ in our lives (vs.14). How this happens he has already explained in Romans chapter 6 as Christians are born again to walk “in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). In a world where everyone lives by this principle of love taught by Jesus and repeated here by Paul; “you shall love your neighbour as yourself” there would be peace and harmony and Godly leaders would also rule in that way. Unfortunately in a world where the majority of people live with greed and selfishness guiding their lives, many prayers are needed on many different levels. This would extend from the King/President right down to the family unit.

So Christians are told to pray for rulers and leaders at every level. But we especially need to pray for ourselves as we live in an imperfect world, but with the blessed assurance of a better life to come.

Read Romans 13 and send your favourite verse to me. jhsmulders@outlook.com

Romans Chapter 14

In writing to the Church in Rome, Paul then turns to another important subject and that is the question of one Christian judging another on matters that are doubtful. Some things are black and white while others fall in the grey area of opinion and personal judgement. In every situation there are usually two groups of people; those who can be classified as liberal in their thinking and those who can be classified as conservative. Paul is encouraging both these groups to respect each other and not judge them harshly.

Paul himself once fell in the ultra conservative group as did Peter. Both grew up in a Jewish religion that consisted of a whole host of rules and regulations and both had to change. Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19) and Peter had a vision in the home of Simon in Joppa (Acts 10:9-16). Both were struggling with an understanding of who Jesus was and how they needed to treat others, and especially believers.

In the early church two groups of Christians existed hand in hand. One group came from a strict Jewish background and the other from a non-Jewish background. In this situation conflict was bound to take place in matters that each group felt very strongly about. So Paul writes in this part of his letter about Christian liberty. As a former strict Pharisee he rejoiced in his new found freedom. At first Peter, also from a strong Jewish background, did not even want to allow non-Jews to become Christians. Eventually he changed his view after the vision God sent him, as recorded in Acts 10. Disputed issues were bound to arise and Paul told the Christians in Rome to accept one another, even if they did not see things in the same way. "Receive one who is weak in faith, but not to dispute over doubtful things" (vs. 1- NKJV). What he is arguing against is a self righteous attitude of "I am right and you are wrong and so you need to straighten up". Some had grown in understanding and in faith, while others were still learning about Christian freedom, and so needed to be given space to grow from their "weak faith" into a stronger and clearer one, as Peter had, as recorded in Acts 10.

Again in this chapter Paul comes back to what is really important in the life of every Christian and that is love: "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (vs. 17). Some in the church possibly refused to eat meat because it has been offered to idols, or prepared in a way that would not meet the strict dietary conditions of the Old Testament Law. Others saw one day as being more important than others. Some drank wine while others did not.

In all these situations Paul points out that what you do also affects others and so you need to be careful how you make your choices. What you do with a clear conscience may in fact set a harmful example to others. Here the responsibility rests on the stronger Christian to act in a way that considers not only their own conscience, but also acts in the best way for others. Does this mean that the stronger Christian must follow the example of the weaker Christians?

Certainly not! At the same time the law of liberty demands that freedom is respected and not abused. It is not only important to do the right thing at all times it is also important to do what is right in the context of how it will affect others. So Paul states that if drinking wine will be a problem for someone else he will choose not to do so, not because he is compromising his conscience, but because of his concern for others.

In Peter's situation, Paul confronted Peter on an important issue, the full acceptance of Gentiles into the Church (Galatians 2:11). This was not a doubtful issue but of vital importance. Sometimes confrontation may be necessary, but obviously needs to be done in a spirit of love. Christian freedom allows for differences of opinion in matters that Paul refers to as "doubtful things", (vs. 1) and so also an understanding and allowance for where others are in their Christian growth and maturity.

Some in the Roman church would have been present at the beginning of the church on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, and then experienced the love that existed in those early days: "Now all who believed were together and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (Acts 2:44, 45). Now in the reality of everyday life they had moved to a situation where they were arguing about

unimportant issues rather than living the Christian life. This is the life of love that Paul described so beautifully in the famous love passage in 1 Corinthians 13.

In a world where My Rights and the rights of My Family and My Country come with a warning; “Beware of Greed and Selfishness”, Paul reminds the church in all his letters that Jesus gave up his rights to die for them. So every action needs to be tempered with the thought: “what is best also for my fellow man/woman and not only for me?”

Reference: Bible References and sources.

1. Scripture taken from the New King James Version. Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
2. Barclay William, The book of Romans.
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Romans Chapter 15

As chapter 14 ends and chapter 15 starts we see that Paul actually continues until verse 13 with the same thought. It must be remembered in studying the Bible that the chapters were only designed much later. The letters and other writings were simply written in one continuous form with no verse and chapter headings. These were added much later to make referencing easier.

In the beginning of this new chapter Paul continues with the thought that it is important to be patient and considerate to each other. The strong need to “bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves” (NKJV). A better translation of this part of verse one is possibly “to bear with the failure of the weak” (N.I.V translation), or even from the Good News translation: “to help the weak to carry their burdens”. The Afrikaans translation is also helpful: “Op ons wat sterk is in die geloof, rus die verpligting om die swakhede te verdra van die wat nie sterk is nie”(Die Nuwe Vertaling van die Bybel).

This highlights the difficulty of translating Greek into other languages and so obviously it is always good to refer to different translations in order to better understand difficult passages. At the same time Paul’s point is easy to understand when he continues with the example of Jesus who did not please himself but rather gave himself for us who were sinners and weak. He walked the extra mile so we could enjoy the promises God wanted to pour out on us.

Paul also throws in an important thought at this point about the writings that were “written before” as being useful for our learning (1:4). He is obviously referring to the Old Testament and later in the chapter he is going to quote from these writings to prove his point. In appealing for unity he quotes from Deuteronomy, Isaiah and Psalms to make that appeal. The problem of disunity in the church is something that is central to his letters (1 Corinthians 1:10,11 is a good example). There were groups in the congregations who came from different backgrounds and who also chose to follow different leaders, a situation that easily leads to disunity. There was only one church and one leader and that is Jesus Christ. This is an important fact for the believers in Paul’s time, and also to be remembered in our time of division and fragmentation of the Church, with its many different teachings and groups.

In the midst of this human failure to preserve the important unity of the church, Paul makes a beautiful statement in verse 13 to finish off this appeal: “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Paul then turns to some personal thoughts about the work that he has been doing in spreading the gospel which he previously referred to as “the power unto salvation” (Romans 1:16). After explaining his personal approach to how he has worked to spread the good news, he mentions his desire to always break new ground for the message rather than follow where others have gone. He also presents them with his plans for the future and I can imagine his scribe, Tertius, lifting his eyebrows as he writes down these words. Perhaps Paul had shared them with him before, but considering the way Paul moves with speed from one thought to another, perhaps he surprised even himself. Paul describes himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. The word used is “leitourgiai”, usually used in the Greek world of someone who has voluntarily chosen to serve his country or community. Tying this to Paul’s statement in chapter 12:1, 2, Paul’s life was an example of literally being a “living sacrifice”, laying his life down on the altar of service to the Gentiles.

Outlining his plan to visit Rome on the way to Spain, even Paul had no idea of how this journey was going to take place and is documented by his companion and often co-traveller Luke, in the book of Acts.

Paul also throws in another thought here that explains the subject of Christian giving and makes some important points. Christians in Rome who have received the spiritual gift of the Gospel via the Christians in Jerusalem, should now repay those who are going through a desperate drought in Jerusalem. He refers here, “to the ministry of material things”. They need to do so by sending relief in order that the poor in Jerusalem may benefit from their generosity and be repaid for sharing the gospel with them. Paul made a similar plea in 2 Corinthians 8 to the Church in Corinth. He also reminded the Roman Christians that he was going to Spain and would need their help to do so.

Finally he appealed for prayers for him in his ongoing plans to take the Gospel even further than he had already done. He looked forward to a time of refreshing when he visited Rome, not realizing that he would go to Rome in chains after he appealed to Caesar while he was in Jerusalem. He did however realize that danger lay ahead in Jerusalem and that proved to be the case as we see in Luke’s account in Acts. This section of Romans is perhaps the best information that Paul shared with others about his own life. There can be no doubt about his dedication and love for the Lord and his fellow man.

References:

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Johan

Romans Chapter 16

As we come to the end of this great book it is time to say goodbye and Paul sends greetings to his many friends in Rome, to members of the church there and to family. It is amazing how many people Paul knew in Rome, even though he had not visited there. It speaks to the fact that many in that time moved from place to place and that the postal service under the Pax Romana, was good.

Obviously he not only knew many personally, but had also heard about many and the work they were doing. As always he especially recognized those who worked in the church. It is also interesting to see how many of the people who he recognized were women. He also does not seem to elevate some to important positions of leadership, as is often done in the church today. Rather he honours the workers over and over again.

A couple of verses jump out for special mention. In verse 16 he refers to greeting each other with a holy kiss and then refers to the name of the churches in the area he is writing from, as the "churches of Christ". This confirms that the early church honoured the name Christ, in referring to them. This is in keeping with the statement by Jesus as recorded in Matthew 16:18 "I will build My church". (NKJV)

In verses 17-20 he again warns about disunity and also those who teach contrary doctrines to what he taught. Confusion was rife in these early times and it is sad to say that nothing has changed over the ages. Every group has their own teaching and so for someone looking for the church of the New Testament it becomes an almost impossible task.

So many different names and doctrines exist and so many people just give up in confusion and despair. No wonder that Jesus prayed, as recorded in John 17:20, 21: "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they all may be one, as You Father, are in Me, and I am in You, that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me".

It is good to remember that letters like this one were carefully written by scribes and then circulated among the various congregations for public reading. One can imagine the excitement in the Roman congregation when they heard that a letter from Paul had arrived and how they enjoyed hearing its public reading, perhaps during worship. Soon local scribes would carefully copy the letter and then circulate it as widely as possible. Only the very rich could own such a copy and it was only much later that some writings were accepted into the canon (the list of writings that were recognized as scripture) and others rejected.

Then again it was only after Gutenberg developed the printing press that the Bible was printed in its present form and distributed more widely. Paul requested that Timothy bring him his own personal scrolls, indicating how important they were at that time.

Another thought that is important is that the letters were read to the early Christians and so reading scripture in its full form brings about the full meaning of what the writer was saying. Getting stuck in some small detail that might be difficult to understand can harm the fuller understanding of the message. Don't miss the big picture, because you get stuck in the small one. Reading the book of Romans and other books like the book of Revelation, is often better understood when the "big picture" is recognized and understood.

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Johan

Lessons for life from Old Testament Characters - Jethro

In the 18th chapter of Exodus, an interesting event in the life of Moses is recorded that teaches us some interesting lessons for today. The setting is a father in law, Jethro, who comes to visit his son in law, Moses. As he looks around at the situation he sees something that is happening that is good but also not wise. Just recently, Uhuru Kenyatta of Kenya, made the statement that in the present Covid 19 virus crisis, he is caught between two “rights”. On the one hand he needs to protect his people from the deadly virus and on the other hand he needs to get the economy running in Kenya. Both are right and like leaders in the world at all levels, he is caught on the horns of this dilemma. Which way to go? What is better at the present moment?

As Jethro sees Moses, his son in law, working from early morning to late at night judging the issues brought to him by the people, the old man realizes that what Moses is doing is right, but at the same time is not good, because it can be improved. So he approaches Moses as recorded in Exodus 18:17 he says : “The thing that you do is not good” (NKJV). Imagine the surprise in Moses’ mind: “what do you mean Jethro; I am working my fingers to the bone serving the Lord and you say it is not good?” Here was the leader of the exodus with all the experience that he had accumulated over the years doing such an important job. How could it not be good?

Fortunately Moses respected his father in law’s opinion and listened to what he had to say. Sometimes a situation can be understood better by someone not caught in the middle of it. So Jethro gives Moses some advice: Instead of trying to do it all by yourself, train others to assist you in the task. Moses heeds the advice and this enables him to do his job better and also empowers many others to become effective leaders in the community. The text tells us “That Moses heeded the voice of his father in law and did everything he suggested” (vs. 24).

Some important lessons to learn from this example:

1. Listen to advice! In the present crisis in our world, it seems that those leaders who listened to the advice from the health experts available and acted wisely did well. This did much to stop the calamity that developed in many other countries. Some of the leaders believed that they knew better and the consequences have been terrible. It is never easy to really listen to advice if you have an “I know it all” attitude. Deep in the human heart is the belief that I know better!
2. Respect the advice of those with experience! Sometimes we need the enthusiasm and courage of youth to stand up against that which is wrong and entrenched in society. At the same time experience brings wisdom and balance. Moses was a great leader, but Jethro saw the situation more clearly and identified opportunities to improve it. When Solomon died his son Rehoboam made a fatal decision. After ignoring the good advice of the elders in Israel, he listened to the advice of his youthful friends as recorded in 1 Kings 12:1-16. This led to the breaking up of the nation of Israel into northern and southern kingdoms.
3. Delegation is an important way of empowering people. Any leader in society who tries to do it all on their own is asking for trouble. In the family, parents who don’t allow their children to accept responsibility for their actions from the very beginning are promoting an attitude of dependence. In business, government and education, training must be seen as a priority at all levels. The lack of training in police departments has been brutally exposed in recent times in many countries, where instead of helping people, high handed force has led to much harm.
4. The harm of burn out. There are examples around every corner of preachers, teachers, politicians, doctors and business people, to mention just a few, who have neglected the really important things in their lives like their own families, children and marriages because of the pressure that they often imposed on themselves. After Moses had delegated the judging responsibility to a team, I imagine he had some time to visit with his father in law and even his wife and children.

In the beautiful example of Moses and Jethro, as recorded in Exodus 18, human wisdom and a sincere attitude to act in the best interests of everyone concerned led to a good outcome. For those who think they know everything and don't need help or advice, it would be well to remember that in society it is always good to listen carefully to the voices that may be speaking to us. Putting aside our high and mighty, "know it all" attitudes can often bring good results at many different levels.

Bible Reference

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**God Bless,
Johan**

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Bible Study Lessons for Life from the Old Testament: Solomon :

One of the really interesting people in the Old Testament is Solomon, who in many ways stands for everything we would like to be. He was one of the richest men of his time (1 Kings 10:14ff) and perhaps of all time. He spent seven years building the temple for God and thirteen years on his own palace (1 Kings 6:38; 7:1). He was blessed with wisdom that brought people from far and wide to come and be amazed: "Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the men of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30). The Queen of Sheba was one such person who made the journey to his palace, as quoted by Jesus and recorded in Matthew 12:42.

Solomon was largely responsible for writing the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. The Song of Solomon is attributed to him. He had 40 thousand stalls for his horses (1 Kings 4:26) and that makes the Queen of England's and the King of Saudi's stables look like a joke. He also had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3).

All this wisdom and wealth goes back to the promise by God at the time of his youth. When he was called to take over the rule of the Kingdom of Israel from his father David, God revealed Himself to Solomon. Although he was the second son of David and Bathsheba, he was, according to 2 Samuel 12:24 "loved by the Lord". The first time the Lord appeared to Solomon he was asked to make a request and Solomon requested wisdom to rule and so God added "riches and wealth and honour such as none of the kings have had who were before you, nor shall any after you have the like" (2 Chronicles 1:7-12).

With these great blessings comes great responsibility and when looking at the rest of the facts about Solomon's life, it becomes apparent that he failed dismally on many counts. While he accepted God's blessing when he started out, he neglected to put into his life the love and care for his fellow citizens that was needed. Before David died he called his son to his side and said: "I go the way of all the earth, be strong, therefore, and prove yourself to be a man. And keep the charge of the Lord to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His judgements and His Testimonies as it is written in the Law of Moses...." (1 Kings 2:2, 3 - NKJV).

The first indication of problems came with the 13 years he spent on building his palace, before he built the temple for the Lord. He also drove his citizens relentlessly in achieving his goals. His son must have seen this and we learn about this in the statement made by the people when Jeroboam came to follow his father as king. Jeroboam was told by the people, as recorded in 1 Kings 12:4: "Your father made our yoke heavy, now therefore lighten the burdensome service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put on us, and we will serve you". The resultant failure of Jeroboam to do so led to the division of the south and north parts of the nation into two kingdoms, Judah in the south, and Israel in the north.

But it is really the influence of the foreign wives in his life that lead to a sad situation. In 1 Kings 12:1-13 it is recorded that Solomon did not follow the advice of his father David and broke the laws about marriage as set out in the Law, leading eventually to the sad statement in verses 4, 6: “His wives turned his heart after other gods” and “Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord and did not fully follow the Lord as did his father David”. Here was a man who had all that this life can offer, as promised by God. He somehow got caught up in his own power and position and forgot what was really important in life.

In fact in the book of Ecclesiastes he confesses to this failure. In this great book he explores all of life as he had experienced it with his God given wisdom. It is sad that he failed to apply what he learned in his own life and so we are left with his final words, as recorded in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work unto judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil”. Sobering words that speak of his life, and as a warning for lives in every age.

If we then could rewind the life of Solomon and re-picture it in a less worldly fashion, it would be much different in many ways. The trouble is that for many today his life is an example to be followed and not a warning as to what to avoid. As the world rushes on along the road of greed, self importance and selfishness, and finally destruction we follow blindly in the search of meaning. So we miss out on God’s blessings when we forget Solomon’s warning, to put God first in our lives, then everything else will fall into place.

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Regards
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Lesson for today from the Old Testament: Nehemiah

In a world where good leadership is needed more than ever, Nehemiah is a great example of leadership to look at. Here a pretty ordinary person, working as a cup bearer for the King of Persia, takes on a huge task and using great leadership skills manages to achieve what he set out to do – to build a wall around the city of Jerusalem which was in ruin after it had been destroyed by Babylon in 586 BC.

After the Persians defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC, Cyrus the second allowed some exiles to return to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and the area became a Persian province named Yehud, with Jerusalem as its capital. In the book of Nehemiah it is recorded how Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall, even though opposed by some of the local population who did not want this to happen. The chaos that a city without a wall permitted suited their corrupt behaviour.

As we look at the way Jeremiah achieved the remarkable feat of rebuilding the wall in just 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15), there are several important leadership skills that he had that are apparent:

1. Nehemiah was moved by compassion and concern for the people. In Nehemiah 1:4 it is recorded that when Nehemiah heard about the state of Jerusalem and the conditions that the people were living in he wept, mourned and fasted. A leader who has compassion for others is driven by a vision of what can be done to improve the situation for them. Jesus wept when he saw what the religious leaders of his time had done to the same city (John 11:35). Today it seems as if many leaders in many different sectors are motivated by greed rather than compassion.

2. Nehemiah looked for help and guidance from God. In today's world where most leaders seem to want to "go it on their own", it would be good for every leader to spend some time in prayer and to submit their needs for guidance to God. Long gone is the time in the western world where important meetings and conferences were opened in prayer. We seem to have become confident in our self sufficiency rather than submitting ourselves to God's wisdom and guidance. Not only did Nehemiah go to God, he also appealed to the King of Persia for much needed help in order to achieve what needed to be accomplished.
3. Nehemiah had a plan and did the necessary ground work. The record shows that he went out at night to inspect the present situation carefully before putting his plan into action. "And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire" (Nehemiah 2:13 NKJV). Good leadership needs a careful evaluation of what can and needs to be done. Analysis of the situation leaders find themselves in, is an important first step in the action needed.
4. Nehemiah dealt with the opposition wisely. As he began to build the wall those who opposed it used every means available to disrupt the work including sowing confusion, debate and even violence. Nehemiah showed that there was a time to talk and a time to simply get on with the work. When physical danger loomed he armed his builders to meet that threat, but because he had a vision and a plan he did not let anything get in his way.
5. Nehemiah delegated responsibility. It would have been impossible for him to "go it on his own" and so he chose workers to each take responsibility for a part of the rebuilding. Chapter 3 lists in detail who was responsible for which gate or part of the wall and in chapter 2:20, the words of Nehemiah are recorded "The god of heaven Himself will prosper us therefore we His servants will arise and build..." A great leader inspires his work force with great words of encouragement!
6. Nehemiah showed compassion and fairness. It was apparent that corruption was rife in the broken city of Jerusalem. A nation that earlier were slaves in Egypt and then in Babylon, were now having to sell their children into slavery to pay the debt that they had occurred from the money lenders in Jerusalem (5:1-8). So Nehemiah put an end to that. He forewent his own salary and that of his brothers to not put a further burden on the already struggling population (5:14-19).
7. Nehemiah inspired a work ethic. The task was completed because the "people had a will to work" (4:6). Leadership that sets the right example, that shows compassion and love, that has a clear vision and that leads in a Godly way inspires people to work. While the "nobles" in Jerusalem showed none of these characteristics and so the situation in Jerusalem was a disaster, most people will follow a good example and work hard if challenged. Nehemiah did that with God's help and so the work was done and everyone benefitted, except those who were corrupt. While power often corrupts, Nehemiah is a shining example that this does not always have to be so.

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: Adam and Eve

One of the most amazing accounts of human behaviour is recorded in Genesis Chapters 2, 3. Here is the account of the Garden of Eden which the NKJV subheading calls “Life in God’s Garden”. What it tells us about human behaviour is as topical as today’s news because it is our story. You and I are Adam and Eve and how they behaved is just like we behave. Placed in God’s creation, a beautiful garden, we are faced with both the responsibility of taking care of it and the danger of temptation to sin and so messing it up at many different levels.

Messing up a beautiful world

The disaster of global warming is testimony to mankind’s greed and mismanagement of the natural resources that we have been given. It is claimed that there is enough food in the world to feed its population but because of greed, the “have not’s” starve, and the “haves” live in abundance and luxury, often at a frightening level. In Genesis 2:15, God says “take care of it”. What a great responsibility that places on the shoulders of every human.

The fact of good and evil

In the garden was a tree that was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen.2:17). Once mankind ate from that tree disaster would follow close behind. The Apostle Paul in writing to the church in Rome writes: “for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law unto themselves” (Rom.2:14). He continues in verse 15 by stating that the law (of God) “is written on their hearts”. So one of the facts that we can learn from the Garden account is that we all know what is right and what is wrong.

Temptation lies around every corner waiting to pounce.

The temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden changes a place of peace and contentment into a disaster area. Here Satan is introduced into the world and anyone who has seen the depravity of human behaviour taking place must accept the fact that there is a battle taking place between good and evil, and that evil often wins. The book of Revelation dramatically tells the story of this war. It is not something that will take place sometime in the future but is a present reality. When Eve hears the voice of Satan and his lie, she, followed by Adam, makes a decision that takes them out of their paradise existence into today’s world. Sin has reared its ugly head and the result is rejection from their paradise existence and hello to Adam’s world. So we in every age also all hear that voice and fall from grace. Again it is Paul who reminds the Romans that they “are all under sin” (Romans 3:9).

Playing the blame game

One of the interesting events that follow as Adam and Eve hide from God (as many try to do today) and finally are required to face up to their disobedience, is playing the blame game. “She made me do it”, Adam and Eve says “Satan made me do it”. Modern Psychologists call it “Attribution Bias”, basically the human need to blame someone else or some conditions outside their control to be the cause of their personal failure. Political leaders in the world are at present busy playing that game with the problems that the Corona 19 virus is causing in their countries. But on a much lower, but equally fatal level, it is something all living in Adam’s world do regularly. The trouble with this approach is that it then leads to failure of dealing with the reality of the problem.

Every action results in a reaction

The sad picture of Adam and Eve hiding away from God is hilarious if it was not so pitiful. In today’s world many hide in the forest of disbelief and so called “human wisdom”. The fact that a person chooses to not believe in God, in Jesus, in heaven and hell does not mean they no longer exist. Things do not simply go away because they are denied. There is a time of accountability for every action. The saying goes: “your sins/lies will find you out”. We hide from responsibility for our actions in many different places and hope for the best, but eventually they come back to roost. Often with a vengeance! Think before you make that bad choice. It may seem like just a small thing, but the multiplier effect often leads to serious consequences. The rejection of God’s promises, as offered in Jesus Christ, has serious consequences in the present and in the eternal world. Spiritual bankruptcy is a sad place to exist in. When God offers peace and joy it is foolish indeed to say no thank you!

Concluding thoughts:

1. Sin comes packaged in tempting wrappings and without the warning; “this can be fatal”.
2. Sometimes Satan comes to a person in the guise of a loved one.
3. Satan is the “father of lies” (John 8:44), so be careful what you believe. It may sound right but is it actually the truth? Jesus claimed to be “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6)
4. God invites you to live in the city of gold with the river of life producing fruit and leaves” for the healing of the nations”. (Revelation 21:2) Paradise lost and Paradise regained.
5. You can run and hide from God but actually there is no place to hide except in your own mind.
6. Every decision you make influences others. No one is an island and there is an effect to what you do, either positive or negative that reaches beyond your little world.

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Lessons for Life from the Old Testament: Rahab

It is time for a look at one of the really interesting women characters in the Old Testament and see what we can learn from her life. Most people know the story of how Rahab hid the spies on the roof of her house in Jericho, as found in Joshua chapter 2 and 3. Not so many know that she is included in the genealogy of Jesus as listed in Matthew (1:5). She was the wife of Salmon and both are mentioned there. She is also mentioned in Hebrews 11:31: “By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace”. (NKJV)

One thing about the Bible is that it tells the story of God’s hero’s warts and all. While it is true that in the historical accounts in the books of Kings and Chronicles, the latter writings (the priestly account), tends to sanitise the lives of the kings. In general however, one can say that the accounts of the Biblical writers, unlike those of the accounts by other nations of that time, are much more open to the true story. They even record the losses and failures of the nation and individuals.

So here in Joshua 2, we see that the spies, who crossed over the Jordan River to have a closer look at the enemy, find their way into the house of Rahab the harlot. It is said that the house of ill repute in those days was also the boarding house or the “bed and breakfast” in modern terms. What however, sets Rahab apart from the other people in Jericho is that she believed in the God of Israel; “..for the Lord your God. He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Joshua 2:11).

All had heard about the wilderness wandering nation that was approaching from the East. All had heard about the powerful God of Israel and how He had brought them out of Egypt. But this woman believed that God was the only God, as the Israelites claimed. This belief led to her hiding the spies under the flax on her roof and eventually helping them to escape and return to Joshua.

It is always good to listen to the voice of God. Sometimes it is spoken or written, but often graphically illustrated in the lives and actions of believers. So a promise is made and when the army marches around the city she hangs the red sash out of her window, having gathered her family together in her house and so was saved. We do not know much more about the life of this remarkable woman but the testimony in the book of Hebrews tells us that she was included

in God's roll of honour as a hero of faith. The fact that she was a link in the genealogy of Jesus indicates that she became a part of the history of David's family that brought into history the Messiah.

So what can we learn about life from Rahab?

Firstly it is clear from her example that God gives second chances. Many of his heroes of faith came from somewhat ordinary backgrounds and some even did extra ordinary bad things in their lives. Think of David as an example: adulterer, murderer and breaker of the ceremonial law. But God sees in him a person "after His own heart". God did not create anyone perfect and left some room for improvement in every life. He uses imperfect people to achieve His will. This does not in any way suggest that He approved of evil and sin. At the same time He sees potential in places we may not see it. Rahab seized the opportunity offered her to get on God's side, and that saved her and her family.

Secondly we see clearly her courage. Hiding spies is a serious situation in every age and so if she was caught it is certain that no mercy would have been shown to her. At times all followers of God are called on to stand against evil. So as we look closely at the many heroes of faith in the Old Testament we see that courage is called for in every life. The Hebrew writer mentions some of those acts of courage in Hebrews 11:17: "they were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, were slain by the sword".

Following God was never meant to be an easy path. It often led to serious challenges. But the follower of God's way keeps going and has the certainty that there is a reward waiting. This is after all what faith is all about: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen".

It is interesting to imagine this woman faced with some difficult choices as the two spies arrive at her house needing help. How she reacted with great skill and even subterfuge to hide them and eventually help them to escape. How she seized the moment and began a new journey in her life that must have been more fulfilling than what it had been up to that point. God meets us where we are and challenges us to change our lives for the better. Sometimes the road seems difficult and challenging and even fraught with danger. At the same time it leads to real fulfilment because

God's way is always the right way. Rahab stepped out in faith and enjoyed the reward that came with that choice. We need to do the same.

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Lessons for Life from the Old Testament: Job

The Old Testament is divided into different sections, namely, Law, History, Wisdom and Prophecy. Job falls squarely in the area of wisdom writings. Not much is known about who wrote this book, when it was written, and when these events took place, but all that is really of no significance. What is important is to look at the message that is clearly taught in this interesting Old Testament Book. The reason for that is because it answers an important universal question about life and about God. Why does a loving God allow bad things to happen to good people?

The graphic and powerful answer comes in this dramatic story that answers the question by taking the reader into the eternal realm. For many who have suffered over the ages, this book has helped to find answers that are otherwise very difficult to find elsewhere. Surely rewards in life in the form of riches and happiness are given to those who live good lives!

Those who are evil face the results of their decisions in the form of sleepless nights, punishment and pain. So it would seem logical, and even a superficial study of the scriptures seems to indicate this. While Israel obeyed God things went well and when they chose to disobey, bad things followed. The book of Judges is a graphic illustration of this fact. In today's world the peddlers of the so called "prosperity gospel" teach this aggressively, and the high life of its proponents is called as a witness to this false teaching.

The writer of the book of Job tells us the story of a person just like we all would want to be; good and prosperous. The problem however, is that in the reality of everyday living this picture exists only in our minds. As we take a closer look at reality we see that many who have given their lives in service to God (just like Job) seem to, at times, be living a hard life. So we find Job on the ash-heap scraping his sores with a shard.

When we take a quick look at the heroes of faith in the New Testament, like Jesus himself, John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul, we see people who did not have the luxury of prosperity and even peace in their lives. A look at the list of the Old Testament men and women of faith in Hebrews 11 shows that suffering and hardship was the reward for most, if not all of God's heroes.

So in this book we are taken to look at the life of this wonderful man called Job, who is in fact, almost too good to be true. In Job's own eyes and in the eyes of the Old Testament writer of this book, there is no fault to be found in him. His three friends however, disagree. Although they cannot put their finger on what exactly the sin is, they believe that Job is being punished by God for a sin or sins that are hidden. They bring to the life of Job the false human wisdom that if something bad happens in your life it is God punishing you for something bad you did. Job's wife's solution is to "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Many in despair still find this as the only answer.

For an answer to this incorrect human assumption, the book of Job gives us one of the few glimpses into the eternal world that exists beyond our physical existence. Here God and Satan are on different sides with different aims. Here the answer to suffering in this life can be found. It lies in the question about good and evil. It is interesting that in the New Testament it is only James who mentions Job and praises his patience (James 5:11). But it is also James who proclaims that "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted no one should say, God is tempting me. For God cannot be tempted by evil. Nor does he tempt anyone..." (James 1:12, 13 NIV). At the same time there is the reality of Satan who has powers, that even if limited, are very real.

Here then is the dilemma: why do bad things happen to good people and often seemingly good things to bad people? This is the same question that Agar deals with in Psalm 73. The answer can perhaps be summarised in the fact that we all fall under the power of Satan and he can offer us good or bad, according to what he wants to achieve. In the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4 and Luke 4) Satan offered Jesus power and possessions while trying to deviate Jesus from his purpose. In Job's situation he used the opposite tactic. Satan is always up to his tricks and so we need to be on the lookout. The answer Job finds comes in 42:1-6. Here instead of searching for answers that are beyond this physical world he comes to trust and depend totally on God: "My ears have heard of you. But now my eyes have seen you" (vs.5).

There is no doubt that following God's way is always the best. At times life may be challenging, but in the end the reward is worth it. So we can learn some important lessons from this interesting book:

1. There are things taking place in the eternal realm that we do not know about.
2. We live in a world where bad things happen for many reasons. Some we have control over and others not (see Jesus teaching in Luke 13:4 about the wall of Siloam falling on people without discriminating between good or bad people. They were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and all suffered the consequences of a poor building construction).
3. We need to not only hear about God but really see Him in a spiritual sense (compare Job 19:26; 41:5; Matthew 5:8 and Romans 11:8; Ephesians 1:18).

4. When life brings its challenges to believers, they need to look up and see God on his throne (Revelation 4:1, 2). We will not always be able to understand everything, but we need to trust in God, do good, and look forward to our eternal reward.
5. God, after all is in control of our eternal destiny, and nothing can separate us from the promises of God. (Romans 8:28-39 – we are more than conquerors in Christ)

References:

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Lessons for life from the Old Testament: Jephthah.

The book of Judges covers the period of time between the entry and settlement of Israel in Palestine, under the leadership of Joshua, and the appointment by Samuel of King Saul. This was a chaotic time in Israel's history and was marked by times of relative peace followed by war and disaster. While the various leaders led the people to listen to God's voice and obey it, a time of prosperity followed. Then as the people turned away from God they suffered the consequences of such foolish behaviour.

Some of the Judges are well known, while others are simply mentioned in passing. The better known Judges are Deborah, Samson and Gideon. Some of the lesser known ones include Abimelech, Abdon and Tola. In the life of another of the lesser known Judges, Jephthah, we find some interesting lessons even for today. It is interesting to take a look at the quality of life of people and even countries and notice that while God rules in the hearts and minds of the people, good things usually happen. When God is rejected a time of hardship and despair results. The book of Judges and world history, and even a closer look at today's world proves this point.

Jephthah's story is recorded in the 11th chapter of Judges and it is full of drama and human tragedy, suitable for a Hollywood epic. He is also mentioned in the book of Hebrews as one of the people of faith. The Bible records that Jephthah was from the tribe of Gilead and a man of valour. Even in today's world we need people to stand up for what is right, and in the recent Black Lives Matter movement we have seen many examples of ordinary citizens taking a stand for what is right and just.

Because Jephthah was the son of a harlot, he was driven out of the family by his half brothers. It is interesting to see that of all the Judges, few were what we would call natural leaders with impeccable lives. At the same time when called to lead God's people, they accepted the challenge using the talents that God gave them. So here we find a person with a rather dubious character, with a band of adventurers living a dangerous life. The elders of Gilead, however, saw potential in this man, and so called him to lead the nation into battle. God sees potential in people and we are often surprised as to whom He can use, even ourselves!

Before going to war against the Ammonites, Jephthah seeks a peaceful path as he negotiated with them. But when this approach was rejected he resorted to the action common of his time. He took to the sword. It is interesting to note that in the discussions with the Ammonites, Jephthah had a good knowledge of the history of his people and of events of the past. As negotiations broke down, Jephthah turned to God for help and the Bible says: "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah" (11:29 NKJV), a phrase used several times in the book of Judges.

Then, in a moment of rash commitment, Jephthah made a vow to God that if the victory was given he would sacrifice “the first thing that came out of his house to meet him” (11:31). What was the man thinking when he made that vow?

It leads to one of the saddest passages in the Bible.

After the victory had been won and he returned to his house, his daughter, his only child, came out to meet him “with timbrels and dancing” (11:34). The agony of a rash vow must have haunted him until his dying day. It begs the question as to why he did not rather sacrifice himself in her place, as God gave His son on the cross in our place.

Both Jephthah and his daughter show great fortitude when they realise the price that must be paid if this vow is to be honoured. The chapter ends with heartbreak that must surely bring tears to the eyes of any parent, even today. The un-named only daughter spends two months in the mountains, mourning the fact that she will die as a virgin (11:38). She then returns to comply with her father’s rash vow; “and he carried out his vow with her that he had made”.

The recorder of Judges ends the chapter with the words: “That the daughters of Israel went four days to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gilead”, and “That it became a custom in Israel” (11:39, 40).

Some important lessons can be learned from the life of this Judge:

1. Don’t let the past haunt you. Not many people are dealt a perfect hand. Move forward with your life and what you have and make the best of it.
2. Always prefer negotiations to conflict, but in the end be able to stand up for what is right.
3. Don’t make rash promises that may come back to haunt you. If you make a promise, make certain it is one you aim to keep.

References:

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: Ruth

Only two books in the Bible are named after women, Esther and Ruth. Leadership in the world of the east always rested firmly in the hands of men as it still appears to be the case today. However every now and then mention is made of women in the Bible, often in a supportive, child bearing role. Ruth tells the story of life for a woman in the men’s world of her time.

There are many ways and many parallels with how things are in today’s world. This month has been designated as women’s month in order to allow a closer look at what is not good in the world and move towards putting it right. The dark cloud of gender based violence is ever present in every country in the world, and no less so in South Africa as our president rightly pointed out last week.

The story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi is a story not only of hardship and heartbreak, but also of hope and love on many different levels. Naomi is a woman whose life is filled with tragedy and heart-break in the brutal world of the Judges and tribal conflict about 1300 BC. Elimelech moves from Bethlehem to Moab to escape the drought that he was facing in his area of Palestine. His wife is Naomi and they have two sons who marry Moabite women after Elimelech dies. One wife is named Orpah and the other Ruth. Ten year later tragedy again strikes Naomi as both her sons die. She longs for her family and so with her two daughters-in-law she makes the journey along the King's Highway back to Bethlehem after hearing that the drought there had ended.

Naomi eventually tries to encourage her daughters-in-law to return to their home where they could perhaps find husbands and rebuild their lives. While Oprah does this, Ruth decides to remain with Naomi making the famous statement as recorded in Ruth 1:16; "Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following you. For wherever you go, I will go, And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (NKJV-used with permission).

Life for an elderly widow in that time was a difficult one to say the least. Too old to join the orphans and destitute gleaners who left over wheat after the harvesters had done their job, starvation loomed. But Ruth joined those who followed the paid harvesters to pick up the fallen grain so as to eke out an existence. Here she comes to the notice of the landowner, Boaz, who proves to be a man who is kind and considerate in many ways. He puts Ruth under the protection of his workers so that she would not be abused something which seemed to be the practice at that time.

Boaz however finds this young woman attractive and so one thing leads to another until he takes her to be his wife. He respects the law of kinsmen- redeemer of that time. Here someone who becomes a widower becomes the responsibility of another male member of the family. They have one child named Obed who became the grandfather of David. It is interesting to find out that Boaz is the son of Rahab the prostitute who hid the spies in Jericho. So Ruth becomes part of the family of David and later on Jesus (Matthew 1:5). The story is rich in many ways. It shows clearly how human kindness overcomes evil and how God's hand can be seen in history.

As von Goethe, the German writer-poet said the story of Ruth "is the loveliest complete work on a small scale" (NKJV – introduction to Ruth pg.350).

What then can we learn from this wonderful short Old Testament book?

1. Life is hard in every age. Here is drama as relevant as the daily newspapers; displaced people, drought and hunger, death and despair, abuse of women and desperate need.
2. But it is also a story of hope and perseverance; of determination and hard work, of loyalty and blessings, of love and caring, of family and good choices. All characteristics that are desperately needed in this modern world just as it was then.
3. This is a beautiful little book in the Old Testament, hidden between Judges and 1 Samuel and often enjoyed in women's seminars and Bible Studies, but which undoubtedly deserves a much larger audience in the minds and hearts of all people in every age and in every place.
4. It is a magical look into life in the times of olden days with important information about legal practices, marriage rituals and working conditions.
5. It also shows that while the world has moved on into the techno age, the human reality of behaviour, both good and bad, is ever present.
6. Only you and I can make a difference when we change our attitudes and behaviour to meet the high demands that God expects from us. This then will make the world a better place for all.
7. The story of Ruth, a Moabite woman does away with any claim of a particular group to have exclusive access to God. The promise made to Abraham was for all nations (Genesis 12:3). Anyone can come to God through Jesus Christ, who in fact is our redeemer.

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: Samuel and Saul

Towards the end of the time of the Judges the people looked around at other nations and decided that they wanted a king “such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:5). This request displeased Samuel who warned them that this was not a good idea. A king would make demands on the people that they did not need - a warning that came true and especially during the time of Solomon. However more than that, Samuel saw this request as a rejection of God as King. In fact God revealed to Samuel: “it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king” (vs. 8).

Here is the problem of every nation in all times: “who is in charge in your country and more so, in the hearts and minds of the people?” Here is the ongoing conflict between political power and God’s power in the lives of the people. This was what Herod felt when he heard from the Wise Men from the East that a king had been born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-12). Herod wanted to be certain that he was in control and so when the Wise Men did not go back to tell him about Jesus, he called for the slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem.

Church history tells the sad story of nations neglecting to find a clear distinction between human rulers and the rule of God. Nation after nation followed the example of Israel in the time of Samuel, by wanting to appoint rulers to follow, and so climbed aboard the train of political power and rule. This leads to a downward ride of greed and manipulation. In an ideal situation a nation, country, city and even family would place God firmly on His throne in their lives and behaviour. God wants to do the best for his people and so listening to his voice and obeying his instruction leads to enjoying his promises.

Imagine a world that is ruled by God’s great love, follows God’s clear instructions. A nation where “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control” rules (Galatians 5:22). Certainly this is not the world that kings and rulers have created. In a world caught between human greed and political power-plays, things can only deteriorate into chaos and violence. A look at the map of today’s world shows clearly that rejecting God as King and replacing him with human leaders is disaster after disaster.

So Samuel appoints Saul, a good looking, rather humble man as king. With a great opportunity to lead, Saul fails dismally. Two fatal decisions result in him being rejected by God “You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel!” (1 Samuel 15:26).

Two crucial events lead to this rejection. Firstly Saul neglects to wait for Samuel to lead the army in prayer before battle and takes over the prophetic/priestly role for himself (1 Samuel 13:11-14). He then, after winning a battle against the Amalekites, does not follow the instructions to destroy everything. Rather he keeps the best cattle and sheep for himself (1 Samuel 15:7-23). Saul also goes to Mount Carmel to “set up a monument in his own honour...” (15:12). On each occasion he lies and blames others for his obvious failures, something that is all too apparent in today’s world.

Saul began the a sad story of Israel's history which was a rule by Kings that extended until the Babylonian captivity. Some of the King's did a reasonable job while many failed dismally. The voices of the well known prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all tried to bring the nation back to following God and his teachings. Some kings tried to the best of their ability but inevitably failed as the nation eventually fell into captivity.

A careful look at the history of the Christian Church tells the sad story of ongoing failure up to the present. We live in Adam's world where greed and violence controls the minds of rulers and so also governments. People today should long for a nation, country, organization and family that stands totally under the wise leadership of God, passed down by God through obedient people. We, as humans, however, have a great ability to mess things up. We really would rather do our own thing no matter where it leads us. Jesus described it as the broad way that many follow and that leads to disaster (Matthew 7:12).

Lessons for Today

1. Listen to God's voice as he speaks to you in both the Old and New Testaments.
2. Put God in control of your life to secure His great promises. Eventually you can only be responsible for your own actions
3. Make a difference in the world by sharing the "good news".
4. Be a light bringer in whatever place you find yourself. Saul had great opportunity but messed up badly. You and I have opportunities every day and have to take them seriously.
5. When people ask for a King/Ruler remind them who should really be in charge.

Regards
Johan

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: David

"A man after God's own heart" is how David is described in Samuel.(1 Samuel 13:14) The people demanded a king and they got Saul, a tall and imposing figure, who however, turned out to be a disaster. So Samuel was sent to anoint David, the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, as the new king. "The Lord said to Samuel. Do not consider his appearance or his height". The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7 - NIV translation used with permission).

It is interesting to note that several leaders that God called over the years were often not the first choice by human standards and were sometimes even reluctant, but always turned out to be a good choice. Moses, Gideon, David and the Apostle Paul were some examples. Even Jesus "had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" according to the prophecy in Isaiah 53:2.

David however proved to have many good characteristics that are really worth following.

1. He was brave and trusted in God in difficult situations. The well-known story of the defeat of Goliath, in 1st Samuel, bears reading again. Here, when God's people are hiding and trembling in their tents, the young boy faces the Philistine giant and wins the battle. His words to Goliath ring through the ages and should be our words when we face the battles in our lives: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty....." (1 Samuel 17:45).

2. He was loyal and trustworthy. In his own description to Saul when the king questioned his ability, he simply stated his experience as a shepherd: “When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and killed it” (17:35). Later when the king was trying to kill him, David had the opportunity to kill Saul but refused to do so (24:1-10). His devotion and loyalty to his job as a shepherd and also to Saul illustrates his general attitude. It is especially his loyalty to his friend Jonathan that remains a shining example of friendship.
3. David used his talents to serve the Lord. The Psalms of David are some of the best known parts of the Old Testament if not of the whole Bible and are testimony to his love and devotion. He served in Saul’s court by playing the harp to calm the king down when Saul was having one of his fits of despair. As a great warrior he brought peace to the nation as he defeated the enemies of Israel.
4. He showed great emotion and love towards others. When his son Absalom led a rebellion against his father and was eventually killed by Joab, the words of David recorded in 2 Samuel 18:33 are testimony to his love: “The king was shaken. He went to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said: O Absalom my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!”
5. He learned from his mistakes. After repentance came a change in behaviour and this showed a contrite heart and soul.
6. But in the final analysis he was also very human. The well known account of his affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah is a sad story of lust and of one bad decision that led to another. Then, as the prophet Nathan comes to point out his sin with the parable of the rich man who steals the poor man’s sheep, David repents and shows a heart that God requires. No one is perfect, that is the sad story of the human race. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:9, 10) That is why God sent his own beloved son to die in our place. David repented and was restored to God and we have the same opportunity.

David really stands out as a person who listened to God’s voice and followed the path that God had set out for him. He was undoubtedly hugely talented but it was really his heart that was important. God even today looks at humans in a different way than we do. We tend to look at the outward appearance but God searches our hearts and so we need to keep them pure. At times we may need to fight battles with great courage like David did. At other times we need to cry out like he did: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.....”

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: Abigail and Nabal

The story of one of the really amazing people in the Old Testament is found in the 25th chapter of 1 Samuel. Again, this is just a brief account of a woman, but at the same time a really remarkable woman. As David continued to flee from Saul he finds himself and his warriors in their stronghold in the desert of Maon and in need of food. So he approached a very wealthy man Nabal, who lived at Maon, near Mount Carmel, for food.

The description of the man, Nabal is of a “surly and mean” person (! Samuel 25:3 - NIV). His name means foolish, as the Bible explains and his life illustrates. In contrast, his wife Abigail is described as “an intelligent and beautiful

woman". The action of both these characters as David looks for help stands in sharp contrast with each other. David and his men are hungry and so call out to this wealthy man for help and Nabal foolishly rejects their approach with scorn, living up, not only to his name but also to his personality.

Nabal says: "Who is this David? Who is this son of Jessie? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. Why should I take bread and water and the meat that I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?" (1 Samuel 25:10-11). The answer is probably: "yes why should you?", if considered by today's thinking. But in the context of the common practice of that time it was expected for a person to be hospitable to anyone who arrived at their door. So we find Abraham inviting strangers into his tent and feeding them as recorded in Genesis 18. Nabal however, lived up to his description as being a mean spirited and selfish person. As we look around us we see many with the same attitude as Nabal, but fortunately also many with the attitude of Abigail.

It was only through the kind actions of his wife Abigail that Nabal was saved from the sword of David. She went out of her way to show hospitality to the strangers. When she then learns that David is to be the new king of Israel she informs her husband about what had happened after he spends the night getting drunk. The Bible writer records that when Nabal heard this, "his heart failed him and he became like a stone" (1 Samuel 26:37). About ten days later he was "struck by the Lord and died".

David obviously was attracted to this intelligent and beautiful woman and so sent word to her asking her to become his wife. She accepts the invitation and "went with David's messengers and became his wife". Later on she is present at the anointing of David as king, as described in 2 Samuel 2:2 and becomes the mother of Kileab.

It is interesting that in the Old Testament hospitality is taught as an important attitude. Yet in today's world many seem to have the mean attitude of Nabal: "I have worked hard for what I have and so why must I share it with others – their problem is their problem!" This attitude becomes a part of our thinking and so part of society. It has been interesting to see how during the Covid 19 lock-down, many have reached out to those who have been in really difficult places.

Jesus taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan that we, as Christians, need to reach out to those who are in difficulty. As we look at the corruption and greed that is present in South Africa and in so many other countries in the world it becomes obvious that the spirit of Nabal lives on in the hearts and minds of many. It is into this dark picture that the example of Abigail shines like a bright light. It gives hope to a world that is basically only interested in looking after itself. She proclaims a different world where everybody shows a spirit of kindness and compassion.

Hospitality is regarded by Paul as a gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:8, 13). Peter writes: "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:9, 10). The Hebrew writer warns: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

Abigail shows us today that even when she was living with a mean and selfish person she acted wisely and stood for what was right. The rewards are not only accumulated by those who receive acts of kindness but also by those administering them.

The next question that every person needs to ask themselves is: "What attitude controls my life, that of Nabal or that of Abigail?" Perhaps only you can answer that!

Yours in Christ
Johan

Lessons for today from the Old Testament: It's okay to cry.

In today's world people cry. According to the teaching of psychologists and mental health experts, crying is an important part of being human. To stop this natural response to our feelings can lead to emotional problems. Crying takes place for many different reasons. One is to release emotions of sadness and also to express feelings of joy. So we cry. Another form of crying is not as positive as people use tears to manipulate others. At the same time, in our confused world, we accept tears as a part of life. Often it is seen as a sign of weakness and so is discouraged.

It is after all one of the ways a baby communicates with the world until it learns to speak. At the same time we teach our boys that "cowboys don't cry" and I have even heard it said that "big girls don't cry". Looking at the Old Testament we find example after example of people crying for a variety of reasons. Here we may find some positive use of tears and some that are not positive at all. (It is interesting to note that most translations use the term weep rather than cry, following the old translations and language of times gone by.)

A quick look at Genesis shows Hagar crying in the desert when sent away by Abraham with her son (Genesis 21:16). Abraham cries when Sarah dies (Gen.23:2). Esau cries when his inheritance is stolen by Jacob (Gen.27:39) and both Jacob and Esau cry when they meet in an emotional re-union (Gen.33:4). Jacob cried when he believed his son Joseph had been killed by wild animals and Joseph cried on several occasions when he and his brothers and eventually his father, were re-united (Gen. Chapters 42-50).

The baby Moses cries while in the basket in the river Nile where his mother put him so he could be discovered by the wife of Pharaoh (Exodus 2:6). During the wilderness wanderings the Israelites cry (Numbers 11:16), as they do again much later while in Babylonian Captivity (Psalm 137:1). Nehemiah cried when he heard about the state of the people in the ruins of Jerusalem. David cried on several occasions and perhaps the most interesting account is after the death of his and Bathsheba's son (2 Samuel 12:15-25). Here in verse 21, his servants are recorded as saying: "What is this you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was still alive, but when the child died, you arose and ate food" (NKJV). This reminds us of the words of Solomon, as recorded in Ecclesiastes 3:4: "A time to weep, And a time to laugh".

A good example of inappropriate use of tears comes in the book of Judges, where Delilah, when she can't get her own way, wears Samson down with her tears (Judges 14:16). "Then Samson's wife wept on him, and said, You only hate me! You do not love me!" So people have learned to use crying and tears to manipulate others. It is interesting to see how soon after birth babies realize that they can get their own way with a bout of heartbreaking crocodile tears. The difficulty that parents have is in knowing when tears are a legitimate cry for help or an early form of manipulation.

One of the most interesting examples of tears is when Nehemiah hears about the desperate condition of his country men and women in Jerusalem. Here the tears are an indication of a person who feels deeply for others. The rest of the book tells the story of how Nehemiah moved from tearful concern to carefully planned action in returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the walls of the city. One of the marks of a true leader is a deep feeling for others, something often missing in modern political leaders who often seem more interested in their own well being than that of their people.

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet as he lived his life often in desperate conditions and had every reason to cry. It is however in the book of Ezekiel, that we get the most powerful illustration of the need that we have to feel about sin and its results. In a graphic illustration the prophet paints a picture of 6 men going through the city of Jerusalem and marking the foreheads of all "who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it", and are then followed by men who kill those who don't care. (Ezekiel 9:1-11).

So it is okay to cry! We need specially to cry about what we see happening in this world and then do what we can to expose sin in our own lives and warn others about the day of judgement that is certainly coming. Jesus cried when he

looked at the city of Jerusalem and saw what it had become. Do you sigh, do you cry, do you *really, really* care about the things that are happening around you? Deep feelings can lead to positive actions as history has shown.

Greetings and God Bless
Please circulate
Johan

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: Women - the Good and the Bad.

While the records in the Old Testament deal largely with the accounts of the famous leaders like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Elijah and many other men, it often gives us a glimpse of women, both good and not so good, or even really bad. These women give us an important glimpse into the reality of human life and the relationship between the sexes. It all starts with Eve who hears the lie of Satan in the Garden of Eden, believes it, and then shares it with Adam, who buys it hook line and sinker. Because of this Eve often gets the blame, but we need to remember that we each have a free will to listen for the truth and obey it. Surely Adam should have had the intelligence to realise that what he was being told was a lie? Often Satan packages his lies in pretty parcels, and so we need to be careful who we listen to.

Always check out the facts to make certain it is not “fake news”!

There is a short list of women in the Old Testament who can be described as really bad. Here Jezebel tops the charts and seems to be simply evil. Potiphar’s wife who attempted to seduce Joseph, could be included in that list. Others were simply weak and fell to temptation and this could include Bathsheba and Delilah. Trapped in situations where it was difficult to stand for the right choice, they fell to temptation, a danger that lurks around every corner in this world. But there are also some who were a shining example of good! One of the early Judges in the history of Israel was Deborah. When she was leading Israel (Judges 4:4) as one of the early judges, Barak was instructed to take up arms against their enemies who were lead by Sisera. Barak replied: “If you go with me I will go; but if you don’t go with me I won’t go.” (Judges 4:8; NIV translation) So Deborah agreed to go and after they won the battle she composed a song of praise, recorded in chapter 5.

With the present health crises in the world it seems appropriate to mention two lesser known women in the Old Testament, Shiphrah and Puah. They were midwives in Egypt and were instructed by the king of Egypt to put to death any Israelite boys that they were delivering (Exodus 1:16). The women refused to do this and as a result were rewarded by the Lord (vs.20-22).

Another lesser known woman was the un-named woman of Shunem (2 Kings4:8), who urged her husband to build a room and furnish it for the prophet Elisha so that he could use when he came to their area. She was rewarded with a much desired son.(2 Kings 4:8-17)

It is however Esther, who stands out for her courage in saving the nation from disaster, a situation still celebrated today by Jews in the feast of Purim. Queen Vashti sets the scene for this moving story. How a young and beautiful Israelite woman becomes the new queen after Vashti refuses to parade her beauty in front of King Xerxes’ drunken guests at a big banquet. After a search for a new queen is made, Esther is chosen and when the evil Haman plots to put all the Israelites to death, Esther risks her life by going into the king’s presence to plead their case. A story filled with heart stopping drama and adventure suitable for a modern block-buster movie. It all ends well and again doing the right thing trumps evil. Her Uncle Mordecai makes the plea: “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows that you have come to royal position for a time like this” (Ester 4:14).

Ruth and Naomi rate highly in the stakes of loyalty, integrity and friendship. They travel to Bethlehem after living in Moab and Naomi encourages Ruth to return to her people in Moab. Ruth then makes the famous reply: “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried” (Ruth 1:16-17a). Ruth becomes part of the genealogy of Jesus as the wife of Boaz the great-grandfather of David.

The Queen of Sheba is a difficult woman to put into any category as she travels from Africa to visit the powerful and rich King Solomon, offering gifts to him and receiving gifts from him. Legend has presented many stories about her and Solomon but we need to leave it in that category.

So what can we learn from these Old Testament woman that can help us today?

Firstly: God uses women to fulfil His purposes. While historically women were not often given the opportunities to lead, an opportunity that they obviously deserved, they often rose to great heights.

Secondly: They show that life offers opportunities to do what is right and what is wrong. Choosing the right is always best.

Thirdly: Women show great determination in the face of challenges and often have the courage that is needed in a difficult world.

Postscript: It is strange indeed that during the Covid 19 epidemic most countries that have women leaders have coped well with combating the virus; Germany, New Zealand, Denmark, Norway and Iceland.

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Lessons for life from the Old Testament: The Ark of the Covenant – Where is God?

One of the really interesting stories recorded in the Old Testament is the event recorded in 1 Samuel 4, 5, 6. Here Israel was at war with the Philistines, and in a battle at Ebenezer they were defeated and about 4000 died on the battlefield (1 Samuel 4:3). Questions were asked as to why God had brought this defeat on His people? This is an easy question to ask, but a difficult one to answer.

The elders decided to send for the Ark of the Covenant which was at Shiloh and bring it into the camp. As it arrived a “great shout” was heard, so loud that “the ground shakes”. This sent fear into the hearts of the Philistines who said: “A god has come into the camp”, and: “we’re in trouble! Nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the desert” (1 Samuel 4:7, 8 - NIV translation, used with permission).

The Philistine leaders realized that a challenge faced them and so they called a meeting and encouraged their soldiers to be brave and to “Be men and fight!” And so they did and they also won the second battle. They captured the Ark of the Covenant and 30 000 soldiers of Israel were killed in that battle; a very bad day for the nation. They lost not only many, many men in battle, but also the important symbol of their covenant with God.

The rest of these three chapters record the trouble that the Ark of the Covenant brought to the Philistines who eventually sent it back to Israel with penalties included; one of the really amusing stories in the Bible. The picture of the Philistines finding the image of Dragon in his temple lying in front of the Ark, broken and battered brings a smile to

the face of any reader. The hardship that comes to the cities where the Ark is kept is testimony to the fate of those who mess with the all powerful God.

The question that comes to mind as we read this account is: “where is God?” There was a strong belief in the minds and hearts of the Israelite army that when the Ark arrived the battle was already won. Even the Philistines believed that they were in trouble, now that “God” had arrived. The problem is, of course, that God does not live in a box that can be sent into battle to ensure victory. This is a basic problem that has haunted God’s people from time immemorial. If we perform the ritual, go to the right place, make the necessary sacrifices, then God will win the battle by protecting us and rewarding us.

Amos wrote: “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:21; 23, 24). Israel had failed to understand that God was not carried around in the Ark of the Covenant but rather needed to be carried around in the hearts of the people who believed in Him, who trusted in Him and who practiced the principles that He taught. Trusting in the symbols would simply not do the job. Taking the words of God to heart and putting them to practice in your life is what really counts.

Jeremiah looked to the future during a time when his people had continually tried to put God in the box of empty ritual to a time when God’s people will have the law of God in their minds and written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).

Lessons for today:

1. It is important to realise that God does not exist in any building or temple or box. Jesus told the woman at the well, as recorded in John 4:24, “Yet a time is coming and has now come when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers God seeks. God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth.”
2. God exists in a spiritual world that cannot be contained in physical places but needs to be worshipped personally and in groups through the spirit.
3. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper that reminds us of the sacrifice Jesus made as we get together to share in this celebration on the first day of the week.
4. Like the Israelites we cannot bring God to meet us in a place when we need Him and we are desperate. We rather need to have Him in our minds and hearts at all times. This is what Jeremiah promised and Jesus taught.

Regards
Johan

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: Listening to God

In any introduction to the Old Testament of the Bible the first point that is usually made is that God has communicated with people in three different ages. Firstly, the Patriarchal Age, then the Mosaic age and finally the Prophetic Age. The first age is then found in the book that preceded the law (Genesis) followed by the coming of the law in Exodus and then followed by the books of the Law themselves, and then by the books of the Prophets. These include the Major and Minor prophets.

In the Old Testament there are also historical books and wisdom literature that make up the 39 books of the Old Testament Bible, as we know it. These books however, overlap in what and when they were recorded, and also in their

aims. One fact that stands out clearly is that in every age it is always good to listen to what God communicates and to do what he says. There are no exceptions to this basic principle. God, our creator, knows what is best and communicates it clearly in every age. So we can cite the examples of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses and in the times of the Judges and Kings.

The example of David, as he begins his rule as the King of Israel, is a good illustration of the way that God communicates with his people and what happen when they hear his voice and do what he says. In 2 Samuel 7, God sends the prophet Nathan to David with a message. The writer of 2 Samuel writes; “That night the word of the Lord came to Nathan saying: ‘go and tell my servant David, this is what the Lord says; Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?’” (vs.4, 5 NIV translation - used with permission).

The issue was who would build a permanent place for God to dwell in? Nathan tells David, who wanted to do this that it was not his commission but that his son would do it. David was a good listener and obeyed God in this matter. Later Nathan would come to David again to confront him with the sin that David had committed with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. Here David had sinned against the Law of Moses and the law of common decency that is written in every persons heart (Romans 2:15). Sadly he then faced the consequences of choosing not to obey the voice of God.

This is a good example of all three stages of communication overlapping. David, like Joseph when tempted by Potiphar’s wife, knew what was right and what was wrong, but unlike Joseph chose the wrong path. The Law given to Moses clearly spelt it out in the Ten Commandments which he must have learned as a young Israelite. He also knew in his heart that what he was doing was not right (2 Samuel 11, 12). David however, when confronted by Nathan with his sin, repented of those sins, but at the same time had to face the consequences. Sin does that! It can be forgiven but its results often live on.

In the book of Hebrews the writer explains an important fact about the Old Testament revelation and brings it forcefully into today’s world. “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things...(Hebrews 1:1,2).

When reading the Old Testament, the principle of listening to the voice of God as it comes into the world is always important. Many chose not to listen and faced the terrible consequences of that decision. Saul, the first King of Israel is a good example as he fell on his own sword in battle and lost the succession of the throne for his family (1 Samuel 31:4-6). Over and over listening to God’s voice and obeying it resulted in reward. Rejecting God’s word led to disaster.

What about today? It still does. Few will argue that sin brings good results. At the same time hearing the voice of God and the promises that come through his Son is much more than avoiding sin. It promises what Jesus called “the abundant life” (John 10:10) with all its rewards in this life and in the future. It brings forgiveness of sin, hope of a better today and an even better tomorrow. It brings what the Apostle Paul describes as “peace that passes understanding”.

How does God speak to us today? “In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son”. Jesus delivered the message in his teaching and example, and finally in his sacrifice on the cross. All Old Testament prophesies point to Jesus and the fulfilment of God’s promises. To hear this voice from God and ignore it seems unwise, it has always has been so. God is speaking in many different ways to each one of us today. He is calling you and me home today! What do we hear! But more important, what do we do?

Yours in Christ
Johan

Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: The Voice of Prophecy

God uses prophets to bring His message into the hearts and minds of people. This has always been the case. Noah warned the people of his time about the coming flood if they did not turn away from their sinful ways (Genesis 6, 7, 8). Moses warned Pharaoh that disaster would come if he did not let the Israelites go (Exodus 7:1-6). The Judges warned Israel time and time again about disaster looming if they did not obey God. The prophets warned of the Babylonian Captivity that was to come because the people had turned from God. Amos was told to go back home by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, when he warns “Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land” (Amos 7:10-13 - used with permission: NIV translation).

There were two conditions that had to be met to prove that a prophet was indeed a true prophet. Firstly, a prophet had to not contradict the law and secondly, his prophecy had to come true. The Old Testament is filled with examples of prophecy that came true. One of the most remarkable prophecies was the warning that the City of Babylon would be destroyed and never inhabited again (Jeremiah 51:24-26; Isaiah 13:19-23). For the people of that time this was a preposterous idea. The great city of Babylon was the ultimate image of worldly power and to suggest such an idea went well beyond belief. Yet it became true. When Archaeologists in the 20th Century finally managed to find the long lost site of this once great city, the words of Jeremiah and Isaiah were proven to be true (The History of the Bible pg.290).

However, it is in the amazing prophecies about the coming Messiah that the Old Testament astonishes the reader. Again and again the prophets write about this person who is to arrive in this world to bring the healing of the nations. Perhaps the most dramatic description of this coming saviour is found in Isaiah chapters 52 and 53 where many of the details about the life of Jesus are described. Almost every Old Testament prophet deals firstly with the problems of his day, but then looks into the future to a better time when God will enter dramatically into the world. So many details about Jesus are recorded and fulfilled that it is impossible to believe that these prophets were not inspired by God. From the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem to his death and burial and resurrection, so many details of his life are prophesied that it takes a very naive person to reject the truth.

It is in a vision of Moses and a prophecy by Joel that brings the idea of prophecy firmly into the New Testament and so into our time. Moses looks forward to a time when all of God’s people will be prophets. “I wish that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit in them.” (Numbers 11:29) And God told Moses “you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:6). Joel later prophesies: “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (Joel 2:28).

On the day of Pentecost when Peter stands before the crowd in Jerusalem to preach, he brings that prophecy into our time by quoting that passage from Joel. Tying this to the Great Commission of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” The role of speaking God’s message of salvation and a better life is firmly placed on the shoulders of every believer. Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Here is the responsibility to be a modern day prophet, a work that must be done by every believer. As the New Testament teaches a ministry of all believers, the role of modern day prophet becomes every believer’s responsibility. The parents to their children, the worker in the work place to their fellow workers, the teacher in the class and staff room, the friend to his or her circle of friends; and so we could go on and on. The message must go out as God still works through people to spread the “Good News”.

Regards
Johan

Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: Choices

Every day and even every hour we are faced with making decisions. Some are routine and are just a part of our normal life. These are programmed into our being by past experiences and by learned behaviour. Every now and then however, something out of the ordinary seems to pop its head out and suddenly we are faced with a decision that is different and might have an important impact on our lives.

In reading the Old Testament we find that often important decisions led to either good or bad outcomes. In taking a closer look at some of the bad choices that were made, we find that they always led to a situation that was not good to say the least, and often even disastrous. The trouble with bad choices is that in retrospect, it is easy to see what they were, but at the time they may have even seemed right. Why then do people often make poor decisions? That is the important question!

Just two examples will help to perhaps answer this important question. Think of Lot and Abraham. The account is found in chapters 13-19 of Genesis and as these two family members grow their farming businesses it becomes obvious that they need to make an important choice. Abraham generously offers Lot the choice of where to locate. Either stay in the desert country of the Negev or move into the fertile plains where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are found. Lot considers the options and makes his choice, one that is going to have devastating effects to him and his family. It would at first seem to be a good decision but it soon proves to be anything but.

The whole story is not told but after some time Lot finds himself in a terrible situation. Visitors arrive at his door and the men of Sodom demand that he hand them over to be raped. He then offers them his daughters in the visitors place. At this time the future of the city is sealed and he is warned to take his family and flee, which he does. As they leave they are warned not to look back but Lot's wife makes the fatal decision to avoid the warning and so loses her life. As we evaluate the situation several interesting points jump out at us.

Firstly, a seemingly good choice may not have the good outcome that was sought. Secondly, it is obvious that one bad decision can easily lead to another. Sin has that habit of compounding its effects and after a while takes control. The alcoholic is a good example of this. The only way to beat this disease is to avoid the first drink. The man or woman who becomes too friendly with a fellow worker can easily be tempted into being unfaithful to their spouse. The young person who takes his parents car for an "innocent spin" can end up in jail after hitting a bystander. And so the daily newspapers record the stories of events that unfolded. Often it was simply bad decisions that eventually lead to devastating results.

Another good example from the Old Testament is that of David. In 2 Samuel 11:1 we read the beginning of the story: "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army." (NIV translation –used with permission) David however, stays at home and one evening when he cannot sleep he takes an evening stroll on the palace rooftop and sees the beautiful Bathsheba taking a bath. One thing leads to another and eventually David murders

Bathsheba's husband Uriah to try to cover up his sin. The long term results of this lust that turned into serious sin is a warning for all to avoid what John calls the "the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does...." (1 John 2:16).

The examples of good and bad choices fill the pages of the Old Testament and continue into the New Testament.

Some lessons about choices:

Firstly as we look at the many examples that we can find in the Old Testament, we are reminded that everyone is given a free will by God. It was so with Adam and Eve and it is so with us.

Secondly we need to realize that good choices always lead to good outcomes and bad choices result in bad and often even devastating results.

Thirdly we need to see that sin is lurking at the door and waiting for opportunities to find a way into our hearts and minds and lives.

Finally we need to know that God's voice calls us to always do the right thing. Often it goes against the way the world behaves and acts. At the same time good choices at every level produces good outcomes.

Regards

Johan

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: The Truth of the Bible

In reading the Old Testament one is stuck by the realness of the accounts. It records the facts "warts and all". This is not typical of other ancient writings where they have been sanitized by the recorders, telling only what the King/Leader wants to make known and at the very least leaving out campaign losses and defeats while expounding victories. This remains the way history is written, even today. The account of the history of an event is written through the mindset of the writer and that often clouds that person's view and so then their account is often prejudiced. Not so with the Bible!

While the truth is told about people and events in the Bible, there are also differences in information recorded by different writers. So in the account of David's life as recorded in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, it is noticeable that the sin with Bathsheba is given a prominent place in Samuel but is left out in Chronicles. This is probably because the writers of Chronicles had a different emphasis and aim to the writer of Samuel.

As we go on to the New Testament, we find that the three "synoptic" gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the same story but approach it from different viewpoints depending on the intended audience/readership. So Matthew gives more Old Testament quotes. Mark appeals to the Roman readers because of how Jesus is portrayed as a man of action. Luke the physician, gives us more information about disease and healing than the other writers and introduces us to many of the interactions Jesus had with women.

There is a lot of "fake news" about the Bible. Often the accusation is made that it is full of contradictions and even false information. When one asks these critics, they usually have nothing specific but are simply quoting others who are equally misinformed.

In his interesting book "The Bible as History," the German journalist, Werner Keller, testifies to approaching a careful study of the Old Testament with the aim of disproving its truth. After spending several years in careful study of especially archaeological evidence, he makes the astounding statement "The Bible is right after all".

One of the discoveries that lends itself to the belief in the truth of the Bible is the information about the Hittites. For many years there was no information about these people except in the Bible where they are mentioned on several occasions (Genesis 26:34; 2 Samuel 11:3 – just two examples). So the naysayers exclaimed: "just another proof that the Bible is not true". But then in 1905 several expeditions into the Near East discovered evidence of an empire that existed along the Mediterranean Sea where present day Turkey is found. In 1907 an expedition set out from Berlin and under the leadership of Otto Puchstein. The remains of a great city was discovered with a lot of effigies and writings from the lost nation of the Hittites.

And so we could go on and on with example after example of history and the Bible being in step.

Archaeological discoveries have lent much evidence to the truth of the Bible and as more and more discoveries are even made in modern times, we can safely echo the words of Werner: "The Bible is true after all."

So the Old Testament and the science of archaeology gives added weight to the believer's faith that God in times past communicated with humanity and continues to do so through the word that is found in the Bible. Romans 10:17 states that: "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God".

References: _____ NKJV of Bible- used with permission. - - Werner Keller, The Bible as History

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: Dealing with Despair.

Life can be somewhat like a rollercoaster ride with its ups and downs. For some people however, life seems like a continuous joy ride and to others an ongoing nightmare. As the Old Testament describes the history of Israel the nation and of individuals, it is clear that for everyone there are certainly ups and downs.

Looking out into the world today there seem to be very many people really battling with life, even to the level of despair. The trouble is however, that even in the most blessed life problems are often just a heartbeat away. The death of a loved one, the loss of income, the loss of house and possessions, serious illness, often lurks just around the corner. The daily news shows us this truth and then suddenly it also becomes our reality.

Looking at the lives of some of the individuals in the Old Testament there seems to be a common factor which is that bad things come to just about everyone. Joseph lived a happy life until his brothers sold him into slavery. Saul became king and after a while fell on his own sword after having been wounded in battle. Hannah was heartbroken because she could not produce a son for her husband. David followed Saul as king and seemed to have it all until he fell to temptation and then suffered the terrible agony of losing his son. Jeremiah preached the message and ended up in a muddy pit. Job enjoyed the good life until Satan destroyed everything he had.

There can be no doubt that life does not seem fair. This theme that flows through the Old Testament shows that clearly. So what then can individuals do to protect themselves from disaster and despair? Often it even seems to be that people who reject God have a better life than those that follow His way.

The writer of Ps 73, Asaph, certainly believed that: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet almost slipped; I nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong" (Psalm 73:1-3 – NIV translation, used with permission).

Here are the feelings of a man close to despair as he looks into the world and sees everything that is happening there. As poverty and hunger plague a huge majority of the world population, many must feel that way. But it is not only the poor who battle with despair. David, in Psalm 86:1, calls out to God: "Hear, O Lord, and answer me for I am poor and needy." When his son was dying after his sin with Bathsheba, he pleaded with God for the life of his child and he lay in his room refusing to eat for seven days (2 Samuel 12:16).

Here is someone who felt grief and despair yet that same person is to write the beautiful Psalm 23 that says: "The Lord is my shepherd and I shall not want." Go with Job onto the rubbish dump and scratch the sores on your body with a piece of broken pottery and you will experience what despair is all about.

So what then is the answer when despair comes knocking at our door as it almost certainly will?

Firstly: It is all a matter of trusting in God even in times that are really difficult. It is easy to have faith when the going is good but sometimes it is that faith that takes one also through the difficult times. This faith has to be nurtured and developed in good times so that when life's disasters arrive, a person is ready to respond in faith.

Secondly: Asaph finds the answer to his questions and doubts when he finds the answer in a visit to the house of the Lord (Psalm 73:17). He continues in verses 21-24: "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant: I was a brute before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory."

David, in Psalm 34:7, writes: "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him". In verse 11 he continues: "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace".

Job, in his life that was a disaster that led to complete despair, eventually found the answer and was restored to his previously blessed life. In the closing chapter Job exclaims: "My ears have heard you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5).

Thirdly: God does not leave us to fight life's battles alone. The Holy Spirit, called the comforter, is always available to help us. John records the words of Jesus when he says: "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever.... the spirit of truth (John 14:16, 16).

Conclusion: One thing is certain; life will throw many a curve ball at every individual. Often it will seem unfair and that is what living in Adam's world is all about. But there is a better life for those who trust God and keep close to him, even in the difficult times. In the book of Hebrews, Chapter 11, the writer describes the lives of God's heroes and argues for faith as the answer. But God's promises are not only for tomorrow but also for today. Paul describes it as a "peace that passes understanding" (Philippians 4:7). David finds in his life a God who will lead him to still waters, who restores his soul. Here even the deepest despair can find healing.

Yours in Christ,
Johan – Have a great week!

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament-Love of a Father

One of the things that strike a reader in the Old Testament is the relationship between fathers and their sons. There are several interesting pictures of mothers and daughters and fathers and daughters also. But it is the father/ son relationships that often catch the eye. Saul and Jonathan, Jacob and his sons, David and Solomon and David and Absalom that stand out for our consideration.

Absalom led a rebellion against his father David. He was eventually killed by Joab after his long hair got caught in a tree and he hung there defencelessly. Joab "took three spears in his hand and thrust them through Absalom's heart, while he was still alive in the midst of the terebinth tree" (2 Samuel 18:14 – NKJV used with permission).

Absalom grew up in a privileged situation being one of the many sons of David, but somehow greed and evil took over his heart and he led an uprising against his father David in order to usurp the kingship that was to be passed on to his brother Solomon. The writer of 2 Samuel records that Absalom gathered around himself chariots and horses and fifty

men to run before him (2 Samuel 15:1). He then lingered at the city gates and intercepted any citizens coming to David for legal decisions and gave them his judgement. So he was taking over the responsibility of the king.

But then Absalom went further and led an uprising against David, forcing him to flee from Jerusalem (vs. 13). So here is a sad example of a son who used his privileged position to plot against his own father. The hostilities extended to warfare and eventually David has no choice but to respond with force. He however, warned his soldiers to be careful not to harm Absalom (2 Samuel 18:5). Here is a father's love at work, something we see elsewhere in the Old Testament.

When the news of Absalom's death eventually reached David, he was heartbroken and made this amazing statement: "O my son Absalom-my son, my son Absalom-if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18:33).

When Joab heard that David was weeping and mourning for his son and that the day of victory had been turned into a day of mourning, he reprimanded the king: "today you have disgraced all your servants who have today saved your life, and the lives of your sons and daughters, the lives of your concubines. In that you love your enemies and hate your friends" (19:5).

The same event as seen through different eyes: Joab was the pragmatist who saw the events from a very practical point of view. David was the emotional father whose heart was broken and whose view was clouded by the love of a father.

Joab continued: "Now therefore arise, go out and speak comfort to your servants. For I swear by the Lord, if you do not go out, not one will stay with you this night. And that will be worse for you than all the evil that has befallen you from your youth until now" (19:7). David took that advice when he saw the bigger picture. Sometimes emotions cloud our ability to act rationally.

Lessons for today:

1. David was a father who loved his son, no matter what. There is a similar situation in the wonderful parable that Jesus taught about the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).
2. God has chosen to love us like sons and daughters. What a blessing that is! At the same time he expects us to behave in a responsible and rational way.
3. At the end of his life David passes on the Kingship of Israel to Solomon with these words: "I go the way of all the earth; be strong, therefore, and prove yourself a man. And keep the charge of the Lord your God; to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments..." (1 Kings 2:1, 2). Something that Solomon unfortunately did not do (1 Kings 12:1-3). A father can only do so much and then it is over to his son. Ezekiel spells out the fact that every person is responsible for his or her own salvation (Ezekiel 18:19,20).
4. We are given a position of sons and daughters of God, as Paul explains in Galatians 3:26, 27 "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ". God loves us not as strangers but as sons. What a blessing!

References:

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Yours in Christ
Johan

Lessons from the Old Testament for Today: Good Advice

The strange thing about advice is that it is often freely offered, but seldom taken seriously. We humans tend to want to do our own thing. The world that people lived in during the Old Testament times is no exception to this basic rule of human behaviour. Everyone knows exactly what others need to do but often are not good at discerning what the best path is for them personally, to take.

Another problem with advice is that, while it is often offered in good faith, it is not necessarily always good advice. People often see things from a different perspective and so what may be good for one situation might not be good for another. Advice also often comes with impure motives and so needs to be considered carefully. The Old Testament is full of examples of people who gave and took good advice but also of those who gave and accepted bad advice, resulting in poor outcomes.

When Moses was judging the new nation of Israel, as recorded in Exodus 18, he was kept busy from dawn till dusk and many people waited patiently, or perhaps not so patiently, for their turn. When his father-in-law Jethro arrived for a visit, he saw what was going on and asked Moses why he was doing things in this way (vs.14). Jethro then in his wisdom, gave Moses some good advice. He suggested that Moses delegate the responsibility to a team of counsellors while being available for the more challenging and difficult cases only. Moses took this advice from Jethro and this resulted in a better situation for all involved.

Not all advice is good advice and in considering the situation as recorded in the book of Job, there is a good example of this. Job lost everything and did not understand what had happened to him. His wife and friends came with dubious, if not really bad, advice. His wife suggested “curse God and die”, hardly helpful to her suffering husband! (Job 2:9). His friends, with limited insight and faulty thinking, gave Job loads of advice as recorded in much of the rest of the book. This caused more harm than good, even if their concern and presence may have helped Job through these extremely difficult times. It was only when Job really “saw God with his own eyes” (Job 42:5) that he was restored to his previous situation. One thing is certain and that is that Satan is always close at hand to give very bad advice as he did to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

One of the saddest examples of bad advice was the advice given to Rehoboam by his young friends when he came to power after his father Solomon died. The people approached him and asked him to soften the heavy load that his father had imposed on them. The elders advised him to do that but he rejected their advice and followed the advice of his young friends. This led to the breaking away of the Northern Kingdom from the Southern Kingdom (1 Kings 12:1-17).

Sometimes wisdom comes with age and experience! His father Solomon made some really bad choices during his own life but at the end of his life gives good advice as recorded in Ecclesiastes “Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man”. (Ecclesiastes 12:13 – NIV used with permission) An interesting situation occurs in the book of Ruth, where Ruth chooses to ignore the advice of her mother-in-law Naomi, to return to Moab. Ruth then makes the famous pledge that she would go with Naomi and that Naomi’s people would be her people and Naomi’s God, her God (Ruth 1:16). Here the advice of Naomi seemed to make practical sense, but God had other plans for Ruth and her choice was obviously the correct one. Ruth became the wife of Boaz and in so doing became part of the dynasty of David (Luke 3:33; Matthew 1:5). Sometimes human common sense is outweighed by faith and trust.

Some lessons on advice from the Old Testament:

1. Everyone will be subjected to advice at times in their life. Some will be good and some will not be good at all.
2. Listen carefully and determine if it is good or bad advice. The source may be important in evaluating it.
3. Often age and experience bring wisdom that is valuable.
4. Always weigh any advice against God’s inspired word and do what God says. Then you cannot go wrong!

Yours in Christ
Johan

Lessons from the Old Testament for Today: Leadership

Who is a leader? The obvious and somewhat simple answer is everyone. We all lead in some way or another, be it a parent in the home, a friend in their group, a person in the workplace, to mention just a few informal leadership positions. In contrast there are formal situations where people are appointed to positions of leadership that exist at every level in society from the president of a country down to the local leader in the most basic situation. All are important because each one has an area of influence that affects others.

Leadership in the Old Testament makes a very interesting study and covers all these situations. In the formal appointed level we find leaders such as Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the Judges, and then Kings (Saul, David and Solomon of Israel), followed by the Kings of the divided Northern and Southern Kingdoms.

Any of these formal leaders would provide us with a treasure of information about what constitutes good leadership and also what constitutes indifferent or even poor leadership. In general it can be clearly seen that those who trusted in God and followed his commands were successful, while those who did not brought disaster not only on themselves but also on their followers.

A study of an informal leader in the form of Nehemiah provides some practical and vital principles of good leadership as he leaves his position as cup bearer in the court of King Artaxerxes in Sushan, a city in ancient Persia, to return to Jerusalem to build a wall around the city.

The first principle that leaps out at us is the fact that Nehemiah is moved by compassion. When he heard about the plight of the people in Jerusalem, the writer of Nehemiah records that he sat down and wept and mourned for many days (Nehemiah 1:4). Nehemiah then turned to God in prayer for help. He confessed his and his peoples' sin and asked for forgiveness. We see here clearly a humble and contrite spirit in sharp contrast to the attitude that we see in many of the leaders, at all levels, in the world today. Nehemiah then looked back at the history of his nation and took notice of what happened in the past.

The second principle that comes out clearly is that Nehemiah developed a clear plan of action to do something positive to correct that which needed to be put right. In addition he gathered together the necessary resources that he would need to achieve his goals. He got not only the blessing of the King but also the authority that he would need (2:7-9). This included letters to the officials in the area and an army escort provided by the King. It becomes obvious that Nehemiah was well respected by the King who he had served for some time. Trust is earned and cannot be expected without proof.

The third principle of leadership in the account of Nehemiah is that any leader can expect and will usually face opposition. Whenever someone tries to do good there are always those with ulterior motives who will try to overthrow those plans. This was so with Nehemiah who at times, needed to take drastic action by arming the workers on the wall to protect themselves from danger (4:13). When those opposed to the building of the wall invited Nehemiah to join them in debate he refused to do so because he knew that they were merely trying to stop the work that he had set out to do.

The fourth principle that we can see in the building of the wall around Jerusalem, is that Nehemiah delegated responsibility and used the work force that he recruited. He appointed groups of people to do a specific part and motivated them to work hard. Nehemiah 4:6 records that the work was done because the people had a desire to work. Nehemiah set the right example and the writer records that he also refused to accept the money offered to him by the King but rather shared it out among the people (5:14). He put an end to corruption and abuse by officials and set a personal example in his own life. It is interesting that over and over he writes "we" had a will to work. He was not someone who stood idly by but worked side by side with the people.

The fifth principle that stands out in the example of excellent leadership is that Nehemiah continued to pray and seek God's guidance along the way. So in fifty two days the wall was completed (6:15) leaving us a great example today of how an ordinary person moved by compassion could achieve a great result.

The challenge is to look around yourself and be moved by what you see in this world and then ask God for guidance in how to become a leader in achieving something to make a difference. You do not need to be appointed but rather like Nehemiah simply start to do something. It may be a small local project or the start of a great movement. Who knows what is possible with God's help?

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Lessons for Today from the Old Testament: The Suffering of the Prophets.

In the book of James, the brother of Jesus writes: "My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of suffering and patience" (5:10 – NKJV used with permission). A study of the Old Testament illustrates abundantly this important principle of life.

Just a few good examples would include Elijah who gets so discouraged and fearful for his life that he finds himself sitting under a broom tree praying that he might die (1 Kings 19:4). He lived a life in fear and complains to the Lord that the Kings had "killed Your prophets with the sword" (vs.10). In spite of the great victory against the 450 false prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah faced persecution and danger in his lifetime from Ahab and Jezebel.

According to the Hebrew writer: "Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasure of sin" (Heb. 11:24, 25). The frustrations that this great prophet faced are recorded in the book of Exodus as he led God's people out of captivity in Egypt. It shows the challenges and difficulty of a prophet and leader.

Jeremiah earned the name "weeping prophet" because of the ongoing persecution that he faced from the rulers as he warned about the coming captivity in Babylon. He was thrown into a cistern to be left to die by the princes of King Zedekiah and was only saved by the concern of the Ethiopian eunuch, Ebed – Melech, who put together a selection of old rags and garments to support Jeremiah as they pulled him out and saved him from a muddy death (Jeremiah 38:7-13).

The prophet Amos was entrusted with taking his prophetic message to Israel during a time of prosperity, which the leaders had interpreted as an indication that all was going well in God's sight. When Amos called the nation to a time of repentance and warned about the coming captivity he was told by Amaziah the priest of Bethel, to : "Go you seer! Flee to the land of Judah. There you eat bread, And there prophecy. But never again prophecy in Bethel" (Amos 7:12,13).

It is then no surprise that we read in the book of Isaiah the prophecy about the suffering servant who was to come to save the nation. "But he was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Jesus did not preach a worldly prosperity message, but warned his followers that they would be persecuted.

In today's world the so called prophets who claim to have a prosperity message from God are not in line with the life of the Old or New Testament prophets, including the obvious example of Jesus and his New Testament followers. As they demand that their followers create a life of prosperity for themselves, they fail in every way to pass the test of a true prophet. The followers of Jesus, as recorded in the book of Acts, all faced hardship and persecution. This is illustrated vividly in the example of Stephen who was stoned to death for preaching the Gospel message (Acts 6). This continues into modern times where often proclaiming the message of Jesus can lead to danger and death, and almost always opposition hardship.

This does not mean that there are no blessings for the modern day prophet. The reward of preaching the message of salvation and a better life is huge. It includes what the Apostle Paul calls "a peace that passes understanding" (Colossians 3:15), and the fruit of the Spirit which includes "love, joy and peace" (Galatians 5:22).

The message from the Old Testament prophets should then come clearly into our world today is; listen for the voice of God when he calls you. Then take the message out to a lost world using your unique skills and situation to glorify God. Be careful not to confuse worldly values with spiritual ones because Satan is certain to try that trick on you and me. After all, that is exactly what he tried with Jesus in the temptation in the wilderness as recorded in Luke 4 and Matthew 4.

Finally; who is a prophet today? Moses looked forward to a time when all of God's people would be priests (Exodus 19:6) and prophets (Numbers 11:29) Jesus sent the message of the Good News out with all believers. (Matthew 28:19, 20) So take the message out, fearlessly and with determination. That is what Old Testament prophets did! That is what all Christians need to do!

Yours in Christ
Johan

The Parables of Jesus: Understanding and Applying the Parables.

Understanding and applying the parables of Jesus is as vital today as it was in the time they were taught. In a way they are at the heart of the Bible. It is important to know how to become a Christian and how to worship in an acceptable way, but what is perhaps even more important is how to live as Christians. The principles that Jesus taught his followers were obviously applicable to the people in his time but are still as applicable today.

Are they easy to apply and even understand? No, definitely not, on both fronts! Even the followers who heard him speak them asked for an explanation at times (Matthew 13:36 “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field?”). This is but one of the requests from them for an explanation. So we need then to try to understand these life teachings to the best of our ability and then to apply them in our lives. Both remain a challenge. Even when we understand them it is another challenge altogether to apply them.

As a beginning we need to approach the parables from a starting point of how they need to be understood. Perhaps the best way to interpret the parables is to realize that they are stories that bring a main point to the hearers. Over the years interpreters have often tried to allegorise the parables. Here every part of the parable has to have a meaning. A good example would be the attempt by Augustine of his interpretation of the Good Samaritan. He saw the injured man as Adam, Jerusalem as the heavenly city, Jericho as a symbol of mortality, the robbers as the devil, injuring the man as temptation to sin, the Priest and the Levite as the Old Testament, the Samaritan as Christ, binding the wounds as the restraint of sin, the oil as the comfort of hope, the animal as incarnation, the Inn as the Church, and the Inn keeper as the Apostle Paul.

It would be better to take a look at who Jesus was teaching the parable to and what the main point of the parable was then and still is today. Then it would be possible to understand the parable in a more meaningful way. At the same time it needs to be realized that when Jesus explained the parable of the sower to his disciples, he said that the various parts of the parable represents different things (Matthew 13:18-23).

In approaching this study of the parables, some important principles need to be kept in mind. Firstly it must be understood that these are stories, often taken from everyday life, that teach an important principle. Secondly the parables usually follow the principle of “end stress”. In other words, how does it end and what is the obvious message it leaves? At the end of the parable what does the teller challenge the hearer to do? Thirdly it is important to realise that the parables are not setting down doctrinal principles. The parable of the dishonest steward does not teach that dishonesty is good. In the fourth instance it is important to look at the context in which the parable was taught.

A good starting point in the understanding of the parables of Jesus would be to go back to a well-known Old Testament example. After King David sinned with Bathsheba and then had her husband Uriah killed, the Prophet Nathan went to David with a parable. The King was outraged at the story that Nathan told him. David then fell into the trap when he condemned the wicked sheep stealer: “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die”. Then Nathan brought the message home when he said to David “you are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:1-7; NKJV used with permission).

Only seven of the parables of Jesus are recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. Another five are recorded in Matthew and Luke. Matthew adds a further 13 more, Mark two and Luke nineteen. How each Gospel writer chose the parables he did makes an interesting study in itself. John does not refer to parables at all but does present what he refers to as “signs” on many occasions.

References: The parables of Jesus by Neil R Lightfoot in the Living Word series.
The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary
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Yours in Christ
Johan

The Parables of Jesus: Sons and Fathers

Two of the parables of Jesus are about sons and their fathers. The well known parable, commonly referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) and a lesser known parable about the Test of Two Sons (Matt. 21:28-32). It is interesting to note that neither parable is repeated in the other synoptic gospels.

The Prodigal Son story is one of three parables that Luke records to describe three lost objects: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and then a lost son. The parables are set in the context of the accusation by the Pharisees and the scribes that Jesus accepted the tax collectors and sinners and even ate with them (Luke 15:1, 2). This was something that the Pharisees and scribes strongly objected to. So Luke records the three parables that clearly illustrate the very reason why Jesus came into this world. Luke states this objective in chapter 19:10 "that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost".

One of the attitudes that Jesus opposed vigorously, was that of self-righteousness and exclusiveness which prevented acceptance of others. Anyone who did not meet the conditions of righteousness, as seen from the viewpoint of those who saw themselves as God's elect, was to be ignored and certainly not mixed with. So Jesus answers this attitude with three beautiful stories of lost things.

What is then also interesting to take note of, is how this parable applies to today's world. The attitude of those in the so called "Christian World" (and in the world of other religious groups) can often lead to an "I am okay so pull up the ladder" attitude. So we have no need to share the good news with sinners. Once we have drawn a clear distinction in our minds between the elect (that is us) and the rest (the sinners) then all we have to do it to isolate ourselves in our self-righteous hideouts and ignore those who are not in our group.

Here it is the attitude of the son who was not lost, at least in his own mind, who is a stark reminder of the thinking of the Pharisees and scribes who in fact were jealous of the teaching of Jesus that the father welcomed back his lost son with open arms and rejoicing. So God rejoices over every lost son or daughter who decides to come home.

The second parable about fathers and sons is recorded in Matthew 21 and describes how the owner of a vineyard requested his sons to do some work in that vineyard. One refused but later changed his mind and he did the work. The other son agreed to do the work but then never even started. This parable came after Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and approached the temple. Here his authority was questioned by the chief priests and the elders of the peoples (21:23).

After replying with a question of his own: "John's baptism – where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?" A question that they could not answer as whatever they said would get them into trouble with the ordinary people. Jesus then again used a parable to drive home an important truth. God entrusted his message to the Jewish people but their leaders usually failed to take it into the world because of their lives and the political fighting for control. More important is that they over the years had rejected the prophets and now in his time they were also rejecting first John the Baptist and then Jesus himself.

The application for today is that God still calls people to be a part of his family. This includes an invitation to serve. This call goes out to all people but unfortunately most refuse. At the same time once a seed is planted in a heart it often takes time to germinate and then grow. So God is patient and is still waiting for people to "come to see the light" and then enter His service. Peter records this fact as he writes: "God is not slow concerning His promises but is patient towards us, not wanting any to perish but rather that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

A clear message for today is that God is a patient God who provides the opportunity for second chances. At the same time the acceptance of the offer of a new life in his Kingdom and family is the option that still rest on the individual. "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have but on Christ". "And so if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:26, 27, 29) What a great invitation! In both parables the father showed an attitude of love and patience.

References: NKJV

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Johan

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Parables of Jesus: Those Found in All Three Gospels

Of the about 40 parables recorded in the so called “Synoptic Gospels”, there are only about 5 or 6 recorded in all three Gospels. The exact number of Parables is difficult to determine as different scholars define what exactly a parable is in slightly different ways. So in front of me I have four lists that vary a bit. At the same time there is an overall consensus to be found, and we will go with that.

The parables that are found in all three Gospels include hiding a light under a lamp, new patches and wineskins, the sower, small beginnings, the tenants in the vineyard and finally unfruitful religion. Taken as a whole, the reason why they were considered important enough to be included by all three Gospel writers is that they mainly answer the questions that are related to the Jewish leaders and the way in which their handling of their responsibility as God’s chosen people had failed.

A question that came up when Jesus started his ministry was why he and his disciples were not fasting as the Jewish leaders and even John the Baptist and his followers where? Instead Jesus seemed to be introducing a new attitude towards life in general and ignored the keeping of religious rituals that had become very important in Israel and Judah. In the book of Amos, the prophet had written, speaking on God’s behalf: “I hate, I despise your religious feasts, I cannot stand your assemblies” (Amos 5:21 – used with permission NIV). What God required of his people was justice and mercy and what they gave him was rituals and falsehood. That was the world Jesus came into and the contrast between his teaching and the empty religion of the nation, stood in stark contrast. So he answers their questions with a little story about a wedding feast consisting of joy and happiness while the long faces and miserable lives of the Jewish leaders could only find fault and criticise the new voice of God among them.

Obviously because the teaching of Jesus stood in strong contrast to the false teaching of the religious leaders, it became apparent that a totally new way was needed. In comparison to the teaching of blessings that come through following the teaching of Jesus, the old way had to be replaced. They simply could not mix. So the parables about the new wine in old wine skins and the new patch on an old cloth illustrate a new way, something that the religious leaders could neither understand nor accept. Religion caught is falsehood cannot see the light of truth. So this new way has to become apparent like a light shining in the darkness. This new way of thinking, that is the good news, should not and cannot be hidden. So Jesus teaches the little story of the lamp standing in the open. Here Jesus describes a rather ridiculous situation of a lamp under a bowl, to illustrate an important truth. The effect of a religious life is testimony to its value. It has to be seen to be believed

In the parable about the builder who constructs his house on a solid foundation Jesus clearly illustrates the failure of Israel to build the kind of religion that God intended. When he revealed his will through Moses and the prophets, the responsibility was to live lives that trusted and stood for all that was good, even when opposition came. Instead the religious leaders of Jesus time had built their lives on greed that lead to what Jesus found when he went up to the temple in Jerusalem. What was meant to be a place of worship had become a den of thieves.

So also in the story of the sower, that every inhabitant of the country could clearly understand, the message was clear but difficult to solve. The obvious problems that existed in Israel were not with the seed, the word of God, but with the hearts of those who failed to open their hearts to the message. They were so busy building their political futures that they failed to understand that God wanted changed lives, filled with love and mercy.

As Jesus and his few followers faced the might of false religion in Jerusalem, a small seed was being planted. Just like a mustard seed germinates, grows and produces a big shrub, so the seed of what Jesus was teaching was to do the same. These three gospel writers recorded what Jesus had said, if not on a scroll, then certainly on their hearts. Many years later they would pen them in the Gospel accounts that we still have today. From that seed came dramatic changes to the world because of its transforming power. Even today the message of the parables recorded by all three writers need to echo around the world. In doing so it has the power to change the hearts of men and women, boys and girls, as it shines like a bright light of hope in the darkness of a lost world.

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NIV Translation – used with permission.

Lightfoot Neil Parables of Jesus

Bakers Bible Dictionary

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The Parables of Jesus: How the Kingdom Grows

Mark only records two parables that are not found in the other Synoptic Gospels and one is the seed that grows by its self. (Mark 4:26-29) The other is about the porter who is on watch. (13:34-37) “The Kingdom of God is as if..., or is like...”, is how many parables are introduced. This one about the seed that grows by its self is no exception as it is also introduced in this way. Jesus is giving the people of his time and also us today information that is teaching specific truths about the Kingdom in these parables. Everyone loves a story and it is difficult not to imagine the faces of the audience as Jesus told these stories. They are just very simple stories about people or nature, with an important spiritual message. That is why Jesus told them in the first place and why the Gospel writers recorded them.

There are also several other parables that deal with the way the Kingdom grows, obviously an important truth to understand. All three Gospel writers record the parable of the sower and also the parable of the mustard seed. Seen together these three parables teach several important lessons about how the Kingdom of God grows. There is an amazing consistence between nature and the spiritual world and this consistency comes out strongly in these parables.

Seed is sown and takes time to germinate. How it grows depends on several important factors. It needs good soil to find a place to send its roots into. Water must be present because without water there can be no life. The sun is needed to allow germination to take place and for growth to continue. While science has discovered much about the growth process it has not managed to produce life out of nothing. Only God as the creator has been able to do this.

This little parable in Mark Jesus explains this dilemma that humans have. In the book of 1 Corinthians 3:6 the apostle Paul states that the gospel was planted by him, then was watered by Apollos, but God gave the increase. In nature as in the spiritual kingdom God is working.

In the parable of the sower Jesus teaches that we as humans have to be like good soil. This shows that God does not force his will on anyone but rather provides possibilities and opportunities but the ultimate responsibility rests with the person who receives the message. In the parable of the mustard seed Jesus teaches that small beginnings can result in huge results, but it will take time. In the book of Hebrews the writer states that in many lives growth did not take place, even over time. While you should have grown into mature members of the kingdom you are still acting like babies, he explains. (Hebrews 5:12)

Here is the sad truth that we see in Christianity in its broadest sense, in the local congregation and even in the life of many individual. People claiming to be Christians but acting just like everyone around them. So somehow growth has never really taken place because the individual has not allowed the Spirit to grow into the life providing force that it should.

Yes, it will often take time. Yes, it will need some watering along the way. But ultimately the growth will become apparent in the production of fruit. In Galatians 5:22/23 this fruit is listed as; love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

So every Christian needs to take a serious look at their own behaviour and determine where they stand. If some changes need to be made then make them. Eternity is too long for anyone to fail their personal test. God waits to help, but he needs the individual to provide the soil!

Yours in Christ
Johan

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The Parables of Jesus: Building on a Solid Foundation.

There are five parables that are found in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels. These are the wise and foolish builders; the children in the market place; the leaven; the lost sheep and finally the wise steward. Matthew has another 13 parables that are unique to his gospel account and Luke 19 that only he records.

The account of the wise and foolish builders occurs in the sections in Matthew and Luke that are commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. They can then be classified as general teachings that were not given by Jesus in response to a particular situation or question. Here he calls his close disciples to him and then, in a way, teaches the basic principles of his message. In Luke this takes place "on the plain" (6:17) and in Matthew "on a mountain" (5:1). Jesus then starts with the "blessings"- teachings that are as valid in every age as they were in his time.

In these sections both Luke and Matthew record the parable of the good and bad builder. As the story unfolds it is easy to see the listeners shaking their heads as they see the builder who fails to lay the proper foundation and then as the storm waters arrive the house is simply swept away with loss of personal possessions and even life. The heads nod knowingly as the wise builder spends the necessary time in laying a firm foundation for his house. As the storm clouds gather and the raging waters arrive the house stands firm and possessions and life are safe.

What an important lesson for life on many different levels but especially in the spiritual sphere. Actually the physical and spiritual are linked together in life and cannot really be separated. What the world offers, is a philosophy of uncertainty and insecurity, just like a house built on sand. Human theories about what is right or wrong, change as time goes by. Nothing is certain and so what a person believes and does at a certain time is often gone tomorrow.

In contrast there is an unchanging and permanent solid foundation that is found in the teaching of Jesus. It is always right to build a life on these principles. They constitute the foundation of life now and will eventually result in the reward that is offered when Jesus returns. The beatitudes: “Blessed are....” promise immediate reward and eternal salvation. A life built on the rock that is God stands firm in the most challenging of times, while a life built on the foundation of human insecurity collapses under pressure.

The rock that a life needs to be built on can be explained in the beatitudes found in this same section of the Gospels. Principles like being merciful, peace making and pure of heart are the solid rock. It needs a spirit that recognises that a creator God did not leave humans to drift through life without a firm foundation. The first step is to overcome the human arrogance that says: “I can do it on my own. I do not need to seek out the solid foundation on which to build my life. ” Here is the foolish builder who seeks out the shortcut and builds without recognizing the need for searching out the firm foundation that comes from God’s revelation and promises as found in His word.

The young ruler who came to Jesus with the all important question of “what must I do to be saved” sadly walked away when the answer demanded a re-evaluation of what is really important in life. A life built on the foundation of worldly pleasure cannot produce the fruit of the spirit that is needed to make this world the better place that God created it to be.

Yours in Christ,
Johan

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The Parables of Jesus: True Value

Among the 13 parables which are recorded only in Matthew’s Gospel, there are two about the value of the Kingdom of God. There are some things that are important in life and some that can be classified as unimportant. However there is another category of those things that seem very important but in fact are not that important after all. So we go through life spending our time and effort looking for those things that seem very important, but in reality may not be so. What a waste of a life!

The people in the time of Jesus, and especially the religious leaders, were spending their time making rules and regulations that really had nothing to do with what was really important. The Old Testament writers described it as follows: “For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6 NKJV – used with permission). All the Old Testament prophets warned against that kind of empty religion but when Jesus came into that world he personally introduced this new way of thinking. Instead of outward religious observance, he taught principles of love and mercy. These principles are the basis for the Kingdom of God.

This brings a totally new way of looking at religion and specifically Christianity. It is not what you and I do on Sunday that defines us, but rather what we do with our lives from Sunday to Saturday. When this truth is discovered and put into operation then it opens up a life filled with true worth and value. A life that makes the world a better place is worthwhile life. This is because it is a life that serves rather than wants to be served, and gives rather than wants to receive.

This kind of life is one that needs to be discovered. In the parable of the Hidden Treasure, the story is of a man who discovers a treasure in a field and then dedicates his time and effort to obtaining that treasure (Matthew 13:44). The excitement of hidden treasure is easy to understand. In every heart there is the hope of finding a hidden treasure. If

only I find that gold, diamond, money, have a windfall, then happiness will come pouring into my life. Just imagine what I will be able to buy! Unfortunately happiness does not come with what you or I can buy!

Poverty on the other hand brings its own misery and difficulties that can take joy away. But it is not really what you own that brings happiness but rather who or what owns you. Satan came to Jesus in the wilderness with the promise of riches and power but Jesus rejected his offer outright because of what it cost. Real value in life comes with discovering the treasure of God's love and applying that to our life.

The parable of the pearl of great price follows the hidden treasure parable (vs.45). Again this simple story emphasises that the kingdom of heaven is of great and lasting value. The cost of the pearl is everything that the person owns, illustrating that everything that this life offers is of little value unless it brings the reward that God offers through His Son. Life is hard as one battles to just make a living. Long hours are needed, often just to survive. Hardship lurks around every corner, but accepting the promises of God brings true value to every life. It offers a true perspective on what is important. We spend a lot of time, effort and worry on the things that we believe will bring us happiness, but as Jesus explains we can leave those things to God and concentrate on what is really important: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

Here is the dilemma that all humans face. What is really important in life? It is only when we discover the hidden treasure, find the pearl of great price, that life begins to fall into place. Until we personally make that important discovery about the kingdom of God life seems to be a battle and will continue to be so. The important discovery of the value of the kingdom of God enables a person to find not only themselves but also real meaning in life. When Jesus claimed to be the way and the truth and the life he was uncovering the real value of human life. Unfortunately this fact is hidden in the world of today and so has to be discovered by every individual.

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Parables of Jesus: The Prodigal Sons and The Good Samaritan.

Luke records 19 parables that are not recorded in the other Gospels. Several of the all time favourite parables appear in this list. The parable commonly referred to as "The Parable of the Lost Son" is one of those. This parable, together with the parable of "The Good Samaritan", are possibly two of the best known and most loved parables in the New Testament.

The interesting thing about both these parables is that they teach us a lot about God and also about human nature. Every one of us can identify with these two great parables on some level. Each of us can also take a new look at the God of the Bible and understand Him better after reading these parables.

When interpreting any parable two basic questions need to be considered. Firstly, what is the context in which Jesus taught the parable, and secondly what was the intended outcome of the teaching? In Luke 15:1,2; the context for the first of these two parables under consideration, is recorded by Luke. Because the tax collectors and sinners came to Jesus to hear him, the Pharisees and scribes were outraged and they complained that "this Man receives sinners and eats with them." (NKJV – used with permission). In the minds of the religious leaders and scholars of his time, Jesus should have stayed away from these

detestable people and certainly not mixed with them! So Luke records a series of parables in the rest of the chapter including the first one under consideration in this article.

The Parable of the Prodigal Sons: I have referred to this parable as “sons” rather than “son” because while it is obvious that one son claimed his inheritance and wasted it, the other son was in an even worse predicament. He was illustrating graphically the attitude of the scribes and the Pharisees who had no intention to reach out to the lost, the very reason Jesus had come. Luke records this important fact in 19:10; “for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost”.

As we follow the story of the prodigal’s wasted life, we read that he came to himself and returned home. The other brother never left home but he also did not seem to ever have a life! “You never shared a fatted calf with me!” he complained. He also did not realize what his responsibility was that when his brother returned was to rejoice. This illustrates the religious attitude in the time of Jesus which cried out: “look how good and self-righteous we are – don’t think of even mixing with the sinners around us in case they contaminate us!” This attitude can easily be identified in the religious minds of many churches and even individuals today.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan: Here the context is set in Luke 10:25 where a lawyer asks a very important question: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” In this powerful story taken out of a very possible situation in Palestine in the time of Jesus, Jesus challenges the people in his time and us today, to take a new look at what being a child of God is really all about.

Again it is the religious leaders of his time who come under the spotlight. The Levite and priest carefully walked by on the other side of the road from where the wounded man lay, presumably in a hurry to perform their “religious” duties. Then to the amazement of the people living in a deeply racially divided world, Jesus introduced a Samaritan into the picture. The Jews and Samaritans hated each other with a deep passion. To the Jewish listeners’ amazement, the Samaritan took the time and effort to help the man, something they would definitely not have done.

In the parable of the sheep and goats, as recorded in Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus taught as he did in this beautiful story that what God requires is mercy rather than religious behaviour (Luke 10:37; Hosea 6:6). A religious movement that leaves the world lying in pain in the road of life, while they “the saved” clap hands and rejoice in their comfortable worship places and services is worthless. It was so in the day of Jesus and it still is today.

So in both these challenging parables Jesus teaches us a lot about God and a lot about ourselves. God loves the sinner so much that he sent his son to die on our behalf. In return he expects us to find the love in our hearts to love our neighbour. Nothing less will do! Unfortunately as Jesus looked at the city of Jerusalem he wept. I wonder what his reaction is to the world today? Do I see a tear or two?

Yours in Christ
Johan

Parables of Jesus: A Glimpse into Eternity

While most of the parables had a message for either the religious leaders in the time of Jesus or for his followers, a couple also give us a look into eternity. One of the frustrations of being a child of God is that we are limited in our ability to see directly into the spiritual world. Although we are physical beings we however, also have the ability to see and understand a greater world that includes the eternal. Paul prays for the Ephesians to be given the ability to open the “eyes of their heart” so that they may be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18 - NIV translation of the Bible used with permission).

A couple of the parables give us a glimpse into the eternal world which was obviously also revealed to us in the teaching of Jesus and even the Old Testament prophets. John, in the book of Revelation, also promises that when Jesus returns “every eye will see him” (Revelation 1:7). It is interesting that in the book of Job, as the story comes to a climax Job cries out that he previously had heard about God “but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:4). Here is what every believer needs to search for- a clear vision of the God of eternity as he has revealed himself to us over the ages. In John 6:63 Jesus explains to his followers that: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life”. Jesus also tells his followers that “If you have seen me you have seen the Father” (John 14:9). So Jesus opened up spiritual reality, firstly in who he was, and then also in what he taught.

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke records what Jesus taught about life after death (Luke 16:19-31). This follows shortly after the comment in 16:14 where Luke states that the “Pharisees who loved money sneered at Jesus”. In the parable, Jesus describes a situation that is still taking place in today’s world which is the huge discrepancy between the haves and the have not’s. Death is the great leveller and so both these groups of individuals face life after death and here the roles are reversed. In hell, where the rich man was in torment he begged for just a drop of water to quench his thirst (16:24). He also pleaded for an opportunity to return and warn his five brothers about the need to do some serious soul searching before it was too late for them. The request is denied on the basis that they already had the warning and were certain to ignore it again: “Even if someone rises from the dead” they will not repent. This is an interesting reference perhaps to the death burial and resurrection of Jesus, which is the ultimate evidence of life after death.

There are a couple of deductions that we can make from this parable apart from its main message that to depend on riches will not result in a positive outcome. The first is that death does not destroy consciousness. Many people today live in the false hope that when they die they will be buried/cremated and that will be the end of it. This is clearly denied in many teachings from the word of God and graphically illustrated here.

The second teaching is that death does not destroy identity. When we look at the body as it is lowered into the grave it seems like the end, but in fact it is only the beginning of a new existence where it seems like there will be recognition of others. When asked by the religious leaders of his time about what will happen about people involved in multiple marriages Jesus did not deny the existence of individuals in eternity, only that there will no longer be the practice of some of the physical relationships that often dominate our lives and thinking.

The third teaching that comes out in this parable is that our memory will remain in tact. While our sins will be blotted out by the grace of God and the saving blood of Jesus, we will still retain memory of the past and enjoy the blessing of the present reality where we find ourselves.

Finally from this parable we learn that death does not destroy destiny and does not provide a second chance to determine that destiny. There is a time of judgement coming that everyone will have to face. This is also clearly taught by Jesus in the parable about the separation of the sheep and the goats as recorded in Matthew 25.

While today we are limited in our ability to see into the spiritual, eternal world, we are not left to grope around in darkness. We have clear teachings from Jesus as he revealed so much in his words, signs and life. Added to that are the Old and the New Testament writers and their revelations. So, like the writer of Psalm 121 proclaims, we need to

look up and see God in all his glory as he has revealed himself to this world throughout the ages and continues to do so today.

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Parables of Jesus: God of Mercy

We live in a world where we look for, hope for, and dream of being treated fairly. If only everyone would be just and fair, what a great world it would be! However the stark truth of reality teaches us that not everything is always fair. This becomes apparent on many different levels in many different ways. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Politicians often lie to further their own ends. Corruption in society and dishonesty lurks around every corner and breeds in every dark place. Rules are broken and promises made that were never even remotely meant to be kept. So the hope and dream of living in the utopian world of fairness is shattered and we are left disappointed and often disillusioned.

In his parables Jesus teaches about the reality of life and uses real life situations to illustrate not only the character of God, but also his way of dealing with people living in this imperfect world. Here Satan often seems to have the upper hand and this becomes apparent in human behaviour. As we approach God, all we ask for is fairness and justice and then to our horror as we look into the mirror of self, we realize that what we need is not fairness but mercy!

In Matthew 19:27 -20:16, the Gospel writer records the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. A scene so unreal that it must have made the people present when Jesus taught it, stand open mouthed in amazement. In this parable a vineyard owner hires people at different times of the day and then when the time comes to pay them, gives them all the same amount of money. Unfair! Unfair! We cry out as the people first hearing the story must have cried out. Those who had worked long hours must have deeply resented not only those who only worked a short time, but also the owner who after all, was treating the long time workers unfairly. Those who worked the short hour were equally amazed and obviously really pleased by what they received.

Over the years theologians have tried to explain the “unjust” action of the vineyard owner in a variety of ways. Some have argued that the late arrivals, because they missed the heat of the day, actually produced as much work as the early starters. These arguments however, seem to miss the whole point of the parable.

In this parable Jesus overturns the human search for fairness with a powerful parable that teaches something much more important. He teaches that what is needed in this world is mercy and undeserved favour. The first question that we need to ask and answer is, was the vineyard owner unfair? Did he make promises he did not keep? He answers that question himself when he says: “Am I not allowed to pay anyone what I choose to pay? After all it all belongs to me and I can do with it as I please! I am in charge!” So he gave to the workers what they needed rather than what they deserved, because he cared for them.

This is exactly what God does as he enters into the world to meet mankind on his terms and not on the world’s terms. If God gave everyone what they deserved it would indeed be a disaster because as the Apostle Paul explains; “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10 –NIV - used with permission). We have the tendency to forget that salvation comes by faith and not works. Yes, God expects a working faith from his followers because as James explains: But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do”(James 2:18).

All the workers had an opportunity to do the work they were given. God is an “equal opportunity God”. Everyone was rewarded not by the particular amount of work each did, but because when the opportunity came they grabbed it with both hands. This goes against the human inclination to believe that “I am going to be rewarded by God because of the amount of work I did, after all in comparison to others, I did much more! That will be fair!”

God’s eternal grace requires faith and when that is appropriated the rest will follow. After all can God not work salvation on his terms like the vineyard owner had the right to pay all workers the same wages? Thank heaven we serve a God of mercy and love who does not give us what we deserve but rather what we need!

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Parables of Jesus: True Discipleship

When an expert in the law comes to Jesus with the question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25 –NIV-used with permission) it must be remembered that he is asking this question before the Christian Dispensation had fully arrived. He lived under the time of the Jewish Law and so in a way this is quite an amazing question for someone to ask at that time. It was also a very personal question as it did not ask “what must a person do?” but it rather asked, “what must I do?” The problem is that he came to Jesus knowing well what the law taught on the subject and so his motive has to be questioned.

When Jesus turns the question back on him he knows the answer and quotes from Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18. His answer is correct but he then resorts to another question that has been debated by the teachers of the law over the ages: “who then is my neighbour?” Perhaps he is trying to justify his own life and possibly his attitude towards others. If you define who your neighbour is in a narrow way you can get away with a very selfish life. This opens the door for Jesus to do some important teaching on the subject, and Jesus does so in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Knowing the Law and its teaching in a theoretical way is fine, but applying it in practice is another problem altogether. So in the parable Jesus uses several different people in a very possible real life situation to illustrate what true discipleship really is all about. It is fine being able to quote scripture, but it is another thing altogether to apply its principles in real life (Luke 10:25-37).

The robbers, the Levite, the priest, the man beaten and robbed and the Samaritan all have minor or major roles to play. The robbers show an attitude that says might is right; what is yours can be mine if I am strong enough to take it from you. The man lying wounded and in pain indicates anyone who is facing the daily difficulties of life and is in desperate need of help. The Priest and the Levite do not seem to care about the person in need even though they should be well informed in the teachings of the law. So what is going to happen? Fortunately for the injured man an unlikely hero arrives on the scene. He is just an ordinary person taking care of his business, but he is moved to stop and take care of the man in need. As we take a closer look at this man’s credentials we see to our amazement that he is a Samaritan.

There was no love lost between the Israelites and the Samaritans. They more than disliked each other, they despised each other. Since the time of the Babylonian Captivity the mixed race that lived in Northern Palestine were considered, by the Jews in general and especially by the Pharisees, as dirt. Rabbinic teaching stated that if you found a fellow Jew had fallen into a pit on the Sabbath you should save him, but if it was a Samaritan who had fallen, you were to let him die. It is interesting that Jesus stops and interacts with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well as recorded in John 4.

But here it is this unlikely hated character who takes the time and effort to ensure that the man in need is taken care of thus graphically illustrating the answer to the lawyers question: “who is my neighbour?”

Your neighbour is anyone in need, not your specific group, friends, family or those positioned geographically near you. Jesus, in the parable of the sheep and the goats as recorded in Matthew 25:31-46, makes it clear that we need to put into practice the first part of the law: “to love God” by practising the second part of the law to “love your neighbour”. We cannot then, by a narrow definition of who our neighbour is, walk by on the other side of the road. In today’s world many of the human population are dying in poverty and many have been robbed of their dignity and livelihood.

The problem is that it just seems like an impossible task to do much about the rest of the world that is so desperately in need. So we acknowledge the truth of what discipleship means but give up on the designated task: “to love our neighbour as ourselves” before we even start. That will not be any good on the Day of Judgement!

Jesus challenges the lawyer to “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37), something the Levite and the Priest failed to do! Something we need to also do!

Yours in Christ
Johan

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The Parables of Jesus: The Shrewd Manager

Some parables are easy to understand while others are not and the parable of the shrewd manager found in Luke 16:1-8 definitely falls into the second category. The story is as relevant as the news today as we see the corruption and dishonesty that is so prevalent in society. People in positions of trust and power often use their positions to feather their own nests. So here Jesus draws on something that was obviously taking place in his time.

A man, trusted with responsibility, uses his position to cheat his employer. When he is about to be caught out by his employer, the man manipulates the situation to gain favour with the people he was using in order to cheat his employer. He then plans to use this situation to his own benefit as the alternative was to become a labourer or beggar, neither option being one that he fancied. Then amazingly the cheated owner commends the dishonest manager! It is possible to see the look of amazement on the faces of the hearers as Jesus concludes this story! “Not possible”, they say!

Jesus uses this parable to teach his followers several lessons about life. He certainly did not encourage them to be dishonest and to cheat and steal. At the same time he used the example of this shrewd manager to show that the followers of Jesus should be shrewd in their dealing with the task that has been set before them which is to take the message of the Kingdom out into the world. It is a fact of life that business people are always looking for opportunities to further their business while followers of Jesus do not use the opportunities that are available to spread the “Good News”. It has been said with some truth that “many followers of Christ are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good”.

Jesus also ends this parable with an important message: “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves so that when it is gone you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings”. (Luke 16:9 – NIV used with permission.) This is a difficult statement to explain as many commentators have found over the years.

As Luke continues in this chapter he gives several additional teachings of Jesus on the value of the proper use of money and then completes the chapter with the parable about the rich man and Lazarus. Luke, more than the other Gospel writers, teaches strongly on the subject of the importance of using the wealth that comes the way of followers of Jesus to further the Kingdom of God.

According to the Apostle Paul “the love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10) and so Jesus taught aggressively that his followers need to be prepared to give up their love of money and replace it with a love of God: “No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money” (Luke 16:14).

In a money crazed world the example of Jesus shines as a bright light as to what is really important in life. This parable teaches a couple of really important principles:

1. Greed leads to dishonesty and more often than not to very bad results that do not achieve God’s purpose.
2. Use the opportunities that you have to further the Kingdom of God. Be wise in how you go about spreading the Good News. The sportsman and business person is always looking to improve their results while Christianity can be guilty of waiting for things to happen.
3. Love of God enables an individual to realize that what a person owns is a gift from God and needs to be used in His Kingdom.
4. Lots of opportunities to use the finances of the church to further the spread of the Gospel are available. Many practical activities can be used to reach people with the Good News. Adult Literacy classes, youth fellowship groups, computer literacy programmes and other educational opportunities can be used to reach out to people in the community. Often buildings are only used once or twice a week when they have great potential for everyday use.
5. Possessions and riches have value for a short time, but investment in purses that never grow old has eternal value (Luke 12:32).
6. Take stock of your investment portfolio in heaven! Invest regularly and big! God needs our time and money because that is how he works. Jesus brings a message in the parable that challenges our thinking and dedication, both individually and collectively!
7. Yours in Christ
8. Johan

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Parables of Jesus: The Rich Fool

While Psalms often warn that it is foolish to believe that there is no God (Psalm 10:4; 14:1,etc.), it is only in the parable recorded in Luke 12:16-21 that God calls any individual a fool. This dubious honour goes to a very successful farmer who was blessed with great prosperity but failed miserably in his life and death. Many in today’s world fall into this category. Not because they have committed any of the sins that are found in the Ten Commandments or the lists in the New Testament such as Galatians 5:19-21 – as two examples. It is rather because they simply did not put what is really important into their lives. It is not because of the evil that this sad man did that would cause him to be spending eternity without God, but rather because of what he forgot to do. It has been suggested that there were at least five things that he forgot to realize.

When interpreting the parables, and in fact any part of the Bible, it is important to look carefully at the context. Here Jesus was confronted by a man who requested/demanded that Jesus tell the man’s brother to share his inheritance with him. The Jewish law on inheritance was clearly laid out in the Old Testament and everyone in the time of Jesus was aware of it. The oldest son received two thirds and the other sons one third (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Why the

man was unhappy is not stated, but probably he was a younger brother and was not happy with what he was receiving.

So Jesus followed this request with an important lesson on covetousness and stated clearly: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15 –NIV – used with permission). Greed is an all pervasive sin that destroys a person when it is allowed to take over a life. It comes in many different forms and seems to threaten so many lives. It can be money but can also be for power, food, possessions, and so the list can go on and on.

This parable by Jesus dealing with this problem hits close to home in so many lives. The rich fool stands out as a warning to be careful because greed can and often does infiltrate a life and so destroys a person. When Satan approached Jesus in the wilderness he offered Jesus the option of choosing this life style, something Jesus rejected completely.

When taking a look at the rich fool we see that on a worldly basis he was successful and prosperous, enjoying the kind of life that all of us would love to have. But in this graphic little parable is clear that he had forgotten some important things in his life. It is sometimes the facts that are left out in a parable that shed light on the message.

The first thing that the rich fool forgot was other people. The “I” word predominates and is accompanied with the “myself” word. No mention of any concern for his workers, the poor in the community of anyone else but self. Here is greed, apparent in that this man was looking out only for himself, an attitude that is prevalent in countries, leaders and even individual ordinary folk. Jesus introduced a movement where his followers are to care for others. This was an Old Testament teaching that had got lost over time and certainly is missing in society today.

The second thing that this rich fool forgot was that life does not consist of the physical only but also needs to take note of the spiritual. This man forgot that God is real and that he was blessed by God in his situation. It is only when we look at the creation and see God’s hand in its beauty that we can live a life that takes care of the physical and spiritual needs of the individual. These two sides are closely interlinked and affect each other.

The third thing that this rich fool forgot was that death and judgement is always just a heartbeat away. When death comes, life and all its glory ends in the same way for both rich and poor. It is however, what you did while you had the opportunity on a day to day basis that remains behind and is important.

The fourth thing that the rich fool forgot was that true happiness comes not from what you own but rather from what you give. The picture of a hoarding miserable rich man counting his money has been immortalized by Disney in the picture of Scrooge. Possessions are something that we all dream about. If only I had (add your own dreams) then I would be happy! There is no value in poverty but what adds value to every life is the attitude of service that Jesus introduced in his teaching and example. Real happiness does not come for eating, drinking and taking life easy. It comes from the satisfaction of a life that has been useful and meaningful.

The fifth thing that the rich fool forgot was that is important to invest in eternity. Jesus teaches this not only in this parable but also in the statement in Luke 12:33: “Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourself that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted...”.

When last have you heard a sermon on that topic!? The answer is probably never. In our material world the challenge of the parable of the rich fool is too close to home to be taught and applied. Yet it is probably the most needed message in a world that has become totally selfish on so many levels.

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Yours in Christ, Johan

The Parables of Jesus –The Judgement Day

While it is difficult to organize the parables of Jesus into specific themes or groups several deal with the prediction of a coming judgement day. In some parables Jesus teaches about the general principles to be found in the Kingdom. In others he teaches about the new religious order that he came to introduce. In several of the 40 plus parables Jesus teaches about behaviour that is important for believers to put into their lives. And then a couple are designed to point out what is going to happen on the so called “Judgement Day”.

The Judgement Day will come unexpectedly, without warning or notice (The parable of the rich fool; the parable of the foolish virgins). It has to be prepared for and when it arrives it will surprise many (The parable of the Rich man and Lazarus). It will be a surprise to many and many will have questions to ask that should have been asked earlier (the parable of the sheep and goats). It will be a time of great rejoicing and reward (The parable of the great banquet). A closer look at the parable of the sheep and goats, as recorded in Matthew 25:31-46, is an important look into the future that challenges every believer as they live their lives on a day to day basis. This parable comes as part of the discourse in Matthew 24 and 25 where Jesus replies to the statement that his disciples make regarding the temple, “calling his attention to the building” (Matthew 24:1 – NIV translation, used with permission). In their question relating to the destruction of the temple and Jesus’ return, events that the disciples saw as concurrent, Jesus teaches some important facts about both.

He then concludes his teaching with three important parables in chapter 25: the parable of the ten virgins, the parable of the talents, and finally the parable about the sheep and the goats. The parable of the ten wise and ten foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) is a clear message that every believer needs to be ready for the arrival of the groom, obviously representing Jesus, by making the necessary preparations in life.

It is obvious as we look at the average person in the so called “General Christian Society”, it is clear that they believe that they are followers of Jesus while at the same time their religious lives can be categorized as careless to say the least. In a figurative sense their lamps are out of oil or have never really been lit and so fulfilled their purpose. In the next parable in Matthew 25:25:14-30, Jesus teaches about the servant who failed to use the talent that he received from his master which left him bankrupt and out of favour with the expectation of that master. Only those who had accepted responsibility for the talents which they had received and which they used well, who blessed. The third parable that needs our clear focus in today’s world is the parable of the separation of the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus clearly teaches about the condition that will lead to reward at the second coming or alternatively to serious disappointment.

In a world that has become increasingly greedy it becomes important to see that the criteria for judgement when Christ returns will not be what group you belonged to, what creed your priest or leader recites, or how many times you sang praises to God and Jesus, but rather how much you cared about your fellow human. It really boils down to the age old question of loving God by loving your neighbour. This is a theme central to the teaching of Jesus. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus answers the question: “What must I do to be saved?” (Luke 10:25) and he answers this with the parable of the Good Samaritan, a parable so contradictory to the behaviour of the religious leaders of his time that they must have literally gasped at its impact.

Here in Matthew 25, Jesus teaches clearly that how one treats their fellow human will determine our eternal destiny. For too long Christians have withdrawn from the world and looked inward to their own needs, something that is foreign to the teaching and example of Jesus. Early Christians cared about others as demonstrated clearly in the book of Acts. They gave so that others we were battling with little could have (Acts 2:44,45; 4:36 and see also 2 Corinthians 8:1-7). Here in the parable describing the judgement scene the determining factor was how you helped others and so helped Jesus with his mission of love.

Yours in Christ
Johan

Parables of Jesus: Humility

Humility is hardly a human attitude that is greatly sought after in the competitive, dog eats dog world in which we live. Most people want to be the “Big Dog”. One of the big challenges of human life is the very strong need to feel important and so often, at every opportunity, people try to be recognized as being just that. This need often leads to someone feeling that they are “a big deal”. This is something that seems to be a learned behaviour and parents feed this attitude to their children from when they are babies. “You are so.....” This builds self esteem, but it also can become a drug that has to be fed.

In the time of Jesus the religious leaders were filled with self importance and at the feasts, which were common practice, it was how people were seated that showed their status in life. The Rabbi’s always enjoyed the most important seat at the head of the table and then in descending order of status the rest of the guests was seated. It must have been really difficult to be at the end of the line – just one step to being out of the door or on the floor. So there were two ways that people behaved. Those who knew that they were on the important list would often arrive late so that everybody attending the feast could see them arriving and being invited to be seated at the head of the table. Others, who were less important, would try to sneakily move up the order and usurp seats that were higher than those they were allocated. So this “circus” was challenging and obviously amusing even to Jesus as he attended such an occasion.

When Jesus arrived at the so called “Last Supper”, two of his disciples had tried to persuade him to allocate the second most important seats, those at his left and right hand, to them. Jesus then took the servant towel and washes their feet.(John 13:1-5) What a powerful lesson on humility that must have been.

But in chapter 14 of Luke’s gospel the writer records the story of how Jesus is invited to have a meal with a prominent Pharisee. Here he notices what is going on in the scramble to get the best and most important seats (Luke 14:7-11). Jesus then uses the opportunity to teach an important lesson about life in the Kingdom. With great skill he describes the situation where people try to impress others with their own importance. This is something that has no place in the Kingdom and yet continues to be noticed in nearly every situation on a regular basis.

It is interesting how Jesus described the feelings of the person who was asked to give up his seat because a more important person had arrived – he was humiliated. On the opposite side of the coin the person whose statue was recognized was moved up in the “pecking order” and so was honoured. Jesus then made the important statement that “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11 – NIV, used with permission).

This reminds one of the example of the two men praying in the temple. One praises himself and pats himself on the back in his prayer, while the other person is an example of humility. Jesus reminded his disciples of whose prayers would be heard and whose would be ignored.

Back in Luke 14, Jesus continued with advice to his host when he tells him how important it is not to only invite your small (or large) clique of friends to eat with you; that is those who can repay your hospitality but to rather to offer hospitality to those who are in need (Luke 14:12-14). These guests would not be able to return your favour but you would be “repaid at the resurrection of the righteous”. Challenging teaching that is as necessary today as it was in the time of Jesus.

A couple of important teachings come from this parable and from the related teaching by Jesus.

1. Jesus as our example came in the role of the suffering servant as predicted in Isaiah 53 and illustrated in the life of Jesus himself by word and action.
2. There is no place in the Kingdom for pride and self-praise. Be humble and serve. What we often see in religious organizations seems to be blatant examples of self glorification or the glorification of a position.

3. Trying to impress others is really unimportant and leads to a rather pathetic illustration of neediness.
4. Doing what is good is far better than trying to look good. In the final analysis it is what you do to help make the world a better place that is important. The great people in history who are honoured as such, are those who sacrificed and served.
5. Humility brings the believer to the cross with Jesus, acknowledging the need for God's love and forgiveness. Many today fail to realize how great God is and how we need Him to give us the new life and promises offered in Christ.

Yours in Christ
Johan

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Parables of Jesus: God's Provision and Judgement

One of the seven parables found in all three Synoptic Gospels is the one that is often referred to as the parable of the wicked tenants. In Mathew's Gospel the setting is the teaching of Jesus after he enters the Temple and is asked by the chief priests and the elders: "By what authority are you doing these things?" and "Who gave you the authority?" (Matthew 21:23 NIV translation – used with permission)

Obviously they felt that Jesus had not asked them for permission. After all they believed that they had the power to carefully control religious affairs in Jerusalem. At the same time it was apparent that Jesus was teaching with considerable authority and that the people were listening to him.

This parable is one that anyone in Palestine could understand as hiring out your property to tenants was common practice. The abuse of that situation by the tenants was also common. The setting was a vineyard as the farming with grapes was one of the most common types of farming in the country. In the parable when the time came for the tenants to hand over their payment to the owner, they abused and eventually put to death the owner's representatives. This led to some serious retribution that included killing the tenants and handing over the vineyard to someone else.

The response from the hearers as, recorded in Luke 20:26, was: "May this never be!" In Mark's Gospel the response is: "Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew that he had spoken the parable against them" (Mark 12:12). Matthew has the same words in his response as Mark (Matthew 21:45).

There are some important practical lessons to be gained from this parable: Firstly; crime does not pay. Secondly; don't forget to keep a careful check on those running your business. Thirdly; be careful who you entrust with the responsibility of taking care of your affairs. Fourthly; one bad deed often leads to another and possibly even a worse one. The reason is that one's conscience becomes seared and so people become more reckless.

But it is obviously a deeper and more important meaning that Jesus had in mind. This is clearly shown in the way that the religious leaders of that day interpreted it. God had entrusted the riches and the responsibilities that come with such promises, into the hands of Abraham and his descendents (Genesis 12:1). He then gave them the law through Moses, and continued to guide them through the voice of the prophets. Over the years these prophets had been rejected, abused and even killed. The nation's leaders, Judges and Kings, chose to go their own way rather than God's way. This led to the captivity and in the time of Jesus, to the oppression by the Roman conquerors. So the chosen nation (the tenants) had failed to fulfil their responsibilities, and the religious leaders also failed because they had lost their purpose. Now a new voice was being heard by the people as Jesus taught with authority and brought a new message of peace and love.

So what conclusion can we then come to for today's world from this interesting parable? Obviously the practical issues of running business affairs have the same implication when we see the corruption, not only in the business world, but also in the political and religious world.

But it is the religious world that the message is as vital as it was in the time of Jesus. Christians today are given the responsibility of working in the vineyard. So then it is the responsibility of the religious world is to listen carefully to the owner (God) and his representative (Jesus), and be ready when Jesus returns.

1. It is important to recognize that God has not sent just another representative into the world but rather His beloved Son. There is only one Mediator between man and God and that is Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5).
2. The Church has the responsibility to work the vineyard, to produce the crops and to do what God has entrusted it with. "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19, 20). Luke puts it this way: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). As God's people, the Jewish nation failed to fulfil their God given responsibility and Jesus came to point this out. What about the Church today?
3. There will be a time of final judgement when God will hold his people to account for what they have or have not done with the precious gospel. Will the church be seen as having been good and faithful tenants in the vineyard of the Lord?
4. The parable teaches that with great opportunity comes great responsibility. Eventually even God's patience will wear out and then he will send His Son again, not as Saviour, but as Judge. A warning comes from this parable, not to play games with God, but to take the task set seriously.

References: NIV Translation of Bible
Lightfoot, N. The parables of Jesus.

Yours in Christ
Johan

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The Teachings of Jesus: The Sermon on the Mount – Number 1

Jesus came as a teacher and this became obvious as the Gospel writers described not really much about his life, but mostly about what Jesus taught. About one third of those teachings are contained in his parables and the rest in passages like the section that is commonly referred to as the "Sermon on the Mount" and elsewhere.

Matthew devotes three challenging chapters to these specific teachings, as recorded in chapters 5-7. John reveals many of Jesus' teaching in his gospel and the teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit is of great importance in that gospel as well (John 14-17).

Jesus came to a world where the Old Testament teaching had been corrupted and abused over the years. The teachings also had a strong national emphasis whereas Jesus introduced a universal gospel. This Old Testament teaching was found mainly in the first five books of the Bible (The Pentateuch), but then also in the Wisdom Books and the Prophets. The message of those ancient times obviously needed an update.

In the parables of the new wine in old wine skins (Matthew 9:17) and new patches on old garments (Matthew 9:16), both recorded in all three synoptic gospels, Jesus taught clearly that it was not a time to amend the Old Testament teaching, but rather a time to bring a new teaching into the world.

Firstly, in looking at the Sermon on the Mount, the 7 “Blessed” or “Happy” passages set the tone for much of the following teachings of Jesus. At the outset the statement that “blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3), catches the eye. For people in today’s world the word poor has a very negative connotation and so this is a difficult statement to understand.

The opposite of this word translated poor is arrogant. This arrogance is an attitude that gives a person who needs God the idea that there is no need for God. So, instead of being poor in spirit (in other words needing God), they believe that there is no need for God. In the parable of the two people praying in the temple (Luke 18:9-14), Jesus contrasts a person who believes he is perfect with one who admits to a need for God.

The arrogant attitude of the Pharisee was the prevailing attitude among the religious leaders of that time and is the attitude of many today. Jesus illustrates this attitude in the words of the prayer of the Pharisee: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, and adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (NIV –used with permission).

In today’s world, as in the time of Jesus, many have a very self-righteous attitude and so they close the door to God’s blessings because they think that they are self-sufficient because of their own efforts. In contrast, the tax collector, who is poor in spirit, opens himself up to receive God’s blessings. In the parable the tax collector beats his breast and says: “God have mercy on me a sinner” and according to Jesus he is justified while the Pharisee is not. The parable ends with the warning that “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

It is only when a person realizes that he or she is a sinner (being poor in spirit) that the journey to submitting to God’s salvation and abundant promises can become real. Living in a state of arrogance does not bring happiness because it leaves a person without the many promises that come with the Christian life and ultimately a happy or blessed life.

“Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). Again, it is strange to think that mourning as an important need and something that brings happiness. Often Jesus makes these dramatic statements that demand the hearer to think about what he is saying. Mourning is a part of life. Times of weeping will follow times of laughter as certain as night follows day. Jesus wept when he looked at Jerusalem.

As we look at the world today, any person who does not mourn, is without feeling. Daily killing and violence is present. The way we are destroying our planet because of greed should bring mourning. However, I really need to mourn because of my personal sin that led to the death of Jesus on the cross. Living a life of “eat, drink and be merry” may seem fine, but in the long term, like the man who built bigger barns to store his crops, there has to be more to life and eternity as this man rudely found out (Luke 12:13-21).

It is then mourning about sin; about the sin of the world; about my own sin; and then about the death of Jesus on the cross that brings an individual to repentance and salvation and the promises of God, now and in eternity. Once a person comes to the cross and submits to the gospel message then joy and happiness becomes a reality.

Yours in Christ
Johan

The Teachings of Jesus: Sermon on the Mount. Number 2

In a world where power, prestige, wealth and position were of utmost importance, came the carpenter's son from Nazareth proclaiming a completely different set of values. Instead of greed came sacrifice; instead of pride came humility; instead of wealth came giving; instead of looking after self, came compassion for others. No wonder the religious leaders of his time wanted to put him to death, but the ordinary people were moved to come and listen to this message that resonated in their hearts and souls.

Jesus took his disciples up onto a mountain and gave them a new teaching. Luke in his gospel, places the teaching on a plain where "a large crowd of his disciples" were and also a "great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon". (Luke 6:17. NIV - used with permission).

These teachings were obviously taught at different times and in different settings, but everywhere the impact must have been the same. Some accepted the teachings while others did not. When some of Jesus' teaching became too difficult, John in his gospel records that, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (John 6:66).

As the Sermon on the Mount continues with what is commonly known as the beatitudes, Jesus says: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth and blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:5, 6). Here Jesus is emphasizing the type of person who realizes that he or she needs help from God. Meekness is not weakness. One translation uses the word humble, and this shows the meaning of the Greek word better. Jesus is often portrayed as meek and mild, but a careful study of his life presents a different picture. From the young boy asking difficult questions in the temple, to the angry Jesus driving out the money changers in the same temple, and the fearless Jesus standing before Pilate, a different picture emerges. As Jesus faced his coming arrest and death on the cross, he prayed: "not my will but Your will be done!"

Pride comes before the fall, the popular saying goes, but there is no place for pride in the Christian life, because God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit have done it all. The follower of Jesus must lay aside the worldly attitude that proclaims: "I can do it on my own!"

Jesus spoke and was heard in his time by people who had "a hunger and thirst for righteousness". The same condition exists today. Believers must first empty their hearts of pride and attitudes that proclaims: "I need nothing in this life from anyone". Rather there needs to be in their hearts the need to seek a better way. Only a heart that empties itself can be filled with the promises of God. In Revelation, right at the end of the book, John records; "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say. 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come, and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life." (Revelation 22:17)

In Acts 2:37 the people on the day of Pentecost cry out: "What must we do?" This question indicates a desperation and need. Peter answers them; "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

As we look at Luke's account of the beatitudes, it is not exactly the same as that recorded by Matthew. This tells us that these sayings were not a kind of recitation that the followers of Jesus learned but rather an important and integral series of teachings that made up the heart of the teachings of Jesus.

It is also interesting to note that Matthew mentions 10 Beatitudes. The first four refer to the attitude that a person must have towards God. The next three deal with the actions that a believer needs to take; that is to be merciful, to have a pure heart and to be a peace maker. The last two speak about what a person who becomes a follower of Christ will have to endure from others. He or she will be persecuted, lied about and insulted. Finally, the blessing is added that there awaits the promise of a great reward in heaven that will be received by those who are faithful. While the challenge of living a Christian life will be an ongoing test of the believer's faithfulness, it will all be worthwhile eventually. At the same time there are many blessings to be enjoyed along the way!

Yours in Christ

Johan

Teaching of Jesus –Sermon on the Mount Number 5 –Jesus and the Law.

One of the vital questions that must have been in the minds of those who heard the dramatic teaching of Jesus was; “What about the Law?” After all that was what the religious leaders of his time concentrated on. They had interpreted the Law to the smallest detail and stated exactly how it was to be applied to every possible scenario in their lives. This had become ridiculous to the extreme, and so the people had to be more careful about avoiding breaking the rules and regulations that had been introduced over the years than living out what the Law actually intended to achieve. So Jesus answers this question with some important statements. “Do not think I have come to destroy the Law and the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil.” (Matthew 5:17 NKJV used with permission) Yet it becomes obvious in the way that Jesus and his followers treated the minute interpretations of the law that he was not referring to their interpretation of the law as laid out by the scribes and the Levites. Rather Jesus is referring to the essence of the Law and what God had intended to achieve with it. Later Matthew is to record in 15:7-9; “Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying; ‘These people draw near to me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

So into this world, where a huge amount of rules and regulations had been introduced, Jesus brought a much more simple message, but also a much more demanding one. His statement in 5:20 is recorded by Matthew as saying: “For I say unto you that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” Following Jesus was so much more than keeping to a list of rules and regulations. It is changing your heart and your mind to love God completely!

In Luke 10 the Gospel writer records the parable of the Good Samaritan. Here Jesus teaches this parable in response to the question by a lawyer; “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replied with a question; “What is written in the law?” So the answer comes that you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself. (Luke 10:27) This illustrated clearly that the only way you can love your God is by loving your neighbour. God lives in another world, but in your world it is your neighbour who needs to be the one who receives your love. In the parable of the Good Samaritan that follows this statement by Jesus it is the much hated Samaritan who stops to administer help to the robbed and beaten traveller, while the priest and Levite walk by, to possibly rush to perform their ritualistic worship, or draw up their lists of regulations.

As Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount is that what is really important is the condition of his followers hearts and minds. The Law says don’t murder, but Jesus says don’t hate. The Law says don’t commit adultery but Jesus says don’t look at someone with lust in your heart. The Law requires compliance with its rules and regulations but Jesus requires a new heart filled with love that will eliminate the possibility of those negative actions from finding a place to even develop.

This was the intention of the law, but the religious leaders over the years, and even today, have substituted the real heart changing power of the Gospel with a poor substitute; a set of rules and regulations. Paul later describes our responsibility as followers of Christ as needing to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, and he calls this our “acceptable service”. (Romans 12:1)

No wonder many of those who heard the teaching of Jesus turned away because they found them too hard to follow as John recorded in John 6:66. It is much easier to try and keep to a set of rules and regulation that change a heart. The rich young ruler who came to Jesus had kept the law all his life but when the call came to follow Jesus by giving up his riches that was a step too far for him to take. The Samaritan proved to be a neighbour to the person who needed his help and stands as an example to all of us in every age.

Jesus not only taught about the love that God requires but illustrated it personally by his self sacrifice on the cross to deliver the great gift of salvation from his Father in Heaven. John 3:15, 16.

Yours in Christ
Johan

The Teaching of Jesus on Prayer.

Jesus taught extensively on prayer and he also put prayer to work in his life. He did not introduce prayer -it was an important part of the religious life of Israel, but Jesus set out to redefine it. Over the years it had been abused and neglected. What it had meant to be had become lost in the fog of time and misuse.

It is interesting to see that Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount (6:9-13), records the teaching by Jesus on prayer as part of his teaching on hypocrisy. Luke, in his account of the same, the so called "Lord's Prayer", records it in a different setting. In Luke 11:1ff, Luke writes: "Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray as John also taught his disciples'" (NKJV – used with permission).

The two accounts are basically the same but not word for word. That may indicate that this prayer was not meant to be a fixed formula to be repeated over and over again, but rather an example that Jesus used to teach on this important subject.

The first important statement as recorded in both accounts is: "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name." This places God and man in a proper perspective; people here on earth in need and God in heaven with the power to be called on when needed. We really need prayer all the time. Paul is later to record: "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17), indicating a prayerful life. This is something that Jesus also illustrated by example.

Recognizing that God is in heaven and we are here on earth does not distance us from God, but rather reminds us that prayer is the way that we can always approach our Father in Heaven. It is the conduit for God's heavenly power to enter into our world when we need it. "Your kingdom come" bridges the gap between heaven and earth, a gap that God filled by sending his Son to die for us. The kingdom has come as Jesus established his church, but it will be ultimately here when Christ returns.

Hallowed be thy name. As we pray to God in heaven, we recognize His Holy name. We approach God in prayer in the name of Jesus. "In the name of" was, and continues to be, a very important thought for anyone seeking favour or needing help. It all depends on who you are empowered by, just as a diplomat comes in the name of the country that he or she represents. Our passport indicates that we are citizens of a particular country. As Christians we come to God in the name of his Son but also claim that we recognize the hallowed name of our father in heaven. We then can go into our world while carrying the designation: "in God's name" because after all, he is our Father. What a great name to live with; a child of God!

Give us this day our daily bread. The request for daily bread goes squarely against the desire for the many unnecessary luxuries that we are so keen to possess. Basic needs are food, clothing and accommodation. Everyone should have access to these but in our world there is a huge disparity between the haves and the have-nots. Many have more than they need and many far too little. Our prayer should be for the essentials in life and the promise is that a caring God will provide what we need and not what we want.

Forgive us as we forgive those who wrong us : A basic need that every human has is the need for forgiveness. We need to be forgiven by others when we hurt / harm them, but especially we need to be forgiven by God. If we then expect forgiveness from God we need to use the same yardstick that we expect God to use for us as we then deal with others. How hypocritical it would be to fail to forgive if we expect forgiveness.

Lead us not into temptation: Temptation is a fact of life. Jesus faced that problem in the wilderness and was lead there by the Spirit (Matthew 4:1). We face temptation on a daily basis. Sin comes at us in the temptation to do things that we should not, but also in not doing the things that we should. We need all the help we can get in the ongoing battle to overcome it. Does God lead us into temptation? A strange statement but in the context of the understanding in biblical times it fell into what we would call testing. Nothing worthwhile comes without testing so this statement can be written in a different way as one translation puts it: "do not bring to us hard testing" (Luke 11:4).

Jesus, when tempted in the wilderness, replied every time with “It is written”. We should be grounded in what God’s Word says in order to combat Satan’s attacks in the same way.

The teaching of Jesus on prayer includes the story he told his disciples about the neighbour who comes to his friend’s house asking for bread for a visitor who arrives at night. Excuses are used to avoid answering this request, but persistent requests bring the required outcome. Jesus makes the promise that those who ask will receive (Luke 11:10). Here he is teaching that persistence in prayer will be rewarded.

In the parable of the two men praying in the temple, one receives a favourable hearing while the other is really speaking to himself because he is so full of his own “goodness”(Luke 18:10). Jesus warns that the Pharisees and scribes who “devour widows houses and then for pretence make long prayers... will receive greater condemnation” (Matthew 23:14). Peter, in his teaching on family relationships, makes the same point about a man who does not treat his wife kindly and so his prayers are in vain (1 Peter 3:7).

Prayer is so vital in the teaching and example of Jesus that it obviously needs to become an integral part in the life of any followers of Jesus. God does not need our prayers; he already knows what we need. But we need to pray so that God knows we are serious about wanting to receive those blessings.

In Mark’s account of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he records that “He could do no mighty works there; except that He laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He marveled, because of their unbelief” (Mark 6:5, 6).

When his disciples could not heal a particular person, Jesus told them that in a case like that success could only come with much prayer and fasting (Matthew 17:21).

It has been said that Satan trembles when a Christian kneels in prayer. He is not worried when people gain riches (The example of the rich young ruler and the man building bigger barns). But when a person prays, it opens up the channel for God’s blessings. Often in Old Testament examples is when God hears the cry of His people, he responds with giving them what they need.

In the same way prayer opens up the gateway to God’s promises for us. God is always ready to bless us, but only if we are ready to receive those blessings. One way we show that readiness is in prayer.

References:

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Yours in Christ
Johan

The Teachings of Jesus on Leadership

As Jesus started his public ministry he called together a group of disciples to take the message of salvation out into the world. The obvious question that was foremost in the hearts and minds of all was how was Jesus going to approach the religious leaders of his time? Over the years a very rigid and controlling structure of leadership had developed in Israel. Political and religious leadership was somewhat intermingled and confusing. Ultimately any form of local leadership fell under the overriding rule by Rome. The Pax Romana was an institution that was used by Rome to see that everything in the Roman Empire ran smoothly. So, in Jerusalem, when Jesus came onto the scene, the Jewish authorities were allowed to run their own affairs but were overseen by the Roman Governor who maintained certain powers. Under the Roman Governor there were the Roman troops that he could call on if needed to keep peace in the Roman Empire.

The Jews were looking forward to the arrival of the Messiah who would then become their King in the model of David of old and free them from the controlling powers of Rome. So the next question on the minds of his followers of Jesus was, "who is Jesus going to appoint as his main leader or leaders?"

A natural question to have but not an easy one to broach. Mark records in 10: 35 - 45 that the disciples, James and John, came to Jesus to request the important places in the coming Kingdom. Jesus calls his disciples together and tells them that to be considered a leader in the Kingdom, a person would have to become a servant.

In John chapter 13, the writer records how Jesus teaches his disciples an important graphic lesson on leadership by taking on the slave's towel and washing their feet. After the final Passover Supper, Luke records that an argument broke out among his disciples as to which one of them should be the most important (Luke 22:24). Here Jesus is recorded as teaching again that leadership entails service and reminds them that he came as a servant (vs.27). At the same time a place of honor is reserved for those who give their lives in service as he did (vs.30).

Matthew recorded in his Gospel account that Jesus had already approached the subject as he condemned the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees and warned that you must not take on names like teacher or father because you have only one father in heaven and nor should any of them be called "Leader", because your one and only leader is the Messiah (Matthew 23: 9, 10).

This human attitude of wanting to be a leader and in fact wanting to have a leader, goes back to the time of Samuel when the Israelites wanted to have a leader/king, "just like all the other nations around them". When they got their own way and Saul was appointed King, Samuel was told by God that it was not Samuel that they are rejecting but rather God himself.

So the teaching of Jesus on leadership is complex and needs to be looked at on different levels. He recognized that there were political leaders and even religious ones that needed to be respected. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's he taught. (Matthew 22: 17 - 22). In Matthew 23: 1, while recognizing the importance of the religious leaders of his time, because they "sit in Moses seat", at the same time he condemned them for their failures to live up to their responsibilities "for they bind heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on men's shoulders but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers". (vs. 4) So Jesus condemns the religious leaders of his time and encouraged a change in heart if they were to be blessed by God.

To his own disciples, he simply teaches that they must be servants. That to be important in the Kingdom of God you must become a servant.

At the same time taking on titles that in fact belong to God should not be allowed. We have one God, our Heavenly Father, and one Teacher, the Messiah. Leaders in the church are all brothers and sisters and when they seek big and important positions and titles they have missed the whole point of Christian service.

As the Church grew, leadership positions were earned by those who served and there is no references in the history of the early church as recorded in the book of Acts to indicate otherwise.

As we look at the religious world of today, it is obvious that what has happened is far away from what Jesus taught. Men have taken on positions and names that were condemned by Jesus. In the Church, disciples are all simply servants and brothers (and sisters). There certainly does not need to be a hierarchy of positions. The appointment of local and regional leaders, who then met in Councils to make rules that are then used to divide the Church into different groups, was not part of the plan. This was rather condemned by Jesus in several places in the Gospels. (Matthew 7: 21; 15: 8, 9) .

It seems that in every age Christian leaders forget that they are servants. As soon as they take on big titles and wear impressive garments they have missed the point. Rather they need to take up the servant's towel and become servants.

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Teachings of Jesus on Salvation

On at least two times Jesus was asked the important question: what must I do to be saved? This was central to the good news that Jesus came to deliver, after all, that was why he came.

Luke records in his Gospel account that Jesus came to "seek and to save the lost" (19:10). He was sent by his Father as a gift of love to deliver salvation: "For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). John then continues in the next verse in his gospel: "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that through Him we may be saved." (NKJV translation – used with permission)

Luke, in his Gospel account, records that a teacher of the law, in trying to trap Jesus, asked him: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:26) In his answer Jesus lay down the basic requirement after referring to the law and summarizing it up in just two principles: Love God and love your neighbour.

In trying then to possibly trying to justify his own lack of love for his fellow man (the Jews hated the Samaritans), the lawyer asked the vital question: "who is my neighbour?"

To this important question Jesus answered with one of the most powerful parables in the New Testament, the parable of the Good Samaritan. The example Jesus used shows clearly that loving your neighbour cuts across national, political and racial lines. In the time of Jesus the Jews hated the Samaritans with a deep rooted passion. They referred to them as dogs, and to even consider showing love to a Samaritan was beyond possibility, so Jesus used the parable to show that God's love knows no boundaries.

He was then saying to the lawyer: if you want to inherit the Kingdom of God, you need to look out for and help those who are in need. Jesus told the lawyer: "Go and do likewise". In other words if you want to inherit eternal life you need to show the same love to others that God showed when he sent his Son to bring his message of salvation to all the world.

The second example of a person asking the all important question about salvation comes from the man who is referred to as the "Rich Young Ruler" (Mark 10:17-22). Jesus again referred the young man to what was written in the

law and when the man claimed that he had kept the law perfectly, Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor and then to follow him.

Mark records in the same chapter that Jesus continued with his disciples with the statement: “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God.” When his disciple heard what Jesus taught about salvation they “were astonished” (Mark 10:24). Jesus often amazed with his teachings that went way beyond what people expected or believed. This statement recorded by Mark was no different. In fact, Jesus backed it up with a more remarkable statement: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God”.

In the next verse, Mark records that they were “greatly astonished, saying among themselves, ‘Who can then be saved?’” Why are riches an obstacle to salvation? In the parable of the sower some of the obstacles to receiving the word are described by Jesus as “the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches...” (Mark 4:19). There is no evil in being rich but in order to follow Jesus a rich person needs to put aside an attitude of “I can do it on my own” and rather to submit to God - often a step that is difficult to take. But every statement on any Biblical topic needs to be understood in the light of other passages on the same topic. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus taught that entry into the Kingdom of God needs to be received like a little child. (Mark 10:15)

Jesus brought this message to His world and backed it up with the miracles that He performed. In John 20:30, 31, John states this fact: “truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

As Jesus was ready to depart this world he gave this instruction to His disciples in what is referred to as the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19, 20)

On the day of the first Pentecost, after Jesus rose from the dead and returned to his Father in heaven, the crowd again asked the same question while addressing Peter: “What must we do to be saved?” The answer was simple to understand but perhaps difficult to obey: “Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:37, 38)

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People Just Like Us –A Study in Biblical Characters: The Woman at the Well.

As the Apostle John records his gospel account, he describes the interaction between Jesus and the woman at the well in the first 42 verses of chapter 4. Referred to as the Woman at the Well, or simply as the Samaritan Woman, her name is not recorded, but at the same time she becomes a well-known person because of the interaction with Jesus.

Jesus and his followers were travelling from Judea to Galilee, and as they passed the town of Sychar (near the larger town of Shechem), they came to a famous historical landmark which was Jacob's well. We read about this important source of water in Genesis 33:18, 19. Now in the time of Jesus, it was a place where weary travellers could stop to quench their thirst and fill their water bottles. The followers of Jesus had left him at the well and they had gone into the town to buy food.

It must be understood at this stage that the Samaritans and the Jews were enemies. There was no love lost between these neighbouring nations, and so, even travelling through this area could be problematic for people from Judea. Another fact that comes into the account is that men and women were separated by strict religious and cultural barriers. A man or woman would not speak to someone of the opposite sex while in public. But Jesus broke these taboos to the surprise of the woman, as John recorded in chap.4: 9; "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (NIV translation – used with permission).

Jesus answered her with a statement, saying that if she knew what the gift of God was, she would ask him for "living water". This was way beyond her understanding. After all, she had the power at that moment. He was thirsty and she had the container that could bring water out of the well. As the conversation continued, a couple of interesting facts appear; not only about this woman, but also about the coming religion that Jesus had come to deliver.

Jesus challenged her to go and find her husband and bring him to the well. This put her into a really difficult position and to her amazement Jesus already knew exactly that. He told her the man she was with at that time was not her husband and that she had already had 5 husbands. Jesus, with his prophetic powers informed her of those facts (4: 16-18). But it is the statement that Jesus made to her that is vitally important. This also then becomes vitally important to everyone in every age: "Everyone who drinks this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed the water I give him will become to him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:13, 14).

At this stage the woman was totally confused and amazed and so she told Jesus that when the coming Messiah arrived, he would clarify much. Jesus kindly told her that the Messiah had arrived and that it was indeed him! As the account continued, she rushed into Sychar to tell everyone the exciting news! Jesus also explained that in the future, religion would not be confined to a particular place (Jerusalem or Samaria) but that those who worship God would worship Him in Spirit and in Truth (4: 23).

From this interaction between Jesus and this ordinary woman at the well in Samaria, several important facts emerge:

1. Jesus came to break down the human imposed barriers that exist between nations, cultures and groups. When he saw this woman, he saw her as the lost soul. So he reached out to her as he does today through the Gospel (Good news). Matthew 28:18, 19).
2. Jesus came to deliver second chances. This ordinary woman, with the many challenges that she must have suffered in her life, was accepted by Jesus and offered the "Living Water" of spiritual life. It is interesting to know that in the time of Jesus, the Rabbi's debated what behaviour on a woman's side gave her husband the right to divorce her. Some argued that burning the food or developing wrinkles was enough. One can only speculate what she went through in her 5 marriages.
3. She believed that God was to be found in the mountains of Samaria. Jesus reveals that a time is coming when worship cannot be confined to a particular place but will be available to those who honestly search for the truth. "God is spirit and his worshipper must worship in spirit and in truth". John 4: 24

4. The Holy Spirit provides new life – what Jesus referred to as “living water”. The river of life giving water is flowing from the throne of God and Jesus, through the City of God, to provide in the leaves of the trees that grow there, the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-3).
5. The Samaritan Woman shared her faith with those she knew, and so the message spread through-out the village (John 4:39).

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Walking with Jesus: “Teach us to pray?”

As Jesus began his ministry, he gathered around him a group of followers referred to as disciples. In Luke 11: 1 & 2, the gospel writer records an interesting interaction between Jesus and his disciples. After a time of personal prayer by Jesus, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples”. (NIV translation – used with permission). Jesus then gave them an example of prayer that has become known as “The Lord’s Prayer”. It is also recorded in Matthew 6: 5 - 12, but in a slightly different form and a very different setting.

In many denominations, the Matthew translation has become a ritual in saying The Lord’s Prayer as a part of worship. Doing this is probably based on Luke 11: 9, “This then is how you should pray”. While there is obviously nothing wrong with repeating the example Jesus gave, it seems doubtful that it is what he intended.

The first thing that jumps out from this passage is the fact that the disciples of Jesus needed to be taught how to pray at all. Surely as young Jewish boys, they had attended their religious school and must have learned how to pray? What about in the home as children growing up? It seems that all children must be taught at the very least by the example of their parents, how to pray. However, both John the Baptist and Jesus needed to teach their followers how to pray.

Perhaps the situation is very much like today, when prayer has been identified as one of the so called “Acts of Worship”. It has also been handed over to the religious leaders to perform. When prayer in a special circumstance is called for, the minister, priest, preacher, pastor or elder is called in to pray. Apparently, how to pray had not been taught to every Jewish boy and so the question came from a perceived need. Perhaps in the example of Jesus and previously John the Baptist, they saw a new example.

The second fact that emerged came from the answer that Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew. The example of how they should pray was far removed from the prayers we hear so many religious leaders praying today. It was certainly also so in the time of Jesus. In Matthew’s account of the prayer of Jesus, it is set in the context of warnings by Jesus of the abuse of prayer by the religious leaders of his time, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogue and street corners to be seen by men” (Mt.6: 5). So the prayer is short and specific. There are no empty phrases and repetitions.

“Our Father in heaven hallowed be Thy name” (Mt. 6: 9). Note that Luke says simply “Father, hallowed be Thy name.” In this opening statement, acknowledgement comes of two different realms, the present earthly world and the greater spiritual world. The prayer issues us into and acknowledges that we are created both physically and spiritually. Prayer then extends our human experience into the heavenly realm. Here we come closer to God and God comes closer to us. In Deuteronomy 4: 7, Moses writes “...our God is near to us whenever we pray to Him”.

While Luke simply says, “Father”, Matthew brings us into a shared relationship with Jesus and God by writing, “Our Father”. Here is not the terrifying God on Mount Sinai, but rather a loving, comforting Father God who so loved the world that he gave his son to pay the price for our sin. There is great mystery in this eternal system that is both fair and just. With the blemish of sin in our lives it is impossible to enter into the presence of a Holy God. So sin’s penalty is paid in full by Jesus on the cross, and forgiveness is made available to all who believe and accept the promise of eternal life.

“Give us this day our daily bread” speaks of a request for what we need on a day to day basis. Into a world driven by the never ending “I want”, comes a request to ask for what I really need. In this world we, as humans, are driven by greed and the need to be self-sufficient. Jesus prayed later to his Father, “not my will but your will be done”. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught that God will indeed take care of us, a difficult concept to understand and an even more difficult one to apply in our lives.

“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” Promises from God come with conditions of reciprocal behaviour. You cannot receive forgiveness if you do not forgive others. You cannot receive God’s love unless your heart learns to love others. Peter writes in 1 Peter 3: 7 that husbands should treat their wives with respect, “so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” The challenges of a Christian life are huge, but the promises great. Prayer helps us to remember those challenges.

“Lead us not into temptation”. Temptation lurks around every corner and again it needs all the help we can get to fight off Satan. Matthew adds, “but deliver us from the evil one.”

Just a short lesson on prayer by Jesus in response to the request of the disciples, “teach us to pray”. The lesson is as relevant today as it was in the time of Jesus. It would be good for everyone to read Jesus’ answer and meditate on it regularly.

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