

Because Context Always Matters

Encounters WITH JESUS

The Rest of Their Stories



Contextual Reflections for Individuals and Groups

Doug Greenwold

Author of *Making Disciples Jesus' Way*



A Digging Deeper Study

People are more interested in faith and religion than in Jesus.

—George Barna

Those of us who know the Bible story well can suffer from knowing it well.

—Alistair Begg

The NT (New Testament), after all, does not come in the form of timeless
Aphorism; every text was written in a given first century time/space framework.
Indeed the NT authors felt no need to explain what were for them and their readers
common cultural assumptions

—Gordon D. Fee

Context rescues truth from the familiar.

—Kenneth Bailey

When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know
but do not always know what we see.

—Unknown

There is no substitute for reading the Bible; it throws a great deal
of light on the commentaries!

—Unknown

If I were the devil, one of my first aims would be to stop folks from digging into the Bible.

—J. I. Packer

The Christian who is careless in Bible reading is careless in Christian living.

—Max Reich

The trouble with ignorance is that it picks up confidence as it goes along.

—Arnold H. Glasnow

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Doug Greenwold

Author of

Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We have Missed

The Rest of The Story: A Closer Look at Familiar Passages

Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God

Those Prodigal Sons

That Good Samaritan

Becoming a Judean Shepherd

First Edition July 2008

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A Digging Deeper Study



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Dedication

To those followers of Jesus who are lifting Him up to others, this book is for you. May it allow you to lift up more of Jesus to a curious, broken and skeptical world.

To those “Bible Alive” weekend participants who keep asking for more Bible-in-context teaching on Jesus’ encounters with people, this book is for you.

To those who have long dreamed for a narrative contextual commentary on the Gospels, this is a very modest first step in that direction. May these pages encourage you to dig deeper into the Scriptures to discover more of the transforming reality of Jesus.

Acknowledgements

Nothing happens in a vacuum. There are always events, people, circumstances and stimuli that cause something to happen. This work is no exception. It comes with great appreciation and thankfulness for the promptings, encouragements and feedback from many. I am particularly indebted to the following:

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- The Spirit of God who inspired Luke to record these encounters with Jesus and who consistently prompted many of the key phrases, ideas, thoughts, resources and questions that have found their way into this manuscript.

Preface

*Those of us who know the Bible story well
can suffer from knowing it well.*

—Alistair Begg

Reader Beware

In just about any well-grounded book written to help us study and understand the Bible better, you will find some version of the following caution:

We should not ask what a passage means for us today until we first know what the words and phrases meant to those who first heard them.

Intuitively we know this has to be true. That is not just good advice; it is also one of those Laws of Gravity when it comes to studying God's Word. As we learn from our physical world, if we choose to ignore the reality of gravity, we will surely stumble and fall because of our carelessness and ignorance. The physical Law of Gravity continues to operate in our world whether we believe it or not, or like it or not. The same is true when studying God's Word. Ignoring the context of a passage does not mean that the unrecognized context residing in that passage is irrelevant. However, if we do ignore the context, we can easily miss much of what God's Spirit intended to reveal to us in that passage.

This first-understand-what-the-passage-meant-to-those-who-first-heard-it caution does prompt the question: Is it even possible to know what the Bible words in a passage meant to those who first heard them; and if so, how would we go about discovering that meaning? Answering this question is why biblical context matters. It is an

assumption of this book that we will never get to the fuller meaning of a Bible passage without first understanding its original context, what the writers of the Bible assumed we would always know.

Context Always Matters

Context matters in everything we do. Always has and always will. We know that to be true in our professions, in our families and in our relationships. Yet despite knowing this universal truth, we still seem to have this remarkable ability to disconnect ourselves from that truth when we enter the Scriptures. The words in the Bible were chosen because of their precise meaning which in turn is drawn from the passage's context. Thus, if we are to more fully connect with the original meaning of a passage today, we need to know what the verbs, phrases, idioms, events, names and places meant to those who first heard them. As this book will repeatedly underscore, understanding the context of a biblical passage can significantly improve our ability to "accurately handle" (II Tim. 2:15) God's Word for today.

Discovering More in "Familiar" Stories

In the "Bible Alive" weekend conferences, considerable time is devoted to looking at Jesus through the eyes and ears of first-century Middle Eastern villagers, the primary audience Jesus addressed. To do this, we have to learn how to disengage our Westernized way of thinking and engage the historical, cultural, literary and geographical context of Jesus that the Gospel writers always assumed we would know and understand. When we do that, we suddenly start to realize that even in these most "familiar" of Bible narratives, there is a whole lot more to the rest of these stories that we have been missing.

Transformation is the Objective

While contextual restoring a biblical passage is exciting and often leads to a series of new discoveries, that is not the main reason why context is essential when studying the Scriptures. The real reason to restore the passage's context is that it gets us closer to the Holy Spirit's original meaning of a passage; and the closer we get to that intended meaning, the closer we get to the epicenter of the Holy Spirit's intended transformation. Therein resides the power of biblical context as the Holy Spirit, the author of every word in Scripture, uses the fullness of that passage to bring us into God's presence where He can transform us. That is why the contemplative person needs to become good friends with the contextualist (and vice versa).

Ready to Wrestle?

As is usually the case, the more we understand a passage as it was meant to be understood, the more challenge we find to our Western evangelical paradigms. In the first-century rabbinic tradition, I hope you will be willing to wrestle with some of the challenges that these contextually restored passages will bring to you. After that wrestling, then proceed to open up a dialogue with those around you asking: "Have we reduced Jesus to a one-dimensional Western understanding? How much do we really understand the Kingdom of God?" Then, in the leading of the Holy Spirit, start to make appropriate changes in how we live each day to honor and glorify God.

Meaningful Change

We all know that new information and insights, no matter how intriguing, are insufficient for meaningful change to occur. Those insights need

to be pondered and processed if they are ever going to penetrate us, let alone percolate in and marinate our hearts and minds. It is in the midst of that meditative process that the Holy Spirit teaches us, touches us, and transforms us, both individually and corporately.

It is my prayer that God's Spirit will find something useful within these pages to encourage and challenge you to be more passionate and intentional about digging into the encounters with Jesus that we find on the pages of the Gospels. The resultant discoveries of "the rest of those stories" will be worth the time spent on the treasure hunt.

Doug Greenwold

Columbia, Maryland

July 2008

Introduction

*When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know
but do not always know what we see.*

—Unknown

Context Matters

For the past 30 years I have been teaching God's Word trying my best to be one who is *accurately handling the word of truth*.¹ During that time, I have repeatedly been woken up to the realization that I was missing something important. The first such awakening occurred in 1988 when I had the opportunity to go to Israel on a study program. Until then, I never knew how important the land – its historical, cultural, geographic and literary context – was to understanding the purpose and meaning of many of the Gospel passages.



Missing a Framework

Not too long ago I again realized something important was missing in my teaching of God's Word. This time it was discovering that I was teaching the facts of the Scripture without providing a facilitating framework into which to organize and integrate them. It was as if I was handing out Christmas ornaments of wonderful biblical truths and facts but never showed people the tree upon which to hang them. From a contextual perspective, these facts and truths were all necessary for understanding a particular portion of Scripture being opened up but insufficient for allowing the whole picture to be seen, let alone grasped.

Missing the Big Picture

I recognized that my own journey of being taught was comprised of others giving me hundreds of pieces to a puzzle, without one of them ever showing me what the picture on the top of the puzzle box looked like. If you ever tried to assemble a 1,000-piece puzzle without ever having seen the top of the puzzle box, you understand how difficult a task this is. I soon learned that I was not alone in this experience. Furthermore, I was

teaching people in the same way that I had been taught. Missing, until recently, were frameworks for helping all of us better understand the Bible.

Seeing the Trees But not the Forest

Here in the West we are so preoccupied with analyzing a leaf (a statement of Jesus) under the microscope that we tend to forget that the leaf came from a tree (the Gospels), and that the tree is part of a great forest (all of Scripture). As a result, we can become so easily focused on the leaf issues of a passage that we often lose sight of its larger contextual background – the tree and the forest.

Finding a Different Perspective

What we often need when engaging the Scriptures is an elevated perspective on the text, a different and wider frame of reference, one where we can take in all the trees and see the whole forest. If we do that, then we can return to a specific passage to examine more closely the leaves that we thought we knew and understood and discover more of what we may have been missing. This is the approach we will take in opening up Jesus' encounters with people.

Three Levels of Context

In engaging Gospel passages within their context, it helps to always keep three perspectives in view:

- **The BIBLE'S Context** – “The Five Story Lines of Scripture”² or the really Big Picture of the Bible. From this 30,000 foot perspective, we first look for what is revealed in any biblical passage about 1) who God is and how He does things, 2) who the Adversary is and how he does things, 3) the character of the Mutiny, 4) the resultant nature of the Human Condition, and 5) God's eternal plan of

Rescue and Restoration to return everything back to its original sinless condition.

- **The BOOK'S Context** – Those contextual themes that the Gospel writer has already been developing in his narrative, e.g., the Rescuer has come, He is establishing a new Kingdom, He is beginning to remake His disciples' worldview, and He is bringing God's mercy to those who have been deprived of it. This is the book-specific perspective from 5,000 feet that we also need to “see” and understand.
- **The PASSAGE'S Context** – Look for the specific contextual clues that the Gospel writer (a Holy Spirit inspired artist with words) gives us by using names, phrases, sites, references, and idioms to “paint” this encounter. This is the ground-level view of a passage. Let's explore this ground-level perspective further.

Words have very precise meanings in Scripture. That's why the biblical writers deliberately chose their words under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to communicate an intentional message. In the Gospels, insights into these word meanings include the³

- **Literary context** of the words used including their Jewish literary form, their linguistic meaning and their use in rabbinic teaching pedagogy.
- **Historical context** they were rooted in, including the intertestamental and Roman occupation periods, as well as Israel's own extensive history.
- **Geographical context** of the sites mentioned including their physical characteristics, topographical and climatic features, as well as the extreme geographical variations that exist in this very small land.

- **Religious context** they were drawn from including the nature of the Temple, Sabbath worship, the Oral Tradition, rabbinic interpretive wisdom, Messianic themes and prophecy, as well as ceremonial feasts and ritual purification.
- **Village context** issues including Jewish social customs of mandatory hospitality and social reciprocity, as well as the nature of farming, shepherding and fishing life.

Such an *integrated* contextual approach allows us to get closer to what the biblical writers intended to communicate about who God is and what God wants to reveal to us in these encounters with Jesus.

How Do You Read It?

At the beginning of the “Good Samaritan” story,⁴ Luke tells us that a certain lawyer came to test Jesus. This confident lawyer initiates his dialogue with Jesus by posing a great question: *Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* In true rabbinic fashion, Jesus answers his question with another question: *What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?*

Since this lawyer had memorized much of the Hebrew (Old Testament) Scriptures for his *bar mitzvah*, the nature of Jesus’ *How does it read to you?* question is not meant to ask him what does God’s Word say; rather, what does it mean? In other words, how do you interpret God’s Word regarding your question of eternal life?

Biblical Illiteracy

Jesus’ *How does it read to you?* (how do you interpret it?) question is the challenge of this book. Over twenty centuries later, that question still confronts us. How are we reading God’s Word today? Through what kinds of cultural filters, worldview grids and lenses are we reading,

massaging and/or altering God’s word so as to make it more palatable to our Western paradigms and personal comfort zones?

Our contemporary situation is radically different from Jesus’ time. Unlike the First Century, biblical illiteracy, not proficiency, is epidemic throughout the evangelical church. As a result, we now have at least two core questions to ask followers of Jesus Christ today: What does God’s Word say (a content question), and then what does God’s Word mean (an interpretation question)? When we read and ponder the Scriptures, do we understand the content of what the Holy Spirit, the author of God’s Word, intends for us to see and understand? Then, are we able to recognize the implications of that timeless content for today?

Words Have Meaning

Before the Gospels were written down on scrolls, they were first spoken in a Semitic language that embodied well-known paradigms (ways of thinking, seeing and understanding things) that Jewish listeners knew well. As such, those words had very specific meanings within the Hebrew mindset of its day. Since then, those Hebrew words have been translated into Greek, then into Latin, and then into the constraints of the English language more than a thousand years later. Thus, a needed perspective for engaging a text or passage is to first disconnect from our traditional Hellenistic (Greek) way of thinking – easier said than done – and then ask how the Hebrews who first heard those words would have understood them.

Original Meaning

This process of sequentially disconnecting from our Western way of thinking to engage the world of the Gospels, and then reconnecting to our

modern way of thinking is crucial. If we miss the original meaning embodied in those Holy Spirit inspired words, it then becomes relatively easy to not only misunderstand those words, but to redefine them and then misapply them. As part of the process of discovering the original intent of the Bible writers' words, we must remember that this disconnect-engage-reconnect process is not always an easy one for today's Westerners:

For many of us Westerners, the Hebrew mindset is so strange, so alien, so impossible to fathom, that we quickly snap back into the comfort zone of the Hellenistic mold of studying the Hebrew Scriptures. We then impose this distorting grid over the Hebrew text – or for that matter, over the Greek text of the New Testament.⁵

Synthesis or Analysis

Not only have we in the West been conditioned by a Greek worldview for 2,000+ years, but we have also been shaped by 300 years of modernity thinking.⁶ This has taken its toll and made us egocentric people who instinctively prefer instant analysis and “how to” answers when engaging the Scriptures. We are also much more comfortable tearing things apart than we are fusing and keeping things together. As a result, we like to label the analytical pieces we create, convincing ourselves that in putting these pieces into the right cubbyholes means we have actually mastered them. For example, being able to list and organize sixteen attributes of God may mean we know something *about* God, but it does not necessarily follow that we actually *know* God. All of this stands in stark contrast to the Hebrew perspective, which was always about synthesis and integration, i.e., keeping things together when wrestling with the Word of God.

Existentialism is Alive and Well

Sadly, existentialism (what a passage means to me is the only thing that matters) is not only very much alive and well in evangelicalism, it is flourishing in both subtle and not so subtle ways. For example, a very common response I get before leading a “Bible Alive” contextual immersion weekend in a church (where we engage the Bible in its context) is, “Who needs this?” The preferred evangelical existential approach to God's Word often seems to be some form of “I just open my Bible each day to a verse or passage and let the Spirit speak to me.” While we would not dare learn physics, nursing, or astronomy that way, we do seem to have this peculiar way of approaching and reading the Bible!

Unaware that we are often pragmatic existentialists, we are not looking for the original meaning of a passage. It is not part of our thinking that the Holy Spirit had something very specific in mind to communicate to us in a timeless manner when inspiring those particular words in the text. Thus we unknowingly rely on the Holy Spirit to work overtime on our behalf to reveal God's intended wisdom to us in the passage because we are too lazy to work at discovering what the Holy Spirit's original meaning is in the text. And then we wonder why we find mostly anemic Christians sitting limply in the pew.

Discerning Purpose and Meaning

Without the plumb line of the Holy Spirit's original meaning for a passage, we are left with only two possible outcomes when approaching the Word of God, both woefully deficient. Either the Holy Spirit had nothing specific in mind when He inspired the words we are reading or; if He

did, we are incapable of discerning what that intent is. While it is a fine line, and I'm certainly not trying to create a new specialized body of knowledge in suggesting this, I am convinced it is necessary for us to do the best we can to try and discern the Holy Spirit's timeless intent for any passage we are studying. With that understanding in place, we are then in a much better position to ask the Spirit for discernment regarding the purpose and meaning of that passage for the complexities of our life and world today.

“What Do You Think it Means?”

In the world of the Gospels, the rabbi had the role of authoritatively interpreting the Scriptures for his disciples. Today the reader of God's Word, not always under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, frequently assumes that role. Because of the widespread biblical illiteracy that is often part of this dynamic, the implications can be unsettling.

Have you ever been in a small group Bible study when a seemingly difficult passage is discussed? The typical question that the leader often sets in motion is, “What do you think it means?” That is certainly a good question. However, it is the response to that question that should give us cause for concern! Often, as that question migrates around the room and each person renders his or her opinion, that process ends with a straw vote to determine the best answer! While this may be good representative democracy, it is a dubious approach, at best, to understanding God's Word.

Unaware that we are often practicing existentialists, we tend to focus on what we think or guess a passage might mean rather than digging more deeply to discern what the Holy Spirit intended it to mean. Then we wonder why we end up looking so much like clones of the

culture, very much at home in our “comfortable self-centeredness,”⁷ instead of distinctive disciples of Jesus.

There is Work to Be Done!

Not too long ago while reading A.W. Pink's commentary on Exodus, I was challenged in my thinking about studying God's Word. Pink makes the observation in one of his chapters that “the Bible does not yield its meaning to lazy people.”⁸ Oh my! It's as if we have become too lethargic or complacent to want to do the work that is necessary to dig more deeply into the riches of God's Word. Paul's exhortation to *Be diligent to present yourself approved by God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth*⁹ appears to be missing from our consciousness. Note the presupposition of work! So we dabble in our understanding of the Scriptures, quickly investing two minutes on power¹⁰ in our microwave approach to studying God's Word, and then collectively meet and share our what-do-you-think-it-means superficial opinions.

Some Convincing Examples

To underscore these preceding observations and to illustrate both the power and the necessity of understanding the context of the passages we read in the Scriptures, this book takes twelve “familiar” Gospel passages from Luke and contextually restores them. Doing so allows us to understand the passages as if we were those Middle Eastern villagers who first heard and understood them.

For Pulpit and Pew

It is my belief that people in the pew can do what this book does – namely restore much of the context of a biblical passage. That's what Preserving Bible Time's Bible-in-Context church

weekends are all about – giving people the tools, frameworks and resources to meaningfully reconstruct the context of a passage.

It is important to accept the premise that this contextual restoration process is not something that should be confined just to ministry professionals. The ability to contextually restore much of a passage was always meant for the pew – the priesthood of all believers.¹⁰ After all, it was “lay people” who first heard the Bible’s words and understood those meanings. As such, it is important to remember that the sources providing the contextual facts used in this book are available to the priesthood of all believers. The last thing I would want you the reader to conclude is: “I can’t do this. This is too hard.” Yes, it requires some digging and perseverance to find contextual facts; however, that digging will be done if you are convinced of the value of mining God’s Word. Doing things differently always starts with seeing things differently. Such an effort can profoundly deepen your love affair with the Father and His Son. It can also re-energize your spiritual life and journey.

Consider again Paul’s admonition to young Timothy: *Be diligent to present yourself approved by God as a workman who does not need to be*

*ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*¹¹

That would certainly suggest there must be a number of ways to inaccurately handle God’s Truth. Are you ready to work at further understanding God’s Word? Are you willing to be your own version of a biblical explorer in passionate pursuit for understanding more of the riches to be found in God’s word just below the surface of a passage? If so, grab some shovels and let’s start contextually digging.

Take Time to Reflect

Appropriate “Reflections to Journal and Share,” as well as some thoughts to “Ponder,” will be found at the end of each chapter. In the spirit of the first-century rabbinic tradition, you will find no fill-in-the-blank questions; rather, thought-provoking questions to wrestle with to further hone your discernment regarding the intended purpose and meaning of God’s Word for your life today.

For small groups and Bible studies, these guided thoughts can serve as helpful discussion questions with which to collectively wrestle. For devotional purposes, they can serve as a guide for personal meditation and journaling. The prayed-for outcomes of both are the same – personal and corporate transformation by the Holy Spirit.

Reflections to Journal and Share...

- What do you think twenty centuries of Greek thinking and three hundred years of modernity thinking has done to the way we approach the Gospels in the West? What kinds of thinking patterns and processing filters might we implicitly be bringing to reading about Jesus in the Gospels without realizing it?

- Are we often unaware that we are using an existentialist mindset (the only thing that matters is what a passage means to me) when we read God's word? What implications might that have for you, your Bible study and your church?
- What issues and implications do you see for people in today's Westernized industrial, urban culture reading biblical words that have first-century Middle Eastern village, agrarian meanings?
- Would you agree or disagree with the thesis that you have to work at studying God's Word? What is your notion of what that work means? Are you willing to do it?
- What is your prayer right now as you prepare to rediscover these "familiar" passages?

Ponder

O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.

—Psalm 119:99

*I remember the days of old;
I meditate on all Your doings;
I muse on the work of Your hands.*

—Psalm 143:5

Reading the Bible through fresh eyes constantly reminds us
of the depths that still remain to be discovered there.

—Philip Jenkins

In the midst of the cultural obsession with expertise, it is essential that
the Christian life should be preserved with its proper amateur status.

—James Houston

Faith may be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the
Adamic ego. Christ may be “received” without the creating of any special love for Him in the
soul of the receiver. The man is “saved,” but he is not hungry nor thirsty after God. In fact, he
is specifically taught to be satisfied and is encouraged to be content with very little.

—A. W. Tozer

The Third Gospel is not simply a narrative text, but a “cultural product.” That is, as literary
text, the Gospel of Luke is itself a representation of the values and contexts within which
it was generated, so any attempt to dislodge the Gospel from its own world would render
it in some ways incomprehensible...All language is embedded in culture, and because
Luke’s narrative enterprise will have been set within a particular discourse situation, it
behooves modern interpreters to engage as fully as possible in an exploration of the cultural
presuppositions Luke shared with his contemporaries.

—Joel Green

Sources and Notes

¹II Timothy 2:15

²James C. Martin and Doug Greenwold, from the Pentagon graphic,
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⁴Luke 10:25-26

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Company, San Francisco, California, 2003), pp. 106, 116, & 120.

⁷Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (The Seabury Press: Minneapolis,
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⁹II Timothy 2:15

¹⁰I Peter 2:9

¹¹II Timothy 2:15

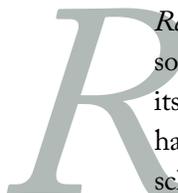
Remez: A Helpful Interpretive Tool

*There is no substitute for reading the Bible (in context);
It throws a great deal of light on the commentaries!*

- Unknown (added)

Read: Luke 1: 46-55

A Harkening Back

 *Remez* is a Semitic word meaning “hinted meaning” or a harkening back to something that needs no further elaboration because the hearers all know its obvious context.¹ Since most first-century observant Jewish young men had memorized much of the Hebrew Scriptures at the local synagogue school as part of their childhood education, rabbis were able to speak and teach in this *remez* (shorthand) manner because everyone knew the complete (longhand) version of the portion of Scripture being referenced.



Because a number of chapters in this book make reference to *remez* as part of the contextual understanding of a passage, it helps to understand this common Jewish literary technique.

Contemporary *Remez*

We are all familiar with the *remez* communication genre. If I were to burst into song and start singing “God bless America, land that I . . . , and then suddenly stop, you could continue the song because almost everyone knows how to finish it. That would be a contemporary *remez*. The same would be true of the opening phrase of The Lord’s Prayer. All someone has to do is start by saying, *Our Father who art in Heaven . . .*, and we all know how to continue it and finish it.

Remez can also be short phrases that have much larger meanings. The “Cold War,” “9-11” and “Remember the Alamo” are examples of contemporary *remez* phrases that have huge historical, emotional and political meanings.

Words as *Remez*

The use of *remez* is also common in Jewish literature and often used by the Gospel writers. *Remez* can be words, phrases, physical phenomena, as well as actions, and occurs hundreds of times in the Gospels (including over two dozen times in Luke's first chapter). Mary's Magnificat and Zechariah's Benedictus are best understood as a cascade of *remez*. In considering Mary's Magnificat, the following would be *remez* associations:

Verse	Remez Reference
46	Psalms 34:2, I Sam. 2:1-10
47	Psalms 35:9, Hab. 3:18
48	Psalms 138:6
49	none
50	Psalms 103:17
51	Psalms 98:1 and 118:15
52	Job 5:11
53	Psalms 107:9
54	none
55	Gen. 17:12, Psalms 132:11, Gen. 17:7

To fully understand what the Holy Spirit intended to communicate through Mary in this passage, we have to take each *remez* phrase and go back to its antecedent source. We then need to understand the total context and weight of the passage where that *remez* phrase is found, then import that meaning back into the *remez* word or phrase we find in the New Testament record.

Jesus and *Remez*

Jesus used *remez* to signify who He was. For example, *Son of Man*² in Luke is a messianic harkening back to the much fuller meaning of

that title in Daniel 7. *Daily bread*³ in The Lord's Prayer is a *remez* back to daily manna in the wilderness of Zin.

Actions as *Remez*

Likewise, many of Jesus' **actions** would have been understood by first-century observant Jews to be in this *remez* genre, e.g., walking on the water in Matthew evokes a *remez* back to Job 9:8, writing in the sand in John 8 when they brought to Jesus the woman caught in adultery is best understood as a *remez* back to Jeremiah 17:13 (*those who turn away from you will be written in the dust*). Jesus bringing the just-died son of the widow of Nain back to life⁴ was a *remez* back to Elisha who did the same thing in essentially the same place with a Shunammite woman.⁵

Riding a donkey down into the Kidron Valley from Bethphage on Palm Sunday would have been understood by many in the crowd that day as a double *remez* back to Zechariah 9:9 as well as to Solomon who did the same thing when he became king centuries earlier.⁶

A Parting *Remez*

Being aware of this *remez* literary technique can sometimes totally change our traditional understanding of a passage. This is never truer than when we revisit the last words of Jesus in Matthew and Mark from the Jewish perspective of a *remez*.

Jesus is a rabbi and is teaching and speaking in a Semitic dialect as a rabbi even to his dying breath. Many observant Jews standing around the cross would have understood Jesus' last utterance, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me*,⁷ as an intentional *remez* back to Psalm 22:1. To the first-century Jewish mind, Psalms 22, 23 and 24 were viewed as "the shepherd Psalms" of David

and as a unitized whole.⁸ Thus by invoking Psalm 22:1, Jesus would have been understood as invoking the integrated oneness of those three Psalms as His final prayer (note that some did not clearly hear what Jesus said and mistook *eloi* as *Elijah*⁹ – both are phonetically very similar in Semitic pronunciation). In using Psalm 22:1 as a *remez*, Jesus identified Himself one more time as the Messiah in how He would die (Ps. 22), stated His hope and trust in His ever-present Father (Ps. 23), and envisioned His triumphant return to heaven (Ps. 24) in this progression of the Good Shepherd (Ps. 22), the Great Shepherd (Ps. 23), and the Chief Shepherd (Ps.24).¹⁰ With this contextual understanding, Jesus is affirming He will not be separated from God as part of His agony,¹¹ e.g., Psalm 23:4.

Making Sense of the Fine Print

Many *remez* will be found in the fine print side notes of your Bible. I suspect most of your Bibles actually have the same side note *remez* references called out for the phrases found in Mary's Magnificat. Understanding how *remez* are being used in God's Word is a good reason to take note of the verse references provided. In doing so, remember that not all fine print verse references that accompany a passage are *remez*. For example, sometimes the editors are just providing a reference as to where the same encounter/theme can be found in the other Gospel passages. So a little bit of discernment is needed to separate out the *remez* references from the other types of references provided. My own favorite Bible for *remez* identification is the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) Wide Margin, Side Column Reference edition.

Some Practice

For some practice, develop more of the context of Zechariah's prophetic Benedictus by tracing down the *remez* to be found in verses 68, 69, 71, 72, 73, 76, 77, 78, and 79 of Luke's first chapter.

With *remez* now in place as one of the interpretive tools in our Bible study toolbox, let's engage Luke's encounters with Jesus from the perspective of their first-century context.

Sources and Notes

¹James, C. Martin, *The Gospels in Context* (Bible World Seminars: Amarillo, Texas, 2002), p. 148.

²Luke 5:24; 6:5, 22; 7:34; 9:22, 26, 44, 59; and more

³Luke 11:3

⁴Luke 7:11-17

⁵II Kings 4:34-35

⁶I Kings 32-40

⁷Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34

⁸J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*, Vol. II, "Joshua through Psalms," (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, Tennessee, 1982), p. 716.

⁹Matthew 27:47 and Mark 15:35

¹⁰J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*, Vol. II, p. 716.

¹¹Doug Greenwold, *The Rest of the Story: A Closer Look at Familiar Passages, "The Last Words of Jesus: What Did He Really Mean and Say,"* (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Rockville, Maryland, 2007), p. 25-28.

1

An Incredible Announcement

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.

—Isaiah 55:9

Read: Luke 1:5-22

Names Matter

The name this ordinary levitical priest gave his newborn son was Zechariah, the Semitic meaning of which is *whom Jehovah remembers*.¹ In a culture where naming was very significant, this proud and overjoyed father had given his newly born son a name that invokes the personal, covenantal name of God, a name that recalls His promises and testimony to be faithful to his people.



A Prophetic Name

In choosing that name, Zechariah's father drew upon a prophetic name that harkened back almost 500 years in the nation's history. The mere mention of the name Zechariah always evoked prophetic echoes of Messiah's coming, priesthood, kingship, glory and His enduring reign of peace and prosperity.² In a culture in which the act of naming a male child was highly significant and a most sacred and solemn task, Zechariah's father gave him a name that came with a history and a legacy. *Whom Jehovah remembers* would be engrained in young Zechariah's mind and embossed in his soul as he journeyed through life. "The Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob always remembers. And my name signifies all that, and more!"

Great Expectations

No doubt Zechariah's father had great priestly expectations for his son. Thus it was important to find his son just the right wife. If sons were to remain in the priesthood, they had to marry daughters of priests. Finally a priestly family with a daughter was found for a possible marriage that seemed almost too good to be true. This daughter's name was

Elizabeth, the name of Aaron's wife.³ Because Aaron had been Israel's first Chief Priest, and with Elizabeth's Semitic name meaning *one who swears by God*,⁴ if one wanted a great name and a great legacy for a priest's wife, this was it.

When the marriage details were agreed to, and the betrothal contract between the two families finalized, Zechariah's father had to have been overjoyed. His son has married into Aaron's priestly line. Perhaps he could not help but wonder, "Maybe the Lord has something truly wonderful in store for this young priest-to-be and his seemingly very special wife. Of course there will be a family. The only question being how many children; and particularly, how many next-generation priestly sons would God bless them with?" As Zechariah and Elizabeth ended their wedding festivities, they most likely had their own expectations of what they thought their family life would be. And in defining their expectations for a family, they unknowingly set the stage for future disappointment.

How Can This Be!

In verses 6 and 7 of his first chapter, Luke surprises his readers with an incredibly concise summary of the first 30+ years of wedded life for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well along in years. (NIV)

With incredible economy of words and with sudden, new and totally unexpected information, Luke packs decades of pain, disappointment, hurt, frustration, self-doubt and misunderstanding into one sentence, with the word *barren* being the most arresting. To first-

century Jews, this is an unconceivable outcome. Such a situation does not make any sense in the way their religious world was thought to work. To be upright in God's sight, and yet to be barren all those years, was incomprehensible to Luke's listeners. It was totally outside a devout Jew's mindset. God just doesn't "bless" people that way. Everybody knows that – or do they?

Being Misunderstood

As a result of barrenness, Zechariah and Elizabeth had to deal with years of incredible misunderstandings. Two things were starkly clear to their clan and community. Elizabeth was childless and Zechariah had never been chosen by lot to perform the incense offering in the Temple. Only one conclusion was possible. Although Zechariah and Elizabeth appeared to be righteous, they must have offended God in some way, and He was punishing them for their sin. Our religious mindsets, those frameworks in which we think, process, and make judgments, can so easily inflict pain in the lives of those who do not conform to our understanding of how we think things should be.

What was it like to be Zechariah all those 30+ years? You are doing right in God's eyes, but your religious culture says you must be doing something wrong! Sometimes life's heaviest burdens are rooted in unsolvable misunderstandings. Reinforcing this dogmatic perspective was the teaching of some of the rabbis who held that there were only two conditions for which it could not be argued that God was chastening a person because he loved them: leprosy and childlessness.⁵ We can only imagine how painful that perspective must have been to the psyche and souls of these two righteous Levites – to be branded as social and religious lepers by those

closest to them. Yet they kept on praying (1:13). They prayed even when they began to wonder what it all meant. They continued to pray even when their hearts were weary and heavy from waiting. No doubt they prayed when they didn't feel like praying at all, especially when they felt they were now waiting in vain for a son.

Unfulfilled Longings

The universal theme of Advent in Luke's first chapter is that life seldom turns out the way we had hoped or dreamed. We all have unfulfilled longings. Everyone is waiting for someone or something to arrive that just never seems to come, e.g. a spouse, a child, the "right" job, etc. Waiting for things that seem so right and so good yet never seem to arrive. How did Zechariah and Elizabeth wait? Luke tells us they waited *blamelessly*. They faithfully kept on keeping on even when there seemed to be no reason to continue to do so. No doubt many a time Zechariah would reflect on the meaning of his name: *whom Jehovah remembers*, and ponder the irony of that meaning when it seemed like God had forgotten the two of them. What an inspiration they are to us to keep on keeping on when life does not go in the direction and with the outcomes we hope and dream it will!

Being Faithful

How might years of waiting have affected this couple? Might there have been times of soul-searching and self-doubt? Luke gives us no clues that answers ever came to their "why" questions – the seeming silence of God. Yet, they remained faithful in walking *blamelessly* (a present tense verb Luke uses) never allowing their shared sense of being "passed over" to degenerate into cynicism and despair. They never permitted their profound sense of unfulfilled longings and discouragement

to paralyze them. All the while this couple's shared sense of unfulfilled longings for a child went deeper and deeper into the marrow of their souls. How long can a soul ache for something seemingly so right before it begins to lose its grip on hope?

Finally Chosen!

Meanwhile, God was at work at a higher level preparing the earthly stage for the entry of His only begotten Son into the world. And to start to unfold the next phase of God's plan, the angel Gabriel was summoned and briefed for his visitation to an unassuming ordinary priest named Zechariah who faithfully served Jehovah in this land.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. (8-9, NIV)

While on duty yet again with his division and family clan, and perhaps now approaching his fourth decade of service in the priesthood, Zechariah is **finally** chosen by lot to perform the coveted incense offering. As a result of his selection, he will enter the Holy Place in the Temple to perform this offering at the Altar of Incense. Given the design of that part of the Temple, he will now be within thirty feet of the Holy of Holies. The only thing that will separate him from the Presence of God will be the massive veil that divided these two chambers.⁶

What Might This Mean?

After all these years, especially given Elizabeth's perpetual barrenness, what could this lot selection mean? Might this be the validation of something? But of what? Or could this be ominous? In Temple worship tradition, the upwards trail of

incense smoke was viewed as signifying the ascending prayers of the people rising up to God.⁷ That understanding might have prompted Zechariah to consider raising his prayer for a son one more (maybe last) time as he was praying while prostrate in the Holy Place.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. (11-12, NIV)

For the briefest of moments, as Zechariah recalled the demise of Aaron's sons in the presence of the Lord,⁸ he might have thought that perhaps "Woe is me!" was the best response. Somehow, he might have reasoned, "my wife and I must be displeasing God, and now I am going to find out why and face our judgment! At least we will finally know, after all these years, what it is that we have been doing to displease the Lord." But, if Zechariah could have thought a little more clearly for just a moment, this surprise visit might well have heartened him. The angelic visitation certainly signified that Jehovah obviously had NOT forgotten him!

Great News

In verses 13-17, Zechariah is informed he will be the father of a son and that this son will prepare the way for Messiah! It is hard to fathom what might have been going through Zechariah's mind and emotions as he heard these words from the angel. Furthermore, this was not going to be just any son, for he would be great in the sight of the Lord. His son will prophetically "turn the hearts" of people, bringing repentance (a new way of seeing and understanding things) to many in Israel. In so doing, his son would make people ready for Messiah. All the prophetic significance of Zechariah's name will now be

coming to fruition. He will have a son because Messiah is coming.

Hearing But Not Listening

While Zechariah heard those words, did he really listen to what he had just been told? Apparently not!

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (18, NIV)

Zechariah has just been honored by God to be the first person to hear that the Messiah's coming is imminent. Yet his initial response has to do with biological issues! Nor can he even trust the Lord's promise of a son, suggesting that perhaps he had just prayed his ascending prayers without any conviction they would be answered. While Zechariah has long been faithful, he is not perfect! Nor might he be expected to be. This momentary expression of doubt and disbelief does not change him into a faithless priest.

God's Response

Not unlike us, Zechariah was so focused on the unfulfilled longings of his heart for a son that he couldn't hear the fullness of God's message – the incredible "good news" that Messiah is coming! Luke's readers must have wondered, "What would be God's response to Zechariah's physiological preoccupation and resultant disbelief?" As will shortly become clear, in this particular setting the expression of doubt and disbelief does have its consequences.

The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at

their proper time.” Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. (19-22, NIV)

Instant Notoriety

Part of the protocol of the incense offering was for the officiating priest to pronounce with uplifted hands the prescribed Numbers 6:24-26 blessing at the end of the liturgy.⁹

Jehovah bless thee, and keep thee: Jehovah make His face shine upon thee: And be gracious unto thee: Jehovah lift up His countenance upon thee and Give thee peace. (NIV)

To this the people would always respond,

Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.¹⁰ (NIV)

When it came time for Zechariah to pronounce that blessing, he opened his mouth and nothing came out! As far as we know, this was the only time this blessing could not be uttered by the officiating priest at the end of the incense offering. Talk about instant notoriety. Suddenly this seemingly passed-over priest is the “talk of the Temple,” and this news would soon travel back to his own village. Many would wonder what to make of all this.

The Gift of Silence

Silence is often God’s prescription for those times when we are having difficulty listening to Him, when we are so preoccupied with our own issues that we don’t hear, or can’t take time to listen to God’s “still small voice.” God, who designed and made us, knows what we need to live abundantly so as to honor Him. As our

Creator, He knows we need periods of solitude and silence to reflect, to listen, to regain our perspective, to refocus on who He is, His will and His ways. God is perfectly aware of all that Zechariah is and what his realities are. God does “remember” Zechariah and blesses him with silence as well as a son, the significance of which Zechariah cannot yet comprehend. As part of His grace and restorative discipline, God gives Zechariah an opportunity to reflect and refocus.

A New Challenge

Going home, Zechariah now has a new challenge. Being mute (and considered by his culture to be possibly deaf as well),¹¹ his ability to communicate is severely constrained. How is he going to explain all this to Elizabeth? For starters, Zechariah now needs to find a writing slate and start to document this incredible experience so he can share it with her.

Amazing Grace!

When Zechariah walks back into their home in Judea, it didn’t take Elizabeth long to realize something profound had happened. But what, that was the question? Slowly Zechariah silently pieced the story together in a way that Elizabeth could understand. There had to have been a humorous moment when Elizabeth finally recognized the significance of what the angel had said to Zechariah. They were going to have a son! And then that wonderful moment, full of paradoxical incredulity, when Zechariah wrote down on his tablet that they needed to be intimate one more time. After hundreds and hundreds of failed attempts at conception, this time there would be no failure and disappointment! What a poignant and healing moment for the two of them!

- Someone once observed that the word “illness” is totally contained within the word “stillness.” What insights might that suggest? Have you ever experienced how God can take a time of “illness” in your life and redeem it into a time of “stillness” with Him? How about a period of prolonged unemployment? What was God teaching you during those times? What did you learn about listening?

- Have you ever experienced a time of God’s “imposed silence?” Was it an opportunity to refocus and be still before Him? What did God reveal to you during that time? How do you need to grow in learning to listen to Him?

Ponder

Luke shows us in this Advent narrative that there can be long periods of time between the initial expression of the prayers of our heart, our prolonged periods of “waiting,” and God’s surprising ways. God’s long-term plan is to remake our character and reveal His glory. Yet our short-term desire is often for immediate gratification and prompt removal of trying circumstances. Obviously, these are two very different and conflicting objectives! Luke also tells us something about God’s nature and His ways in this story. We see a God who is utterly faithful. Yet at the same time, we also see a God who is totally unpredictable!

We also see in Luke’s narrative that God sometimes uses enforced periods of silence, both for our benefit and His glory. Often times He does this to get our attention (yet again). Frequently it seems as if His purpose is to break our preoccupation(s) with the trinkets and pursuits of this world. That way He can draw us to Himself once again, so that we can more clearly hear His voice to realize afresh and anew that we truly are His beloved.

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.

—**Proverbs 16:33**

*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways
and My thoughts than your thoughts.*

—**Isaiah 55:9**

Cease striving and know that I am God.

—**Psalm 46:10a**

Sources and Notes

¹Gesenius, *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974), p. 245.

²*New International Bible* (Zondervan Corporation: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985), p. 1406.

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⁶Leen and Kathleen Rittmeyer, *The Ritual of the Temple in the Time of Christ* (The Temple Institute, Carta: Jerusalem, 1997), p. 34.

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⁹Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple* (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), p. 115.

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2

God's Gracious Glimpses

God's heavenly plan does not always make earthly sense.

—Charles R. Swindoll

Read: Luke 1

Names Matter

Her name is Elizabeth, which means *one who swears by God*.¹ She was born into a priestly family and carried the name of Aaron's wife² (Aaron being Israel's first Chief Priest). Her father betrothed her to Zechariah, a son of another levitical priest. The Semitic meaning of his name is *whom Jehovah remembers*,³ a name that harkens back almost 500 years in the nation's history evoking prophetic echoes of Messiah's coming,⁴ priesthood, kingship, glory and His enduring reign of peace and prosperity. With the legacy of both names, it seemed an ideal marriage for both families.



Note: For thematic continuity, some paragraphs from Chapter 1 are repeated in Chapter 2.

High Hopes

No doubt Elizabeth's family had high hopes for this marriage. When the dowry details were agreed to, and the betrothal contract finalized, perhaps they could not help but wonder, "How many priestly sons will be born to this young priest-to-be and our daughter Elizabeth? **Of course** there will be a family, only question being how many children and particularly, how many priestly sons would God bless them with?" As Zechariah and Elizabeth ended their wedding festivities, they also likely had expectations of what their family life would be.

A Totally Unexpected Outcome

In Luke 1:6 and 7 we are provided a totally unexpected summary of the first 30+ years of wedded life for Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well along in years. (NIV)

With incredible economy of words, and sudden, new and totally unexpected information, Luke packs decades of pain, disappointment, hurt, frustration, self-doubt and misunderstanding into one sentence with the word *barren* being the most arresting. To first-century Jews, this is an inconceivable outcome that does not make any sense in the way their religious world was supposed to work. To be upright in God's sight, and yet to be barren all these years, was incomprehensible to Luke's listeners. It was totally outside a devout Jew's mindset. God just doesn't "bless" people that way. Everybody knows that – or do they?

"My Disgrace among the People"

What was it like for Elizabeth to be barren for 30+ years? She was doing right in God's eyes, but her religious culture said she **must** be doing something wrong! Year after year, her sense of inadequacy most likely increased. After all, it was a given that procreation was her God-given task. A woman's identity, purpose, and meaning were largely wrapped up in fulfilling that role.⁵ Over the decades, her growing sense of social rejection and cultural humiliation within the extended family may well have coalesced into a deep sense of perpetual shame. In her own words, Elizabeth acknowledged *my disgrace among the people* (NIV). J.B. Phillips, in his Modern English Bible, translates Elizabeth's words as *the shame that I have suffered*. Not only did she live with a chronic sense of feeling misunderstood, but most likely a corresponding sense of powerlessness,

fully realizing there was nothing she could ever do about it.

Being Misunderstood

One thing was starkly clear to Elizabeth's clan and community. She was childless and had been for a very long time. Thus, only one conclusion was possible. Although Elizabeth appeared to be righteous, she must have offended God in some way, and He was punishing her for her sin. Our religious mindsets, those frameworks in which we think, process and make judgments, can so easily inflict pain in the lives of those who do not conform to our understanding of how we think things should be.

A Social Leper

Reinforcing this dogmatic perspective was the teaching of some of the rabbis who held that there were only two conditions for which it could not be reasoned that God was chastening a person because he loved them: leprosy and childlessness.⁶ We can only imagine how painful that perspective must have been to the psyche and souls of these two righteous Levites – to be branded as social and religious lepers by those closest to them. Yet they kept on praying (1:13). They prayed even when they began to wonder what it all meant. They continued to pray even when their hearts were weary and heavy from waiting. No doubt they prayed when they didn't feel like praying at all, especially when they felt they were now waiting in vain for a son.

Unfulfilled Longings

The universal theme of Advent in Luke's first chapter is that life seldom turns out the way we hope or dream it will. We all have unfulfilled longings. Everyone is waiting for someone or something to arrive that just never seems to

come – a spouse, a child, full health, the right job – waiting for things that seem so right and so good yet they are not part of our life. How did Zechariah and Elizabeth wait during all those years? Luke tells us they waited *blamelessly*. They faithfully kept on keeping on even when there seemed to be no reason to continue to do so. No doubt many times Elizabeth reflected on the meaning of her husband's name – *whom Jehovah remembers* – and pondered the irony of that meaning, especially when it seemed as if God had forgotten the two of them. What an inspiration they are to us to keep on keeping on when life does not go in the direction we wish and with the desired outcomes for which we hope and dream!

Waiting and “Why?”

How might years of waiting have affected this couple? Might there have been times of soul-searching and self-doubt? Luke gives us no clues that answers ever came to their “why?” questions – the seeming silence of God. Yet, they remained faithful in walking *blamelessly* (Luke uses the present tense verb) never allowing their shared sense of being “passed over” to degenerate into cynicism and despair. They never permitted their profound sense of unfulfilled longings and discouragement to paralyze them. All the while this couple's shared sense of unfulfilled longings for a child went deeper and deeper into the marrow of their soul.

Incredulous News!

Then one day some 30-40 years after they were married, a mute (and perhaps even deaf)⁷ Zechariah comes home from serving yet again in the Temple. Slowly he somehow communicates to Elizabeth what happened to him when **finally** he was selected by lot to serve at the Incense offering. As she pieces together the story, she

realizes that they are **TO HAVE A SON!** How incredulous that moment must have been to her!

Amazing Grace

Luke shares Elizabeth's reflections on this phenomenal progression of events:

“The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.” (1:25, NIV)

God has His ways and they are so different from ours. Although Zechariah is mute, what happened to him in the Temple is now a matter of much public discussion. In several months, Elizabeth's pregnancy will publicly acknowledge God's womb-opening grace removing her decades-long shame. Her deep longings for a child have finally been fulfilled resulting in God's “fullness of time” for her. As a result, she has been rescued from continual cultural humiliation and social rejection. *Nothing is impossible with God* will become a recurrent theme of her heart. Her son will prepare the way for the Lord's Messiah!

Lifted Up

In Luke's compelling narrative of this couple, not only does the Lord remember Zechariah and Elizabeth, but He rescues them and honors their decades of righteous waiting. In the process of being released from her cultural disgrace, Elizabeth is not only restored to social acceptance in the greater family, but is lifted up to an honored position within the clan. She is repositioned from being on the “outs” to being very “in;” from being marginalized and excluded, to being at the epicenter of inclusion. What a reversal!

Because of Zechariah's Holy Place visitation, it was now clear to many in the clan that someone special was growing in Elizabeth's

womb. For years to come, people would talk about her son's birth announcement and later his adult "preparing the way" ministry. What she couldn't see was that her priestly son would become the greatest of the prophets carrying on the prophetic tradition of Zechariah's name in a most remarkable way. Elizabeth is remembered as a very special person in the eyes of her greater family and culture, one who experienced God's restoration in a most surprising way.

Two Intertwined Wombs

Having now put God's incredible surprise in place in his narrative, Luke suddenly shifts his focus from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north, from senior citizen Elizabeth to a (most likely) twelve-and-one-half year old girl-about-to-become-woman named Mary. As Luke continues to unfold his narrative in verses 26-38, he contrasts two wombs: one long closed and another yet to be open. Two wombs always intended to be intertwined in God's eternal plan.

Mary's "Good News"

The message that the angel brought Mary (1:31) was not initially "good news" at all. From Mary's cultural perspective, becoming pregnant while betrothed could mean death by stoning for adultery.⁸ Her best-case scenario would be a perpetual stigma resulting in a non-married status (who would ever want to marry her?) for the rest of her days. Knowing how things worked in her culture, Mary instantly knew all her hopes and dreams for an ordinary and uneventful life were suddenly gone. In her worldview, the most likely thing to now happen would be for Joseph to go back to the scribe and undo the betrothal contract with a writ of divorce. As a result, she would never have a husband, and, therefore, no "social security" for the rest of her days. Furthermore, in the devoutly religious culture of Nazareth, her son would forever be known as

the illegitimate son of Mary.⁹ In that moment, Mary, knew her life was dramatically and irreversibly changed forever.

Elizabeth's Faith Encourages Mary

Knowing that these perceptions would be part of Mary's social and cultural reality, God encouraged her in this bewildering and deeply perplexing moment. He had the angel inform Mary that Elizabeth, her relative, was also with child. Being a relative, most likely a cousin, Mary would know of Elizabeth's plight and years of disgrace and would have immediately understood the miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Just to make sure that the meaning of Elizabeth's newly opened womb is not lost on Mary, God had the angel re-enforce that meaning by declaring, *for nothing is impossible with God*. Mary, suddenly starting to sense the inherent shame issues of her new situation, must have been comforted by this gracious glimpse into Elizabeth's new reality.

Faith is a Verb

Luke's next verse further provides us an insight into the impact of Elizabeth's newly announced pregnancy upon Mary. Mary replies in a spirit of submission and faith to the angel by declaring, *I am the Lord's servant... may it be to me as you have said*. With her response, Luke portrays Mary as the measuring rod of submission for a disciple and gives us a deep, practical glimpse into the nature of her faith. With Mary, faith is not just an intellectual proposition. It is a verb that is lived out in submission to God's will and ways, a submission lived out even when every cultural fiber of her being instinctively feels that this scenario may never be in her best interest. It will help sustain Mary as she journeys forward into the unknown. Elizabeth doesn't know any of this yet, but that did not keep God from using her faith journey as a case history to encourage Mary.

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (39-45, NIV)

A Gracious Glimpse

We observe from these verses an anointed encounter of two women whose wombs are suddenly opening, and see how some of the “why” clouds now begin to part for Elizabeth. She is graciously given a glimpse into **THE** barrenness question that has long been a part of her life. God gives her a new perspective by allowing her to look back through the rear-view mirror and see His ways realizing **why** she and Zechariah had to wait all those years for her to become pregnant. They had to wait for Mary to be born and then to come of childbearing age. Now **at long last, the pieces of their life puzzle**

start falling into place! Unlike many of our desires, their longings for a son were always rooted in God's plan for them. All those years of being misunderstood, of feeling disgraced, of not knowing get anointed with the beauty of God's purpose and meaning. Their decades of waiting with unfulfilled longings were intentional in God's hand. It served a purpose, His purpose. It revealed and displayed God's glory!

Always in God's Plan

Elizabeth's (and Zechariah's) courage and life-long commitment to persist in their faith is now undergirded with the added realization that **God was at work all that time; they just didn't know it and couldn't see it.** He was at work at a higher level and with a higher purpose than either could have imagined. Of course, they had to wait until Mary's “fullness of time” had come. Not knowing all this, Zechariah and Elizabeth remained faithful, and Mary submits in faith. This is something Elizabeth observed and re-enforced with her affirmation of Mary. What a wonderful moment it must have been for both of them! In fact it was so wonderful and so overwhelming for Mary that she burst forth in praise to God with awe and wonder for whom He is and how He does things, a song of praise that has become forever known as Mary's Magnificat.¹⁰

Reflections to Journal and Share

- How many unanswered “why” questions do you still have in your life?

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- Can we totally trust God and rest in the fact that His timing is perfect while our notions or desires are not?
- What do you think Elizabeth's rearview mirror glimpse into the great "why" question of her life did for her soul?
- Has God ever encouraged you by giving you "glimpses of grace" in the rear view mirror of some of the major issues and events of your life?
- Have you ever wondered about the pleasant surprises that still await you in God's Providence?
- What case histories of the faith journeys of others has God used to encourage and strengthen you?
- Is faith a verb to you that submits to God's will and ways regardless of the consequences?

- If you envisioned your faith journey as a case history being written by God to encourage others, would it change the way you approach and live each day?

- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

Where did Elizabeth and Zechariah get the courage, strength, and tenacity to keep on keeping on in a lifetime of faithfulness? That may have been God's greatest gift to them. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, *What do you have that you did not receive?* (I Cor. 4:7)

Advent is a story of two wombs. One never opened and one long closed. However, it is first and foremost a story about God for whom nothing is impossible.

*I will sing unto the Lord,
For He has dealt bountifully with me.*

—Psalm 13:6

*Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.*

—Psalm 16:5 and 6 (NIV)

*You have turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and
clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.*

—Psalm 30:11-12 (NIV)

*How great is your goodness, which you have stored up for those who fear you,
which you bestow in the sight of men on those who take refuge in you.*

—Psalm 31:19 (NIV)

Where faithfulness is most difficult it is most necessary.

—Unknown

Faithfulness is our business; fruitfulness is an issue that we must be content to leave with God.

—J. I. Packer

When we lose one blessing, another is often unexpectedly given in its place.

—C. S. Lewis

If you think you know the will of God for your life...you are probably in for a very rude awakening, because nobody knows the will of God for his or her entire life.

—Elizabeth Elliott

Doing the will of God leaves me no time for disputing about his plans.

—George Macdonald

Most people don't want to know the will of God in order to do it;
they want to know it in order to consider it.

—William Pettingill

We must do away once and for all with the great myth that suffering
is never part of God's will.

—Frank Retief

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3

Mutiny on the Sabbath

David said to Gad, "I am in great distress; please let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are very great. But do not let me fall into the hand of man."

—I Chronicles 21:13

Read: Luke 4:14-28

What News?

Luke opens up this passage by informing us that *Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district*. A good place to start digging into what Luke meant with that information is to ask: What was the news about Jesus?



The word was indeed spreading regarding the miracles that Jesus had been performing. In the first-century Jewish worldview, this would have established Jesus as yet another in a long line of miracle-working Pharisee rabbis from the Galilee district. These rabbis were called the *Hasidim*¹ – the righteous ones – and throughout the Jew’s religious history they were well known for their prayer-warrior nature and for doing things for the benefit of the community. However, the news of yet another miracle-working rabbi on the Galilean scene, as wonderful as that might be, was certainly not the same thing as *THE* Messiah.

What About Nazareth?

When Luke tells us in verse 16 *And He came to Nazareth*, we need to understand what Nazareth represents in the First Century. Since Nazareth is not cited in the Old Testament record, it appears to be a New Testament town.

When King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Judah, very few did. Most preferred to stay in place tending their farms and their businesses. Even when Ezra and Nehemiah later returned to rebuild the walls, most still stayed behind in Mesopotamia for political/religious reasons such as not wanting to return “home” as long as pagans ruled the land.²

These reasons began to change in 167 BC when Judas the Maccabee launched a revolt against the last vestiges of the Seleucid (Greek) empire

governing Palestine. By 150 BC much of the land was recaptured and Jews (the Hasmonean family) were reigning over a combined northern and southern Israel for the first time since the reign of David and Solomon. That was great news to those still living in Babylon.

The Land of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Starting around 100 B.C. new waves of Jews began returning from Babylon to their homeland. Many of the messianic Jews (obsessed with reclaiming and readying the land for Messiah) chose to settle in the north, extensively populated by Gentiles, rather than migrating to the south to be close to Jerusalem and the Temple.³ They remembered Isaiah's (Chapter 9) prophecy that Messiah would be seen first in the northern tribal areas of Zebulun and Naphtali. Geographically speaking, Nazareth is in the tribal allotment of Zebulun and Capernaum is in the Naphtali allotment. Other Jews from the Judean south, e.g., Bethlehem and Hebron, likewise felt the call to resettle in the north to redeem the land for Jews as part of "Maccabean nationalism."⁴

These Jews intentionally settled in the north because they had a "settlement" mentality⁵ much like the Jews we see today who establish the controversial Jewish outposts in the West Bank/Palestinian Authority land. Their zealous intent was to create a strong Jewish presence in the Galilee region so that when Messiah did come they would be part of inverting this social order resulting in Jews ruling over these pagan Gentiles.

Isaiah 61 (particularly verses 4-6) is one of the favorite messianic passages of the Jews from Nazareth and the Galilee District that clearly and prophetically state why they deliberately chose to resettle in the North:

4 Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, they will raise up the former devastations;

And they will repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations.

5 Strangers will stand and pasture your flocks, And foreigners will be your farmers and your vinedressers.

6 But you will be called the priests of the Lord; you will be spoken of as ministers of our God.

You will eat the wealth of nations. And in their riches you will boast.

Jesus' "Rescue Manifesto"

So when Jesus returns to Nazareth one weekend, the head of the Nazareth synagogue honors Him by asking that He read from the prophetic scrolls, a standard part of Sabbath worship.⁶ Many in that synagogue audience who knew Jesus well from His formative years must have wondered what portion of the prophets He would read and how He would interpret (the "sermon") the selected passage.⁷

When Jesus was handed the Isaiah scroll, He slowly started to unfold it until he reached Isaiah 61, found near the far end of the scroll that contained all 66 of Isaiah's "chapters." As it would have taken Jesus some time to get to where He wanted to read, the rustling of the unfolding scroll would only have added to the anticipation of those in the audience. What would their hometown boy, now developing a reputation as a miracle-working *Hasidim* rabbi, read from that great prophet today?

A Cut-and-Paste Commentary

When Jesus finally got to the messianic portion of Isaiah that would be the focal point for His reading, He read the passage that was so very familiar to them. Then according to rabbinic

Sabbath protocol, He began to comment on a portion of it. This rabbinic interpretation was the part that the audience always looked forward to and the more innovative the interpretation, the more creativity “points” the rabbi scored with his audience.⁸ It was no different this Sabbath. We don’t know the scope of the entire Isaiah passage that Jesus read that morning. In Sabbath liturgical protocol, it might have been as few as two-dozen verses, or as much of what we would now call a chapter.⁹ But Luke does tell us what phrases (verses) Jesus chose to focus on to introduce His incredibly short interpretive commentary.¹⁰

Starting with Isaiah 61, Jesus began by restating the first two verses in a slightly different way from what the audience had just heard Him read. Reading Luke’s record carefully, we see that Jesus did a creative rearrangement by blending parts of the first two verses of the 61st chapter together with an imported phrase from the 58th chapter. He then omitted two phrases from those first two verses of Isaiah 61. All of this resulted in the following editorial rearrangement of the text in what some have termed His “Rescue Manifesto.”¹¹

- 61:a *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,*
(NET)
- 61:1b *because the Lord has anointed me to **preach**
good news to the poor.* (NIV)
- 61:1c omitted (*to bind up the brokenhearted*)
- 61:1d *He has sent me to proclaim **release** to the
captives and **recovery of sight for the blind,***
- 58:6c *to **set free** those who are oppressed,*
- 61:2a *to **proclaim** the favorable year of our Lord.*
- 61:2b omitted (*proclaim the day of vengeance of
our God*) (**bold** added for emphasis)

Words Have Meaning

It adds to our understanding of what Jesus has just editorially said by focusing on some of the key words in these phrases. Joel Green contends that the word *poor* needs to be contextually understood as not just the economically poor but those who are of “low status,” those who have been “relegated to positions outside of the boundaries of God’s people.”¹² (If there is any question about what Jesus meant by *poor*, simply look at all the outsiders Jesus invites into the Kingdom of God in the next several chapters of Luke). Kenneth Bailey contends that the word *captives* also embraces the understanding of “refugees.”¹³ In making reference to the favorable year of our Lord, Jesus is making a *remez* reference back to the year of the Jubilee when all debts will be forgiven, i.e., the year of total forgiveness.¹⁴ Jesus is saying that He has come to proclaim the good news that God is willing to forgive all sin and to bring into a new spiritual community those who have been systematically deprived from belonging. To an observant Jewish culture where mercy to “people not like us” is conspicuously absent, this is certainly not “good news” to their settlement paradigm as Jesus took one of their favorite vengeance passages and interpreted it as a compassion passage.

A Short Surprising Sermon!

As Jesus gets to the end of the second verse of Isaiah 61 in His cut-and-paste rearrangement, one can sense that His listeners were waiting for Him to get to the “best” part of the passage. From their perspective, verses 4, 5 and 6 were the “meat” of that passage for all the settlement mentality reasons previously mentioned. But Jesus suddenly stops at the end of the second verse abruptly turning the growing sense of anticipation into great tension. Luke informs us that

Jesus then *sat down*, most likely referring to the Seat of Moses.¹⁵ (Sitting in that substantial stone seat at the front of the synagogue is what the rabbis did when they wanted to authoritatively bind their listeners to what they were saying.) In perhaps the shortest commentary ever given by a rabbi in a Sabbath service, Jesus authoritatively and succinctly closed it by saying, *Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*. The Greek word used for *fulfilled* in this text is probably better understood as “inaugurated” or “commenced.” The phrase *in your hearing* is best understood as “you are being witness to it.”

Messiah: No Way!

To those in the synagogue audience that Sabbath morning, there was no misunderstanding, no ambiguity to be found in what Jesus had just declared. (Did you ever wonder what kind of an emphasis Jesus put on the word *me* in these verses?) There in His hometown, Jesus clearly and deliberately declared Himself to be THE Messiah before sitting down presumably in the seat of Moses (giving it the same authority as if Moses had just said it). The significance of what He bound His hometown friends, family and acquaintances to was not lost on any of them. To the worldview of Nazareth, what they just heard was not simply a creative commentary; it was blasphemy!

A Problematic Verse

With this contextual backdrop, Luke 4:22 as traditionally translated needs revisiting:

And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” (emphasis added)

From a contextual perspective, it doesn’t seem likely that those in the audience would have been speaking well of Jesus at this moment in time. So how do we resolve this? Joachim Jeremias, long recognized as an expert in Gospel linguistic

context, points out that the underlying verb in this text is “they witnessed him.”¹⁶ It is up to the translator to determine how the people would have witnessed Jesus – for Him or against Him. Missing much of the contextual backdrop just developed, one can understand how Western translators chose “for” instead of “against” in their translation of how “they witnessed him.”

Others have suggested that the underlying Hebrew words *divorei chesed* being translated in Greek as *gracious words* can also be understood as just the opposite, as “disgrace” because the context strongly suggests that the word “gracious” is being uttered sarcastically.¹⁷ Thus the contextually correct linguistic translation suggested for verse 22 would seem to be

And all were witnessing against Him, and wondering at the words of heresy which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” (emphasis added)

Joseph’s Son?

With this contextual backdrop, there can be a different understanding to the audience’s question: *Is this not Joseph’s son?* Might they be asking themselves, “Who does Jesus think he is? It’s one thing to be a miracle-working Hasidim rabbi, but don’t get carried away with that, Jesus, and conclude that this is the same thing as Messiah! Furthermore, what’s all this talk about mercy and compassion to those people not like us. Doesn’t he know why we are here? Surely He can’t have forgotten all that we taught him – that God despises pagan Gentiles? Doesn’t he remember our vision for reclaiming this territory for Messiah? He should, after all, know these things; he is Joseph’s son. And by the way, why did he delete that reference to *the day of vengeance of our God* (presumably toward Gentiles in their worldview)? He should know that is the part we really like to hear!”

Jesus knows full well that what He has just said is not being received well in His hometown. Can you imagine how increasingly uneasy His disciples were becoming about this time? If Jesus was a political candidate, his “handlers” might well now be trying to get his attention to “tone it down.” In fact, they might well be thinking, maybe it’s a good idea if we left now while we can. Little did they know what was yet to come as Jesus courageously confronts his hometown friends and acquaintances with the realities of God’s mercy.

Two Witnesses

Having just declared His Messiahship, Jesus now underscores the point that God’s mercy was always intended for Gentiles as well as Jews (remember the Abrahamic Covenant from Genesis 12 was to be *for all the families of the earth*), and in so doing pours more fuel on the fire. His first witness was from the Old Testament record, that of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in Sidon.¹⁸ This woman was a despised Gentile to these observant Jews and yet Jesus is pointing out that God’s mercy was only extended to her in that story. His audience cannot deny this reality because they know full well that this encounter is a part of their history.

Before his audience can catch their breath, Jesus calls His second witness to God’s mercy toward Gentiles by reminding them of Naaman the Syrian who was healed by Elisha.¹⁹ Naaman was a general of the army of the most hated enemy of Israel and here in this passage he too is a recipient of God’s mercy! Again His hometown Jews cannot deny that happened for they indeed know their Hebrew Scriptures.

Enough is Enough

By this time the citizens of Nazareth have heard enough. Not only has Jesus declared Himself to

be the Messiah in no uncertain terms, but He has underscored that God’s always-intended mercy includes Gentiles. The former assertion is incredulous, but the latter is totally unacceptable. This is one paradigm they will not allow to be changed. Their no-mercy-to-Gentiles theology is part of their cultural and religious DNA. They are here to reclaim this land for Jews and Messiah and make slaves and serfs out of these Gentiles who are now in the land. They cannot hear, cannot accept, and cannot reason that God would ever be merciful to Gentiles. Zealots often have ears of stone.

Much like a handpicked crowd of cronies of the Sanhedrin will cry “Crucify Him” a few years later in a courtyard in Jerusalem²⁰ during “Passion Week,” these citizens of Nazareth start to mutter amongst themselves, “Stone Him.” And so they storm out of the synagogue taking Jesus with them to the *brow of the hill on which their city had been built* with the intent of throwing Him over the cliff and then stoning Him to death.

In one of the most remarkable verses in Scripture, Luke records *but passing through their midst, He went His way*. How remarkable is that? What an authoritative presence Jesus must have had in His persona as He turned and faced the crowd forcing Him towards the edge of the cliff and walked through their midst untouched. It had to have been reminiscent (a *remez*?) of God’s parting of the Red Sea (with Moses – Jesus just left the seat of Moses! – leading the people!) many centuries before. What a relief that outcome must have been to Mary and the family as they most likely trailed this angry crowd and observed from a distance.

What Did Jesus Really Say?

To further appreciate the weight and focus of Jesus’ commentary, it’s necessary to understand

that Hebrew thought and expression is often parallel in structure. While there are various forms of parallelism, a common form is that of an inverted parallelism. This is the form that Jesus used for the construct of the five short statements He made in His cut-and-paste editorial commentary from Isaiah 61 and 58. Examining the verb of emphasis in each of those five statements yields an inverted parallel structure as follows:²¹

Proclamation

*He anointed me to **preach** the Gospel to the poor*

Social Justice

*to bring **release** to the captives (refugees)*

Compassion/Mercy

***recovery** of sight to the blind*

Social Justice

*to **set free** those who are oppressed (crushed)*

Proclamation

*To **proclaim** the favorable year of our Lord*

When the parallelism genre is used, the Hebrew listener always looks for the “center.” There will be found the culmination of the thoughts being

developed, what the rabbi/teacher/prophet most wants to underscore and emphasize as foundational to his overall message. To an observant Jewish culture where mercy to Gentiles is conspicuous by its absence, Jesus declares that the pivot point or the epicenter of His ministry will be bringing God’s mercy and compassion to those who have been systematically deprived of it.

In this inverted parallelism, Jesus states that which He will now live out in His earthly ministry. He has come to both declare and pour out the mercy of Heaven. These three passions – proclamation, social justice, and compassion/mercy – become the plumb line for His disciples. His ministry mandates giving equal weight to Proclamation and Social Justice driven by a core passion for bringing Mercy and Compassion. This is the three-part measuring rod that Jesus sets for Himself, for His Kingdom of God and for His legacy – the Body of Christ. It is a sobering challenge to implement His passionate purpose with an equal emphasis in each area!

Reflections to Journal and Share

- What did you learn about Jesus in this passage? Not exactly “gentle Jesus meek and mild” here! Rather, a courageous confronter who will not back down. What did you learn about the human condition?
- Who are today’s “righteous?” Those who, like those first-century citizens of Nazareth, are convinced they have it right - all figured out - but have missed God’s heart of compassion and mercy for those not like them.

- Would you agree or disagree with the observation that it often seems as if our deepest wounds (and attempted stonings!) come not from the world, but from within our church, Para-church, and family cultures?
- Given Jesus' expressed purpose of "setting the prisoners free," have you ever thought of the Kingdom of God as a massive jailbreak and yourself as an ex-con set free from "death row?"
- Notice how the messianic zealots in Nazareth became such prisoners of their paradigms and expectations that they 1) missed Messiah when He came to them, 2) couldn't hear God's voice when He spoke to them, 3) had to ignore (or perhaps even deny) what their own Scriptures taught about God's mercy to Gentiles. Ring any bells? Have you seen any of these stone-ear patterns in your religious journey?
- God's mercy always produces more mercy. How are you, your church, your ministry and your family measuring up to Jesus' three-part plumb line for His Kingdom of God?
- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

There's a wideness in God's mercy, Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice, Which is more than liberty.

—Traditional Hymn by Frederick Faber

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

—Matthew 5:7

*But go and learn what this means: 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT SACRIFICE,'
for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*

—Matthew 9:13

*But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth.*

—Psalm 86:15

For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

—James 2:13

As a sailor locates his position on the sea by “shooting” the sun,
so we may get our moral bearings by looking at God.

—A. W. Tozer

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4

Simon Encounters Jesus

*When all that you are is available to all that God is,
then all that God is is available to all that you are.*

—Ian Thomas

Read: Luke 5:1-11

Night Fishing

In his fifth chapter, Luke gives us a key piece of contextual information regarding Simon's encounter with Jesus by informing us that Simon (and his business colleagues) fished all night and caught nothing. As expert fishermen, they all "knew" (and with justification) that fish could see their linen trammel nets (one of three types of fishing nets used on the Sea of Galilee) during the day.¹ That is why they *always* fished with trammel nets at night.



These Sea of Galilee professionals knew that not only was fishing during the day foolhardy but their fragile, linen nets required both cleaning and complete drying after each use to prevent weakening. Fishing all night meant that they rested and slept during the morning hours as soon as the nets were cleaned and hung out to dry. These facts were part of the unquestionable paradigm that everyone "knew" about Galilean fishing.²

A Modest Request

In this encounter, Luke tells us that Jesus is teaching on the Galilean seashore early one morning as Simon and his business partners are cleaning their nets. Luke assumes that we remember Simon's prior exposure to Jesus when Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law one Sabbath after synagogue services.³ Most likely at this moment in time, Simon's view of Jesus is that this new rabbi in town is yet another in a long line of *Hasidim* miracle working rabbis from the north.⁴ Of course that is something very different than seeing Jesus as the Messiah!

An Inconvenient Time

Luke unfolds this story as Jesus encounters Simon in his professional world and asks him if He can use his trammel boat as a teaching podium to better address the growing crowd on the seashore. Jesus' modest request comes at a very inconvenient time. Simon is likely very tired, hungry and in need of sleep. There is also the necessity of cleaning, drying and mending the trammel nets. Nevertheless, Simon decides to submit to this miracle-working rabbi's request and allows Jesus the temporary use of one of his boats. Had Simon not yielded to this small request, he never would have experienced a life-changing encounter with Jesus. Note also that Jesus asks Simon to be with Him in the boat. Jesus needs Simon's rowing and trammel boat-guiding expertise to help keep the boat stable from the winds and waves while He teaches. Assenting to Jesus' request, a very tired Simon now has a new challenge – to stay awake and expend some more physical energy for a few more hours as Jesus teaches the crowd.

An Inconceivable Request

When Jesus' teaching is over, He directs Simon to take his boat out into the deep and let down his nets. In his tired condition, Simon now has some new issues to consider. Fishing in the deep is done in four-person 25-foot trammel boats,⁵ so he needs two more helpers (assuming that Jesus will also pitch in as the fourth fisherman). Simon also needs to reload the trammel nets back into the boat. Most likely they were not yet fully dry.

A Paradigm is Challenged.

The bigger issue is this: Only a fool would fish during the daytime in the deep! *Everybody* knows this – his business partners as well as those lingering on the shore in the just-taught crowd.

Furthermore, Simon might well have been thinking, "What does this rabbi know about fishing? He may be an authority in interpreting God's Word, but what does He know about the realities and nuances of my fishing profession? That's my core competency, not his!"

Jesus' request creates strong feelings of dissonance and conflict within Simon. For him to submit to Jesus' request is to run the risk of looking very foolish, both to his fishing colleagues as well as to the remaining onlookers. He might well be the recipient of jokes and barbs for the next ten years: "Remember when Simon foolheartedly listened to that new rabbi one morning and then went out and tried to fish during the day...!" Submission to Jesus also introduces a good bit of personal risk to Simon as he is now putting key financial assets of the business – namely the still-wet nets – at risk.

Submission is a Verb

Regardless of his feelings Simon submits to the authority of Jesus and does as Jesus directs. In so doing, Simon gives us insight into the Hebrew understanding of submission – a verb. It means submitting to the authority of another even when every fiber of your being says, "This is not in my best interest; plus this will never work." To a first-century observant Jew, belief and faith are verbs. They are things you do, something you live out. By way of contrast in the West, belief often takes on much more of the nature of a creed, a menu listing of particular theological and doctrinal facts we will or can (mostly) agree to.

A New Fear

From Luke's narrative, we know what happens next. Simon goes out with Jesus and a few of his partners with the (most likely) still wet/moist nets, lowers the nets into the deep waters in

broad daylight and in full public view, and then experiences a remarkable (and miraculous) catch of fish. The catch is so large that it now introduces a new element of danger into Simon's reality. These never-fully-dried nets may not be equal to the weight of this catch. What if they break? That would cause the business to miss this catch plus many missed nights of fishing resulting in lost income until the nets could be repaired or replaced.

I Knew It!

For a critical moment, Simon's fear seems justified as Luke tells us the nets did indeed begin to break from the immense size of the catch! As Simon will later learn, if Jesus can be trusted for the catch, He can certainly be trusted to bring the catch to shore. Note also that if Simon had not submitted to Jesus' direction, some of his colleagues, as well as the remnant of the crowd still on the shore, would have missed a life-changing experience. Our submission to Jesus during conflicted times always has transformational repercussions for those around us who are closely watching.

Signal or Shout?

Luke gives us an intriguing insight into Simon's humanity when he tells us that Simon signaled to his partners to come and help. Fortunately, Simon's fishing colleagues were on shore watching this remarkable scene unfold, so it wasn't too hard to get their attention. What is of interest here is that Simon did not shout for their help and his partners were able to see and discern the nature of his signaling. Despite being in the deep, Jesus apparently took Simon and a couple of his partners to a place that was close enough to shore for their signal to be understood by Simon's partners on the shore. Being familiar with some lakes that

are one mile in diameter, it is impossible to discern the nature of someone's hand and arm signaling in a boat a mile away. Yet these partners on shore were able to discern the difference between an arm wave shooing away a fly and a beckoning for help. That would have put Simon and the others well within one-half mile from shore. Since much of the Sea of Galilee gets deep rather quickly, this proximity to the shore is consistent with the depth contours of much of the lake.

There is another glimpse into Simon's humanity that Luke gives us regarding signaling for help versus shouting. Fishing is a competitive business. When a fisherman finds a good fishing spot or "hole," the last thing he wants to do is disclose it to other fishermen. The result may be that the new spot becomes over fished and quickly depopulated. Also, given the way sound travels over water, to shout out for help would run the risk of drawing added attention to what has just happened and potentially disclose this new fishing spot to others.⁶ That could minimize Simon and his partner's ability to exploit this new discovery for themselves in future nights of fishing. Can you identify with Simon's competitive instincts? What Simon (Peter) will later learn is that if God blesses with abundance, He expects it to be liberally and willingly shared with others, not hoarded for personal gain.

Core Competencies and Paradigms

Note what Jesus is doing in this encounter. He frames the issue of submission right at Simon's core competency. Jesus does not direct the issue of submission at any of the peripheral areas of Simon's life, but brings it to bear at the one thing Simon knows best – fishing. Jesus knows that unless Simon submits and is broken at the one thing he knows and does best, the one thing

he would always depend upon to provide for his needs, he will never become Peter, the rock, fully and fruitfully dependent upon God for everything.

Simon is rewarded for his submission. This day's catch is equivalent to many nights of good fishing.⁷ The catch is more than compensation for the sleep lost, a breakfast missed, and putting his reputation as well as his business assets at risk in submitting to Jesus.

Pulverizing Paradigms

Jesus uses this day-fishing lesson to pulverize Simon's fishing paradigm. The Gospels document a consistent pattern of Jesus pulverizing every religious and social paradigm that His disciples had been taught from their earliest years to be "true." Day in and day out, the disciples experienced shock therapy with Jesus. Everything these Twelve held to be "right" in their religious culture was removed from them – pulverized before their very eyes. Jesus knew this was necessary if they ever were going to be useful in His inbreaking Kingdom of God.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- What did you learn about God in this encounter? About human nature? About yourself?

- Has God ever asked you to do something for Him at a very inconvenient time in your life? So, what happened? How did it turn out? What might it have led to?

- Total submission to the authority of Jesus in all areas of our life is certainly not a popular notion these days, even in many parts of Christianity. Have all of our religious and cultural paradigms been sufficiently shattered by submitting them to the authority of Jesus so that we can be fully used in doing "the Lord's work the Lord's way?"

- Have there been times when Jesus called you to fish in the deep during the day? To do something that seems not only counter-intuitive, but puts your credibility and even your personal assets at risk? How did that work out and what did that experience do for you and to you?
- Are we still protecting (even defending) some of our flawed paradigms of success, achievement, significance, relevance, discipleship, church growth, to name but a few, even though they are significant barriers to the growth of God's Kingdom here on earth? What paradigms that you still embrace might Jesus need to pulverize?
- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

Is *faith* a verb to believers today? Is submitting everything to Jesus a "given," or have we allowed our understanding of faith to be something that we just keep compartmentalized at the intellectual level? Are we content to have the right creed, to be able to check off all the right theological and doctrinal statements, or do we understand that a living faith requires that we submit everything every day to the authority of Jesus?

It is relatively easy to turn over to Jesus those weak areas of our lives. In those areas we need all the help we can get, and we are more than willing to acknowledge that. But to take what we do best and submit that to Jesus can be a whole other issue. The question is: Have each of us been sufficiently broken in the areas of our core competencies so that Jesus can fully use them, and us, in His Kingdom for His Kingdom?

Note that if Simon had applied logic and reason from his fishing expertise to Jesus' request, he never would have obediently submitted to Jesus' direction. When *Jesus' call is clear*, our logic and reason needs to be subordinate to submission and obedience. Otherwise, our fleshly logic and reasoning can so

easily talk us out of doing what God’s Spirit is prompting us to do causing us to miss His My-ways-are-not-your-ways surprises.

Ever wonder how many times later in his apostolic life Peter harkened back to this paradigm changing experience? Doing so may well have nudged him to be obedient in situations where obedience seemed counter-intuitive as he was reminded yet again that *My ways are not your ways*.

We live by faith, not by sight.

—II Corinthians 5:7 (TNIV)

*His master said to him, well done, good and faithful servant.
You were faithful with a few things,
I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of our master.*

—Matthew 25:21

One of the miracles of the grace of God is what He is able to do
with the torn nets of lives surrendered to Him.

—G. B. Duncan

The path of submission is the way to peace.

—Herbert Carson

If you don’t surrender to Christ you surrender to chaos.

— E. Stanley Jones

Everyone wants the Kingdom of God, but few want it first.

—Charles Venable

Let God have your life; he can do more with it than you can.

—D. L. Moody

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5

He Touched Me!

If all the compassions of all the tender fathers in the world were compared with the tender mercies of God they would be but as a candle to the sun or a drop to the ocean.

—Matthew Henry

Read: Luke 5:12-14

The Physician's Eye

Immediately after selecting His first disciples, Luke records that Jesus encountered a leper. In biblical times, the term “leprosy” covered a variety of skin-related diseases, some temporal and some chronic, with certain severe forms becoming progressively debilitating over time.¹ When physician Luke informs us with his medically trained eye that this leper was covered with leprosy (the only Gospel writer who provides us this detail), he is informing us with this Jewish idiom that this particular leper is a very severe case.² Ever wonder why the Holy Spirit prompted Luke to position this encounter immediately after the calling of the first disciples?



A Double Judgment

From the perspective of observant Judaism, being a leper in the first century constituted both a physical and a moral judgment from God.³ There were rabbis who taught that there were only two conditions by which you could not reason that God was disciplining you because He loved you – leprosy and childlessness⁴ (think of Elizabeth and Zechariah in Luke 1). Thus, if God doesn't like you, so they reasoned, we are certainly not going to like you either! One rabbi proudly taught that he always carried stones in the pocket of his tunic so he could throw them at any leper he saw to force him or her to flee.⁵ Because of such teaching, rabbis and lepers were like oil and water. No leper ever wanted to get near a rabbi, let alone approach one.

While it is true that there are Old Testament provisions and prohibitions regarding lepers in Leviticus requiring separation of lepers from

the community for health reasons,⁶ God did not intend that separation to also be a moral judgment on lepers. The condemnation of lepers was the creation of Pharisaism, which put it at cross-purposes with God's heart of mercy and compassion for the unfortunate.

The Leper's Protocol

Lepers not only were condemned sinners but were also required to loudly declare themselves "unclean, unclean" whenever non-lepers were nearby.⁷ This was to avoid any inadvertent contact since this disease was assumed to be communicable by contact. As part of this contamination concern, there was a six-foot prohibition,⁸ more if the wind was blowing toward you, which meant that if any non-leprous person got within six (plus) feet of a leper (depending on the winds), they were considered to be ritually impure. That would mandate the non-leprous person having to go to the purification baths to be "cleansed." Obviously no one in his or her right mind would ever deliberately touch a leper.

Lepers were also forbidden from going to the Temple.⁹ In this culture by not going to the Temple and participating in the required sacrifices and offerings there, one could not become "right with God." Thus, a leper could never get right with God and, as a result, had no hope. What must it have been like for a leper to walk around every day feeling in his soul that God does not like him and, furthermore, being convinced there was nothing he could do about it? He was considered to be the "living dead"¹⁰ in the eyes of this merciless and condemning religious culture and thus was expected to exhibit the countenance of a mourner.

The humiliation of being a leper never ended. The religious system of Jesus' day also

mandated that a leper could never wash his or her face (another constant reminder that you are always unclean). Furthermore, a leper was required to always hold a cloth under his or her nose to cover the bottom part of the face.¹¹ The painful reality was that lepers were abandoned, anonymous, faceless people condemned to live under perpetual rejection by a heartless religious culture. The tragedy of this religious reality was that it was being done to honor God! Another reason Jesus had to come!

Remember Naaman?

As further context for this encounter, Luke told us in chapter three that when Jesus returned to Nazareth one Sabbath, He read from the Isaiah scroll as part of His "Rescue Manifesto."¹² Right after reading that passage, Jesus reminded His Nazareth audience of Naaman the hated Gentile Syrian general whom Elisha healed from his leprosy.¹³ In harkening back to this healing of Naaman,¹⁴ Jesus set the stage (in part) for His upcoming encounter with this leper. Since some rabbis taught that the healing of a leper was as difficult as bringing someone back from the dead, the healing of lepers was viewed as an extraordinary miracle from God and one of the sure signs that the Messianic Age had arrived.¹⁵

A Very Different Rabbi

With all this as a contextual backdrop, it is remarkable that this leper even wants to approach Rabbi Jesus. After all, rabbis were considered to be the nemesis of a leper. Somehow, this leper concluded that Rabbi Jesus (*Yeshua*) was a very different (and therefore approachable) rabbi. How might he have come to that conclusion? From more than six feet away, He most likely overheard people talk about Jesus in the marketplace or on the highways and byways of the Galilean district. That kind of overhearing is a

very effective way to spread the Good News to desperate people!

The Leper's "Faith"

As this leper and Jesus approach each other, the leper prostrates himself before Jesus. That is what Simon Peter also did in the preceding encounter after the great catch of fish, seemingly a sign of recognizing deity. Does this leper recognize the deity in Jesus? Not sure. But one thing is sure, he would never pass an Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed exam. Like everyone who comes to Jesus in the Gospels, he does not fully comprehend who Jesus is. Yet one thing he seems to be convinced about: Jesus has the power to make a difference in his life – *you can make me clean*. Therein rests his "faith." And that is enough faith for Jesus. That conviction is what this leper draws upon to steel his courage to try to confront this rabbi, even if it means defying the social/religious prohibition of getting within six feet of a non-leprous person.

Make Me Clean

Note the leper's request to be cleansed, not healed as he prostrates himself before Jesus. Admittedly healing and cleansing travel closely together in this culture, but it is the moral judgment aspect of his disease that he brings to Jesus. What would walking around for years declaring yourself "unclean, unclean" do to a person's psyche and soul? What is it like to live day after day with absolutely no hope of ever getting right with God? After years of declaring himself "unclean, unclean" (being seen as morally filthy in the eyes of observant Judaism), might there have been a deep and desperate longing within this leper's soul for a day when he could somehow be clean. A day when he could wash his face, throw the facial cloth away, go to Temple and get right with God and be "clean" for the rest of his days?

Can You Believe This?

In response to this leper's brazen (and desperate) request, Jesus does the unthinkable – He touches the leper and in so doing brings God's intended compassion and mercy to bear saying *I am willing, be cleansed*. The six-foot no-encroachment zone has been breached. Furthermore, it has been intentionally breached. Jesus' newly chosen disciples cannot believe what has just happened. You just don't touch lepers! Everybody knows that! And He even did it deliberately! And then it should have been quickly apparent that the leprosy was now gone from the leper. Where did the leprosy go? Oh no, might Jesus now have leprosy? What a tragic end that would be to a remarkable ministry just getting started. Such cognitive dissonance might well have flooded these new disciples' hearts and minds as they viewed this paradigm-pulverizing scene in their shock therapy, new-disciples-in-training state.

An Assignment

Having just miraculously healed this new ex-leper, Jesus gives him his next task - go to the Temple and present yourself to the priests. Get certified as "clean" so you can once again 1) be restored to fellowship in your community, 2) participate in Temple worship and liturgy, and by implication 3) deliver a message to Temple Leadership that people covered with leprosy are being healed. The Messianic Age has come!

Rescue and Restoration

Note that with Jesus, healing is always a tactic; complete restoration is always the objective. Jesus not only wants to set this leper free from the physical malady that has debilitated him, but also wants him to be free from the moral and spiritual judgment that has been wrongfully projected on him. And so He commands him to go straight to the Temple to be inspected by the priests to be

certified by the religious “establishment” to be free of this physically and socially debilitating disease. This insight can help shape the way we pray for others. Pray not just for the immediacy of healing in others, but for the total restoration of that person in all aspects of his or her life as well.

First Things First

At this point, it may be helpful for Western evangelicals to reflect on what Jesus did not do after choosing these first disciples. There is no evidence from Luke’s record that Jesus gave them a comprehensive lecture series about why they should now suddenly change their thinking about everything their religious culture has taught them to be “right” and “true” about lepers. Nor did He take them off on a weekend retreat to teach them three principles of why they should now love lepers. In Jesus’ consummate wisdom, He knew He could teach every day for three years, “You disciples need to love lepers,” but even then they would not wake up one morning and beg Jesus, “Please, can we touch lepers today?”

Do and Teach

From Luke’s perspective, Jesus’ discipling strategy was “do and teach” (Acts 1:1), not a “teach and maybe do” approach. The difference in sequence is profound! We so often see the “teach and maybe do” strategy pragmatically lived out in the West where we tend to teach too much and do (experience) too little. For this kind of loving-lepers paradigm shift, Jesus knew these initial disciples first needed a radical behavioral experience to start to smash their entrenched religious paradigms before any teaching could start to effectively sink in. So He gave them no choice in the matter with His watch-Me-touch-a-leper-we’ll-talk-about-it-later discipling boot

camp approach. Western evangelicalism still has much to learn from Jesus’ “do and teach” discipling pedagogy.

What’s Going On Here?

What’s been happening in the short span of these four verses? For starters, Jesus is

- **Rescuing and restoring prisoners** and inviting them into the Kingdom of God. His name is *Yeshua*, the Semitic meaning of which is *the Lord Rescues*. Jesus is implementing the “Rescue Manifesto”¹⁶ that He announced to His family and friends that Sabbath morning in Nazareth.
- **Restoring God’s mercy and compassion** to those who have been deprived of it and for whom God always intended to be its recipients.
- **Redefining purity** from God’s perspective. The ritual purity system of Jesus’ day decreed that when an unclean person touches a clean person, the clean person becomes unclean. Jesus inverts all of that by showing that when the Perfectly Clean touches an unclean person, the unclean person becomes clean and the Divine stays clean.
- **Remaking His disciples** by “do and teach” shock therapy. Disciples are those people who are having all their religious and cultural paradigms torn down, pulverized and deconstructed so they can more fully see, understand and then radically embrace the compassionate nature of the Kingdom of God.
- **Readying the cross** by pointing ahead to what will happen at Calvary. It is there that Jesus will take upon Himself all the sin of people who are likewise the “living dead” *covered* with a leprous condition brought on by issues of guilt, shame and moral judgment, leaving

them eternally cleansed as He absorbs the infinite wrath of God for them and dies in their place.

We Were Lepers Too!

It is important to identify with this leper. We need to see him as the prototypical person – he is us. We too were once the “living dead” on our inevitable way to becoming the “dead dead.” In our blindness and deafness we could not discern that is who we were from a Holy Heaven’s perspective. And then one day we too met Jesus on the pathway of our life and He reached out and touched us. In that moment, we too became cleansed in the eyes of His Father as we were set free from the judgment of the debilitating sin that had so covered us and weighed us down. As a result, we too can now joyfully proclaim, “He touched me! Praise God Almighty, now I am clean!”

It’s About God

The Bible is always revealing to us who God is and how He does things. We learn in this passage that

- God is unpredictable and uncontrollable (by His disciples).
- He responds to those who want to be clean and who seek Him out to be cleansed.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- Is your heart aligned with God’s heart? Does your heart beat in a harmonic way with His? Where does your will and your way need to be realigned/remade/pulverized to be more like His?

- God’s heart is full to overflowing with mercy and compassion to those who have been marginalized.
- One of His ways of (re)making disciples is to radically confront those paradigms that need to be changed so that they can be freed up to embrace God’s Kingdom way of doing things. Note He does not give His disciples any choice in the matter. He knows it has to be done and, given their inclinations, they would never address it.
- Jehovah is personal even to His touch and His touch is sufficient!

It’s About Rescue and Restoration

As regards God’s Plan of Rescue and Restoration, note that

- It is centered in the person and power of Jesus Christ.
- It involves communicating the “Good News” of Jesus Christ to those around us.
- It starts with rescue (healing) but always ends in total restoration.
- God uses disciples in His Plan, but first they need to be remade – have their faulty paradigms completely stripped away. “**Do** and **Teach**” is a very effective and biblical way to remake disciples.

48 • Encounters with Jesus

- How is your Gratitude Index these days? Are you still thrilled and overwhelmed that one day Jesus entered your life by touching you and setting you free?

- Do you still see yourself as an ex-leper? Or are you still laboring under the misconception that somehow God is indeed fortunate to have you in His Kingdom?

- Are you being overheard in the marketplace? Are you talking about Jesus or about things that never seem to point to Him at all?

- Where do you still need to be touched today? Is there some area of your life, what the Puritans called our “besetting sin,” that is still causing you to slowly die in that part of your life? Bring that to Jesus and let Him touch you there so that you can be completely, not just partially free to live for Him.

- Who are the lepers in our world today? That is a corporate question and begs the question of what are we doing either for them or to them? Are we being helpful or are we being a benign hindrance?
- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

Who are the lepers in your world today? That's a personal question. In your sphere of influence, I would guess there are a significant number of lepers. Most of them are inadvertent lepers – "lepers" you are not even thinking about. A personal example:

When our 13-year old daughter was running out the door of our house in Maryland one Saturday morning for seemingly her 100th birthday party, my wife and I suddenly looked at each other with tears in our eyes and realized that no one had ever invited our 15-year-old son David with special needs (cerebral palsy, autism, delayed mental development) to anyone's birthday party. And we were living in a wonderful community of faith. It wasn't that people were being deliberately non-inclusive, it's just that they were not thinking in a wide-angle inclusive way that brought our son David to mind when it came to birthday parties for their children. In a certain sense, David was invisible to their way of thinking and seeing things. It's that kind of out-of-sight-out-of-mind glaucoma that gives rise to a challenging question: Are we creating defacto social lepers just because we don't view the world with the same inclusive and compassionate eyes like our Father does?

How would God have you be a part of touching one of those "lepers" in your life this week with His mercy and compassion? Who do you know that needs to be rescued and restored, and what might your role be as God's ambassador bringing His compassionate touch into these people's lives?

In the days ahead, set aside some time in solitude and silence to ponder this encounter with a leper. Be sure to put yourself in this scene because it will cause you to savor our Savior yet again. Let this scene both stir and soothe your soul as you let it speak to you as well as touch you in fresh and new ways.

*Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace,
so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

—Hebrews 4:16

Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

—Matthew 23:23

Miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us.

—C. S. Lewis

As there is no mercy too great for God to give, so there is no mercy too little for us to crave.

—Thomas Brooks

God's reasons of mercy are all drawn from Himself, not from anything in us.

—Matthew Henry

Mercy may seem slow, but it is sure. The Lord in unfailing wisdom has appointed a time for the outgoings of his gracious power, and God's time is the best time.

—C. H. Spurgeon

God has two sheepdogs: Goodness and Mercy. He sends them to us from his throne of grace, sometimes to bark at us, to badger us; sometimes to woo us by persuading us that his will is good and perfect for our lives.

—Sinclair Ferguson

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¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Leviticus 13:45

¹²E. Stanley Jones uses this phrase in his book *The Word Became Flesh* (Abingdon: Nashville, Tennessee, 1963).

¹³Luke 4:27

¹⁴II Kings 5

¹⁵Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 463.

¹⁶Luke 4:16-30

6

He Healed Me! – Twice!

*I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever. To all generations
I will make known Your faithfulness with my mouth.*

—Psalm 89:1

Read: Luke 5:17-26

Expanding His Authority

So far in the fourth and fifth chapters of Luke, Jesus has already established His Divine authority and He is systematically expanding the scope of it. He has established His authority over the Adversary in the three temptations, then sequentially over temporary disease (in Simon Peter's house), demon possession, over nature with the great catch of fish, and over terminal disease with the healing of the man *covered* with leprosy. Now the time has come in Luke's meticulous narrative development for Jesus to assert His authority to forgive sin.



On the Radar Screen Now

Luke starts to paint his Holy Spirit inspired portrait of this encounter by telling us that *one day He was teaching; and there were some Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem.* Jesus is now on the radar screen of the religious establishment. His healing of the leper in the prior passage and sending him straight to the Temple to present himself to the priests has apparently had its desired “announcement” effect. Since such a miracle was deemed by many to signal the advent of the Messianic Age,¹ this Rabbi Yeshua needed to be immediately checked out.

Loyal Friends

As Luke continues his narrative, we learn that *some men were carrying on a bed a man who was paralyzed.* Being a paralytic in that culture meant that you were a person with a stigma, e.g., people who were lame were forbidden from participating in the ordinary priesthood.² At first-century Qumran, people with disabilities were not allowed by the Essenes to fully participate in that Dead Sea sect's community life.³ As a result, issues of

rejection and exclusion would be a regular part of a paralytic's life. Given this contextual backdrop, what is stunning in Luke's narrative is that this paralytic not only has a friend, but apparently has several loyal friends, friends so committed to him that they are willing to do whatever is required to bring him to Jesus.

Persistent Friends

Luke informs us that these friends *were trying to bring him in and to set him down in front of Him*. Most likely Jesus was back in Simon Peter's house, one of the larger houses in Capernaum. This house was a multi-room structure with many side rooms arranged around a central courtyard. Each of these sleeping and storage side rooms was typically narrow (usually 3 - 6 feet wide) and quite deep, with few or no exterior windows.

Since these houses were commonly made of basalt, a "hard, dense, dark volcanic rock,"⁴ the black-walled side rooms would have been quite dark. Whatever light penetrated these rooms would have to come through the room's entrance facing the courtyard. From the detail Luke gives us, we can deduce that Jesus was standing in front of one of these dark side-room entrances addressing the crowd in the courtyard. Because of the spectator crowds that Jesus attracted, it was not possible for the friends of the paralytic to even enter the courtyard, let alone get close to Jesus. However, being committed to bringing their paralyzed friend to Jesus, they came up with a creative, alternative plan to overcome this obstacle and encounter this miracle-working rabbi. Since rabbis would teach for hours as long as people would listen, these friends could tell from the current size of the crowd that they had sufficient time to carry out their plan.

Let's Try the Roof

Luke compresses into one sentence the friends' surprising plan: *but not finding any way to bring*

him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down through the tiles with his stretcher, into the middle of the crowd, in front of Jesus. That means these friends had to "read" the eyes of the crowd while up on the roof to determine which of the many side room entrances Jesus was standing in.

The roofs of first-century Galilean homes were flat to serve multiple social meeting purposes. Thus there were always outside stairs leading to the roof.⁵ While the translation of the NASB text calls the roof covering tiles (a word Luke chose to use to communicate to urbanite Gentiles who had tile roofs but no understanding of Galilean roof construction), archaeological evidence suggests these roofs were typically composed of hard-packed earth and stone covered with some type of hard substance⁶, e.g. brick or stone. This earthen roof was laid down over a wooden lattice of tree branches, boughs and limbs which in turn rested on basalt cross beams.⁷ Thus, it was a major effort to open up a large enough hole in such a roof through which to drop a person on a stretcher.

Creating an access hole near the entrance of the targeted side room where Jesus was standing would have taken a considerable period of time during which there had to have been a growing commotion going on around Jesus. Standing in the courtyard, most of the crowd would be able to see these friends of the paralytic at work on the roof slowly opening up an ever-expanding hole, and would wonder: what is going on?

Visible to All

Using our imagination, we can envision some of this scene. Slowly a hole began to appear in the roof, growing until it was large enough for a man on a stretcher to descend. All during this time, clumps of dirt and stones were likely dropping down around Jesus. As the hole in the roof

enlarged, more and more daylight penetrated into this dark room behind Jesus providing what photographers call a backlit scene. Obviously, Jesus carried on with His teaching as this intriguing hole in the roof grew, debris from the hole continued to fall, and more and more of heaven's light entered the dark room (world) behind Him illuminating this unfolding scene for all to "see!"

Already Forgiven!

Finally the paralytic is dropped down and lands next to Jesus to the shock and surprise of almost everyone except Jesus. The surprise of the Scribes and Pharisees would have been laced with arrogant scorn. How dare people do such an audacious thing for such an obvious "sinner?" (Remember the disciples' reaction in John 9:2 when they saw a blind man: *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?*) In this way, Luke implicitly brings "sin" into this scene, a theme he first introduced in 5:8 and is continuing to develop.

As Jesus faces this paralytic, the crowd must have wondered, "What will Jesus do about this brazen interruption?" Luke records that *seeing their faith, He said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you."* Let's consider Jesus' surprising mercy-laden declaration from three different perspectives: that of 1) the paralytic and his friends, 2) the Pharisees and teachers of the law, and 3) Jesus.

An Unexpected Outcome

The friends of the paralytic had to have been stunned as they realized their plan wasn't going as they had hoped. Getting forgiveness for their friend wasn't why they came, not what they wanted and certainly not what they were expecting. They brought him to Jesus to be healed. They might well have been thinking, "Get real Jesus. Be relevant to our friend's predicament here. Be responsive to his real and obvious need."

We Have A Problem Here!

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law also had a "problem" and *began to reason, saying, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sin, but God alone?"* Well, they got that part right! No one can forgive sins but the Divine and that authority has not been delegated to men. Furthermore, they are prisoners of their observant Jewish "forgiveness" paradigm. By their definition of being "right with God," one had to: 1) exercise scrupulous behavior, 2) go to the ritual purification baths when ceremonially unclean, and 3) participate in Temple offerings and sacrifices. It's the religious "system" that imputes "forgiveness" to you. Thus from the Pharisees perspective, there could be no real "forgiveness" without Temple sacrifices and offerings. Yet Jesus had just declared this paralytic "forgiven," even though there was no animal sacrifice rendered here and they are obviously not in the Temple! Thus, blasphemy was their only logical conclusion.

First Things First

Looking at this scene from Jesus' perspective, He has the perfect holistic solution for this paralytic's predicament. We can only imagine what Jesus was thinking to Himself as others grappled with the unconditional "forgiveness" He had just proclaimed: "Yes, you Pharisees are right that forgiveness does require a sacrifice, and this is not the Temple. In just a little while, however, I will be standing before Pilate in another courtyard getting ready to make an incredible sacrifice that will change the access to God's forgiveness. In addition, I have a new 'Temple' in view."

Furthermore, Jesus knew the paralytic's friends did not understand that if He (just) healed their friend, the paralytic would still be paralyzed in his spiritual relationship with the

Father. Jesus knew he really needed to be restored in his relationship with his Creator. So first things first, everything has to start with forgiveness. Their friend needed to be fully restored, not just rescued from his physical paralysis.

What Kind of Faith?

Perhaps a comment is in order on the faith that Jesus commends. Notice His reference is to *their* faith. It is not just to the faith of the paralytic, but to the faith of his friends. In fact it is not entirely clear if the paralytic had sufficient faith to be healed; rather it might only have been the collective faith of his stretcher-bearing friends. Nevertheless, the question needs to be asked: What kind of faith did they exhibit? Is it a fully matured creedal faith? Do they have a sufficient understanding of who Jesus is? Not at all. But they do seem to be convinced that Jesus can make a difference, and that is enough to fuel their desire to get their friend in front of Him. That threshold measure of “faith” is sufficient for Jesus to affirm in a miraculous way. There are times when we need to be carried by the faith of our friends when our own faith seems insufficient to carry us forward.

I Am Messiah!

As this encounter builds to a climax, Jesus asserts his Messiahship in no uncertain terms by referring to Himself as the *Son of Man*. This *remez* reference to Daniel 7 is Jesus’ way of saying that I am God’s Messiah and your statement that only God can forgive is not only correct, but I am His Divinely authorized representative.

You Have Been Forgiven!

The phrase *your sins are forgiven you* is in the perfect passive tense which means that God has already forgiven the paralytic his sin at some point in the past.⁸ Furthermore, Jesus is in

essence saying, I have the authority to pronounce that prior forgiveness to you. What is remarkable here is that we are given no clues by Luke that the paralytic even wanted to be forgiven!

Putting an exclamation point behind His assertion that He has the authority to forgive others as God’s Agent, Jesus says to the paralytic *I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home*. Luke records, *Immediately he got up before them, and picked up what he had been lying on, and went home glorifying God*. Why did Jesus direct the paralytic to pick up his stretcher and carry it home? Could it be that He wanted it to be a tangible memorial, a lasting memory, of what Jesus had just done for him? Do you have such tangible remembrances?

Glorifying God

The Hebrew understanding of *glorifying* God means to accurately reveal and portray God to others. This ex-paralytic went home accurately telling his story and in so doing correctly portrayed God (Jesus) to others. That’s what “prisoners” who have been set free are expected to do – glorify God by accurately telling their story to whoever will listen by rightly depicting what God has done for them.

Luke ends this encounter by observing that *they were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, “We have seen remarkable things today.”* How true! Note that when one person starts glorifying God, others tend to do the same. Glorifying God can be contagious!

Exceeding Expectations

As the friends of this now ex-paralytic scrambled back down the roof stairs and trailed him home, I wonder if they realized that they had just received far more than their highest expectations.

Their friend had just received a double healing – an outer healing to be sure, but an inner healing as well along with hope for the future. That is often the way it is when you come to Jesus. In His loving response, you often get **so** much more than you hoped or planned to receive. Remember ... *God can do anything, you know, far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams.*⁹

Observations from 30,000 Feet

Now returning to our contextual framework for digging into a passage as developed in the “Introduction,” let’s start by asking what have we learned in this passage from the 30,000-foot (forest) level of “The Five Story Lines of Scripture.”¹⁰ We can observe that

- With regard to Who **God** is and how He does things:
 - God forgives the sin (spiritual paralysis) of a person that relationally blocks him or her from Him.
 - He is Sovereign in when and how He forgives.
 - God is incredibly merciful – He will forgive a person who was not even expecting to be forgiven.
 - He is unpredictably beneficent – come for just one thing and get sooo much more! Come for an outer healing and received an inner healing as well!
- With regard to the **Mutiny**: Religious institutions become part of the continuing Mutiny when they create artificial restrictions and conditions on how and when God can forgive people.
- With regard to the **Human Condition**:
 - “Church” crowds of Jesus spectators can be impediments to seekers wanting to encounter Jesus.

- Spiritual and physical paralyses are an inevitable reality of the Human Condition.
- With regard to God’s Eternal Plan of **Rescue and Restoration**:
 - It is centered in the Person, Power and authoritative life giving, forgiving Word of Jesus.
 - Rescue from spiritual paralysis and the journey to Restoration begins with forgiveness.
 - As the paralytic’s case history attests, God’s Plan starts with Rescue but ends in Restoration.
 - Glorifying God is part of God’s Plan to bring the “Good News” of Rescue and Restoration to others as we continue to remember and share with others what God has done in our own lives.

Observations from 5,000 Feet

From the book-specific (tree) view of 5,000 feet, Luke continues to underscore the character of Jesus’ ministry in this encounter as He portrays Jesus a) bringing God’s mercy to those who need it and have been systematically deprived of it, b) teaching and remaking His disciples’ world-view - this time regarding forgiveness, c) bringing more “outsiders” into His new Kingdom, d) rescuing and restoring yet another “prisoner.”

Another new theme having to do with sin and its remedy is also being developed in these early Luke 5 passages. Luke first introduced the reality of sin in 5:8 with Simon Peter’s response to Jesus regarding the great catch of fish. He then extends the theme by way of analogy of the man *covered* (as we are with sin) with leprosy. Now in this encounter with the paralytic, he links humanity’s hopeless case of sinfulness with God’s gracious and merciful remedy of forgiveness.

Ground Level Reflections to Journal and Share

- There are times when we all need to be carried on the wings of faith of others. That is part of what the Body of Christ is all about. Are you willing to let the Body carry you during those times and seasons of faint faith in your life? Why or why not? Have you been carried by the Body during difficult times? What was that like? How did that effect you?

- Is there anyone in your life right now that you cannot forgive? What is keeping you from extending forgiveness to them? Ask the Spirit to start to soften your heart toward that person or those people.

- We are called to be continually glorifying God – accurately telling our story and portraying God to a watching world. Does your life glorify God – are you accurately portraying Him to others? How contagious has your glorifying God been?

- What kind of a friend are you and your church to people with disabilities? Do you spend time with them? Would you creatively and determinedly bring them to Jesus to be rescued and restored?

- Do you have tangible remembrances in your life to remind you of what God has done for you (see, for example, Joshua 4:1-9)? What might they be? “Remembering” is the most prevalent theme in the Scriptures. Why? Because God knows how easily and repeatedly we can forget. Do you set aside time to remember Him and what He has done for you? How do you keep yourself from forgetting?

- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God’s Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

We need to be forgiving people. If God’s plan of Rescue and Restoration starts with forgiveness, whenever we are unwilling to forgive another, we are not only an impediment in God’s Plan, but we are actually acting in ways that keeps the mutiny going. Most of us can deal with “forgiveness for cause.” It’s easier to forgive others when we can see a “reason” for why another wronged us. But real forgiveness and authentic mercy starts when there is no reason, no rationale to excuse what another has done to us – when it is deliberate, premeditated and intended to harm.

Beware of your expectations when you come to Jesus. We should be people who come to Jesus with a sense of expectancy, but without any rigid expectation(s) of what He needs to do and when, where and how He needs to do it. We should be people with open, receptive hands ready to receive whatever God in His sovereignty lovingly chooses to put in them at any moment in time, not people clinging to our preconceived notions of what we self-servingly think needs to be done. We often come to Jesus preoccupied with our need for healing, but there are times when Jesus wants to first focus on our need for restoration.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And all that is within me, bless His holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And forget none of His benefits;
Who pardons all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases;
Who redeems your life from the pit,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;
Who satisfies your years with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.*

—Psalm 103:1-5

I will rejoice and be glad in Your lovingkindness, because You have seen my affliction.

—Psalm 31:7

I trust in the lovingkindness of God forever and ever.

—Psalm 52:8b

Christ wants not nibblers at the possible, but grabbers of the impossible.

—C. T. Studd

There are no difficulties with God. Difficulties wholly exist in our own unbelieving minds.

—Thomas Charles

You must live with people to see their problems, and live with God in order to solve them.

—P. T. Forsyth

Faith will lead you where you cannot walk. Reason has never been a mountain climber.

—E. W. Kenyon

If God were not willing to forgive sin, heaven would be empty.

—Anonymous

If anybody imagines that God could simply forgive us in the same way that we forgive one another, he has not yet considered the seriousness of sin.

—Anselm

Sources and Notes

¹Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1992), p. 463.

²Leviticus 21:18-24

³Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997), p. 211.

⁴Phillip King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, Kentucky, 2001), p. 23-24.

⁵New International Version *Archaeology Study Bible* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005), p. 1584.

⁶John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991), p. 164-165.

⁷Personal conversation with archaeologist Dr. David Hansen.

⁸Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 241.

⁹Ephesians 3:19, *The Message*

¹⁰James C. Martin and Doug Greenwold, adapted from the Pentagon graphic, "The Five Story Lines of Scripture," as used in Preserving Bible Times "Bible-in-Context" seminars, 2003.

7

He Chose Me!

*I will rejoice and be glad in Your lovingkindness,
Because you have seen my affliction;
You have known the troubles of my soul.*

—Psalm 31:7

Read: Luke 5:27-29

Jesus the Imaginative Storyteller

Jesus used imaginative story telling to not only reveal more about His Father, but to teach His disciples how to think, feel and act in the Kingdom of God. As best we can, shouldn't we be trying to do the same thing?



Jesus is both The Story and the Master Story Teller. His parables were consummate narratives, rich with imaginative treatments of everyday images, situations and occurrences. When contextually understood, His parables were often incredulous stories (the Prodigal Son) and outrageous situations of village life (the Friend at Midnight) that allowed His listeners to remember His teaching as well as its meaning.

Missing Imagination

Two millennia later in the West, we seem to have forgotten much about how Jesus taught. In Western Evangelicalism today, the use of imagination in retelling the Bible's stories to bring them alive for this generation is conspicuous by its absence. In fact, things have become so inverted in some circles that if you do use in a Sunday message or lesson that same kind of imagination that Jesus did, you run the risk of being labeled "totally inappropriate." How did we drift so far from Jesus' effective pedagogy?

A Wonderful Gift

One Christmas day, Dr. Art Lindsley, Scholar-in-Residence at the C. S. Lewis Institute, good friend, and author of several books including *C. S. Lewis' The Case for Christ* and *True Truth*, gave me a "gift" from one of C. S. Lewis' selected essays. I knew a light had been turned on as soon as I heard:

*Reason is the natural organ of truth;
but imagination is the organ of meaning.*

Wow! There it was: both a diagnosis and a remedy. Western Evangelicalism, with its Greek oriented thought processes, primarily focuses on the first line of Lewis' quote. For too long we have been preoccupied with using reason to present truth to believers, yet seldom using appropriate imagination to underscore the meaning of that truth in memorable ways. We've been preaching and teaching on AM monaural to people designed by God to better hear His Word in FM stereo.

Reason and Imagination

In the Gospels, Jesus was certainly proficient presenting reason and truth to His listeners while at the same time very creative in using imagination to capture the meaning of that truth. From Jesus' example, we can see that reason and imagination need to travel together in our teaching and preaching if truth and meaning are to be fused together in an integrated way in the lives of our listeners. If that's what Jesus did, shouldn't we be doing the same thing? After all, that's what being a disciple is about – having a passion to emulate your rabbi.

Appropriate Imagination

There are certainly some issues and concerns when it comes to the appropriate use of imagination in bringing the meaning of God's truth alive for today. It is a given that there will always be differing plumb lines regarding what constitutes appropriate imagination and what does not. Unfortunately, the fear of being judged "totally inappropriate" has caused too many preachers and teachers to deliberately avoid the creative use of imagination in their teaching and preaching of the Scriptures. That has been to our collective

detriment. But as Dr. Lindsley would often observe in his apologetic classes: *the potential for abuse is never an argument for disuse.*

A Safety Net

Contextual restoration is a helpful safety net for the appropriate use of imagination in opening up the Scriptures. Reconstructing a passage contextually not only suggests appropriate ways to bring a passage alive, but paradoxically also sets limits on 1) where that imaginative treatment can be taken in the retelling of the biblical story and 2) where speculation beyond the context cannot.

Becoming Levi

To try and illustrate how imagination can be used to open up a passage, I will take a creative approach in contextually restoring Luke's brief account of the calling of Levi in 5:27-28. But before we dig into these two sentences, we need to remember where Luke has already intentionally taken us in his deliberate narrative development:

- Luke has been developing the character of Jesus' ministry: a) bringing God's mercy to those who have been systematically deprived of it and bringing "outsiders" into His new Kingdom, b) dismantling His disciples' worldview from everything that religious culture had taught them to be "right" and "true."
- In the fifth chapter, Luke introduced a new theme having to do with sin. He first introduced the reality of sin in 5:8 with Simon Peter's response to Jesus regarding the great catch of fish. Luke then extends that theme by way of analogy with the man covered with leprosy (as we are with sin). In the prior encounter with the paralytic, he links humanity's hopeless case of sinfulness with God's gracious and merciful remedy of forgiveness.

Just How Much Can He Forgive?

Having just established Jesus' authority to forgive sin in the prior encounter with the paralytic, the next obvious questions are: How MUCH sin can He forgive? How deep, how wide is God's forgiveness? To answer these implied questions,

Luke brings Levi, a despicable **port** tax collector, onto his narrative stage. Bring your imagination along, and leave your grammar and sentence structure rules behind as we take a closer contextual look at this extraordinary two-sentence encounter.

The Story Behind the Story

My name is Levi, I am a Jew. You might think that given my name I must have been part of the Levitical priesthood. Well nothing could be further from the truth.

You see I was a Hellenistic Jew, not to be confused with those observant Jews up in the NW corner of the Sea of Galilee. We Hellenistic Jews liked to go to Synagogue on the Sabbath. But we also liked to go to the Greek theatres, gymnasiums and baths during the week. Because of that, observant Jews always looked upon us with scorn as pleasure-seeking Jews who wanted to have it both ways. Well, who would ever want to live life with all the scrupulous behavioral constraints and requirements they submit themselves to? Not us!

To be completely honest, I would have to describe myself early on as a VERY compromised Hellenistic Jew. You see, I was a port tax collector in Capernaum.

I never planned to be a tax collector. In our tradition, a young man almost invariably assumed the trade or profession of his father. But at an early age I knew that I had no desire to carry on the work of my father Alphaeus¹. My father and I talked about that for years. Finally one day he released me from having to carry on with the family profession. That was fine, but it did leave me with a new issue: what was I going to do now?

I was struggling with that question when one day a Chief Tax Collector came to town looking for new land tax collectors. Chief Tax Collectors are Jews who have secured the tax collecting franchise from Rome for a specific area,² in this case the Galilee District. One of the townspeople mentioned my name as someone needing a career, so he sought me out. When we first started talking, I said, "You have got to be kidding! Me become a land tax collector? No way!" You see I knew what that meant. Everyone despised tax collectors for they were Jews who decided to work for Rome to exploit and extort fellow Jews. Observant Jews, and even many Hellenistic Jews, viewed Rome as the kingdom of evil. Therefore, becoming a tax collector was the equivalent of saying you wanted to be a foot soldier in Satan's army. That is a kiss of death in our culture. As a traitor to Judaism, your family, friends and neighbors disown you as if you were the living dead.

*Well, that Chief Tax Collector certainly was persistent. Periodically he returned and kept seeking me out. And I kept saying "Not me!" Then one day he came and said, "Look Levi, this is my last visit. I am not coming back again." Then he surprised me by "upping the ante." He said that only if I would accept today, he would allow me to be a **port** tax collector in Capernaum, not just another **land** tax collector in the Galilee District.*

Unfortunately, that suddenly enriched offer caught me off guard and caused me to pause to consider it.

Well, I immediately knew what that meant. That offer was an invitation to print money. You see, in our taxation system, a land tax collector was pretty much a "cut and dried" profession.³ The tolls

*and taxes for wheat, sheep, and olive oil were pretty standard. You could make a pretty good living as a land tax collector keeping the excess after giving Rome its portion, but not one worth selling your soul for. But a **port** tax collector, well that was different. You could really become rich with that position. You see, being a port tax collector in Capernaum meant that you were right in the center of all the commercial action. Capernaum sits astride the International Highway, that avenue of international commerce that runs from Damascus down to Egypt. Furthermore, there were more than a dozen cities and towns from around the Sea of Galilee⁴ that shipped their commercial goods by boat into the port of Capernaum to transact with the merchants working the International Highway. The range of that commerce was so varied that a tax collector had much more latitude to be ingenious and creative⁵ (I think you know what I mean!) in assessing tolls and taxes and therefore could actually accumulate significant wealth even after giving Rome its prescribed portion. Being a port tax collector in Capernaum was the *crème de la crème* of tax collecting positions, and that's what momentarily intrigued me.*

*Well, I don't know if it was a moment of weakness or what, but I said that I would be willing to sign up that day if I could have that Capernaum position. Let me tell you, that was the **worst** decision of my life!*

Have you ever been at a cross roads in your life where you were faced with a decision that if you decided to go down one road you knew you would never be able to travel down the other road again? Well, that's where I found myself. If I chose to become a tax collector, I knew I would lose my family, my friends, my clan and community and be a social pariah for the rest of my days. I guess I reasoned that at least I would be a very wealthy pariah. And that's how I came to be the port tax collector in Capernaum. Like I said, it was the worst decision of my life.

I was mostly right in my initial assessment. I did indeed lose all my former friends and family and I certainly did acquire considerable wealth. My new and only friends were some fellow tax collectors and prostitutes.⁶ We comprised our own little community of outcasts. But the one thing I never thought about on the day of that offer was how lonely and hopeless I would feel as a port tax collector.

*You see, we have rabbis in our world. They are the ones that our culture gave the right to authoritatively interpret God's Word – the Torah. Well, those rabbis **really** hate tax collectors and they particularly single out **port** tax collectors for the brunt of their derision. In fact some rabbis authoritatively taught that a port tax collector was the worst of the tax collector lot (they thought our creative tax assessments were an abomination) and therefore could never, ever be forgiven by God.⁷ **NEVER!** Not with 30 years of retribution and 30 years of contrition, they could **NEVER EVER** be forgiven. That interpretation was not only binding on their disciples, but many others in the Galilee District willingly embraced that view because we tax collectors were so hated and despised.*

*Do you have any idea what a debilitating thought that is? To walk around everyday being convinced that you can never ever be forgiven. That makes you a person with absolutely **NO HOPE**; a person living with perpetual despair. Some of you may have had a similar hopeless feeling for a day, a week, or perhaps for some short period of time in your life. But do you have any idea what it is like to carry that "truth" around month after month, year after year? So the sad reality of my life was that I had plenty of money, very few friends*

and absolutely **NO HOPE**. Day after day, that was my port tax collecting reality. Whoever said that having wealth could solve a myriad of problems was **never** a port tax collector in Capernaum!

Well, one day I was standing by my tollbooth on the Capernaum shore of the Sea of Galilee waiting for a boat from Hippos to come in. I could tell by the wind direction and from the boat's tacking that it would be a while before it made port. As I glanced around, I saw a crowd growing down on the shore listening to the new miracle-working rabbi in town. I overheard some of the town's people remark that he taught with an authority like no other rabbi. Furthermore, it was said that he was choosing his own disciples. That was unheard of in our culture. It was always the other way around – disciples-to-be always asked a rabbi if they could become one of his disciples. I wondered what that all meant.

So in the time I had left, I decided to mosey down the shoreline as inconspicuously as I could so as not to be noticed by the crowd but still be in a position to hear what this rabbi was saying. Fortunately the winds were coming from the SE, so it carried this rabbi's voice toward me. Among other things, this rabbi said that God was his Father. I was obviously not a religious person at that time, but even from my Hellenistic Jewish upbringing, I knew that was an extraordinary claim.

*As I was listening to this rabbi teach, he said at one point that people could indeed be forgiven by God if they would simply come to him, repent, and ask to be forgiven. And he said those that did ask would be forgiven **for anything and everything they ever did!** He talked about repentance as being a whole new way of looking at things. I never heard such forgiveness thoughts. The other rabbis certainly never taught that. Could that possibly be true! If it were true, that would really be "good news!" and truly a whole new way of looking at everything.*

*As I walked home late that afternoon, I couldn't get that thought out of my mind. What if I could truly be forgiven? What if I could get right with God? I thought about it all that evening. Then in the middle of the night I heard a voice say to me, "Forget it Levi; you can never be forgiven. **Never!** Get that thought out of your mind. It's hopeless. **It is impossible for a port tax collector to ever be forgiven.**" Much later I realized that was the Adversary trying to talk me out of continuing to be drawn towards God's incredible mercy that forgives.*

A couple of days later, I had a chance to overhear this Rabbi Yeshua (his Hebrew name) teach again. He repeated what he had said before. He went on to say that his "yoke was easy to bear and my load is not hard to carry"⁸ and that the yoke of the rabbis and the Pharisees was heavy. To us Jews, that reference to yoke meant the total weight of all that the Torah taught as well as all the additional interpretations that the rabbis had piled on top of the Torah over the centuries. Well, if part of their yoke is that some people could never ever be forgiven, that is indeed a heavy burden and an impossible yoke! And if the converse is true, that a person really can be forgiven for anything and everything they have ever done, that really is a easy yoke and a light burden! I was so taken with that thought that much later I recorded what Jesus said about that in my Gospel.⁹ Needless to say, I went home with these thoughts and didn't sleep that night either. What is going on?

*Well, a couple of days later, I was standing in front of my toll booth on the sea shore when Jesus came walking toward me. He had just left the Capernaum Synagogue and was walking past Simon Peter's house when he first fixed his eyes on me. As he continued to walk my way, his compassionate eyes never left mine. I found myself just drawn to him. When he got within several feet of me, Jesus (his Greek name) stopped and affectionately said to me, "Follow me." I couldn't believe my ears! He's asking me to follow him? Do you know what that Jewish idiom "follow me" means in our culture? It means, "Come and be with me and be my disciple **and submit** to my authoritative teaching." Well, who wouldn't want to submit to a teaching that says you can be forgiven! It was then that I made the **best** decision of my life. I left my tollbooth and started to follow Jesus and never turned back. What a day that was! A despicable port tax collector became a disciple of Jesus the Son of God. Can you believe that! You should have seen the shock on the faces of the other disciples! They could not believe what Jesus had just done. I'm sure if it were up to them, they would have annulled his invitation. But they couldn't; and as a result, my life changed forever. What a day that was!*

Well, I was so overjoyed that I had been asked by Jesus to join his band of disciples that I invited all my tax collector colleagues and our prostitute friends to a big dinner at my place to meet Jesus. I told my friends and colleagues, "You won't believe what happened to me today. You need to come and meet this Rabbi Yeshua/Jesus and hear it for yourself. Do you realize that you too can be forgiven for anything and everything you ever did! You too can be loved by God." Well, many of them did come and they too were overwhelmed by what Jesus had to say. As I was later to record in my Gospel (Matthew is my Greek name), some of the first people in the Kingdom of God were tax collectors and prostitutes.¹⁰ Well, from that day forward, one question continued to haunt me. "Why me? Jesus, why did you ask me to follow you? What motivated you to do that? That was such an over-the-top thing to do. And it sure did shock all your disciples! I'm not sure they have still gotten over it."

Months later I had the chance to briefly go one-on-one with Jesus and ask him that question: why me? He never answered that question. He just smiled compassionately again. But I think I know why he did. You see, ten of the twelve Disciples were observant Jews. They came out of a system that made them righteous solely based on their behavior. So for observant Jews, if they 1) exercised scrupulous behavior, 2) went to the ritual purification baths when ceremonially unclean, and 3) participated in Temple offerings and sacrifices, the system makes them "right with God" by definition and God would bless them.

*Well, my theory is that Jesus wanted someone in the band who would never ever get over the fact that he had been forgiven. Someone who would be the leaven in the other disciples' loaves to always remind them of God's amazing grace and never to take their forgiveness for granted. Someone around who would keep them from slipping back into that mechanical way of thinking – that the old behavioral righteousness "system" still somehow made them acceptable to God. Well, I want to tell you, I wake up every morning thrilled that I have been rescued by God's mercy and grace, still overwhelmed that I have been forgiven and restored in my relationship with God. **How do you wake up in the morning?***

Now you know some of my story. Now you can appreciate just a little bit more why I felt compelled to write down for the record some of what Jesus said and did and the "case histories" (in context of course!) of some of the "prisoners" like me whom He rescued. So the next time you read the Gospel of Matthew that the Holy Spirit inspired me to write, you'll have a little better context for the ex-tax collector who wrote it.

Observations

From this imaginative woven-back-together contextual restoration of this two-sentence story, we can observe that

- With regard to Who **God** is and how He does things:
 - God can forgive anything and everything we have ever done, no matter how despicable, and He wants us to know that! God seeks out the “no hope” people to give them a hope and a future. As C. S. Lewis once observed, “the hound of heaven still stalks the human soul.”
 - God expects us to extend mercy and compassion to those who don’t seem to deserve it.
- With regard to the **Adversary**:
 - He tries to convince us that we can never be forgiven.
 - He will even work through religious systems to try and convince of us that.
- With regard to the **Mutiny**:
 - Isn’t it amazing how easily we can marginalize and despise others?
 - We don’t always want to be compassionate, forgiving people, do we?
- With regard to the **Human Condition**:
 - Oh my, do we ever mess up with the bad decisions and poor choices we make in life!
 - Sometimes the consequences of our choices can seem as if they have put us in an impossible, hopeless situation.
- With regard to God’s Eternal Plan of **Rescue and Restoration**:
 - It is centered in the Person, Power and authoritative life giving, inviting Word of Jesus to “Follow Me.”
 - Forgiveness is the very first step toward restoration and anyone can be forgiven.
 - He really does “set the prisoners free.”
 - He expects His disciples not just to be with Him, but also to willingly submit their will and ways to His Will and Ways.
 - We need to share our joy of being forgiven by His amazing grace (might John Newton have identified with Levi?) and accepted into a new community by inviting others to hear about it.
 - Rescue and restoration always come with the aromas of joy, gratitude, praise and thanksgiving.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- How did you react to discovering more about Levi through the use of (what I hoped was) appropriate imagination? Were you comfortable or somewhat uncomfortable with that approach to opening up the passage? Does it give you any thoughts or ideas that you might want to use in your times of reflecting and contemplating Jesus’ encounters with people?

- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

Are you encouraged by this passage as you think of others you care about who are seemingly hopelessly stuck and seem to be miles away from Jesus? As Levi's case history teaches us, and C.S. Lewis once observed, "the hound of heaven still does stalk the human soul."

As you ponder Luke's remarkable two-sentence scene in the days and weeks ahead, let the Holy Spirit speak to you, touch you and transform you to renew your joy that you too have been rescued by the Savior.

*God makes a home for the lonely;
He leads out the prisoners into prosperity
Only the rebellious dwell in a parched land.*

—Psalm 68:6

Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea,
until they have something to forgive.

—C. S. Lewis

You may despair of yourself as much as you like, but never of God.

—C. C. Grafton

Hopelessness and lifelessness go together.

—William Gurnall

The glory of Christianity is to conquer by forgiveness.

—William Blake

The unforgiving spirit as a pride form is the number one killer of spiritual life.

—James Coulter

Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a permanent attitude.

—Martin Luther King

Those who say they will forgive but can't forget,
simply bury the hatchet but leave the handle out for immediate use.

—D. L. Moody

If God forgives us, we must forgive others. Otherwise it is almost
like setting up ourselves as a higher tribunal than Him.

—C. S. Lewis

No prayers can be heard which do not come from a forgiving heart.

—J. C. Ryle

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⁶Matthew 11:30

⁷Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p. 237.

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¹⁰Matthew 21:31-32

8

The Perfect Storm

The more terrible the storm, the more necessary the anchor.

—William S. Plumer

Read: Luke 8:22-25

One of Those Days

As Luke simply records it, it was *one of those days*. Another one of those days with Jesus healing people and teaching parables. There had been many such days in the lives of these new disciples and this one seemed pretty much like the others until late this particular afternoon when Jesus said to them, *let us go over to the other side*.



Idioms Matter

Not understanding Jewish idioms will cause us to miss the significance of Jesus' instruction to the disciples to get into the boat and go over *to the other side* of the Sea of Galilee. To first-century observant Jews, *the other side* seems to be a ritual purity euphemism¹ for the Decapolis, a place they were forbidden to go. Let's further develop what the Decapolis signified to an observant Jew of Jesus' day.

History Matters

Going back in intertestamental history, we learn that Alexander the Great conquered this part of the world in 332 BC. As part of his subjugation strategy for this land, he imported Macedonian city-states which brought the Greek language, Greek philosophy and a Hellenistic worldview into this land.

Then two and one-half centuries later in 63 BC, the Roman Tenth Legion under Pompeii conquered this land and brought with them a Roman worldview. By the time of Jesus, ten of these cities, lying in an area to the east and southeast of the Sea of Galilee, had matured into magnificent architectural venues and formed a confederation known as

the Decapolis.² In these cities, a grand main street (the *cardo*) was lined with columns and flanked on either side with temples to various gods, including those practicing ritual prostitution. Also lining these main streets were all the pleasures of Greco-Roman life – theatres, arenas, gymnasiums, baths – populated mostly by Gentiles and some Hellenistic Jews who indulged themselves in all the hedonistic pleasures of first-century Greco-Roman life: if it tastes good, eat it; if it feels good, do it; if it looks good, by all means touch it.

The Land of Evil and Purity

Not surprisingly, the Decapolis represented the epitome of the land of evil to the observant Jewish worldview of Jesus' day. God's Adversary was viewed as the Chief Operating Officer of Rome and thus of the Decapolis as well.³ Consequently, observant Jews were forbidden from ever associating with Gentiles, visiting them, or setting foot in their houses or on their land, something Peter acknowledges in Acts 10:28.

In a religious society preoccupied with issues of ritual purity, observant Judaism held that even uttering the word *Decapolis* made a person unclean and required them to go to the ritual purification baths. To avoid this, various code words and phrases evolved allowing an observant Jew to say essentially the same thing, but in a way that maintained ritual purity. Hence, the euphemism for the Decapolis became *the other side*.

What Did He Say?

So when Jesus says to His disciples late that particular afternoon, let's go over to *the other side*, they cannot believe their ears! Once again Jesus has put these disciples into another shock therapy situation. Touching a leper was one thing;⁴

calling a port tax collector to be a disciple something else;⁵ touching a dead body (thought to be beyond the pale by these disciples) was really stretching it;⁶ but going to *the other side*, "Jesus, you can't be serious!"

The buzz must have spread quickly amongst the Twelve. "Did you hear what I just heard? We must have misunderstood what Jesus just said, right Simon? John, do we need to draw a line in the sand on this one? Do we have to just tell Jesus that this is one field trip we disciples are not going to take?" While that may be how our Western minds might react, this is first-century Palestine and those Twelve knew their role as Jesus' disciples. As a result, they were totally submitted to Him, His teaching and His ways. As disciples they were expected to emulate their rabbi.⁷ So into the boats they went.

We're Going Now!

In his parallel treatment of this scene, Mark gives us a fascinating piece of information regarding this encounter by telling us that Jesus got into the boat with the disciples *just as he was*.⁸ Here we have another insight into Jesus' disciple-making methodology. To a first-century Jew, *just as he was* is another idiomatic phrase that means NOW!⁹ By using this phrase in his narrative, Mark tells us that Jesus told His disciples to "Get into the boat right NOW!" With those words still ringing in their collective ears, into the boat(s) the disciples went (Mark uses the plural for boats)! Well, if you were one of the disciples, how would you be feeling at this moment in time? Excited, pleased, thinking kindly thoughts? I doubt it. Most likely just the opposite!

No Voting, Just Submission

Perhaps we should pause here for a moment and make a few observations. Did you notice that

Jesus does not ask the disciples to become a focus group to see if they thought going to *the other side* was a good idea? Nor does He take a straw vote to see if the disciples might be able to reach consensus that this is a convenient time for them to go! Jesus does not need their permission to do this nor their voluntary participation. He is their rabbi. They are totally submitted to Him. Remember, that's what disciples are about and that's what disciples do – totally submit to their rabbi.¹⁰ Jesus determines what they will be exposed to as well as the when, where and how, and what He will teach them through these journeys. Sobering isn't it to project those same discipling dynamics into our 21st century lives. Well, Jesus hasn't changed and nor has anything changed in what it means to be His disciple. Before we leave the Capernaum shore and commence our journey, let's consider a related observation.

Confronting Entrenched Paradigms

When the task is changing well-entrenched (religious) paradigms, it generally doesn't work to ask people if they are willing to change them! People will almost always choose to stay in the friendly confines of their comfort zones. Jesus, knowing all this, gives the disciples no choice in the matter. He knows that if they are ever going to understand the character and nature of the Kingdom of God, all of their religious paradigms will have to be wrenched away from them and then pulverized. Furthermore, He knows that they will never willingly consent to this disconcerting process. Thus, the only way to deal with this inherent resistance is to immerse them in an experience they would never choose on their own. So he directs them into the boats. That's the most effective way at this stage in their development to get these disciples to see and understand

that the Kingdom of God is truly meant for all peoples. Do you think Jesus' paradigm-changing, disciple-making methodology has changed? What might that mean for our Western mentoring "discipleship" notions of today?

When you stop and think about it, Western "discipleship" is much more like an optional scouting jamboree weekend than an "Onward Christian Soldiers" commitment. By way of contrast, especially when understood from the perspective of first-century observant Judaism, Jesus' manner of making disciples has much more in common with the United States Marines than the Boy Scouts. Are we prepared to listen and respond to the promptings of God's Spirit from that submitted perspective?

Everybody Knows

As Jesus and the disciples leave Capernaum in the boats early that evening, those standing on the shore can quickly tell where Jesus and His band are headed – to the southeast! They are going to *the other side*? How can this be? The disciples in the boat know full well that they are embarking on a journey that their family and friends will disapprove of and it will likely tarnish their reputations?

A Sudden Storm

After darkness descends on the Sea, a strong wind begins to blow quickly becoming stronger and stronger. In the beginning, they seem manageable to the experienced fishermen in these 27-foot long, 7-foot wide, four and one-half feet deep trammel boats.¹¹ They have fished in all kinds of weather in these waters. They can handle it. Done it many times before. Yet the winds continue to strengthen and the lake gets rougher and rougher. "Well," they may have thought, "these winds are getting much worse!

But with our extensive experience and proven sailing expertise, we should be able to handle this one too.” Meanwhile Jesus, weary from all the teaching and healing of that day, is sleeping in the stern of the boat that is increasingly being pitched and battered by these winds.

A Violent Storm

It helps to understand a few things about storms on the Sea of Galilee. From a geological point of view, the Sea of Galilee is a giant cereal bowl 13 miles north south and roughly seven miles east west. Violent storms can and do arise very quickly at night given the climatic phenomena of land and sea breezes. The land to the east of the Sea of Galilee is mostly a desert-like climate. Thus, it tends to be hot during the day and cool during the night. These radical changes in temperature often cause a sudden wind shift. In the winter these particularly rapid and violent wind changes are called *shargia* winds.¹² When they suddenly occur, 6-8 foot waves can develop in minutes on this lake as the sloping geological contours of the Sea of Galilee “bowl” act as a wind tunnel suddenly whipping the waves into a vicious pitch.

We Are Going To Perish!

On this particular night as the winds continue to strengthen and the wave troughs deepen, more and more water fills these trammel boats. The disciples begin to realize that this is not a typical storm and that they are in over their heads (literally and figuratively). In the space of a few minutes, they recognize that without intervention they are going to die. Ironically, only now do they think it’s time to wake up Jesus! And as they do, notice what the disciples say: *we are perishing!* Not, I think we might perish. Nor, there is a 90% probability we are going to perish. As seasoned

fishermen, they are now utterly convinced they will die!

Second Thoughts

As the storm peaks, perhaps their original misgivings return. “I KNEW we should never have agreed to go on this journey! Yes, we are disciples, but there comes a time when even disciples need to tell the rabbi this is something we shouldn’t be doing! Now we are all going to die and all that our friends and family will remember is that we died trying to go somewhere we were forbidden to go. ‘Serves them right’ may be our families’ final verdict. How did we ever let ourselves get into such a situation?”

Trusting in Our Competencies

It is necessary to ask the question: why did the disciples wait so long to come to Jesus? Answer: they trusted in their own competencies. As fishermen very familiar with winter storms on the Sea, they felt they could handle this one on their own. So why wake Jesus? In this manner of thinking, do they remind us of anyone we know – perhaps you and I? Do we also trust in our own abilities to handle things? Do we postpone taking our issues and problems straight to Jesus because we feel we should be able to work these things out for ourselves? And only when things seem to go beyond our ability to cope, then might we be willing to bring our predicament to Jesus? As an acquaintance once observed, “our real disability is our ability.”¹³ Thus our strengths are only a short distance away from becoming our weaknesses.

Rebuking the Wind

When the disciples finally decide to wake Jesus and make Him aware of their perishing plight, doesn’t their self-serving manipulative question bring a smile to your lips: *Rabbi, do you not care*

that we are perishing? (Mk. 4:38). Pretty self-revealing wouldn't you say! Have you ever had such thoughts in a similarly dire situation? Did you notice Jesus' response to the disciple's situation? First, He doesn't rebuke them when there is every reason to give it to them straight between the eyes. However, He does *rebuke* the wind (Luke 8:24). Have you ever been puzzled by Luke's use of that word? Does Jesus need to rebuke nature? Not per se; after all He created nature. No, what Jesus is rebuking is the Adversary's highjacking of nature to try and keep Jesus from invading his territory. Let's connect the contextual dots on that one.

Demonic Intent

As previously observed, the disciples are going to a place where they are forbidden to go – the Decapolis. This is the Kingdom of Evil to these observant Jews. Jesus has already been doing demonic exorcisms¹⁴ establishing His authority over the minions (foot soldiers) of Satan's army. Up until now, Jesus operated in the relatively friendly confines of observant Judaism around Capernaum. The disciples know that in going to *the other side*, Jesus is deliberately going on the offensive into enemy territory for the first time in His ministry.

It would be part of the disciples understanding to expect the Adversary to resist Jesus invading his kingdom of evil with the Good News of the Kingdom of God. As observant Jewish young men, these disciples know their Hebrew Old Testament. They know that Hosea 12:1 makes reference to the east winds propagating lies and violence. They are sailing primarily to the east (actually ESE) to Gergesa. To the disciples, this wind is most likely a physical *remez*. Thus the disciple's worldview would rightly have seen this wind as a demonic wind.

That's why Jesus rebukes the wind and in so doing rebukes His Adversary and his destructive tactics.

Who Will Prevail?

These disciples already know that Jesus has authority over nature. They saw that with the great catch of fish in Luke 5. They know Jesus has authority over Satan's foot soldiers from the demonic exorcisms previously cited. But they have never seen Jesus go toe-to-toe with the General of Evil and prevail. These disciples were not present during the three temptations¹⁵ when Jesus decisively and convincingly established His authority over His Adversary. So for them, this is a showdown between Jesus and the Adversary, and in the midst of "The Perfect Storm" that Satan assaults them with, they are not sure who is going to prevail!

Where is Your Faith?

With this as a backdrop, we can now understand the nature of the question Jesus poses to these severely shaken disciples: *Where is your faith?* Now we are at the core of this passage. What Jesus is asking them is this: "Don't you know I have complete authority over the Adversary? That in a split second with but a word I can banish Satan and completely thwart his intentions?" Obviously they did not! On this journey the disciples failed an important faith test, but Jesus does not berate them for their failure. Praise God for the patience He displays with these disciples – and with us – because we have all tried sailing with our own resources in some of those same winds.

Winds and Waves Ceased

Did you notice that when Jesus rebuked the winds two things happened? The winds immediately ceased **and** the waves stopped. Here is

another dimension to this miracle. Those of you who have lived around water know that waves have a life unto their own. Once a wave is set in motion, it just keeps going until it crashes onto a

shore somewhere. What is amazing here is that these 6-8 foot waves suddenly become flat, and from the Greek verb tense Luke uses in this passage, stay flat!

Reflections to Journal and Share

- God's timetable for remaking us is seldom our timetable. If it was up to us, we would never be quite ready to go on the next offensive with Him. Have you experienced this?

- God's plan to remake our paradigms so we can better understand the nature and character of the Kingdom of God does not necessarily come at convenient times in our lives. Any examples of how He has remade some of your paradigms?

- Have there been times when you waited too long to bring your problems/dilemmas/crises to Jesus? What caused that to happen? What transpired after you did bring them to Jesus?

- God does not give up on a disciple just because he or she fails a significant faith test. Can you personally relate to God's graciousness in that way?

- Do our Western notions (paradigms) of democracy and democratic ideals, e.g., voting and consensus, help or hinder our corporate/personal understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and how disciples are made in the Kingdom of God? Have you ever reflected on what's elective, voluntary, or discretionary in the Kingdom of God and what isn't? Does this challenge you?

- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

When you go on the offensive with and for Jesus, don't be surprised if an East Wind starts to blow to try and stymie your plans.

- Plan for opposition and anticipate resistance.
- At the first sign of opposition, go straight to Jesus.
- Resist the temptation to lean on your own abilities and resources to prevail.

All it takes is one word from Jesus and the Adversary and his tactics are banished. That should give us great confidence, settle our fears, and encourage us to go immediately to Him.

When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You.

—Psalm 56:3

*It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man.
It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.*

—Psalm 118:8 & 9

*The Lord helps them and delivers them;
He delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
Because they take refuge in Him.*

—Psalm 37:40

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.

—Proverbs 3:5

Terms with God must always be His terms, not yours.

—John Hercus

If you don't surrender to Christ, you surrender to chaos.

—E. Stanley Jones

It has always been my ambition to have no plans as regards myself.

—Robert Murray M'Cheyne

He who abandons himself to God will never be abandoned by God.

—Unknown

When all that you are is available to all that God is,
then all that God is is available to all that you are.

—Ian Thomas

Character is not made in a crisis – it is only exhibited.

—Robert Freeman

The lordship of Christ is neither optional nor negotiable.

—John Blanchard

The whole of Satan's kingdom is subject to the authority of Christ.

—John Calvin

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⁵Luke 5:27

⁶Luke 7:14

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⁸Mark 4: 36

⁹Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (MacDonald Publishing, undated), p. 276.

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¹⁴Luke 4:35, 41

¹⁵Luke 4:1-13

9

The Perfect Rescue

God can do anything, you know, far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams.

—Ephesians 3: 20-21 (*The Message*)

Read: Luke 8:26-39

Start Rowing!

After Jesus calms the wind and waves (Luke 8:24d), there is only one way to get to *the other side* – grab the oars and start rowing. The disciples started this journey in a passive posture by letting the sails catch the wind and move the boats, but now they have to become actively involved in getting Jesus to the eastern shore. This is often Jesus’ way of getting us more caught up in His mission.



What’s That?

As the boats approach the shore, shrieking sounds are heard coming across the water from *the other side*. Soon the disciples discern a human form in the moonlight – the source of these chilling sounds. A closer look suggests this screaming person is naked. And could those caves in the background be tombs?

Now the disciple’s original misgivings about this journey get even more compounded. As observant Jews they are not only forbidden to set foot on Gentile soil;¹ but they are also prohibited from viewing a naked man and, furthermore, have purity issues with tombs. Suddenly there are more dilemmas of ritual impurity to face than when they started this disconcerting trip. Might they be wondering, “Why are we heading towards THIS?”

Staying in the Boat

As the boats finally reach the eastern edge of the Sea of Galilee and the bows wedge into the stony shore, we need to carefully read Luke’s account of this journey.

Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee (8:26). And when He came out onto the land, He was met by a man from the city who was possessed by demons; and who had not put on any clothing for a long time, and was not living in a house, but in the tombs (8:27 with emphasis added).

It seems Luke is telling us that only Jesus got out of the boat! This is re-enforced later when Luke refers to only Jesus getting back into the boat (8:37c). Mark's account likewise suggests that only Jesus got out of the boat (5:2&18). To Jesus' disciples, this scene, with its three-fold impact of ritual impurity, is just too much to deal with as observant Jews. So they vote with their feet and stay put in the boat. We can certainly relate to their reluctance. While in theory we would all say we are willing to travel closely with Jesus, there are times when our fears can cause us to pragmatically stay put in our own boats and paralyze our compassion.

Compassion Needed

In his book *Abba's Child*, Brendan Manning makes an arresting observation when he suggests that compassion starts when we know why our enemy cries. That reminds us that our compassion for this demoniac starts when we know why he weeps and screams. Let's try and understand who this outcast is.

In the lands surrounding Palestine, demonic possession was not uncommon. Demon worship and even dedicating one's child to the Devil was not unheard of. Thus, it could be that this no-name person has been demon-possessed for quite some time. He is not a pretty sight. His arms and legs are most likely ringed with concentric layers of scar tissue, the result of repeatedly contesting the chains that others used to try and confine

him to this place of the living dead. Now free of those chains (Mk. 5:3), he tortures himself by gashing his body with stones. Some of his recent wounds might still be oozing puss and blood. From both a physical and a spiritual perspective, he is nauseating and repulsive to behold!

A Cultural Nobody

Might you be able to relate to what it's like when no one likes you, wants you, or sees any value in you? Can you imagine what it must be like not to belong to anyone? To have no home, no friends, and no one who even cares one iota about you? To be someone utterly alone and totally forgotten?

Over the years, this demoniac has accumulated PhDs in abandonment, humiliation and rejection.² How worthless and hopeless does that feel? What might years of absorbing that kind of pain do to your psyche and your soul? He is not even a nobody. In the eyes of his culture, it's even worse than that; he is a sub-, sub-, sub-, sub-human being who is rejected by God.³ And yet the compassionate heart of the Father passionately beats for this demoniac with the same intensity as it does for His only begotten Son (a Perfect God only has one intensity of love - perfect). The demoniac doesn't know it yet, but his "fullness of time" has come.

Who is He?

Imagine what this demoniac must have been wondering as he watches these boats coming toward him in the moonlight. He sees the boats beach and only one person gets out. Instead of running away in fear, he is drawn toward this person. Approaching Jesus, this possessed man suddenly realizes that the mysterious person from the boat has facial hair – he is a Jew! Incredible! What is a Jew doing over here, let alone at this time of the night?

It doesn't take long for the demoniac to realize that this Jew has come to fight for him. The questions begin to whirl in his mind. How can this be? Who is this Jew and WHY would he be personally fighting for me? What could possibly cause him to want to do that? Could the demoniac be wondering about how this legion of demons (a Roman Legion has 5600 soldiers⁴) within him would resist? Who will prevail?

A Backup Plan

The "fight" doesn't take long. The demons know they are out of their league with Jesus. They know exactly who He is: *Yeshua, the Lord's Rescuer*. So they try to "cut a deal" and plead with Jesus not to command them to go away into the abyss (8:31). Rather they asked Jesus for permission to enter the boars on the hillside. (Swine is a word that Western translators have used to help us relate to the boars in this scene.) Jesus consents to their request. As a result 2,000 boars run down the only geological slope that runs west from the Golan Heights straight down to the edge of the Sea and drown.⁵ What's amazing about this is that everyone in this culture knows that boars are good swimmers.⁶ The fact that all 2,000 of them drown is stunning!

What's going on here? Well, the Adversary has not given up yet! When his frontal assault with "The Perfect Storm" wasn't successful in keeping Jesus out of his territory, he instituted a backup plan. By wrecking a major piece of the local agrarian economy, and making it appear as if Jesus is the reason for this "disastrous" outcome, maybe the people will force Him to leave. And that is exactly what happens. Rather than being overjoyed that a demoniac has been freed in what was an off-the-charts Richter scale of exorcism miracles, the town's people are angry with Jesus over the loss of their boars. It is part of the

continuing legacy of the Fall that boars can be more valued than a miraculously rescued human being.

There is another dimension to this drowning of 2,000 boars. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, tells us that the Roman Tenth Legion is occupying Palestine at the time of Jesus. History also tells us that their mascot is the boar!⁷ Thus there is a prophetic statement by Jesus in the drowning of these animals.

No Gratitude

When a new day dawns and the word gets out about what has just happened, the town's people come out to see for themselves. As they arrive, they find the demoniac sitting at the feet of Jesus, the posture of a disciple, fully clothed. Where did the clothes come from? Yet another dimension to this miraculous encounter. I doubt the demoniac had an armoire of clothes in his cave tomb just waiting for this day. Furthermore, Luke tells us this demoniac was *in his right mind*. This man has not only been rescued, but he has been restored. That's the way it always is with Jesus. You don't just get rescued (where it starts); you also get restored as wholeness starts to penetrate all aspects of your being.

Let Me Come with You!

When Jesus is about to leave and sail back to Capernaum with His still-in-the-boat disciples, this rescued and restored ex-demoniac wants to get into the boat with Him. Who can blame him for wanting to be attached to Jesus' side like a Siamese twin for the rest of his days? While Jesus' response may initially seem harsh, Jesus has a purpose for this newly rescued and restored person. He gives him a task: *return to your house and describe what great things God has done for you*. Notice how Luke then records it: *so he went*

away, proclaiming throughout the whole city what great things Jesus had done for him (underscore added). To this newly freed person, Jesus is God.

The Fruits of Obedience

So what did this newly rescued person do? Exactly what Jesus told him to do. He told his story to anyone who would listen. Everyone knew his “before” story and now they hear his “after” story. He told his story morning, noon and night. He told it to people as they were going into and coming out of the baths and the temples. He told it so often and so persistently that people came to know what he was going to say before he could even start to say it. Ever wonder what the fruit was of his tell-your-story obedience?

When Jesus returns to this part of the Decapolis several months later,⁸ several thousand people come out to see Jesus and we have the feeding of the 4,000. All because one person was obedient (submitting to Jesus’ direction) and just told his story. A person who once was viewed as a sub-, sub-, sub-, sub-human being by his culture is rescued by the compassionate and merciful heart of God and becomes the first missionary of the New Testament.

Observations

This is really a story about God’s heart and to what extent He will go to rescue one human being. What a God, what a Rescuer, what a rescue, what a story! Some of what we can reflect upon and ponder in this encounter includes:

God

- From God’s compassionate perspective, rescuing and restoring one person is worth whatever it takes. He will focus enormous power to accomplish that and He cannot be thwarted.

Adversary

- Always be alert for the Adversary’s backup plans. He will change his strategies to try and thwart God’s purpose. If Plan A doesn’t work (storm), there is often a Plan B (drowning boars).
- Notice how the Adversary ruins things and then points to Jesus. It is consummate deception. We all have bought into that deception in the fine print of our homeowner policies where it says that if something really bad happens, it is considered to be an “act of God.”

The Mutiny

- It is part of the ongoing mutiny that 2,000 boars can be more highly valued than one incredibly rescued human being.

Human Condition

- Our fears of becoming “unclean” on rescue missions with Jesus can cause us to become paralyzed and stay in the boats.
- Isn’t it amazing how easily people can withhold compassion and marginalize a person who is not like them?

Rescue and Restoration

- God’s plan of rescue and restoration is centered in the person, power and word of Jesus Christ.
- God doesn’t just rescue people. He restores them as well. That insight can shape the way we pray for others. While our immediate reaction is often to pray for the “rescue” of another in crisis, perhaps we should envision what total restoration of that person might look like and then pray that comprehensive portrait to Jesus as our prayer.
- God wants us to share our unique story of rescue and restoration to whoever will listen.

My Ways are Not Your Ways

This passage places before us the following observation: Luke gives us no clues that this demoniac knows who Jesus is and that being miraculously rescued is even possible. Yet rescued and restored by Jesus he is! Does your theological paradigm of salvation embrace this scene, or might your paradigm(s) be too small, too limited, or too restrictive for a God who reminds us that

*My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways?*⁹⁹

Have you been praying for years for someone you love to be rescued by Jesus; yet, it seems as if nothing is ever going to change in their lives? Remember this demoniac and be encouraged. As C.S. Lewis once observed, “The hound of heaven still stalks the human soul” and; we might observe, on His timetable.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- Does your heart beat with God’s heart? Where might you still need to be broken, remade, have your paradigms pulverized, so that you see the outcasts of this world as the Father sees them?

- Do you have the courage and persistence to stay close to Jesus as He rescues and restores the outcasts of this world?

- Have there been times when you valued boars over people, materialism at the expense of relationships?

- How have you been doing telling your encounter-with-Jesus story to whoever will listen? Has that been hard? What kinds of reactions have you gotten? Do you need to pray for courage and persistence?

- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God's Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

Where do you still need to be rescued? Oh, I know you are most likely already a believer, but that does not mean that all the rooms in your house (life) have been renovated by Jesus. In fact it may be that while you have willingly invited Jesus in to renovate the ground floor and even part of the second floor of your life, there still are some upstairs bedrooms that are off limits to Him – certain parts of your life that you just don't want to give up control over and relinquish to His rescuing and renovating power. That is where you are still in chains, where you will keep gashing yourself. And that is precisely where you still need to be rescued and restored to continue your journey of becoming evermore like Jesus.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul.
And all that is within me, bless His holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And forget none of His benefits;
Who pardons all your iniquities,
Who heals all your diseases;
Who redeems your life from the pit,
Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion;
Who satisfies your years with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.*

—Psalm 103:1-5 (emphasis added)

*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.*

—Psalm 23:1-3

*Then I will make up to you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten...*

—Joel 2:25a

On the Mount of crucifixion, fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God's mercy, flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers, poured incessant from above,
And Heav'n's peace and perfect justice, kissed a guilty world in love.

—From the traditional hymn
"Here is Love Vast as the Ocean"

Compassion is what makes a person feel pain when somebody else hurts.

—Unknown

The Christian should show the same concern for compassion as for creeds.

—John Blanchard

There is no exercise better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people up.

—John Andrew Holmer

Biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world.

—Francis Schaeffer

Unthankfulness is the devil's text.

—John Boys

I believe that the definition of man is the ungrateful biped.

—Feodor Dostoevsky

Thankless men are like swine feeding on acorns, which though they fall upon their heads, never make them look up to see the tree from which they came.

—E. F. Hallock

Mercy is without price and beyond all price.

—Unknown

God leads us to eternal life not by our merits but according to His mercy.

—Augustine

Sources and Notes

¹Acts 10:28

²Dr. David Allen, Handout from The Eleuthera Institute, Arlington, Virginia. Dr. David Allen, a Christian psychotherapist and author of *In Search of the Heart* has developed what he calls the “Bermuda Triangle of the Soul.” His clinical experience suggests that the three sides of his Bermuda Triangle – abandonment, rejection, and humiliation – speak to the human condition of every person. The only question is to what degree. Contained within that prison triangle are the issues of shame in what Dr. Allen calls “The Guilt Trail.”

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⁵Vassilios Tzaferis, “A Pilgrimage to the Site of the Swine Miracle,” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, XV (March/April 1989), p. 45-51.

⁶Dr. James C. Martin, et. al., *Exploring Bible Times: The Gospels in Context* (Bible World Seminars: Amarillo, Texas, 2003), p. 124.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Mark 7:31

⁹Isaiah 55:8

10 Two Desperate People Find Jesus

True faith is never found alone; it is accompanied by expectation.

—C.S. Lewis

Read: Luke 8:40-56

A Crisis

Luke opens this passage by introducing us to Jairus, the ruler of the Capernaum synagogue, and his 12 year-old daughter who is on the verge of death. Like any father, Jairus has hopes and dreams for his **only** daughter. She is on the brink of womanhood and perhaps already betrothed. That means a wedding and grandchildren might be in the offing. But today any such future seems to be hanging by a thread.



What About Jesus?

Jarius ponders what he can do in light of his daughter's deteriorating state. His thoughts turn to what he has heard of Jesus' miracles and he is convinced that Jesus can heal his daughter. As a synagogue ruler, he knows that the laying on of hands for healing by certain rabbis in observant Judaism is common in first-century religious life. Everyone in Galilee would have known of Jesus' healing miracles performed in and around Capernaum establishing Him as yet another in a long line of miracle-working Pharisee rabbis from Galilee. These rabbis were called the *Hasidim*,¹ the righteous ones, and were well known for their prayer-warrior nature and for doing things for the benefit of the community.

Where is the Rabbi?

But where is Jesus? Then Jarius learns that Jesus went over to *the other side*. Thus, he knows that Jesus will be ritually unclean upon returning to Capernaum. What to do? Should he immediately ask for the rabbi's intervention, even though Jesus will be in a defiled state? Or, to protect his own reputation and status, might it be better for him to wait until Jesus purifies Himself in the *mikve*?² (Hebrew for purification bath)? In this conflicted state, Jarius decides to follow his heart.

Please Help!

As soon as Jesus reaches the Capernaum shore, *the people welcomed Him, for they had all been waiting for Him*. However, when Jairus arrives the people recognize him and part for this important man. Luke records that Jairus then *fell at Jesus' feet, and began to implore Him to come to his house*. The crowds had to have been astonished when Jairus prostrates himself before this “defiled” rabbi and begs Jesus to come to his house. Because desperate people do desperate things, Jairus is willing to risk throwing his reputation and synagogue ruler career aside to plead with Jesus to heal his daughter.

Curious Crowds

Luke tells us that *as He went* (to Jairus' house), *the crowds were pressing against Him*. The Greek verb Luke uses for “pressing” is the same word used for crushing grapes. The crowds are squeezing and pressing Jesus. He is THE magnetic center of attraction. For some in the crowd, Jesus and His miracles have become quite the show, the best thing to hit Capernaum in a long time. Others are pressing in on Him because they have heard that good things might happen to them if they are close to this miracle-working rabbi. As far as we can tell from the text, no one in the crowd is following Jesus for the purpose of submitting to Him. That is often the way it is with crowds: curious, sometimes crushing, but certainly not committed.

A Slowly Dying Woman

On the fringe of this dense group of people stands a woman whose name we do not know. Luke tells us that this is a desperate woman *who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone*. To a first-century observant Jew, this is a woman with a twelve-year physical, social

and spiritual problem because to a Jew *the life of the flesh is in the blood*.³ Thus Luke increases the drama of his story as he juxtaposes two women in his narrative: one who has been slowly dying for twelve years with a twelve-year-old woman-to-be who is now rapidly dying.

An Unclean Woman

There are very significant social and spiritual implications for a woman with a chronic issue of blood. In the ritual purification notions of observant Judaism, this woman is continually unclean prohibiting her from Temple worship, which is where she had to go to get “right with God.” Consequently, for the last twelve years this woman would have seen herself as being unacceptable to God. How debilitating a thought is that? As if that is not bad enough, in her condition anyone who has contact with her becomes defiled and thus ritually unclean. Thus no one would ever knowingly want to touch her.

Failure to Thrive

Remember those stories of 30-40 years ago about newborns in Eastern European orphanages who just laid in a crib month after month without human contact? Medically speaking they came to be known as “failure to thrive” babies. In a similar vein, what is it like for an adult not to be touched or hugged for twelve years?

This woman must have had a four-fold “failure to thrive” – physically, spiritually, emotionally and socially. For religious reasons, she has been deliberately rejected, humiliated and abandoned by her culture! More than a decade of living this way has made her desperate. She has tried everything that could possibly help, spent all her monies, and has only gotten worse.⁴ Her body as well as her soul is dying. What to do? Being the ultimate outsider, she does not have easy

access to Jesus like Jairus does as the consummate insider. Since she is forbidden to make contact with others, the crowds in front of her represent a seemingly impossible barrier for her to get to Jesus. Yet she is convinced that Jesus can make a difference. She is another desperate person willing to do desperate things to get to Jesus.

A Risky Plan

Reaching Jesus through this mass of compressed humanity appears daunting. Yet she tries by persistently and forcefully elbowing her way through the crowd, hoping that the crowd's eyes will stay fixed on Jesus so that no one will recognize her. Even as she does so, she defiles dozens and dozens of men and women with her contact. How might the crowd respond should they recognize her? This is risky behavior indeed!

A Desperate Idea

Finally the woman gets close to Jesus without being recognized by the crowd. Now what to do? To try and get Jesus' attention would be too chancy. That might get her publicly recognized and reveal what she had just done – making many ritually defiled. But given her first-century understanding of things, she has an intriguing idea. “If only I could touch one of his tassels; that might get me healed.” In order to do that, she needs to get close enough to touch Jesus' prayer shawl. We need to interject some more context to understand her plan.

Prayer Tassels

The Torah required observant Jewish men to have tassels at each of the four corners of their prayer shawls. Deuteronomy 22:12 and Numbers 15:38-40 dictate that these tassels are to be made of white threads with one blue thread in the center. The singular blue thread, similar to the shade of blue in the High Priest's robe,⁵ reminds

Jewish men that Israel is called to be a holy nation of priests.⁶

During the time of Saul and David, these tassels also signified the essence of a man. In I Samuel 24:4-6, when Saul enters the cave where David is hiding and falls asleep, David decides to cut off one of Saul's tassels (*edge of Saul's robe* is an imprecise contextual translation). A short time later David's conscience strikes him because he never should have raised a hand against the personhood of one anointed by God.

Healed!

In light of this historical backdrop, the woman in Luke's story may have reasoned that if she can touch one of Jesus' prayer shawl tassels, she would be making contact with and submitting to His personhood without physically touching Him (women are forbidden from making contact with any man except their husband). Maybe that would be sufficient to get healed. In her desperate situation, it was worth the risk.

So a woman very much on the fringe of first-century Judaism finds enough courage (and strength!) to fight through the crowds to get close enough to touch one of the tassels on Jesus' prayer shawl. As she does so, she immediately knows she is healed. She has been released from this “bad blood” prison! But before she can even start to formulate an exit strategy, Jesus detects her and now all eyes are suddenly fixed upon her.

Rescue and Restoration

Jesus is never content to just rescue a person. He also wants that person to be fully restored. Thus, as one commentator observed, “a private healing needs a public acknowledgement.” Being healed of her “bad blood” is only the beginning. She also needs to be socially and spiritually accepted back into the community, so Jesus needs to let

everyone watching this scene know that she is no longer “unclean.” In order to accomplish this, He asks a question to which He already knows the answer (a good rabbinic teaching technique): *Who is the one who touched Me?* (Note that with this question Jesus acknowledges that touching His tassel is equivalent to touching Him.) By asking the question, He is informing the community of her newly healed state, thus restoring her back into fellowship with them.

Of course, not knowing Jesus’ intent with His question, this woman fears the worst. Will the crowds now turn on her as they realize she has defiled them? Her plan to remain anonymous has failed. All she can do is fall down in a trembling state before Jesus and disclose why she came to touch His tassel and *how she had been immediately healed.*

My Daughter

Notice what happens next. Jesus, setting aside time to listen to her story, *said to her, “Daughter your faith has made you well: go in peace.”* In its original Semitic understanding, what Jesus said would be heard as, *my daughter*,⁷ an endearing, family-belonging term in the Kingdom of God. Now everyone in the community knows she has been healed **and** has been totally accepted by Jesus. No longer will they have to ostracize her forcing her to live life on the fringe. Now she can be hugged. Finally she can go to the Temple again.

Jesus commends her *faith*, which begs the question: what was the nature of her faith in Him? Would she be able to pass an Apostles or Nicene Creed exam on who Jesus is? No. But she was convinced He could make a difference in her life, and that emboldened her to fight through the crowds to submit to Him. That was sufficient “faith” for Jesus to respond to and commend.

A Shalom Benediction

Jesus sends this woman forth with *go in shalom* (*peace* is the Greek word for the Hebrew word *shalom*) – a benediction of restoration. *Shalom* to first-century Jews had a four-fold meaning:⁸ being reconciled with 1) God, 2) the community, 3) yourself, and 4) God’s creation. Come for one thing and get so much more! That’s always the way it is with Jesus. We come in crisis looking to be rescued, but end up being *shalom* restored.

It’s Too Late

Now back to the story line of Jairus that opened Luke’s narrative. How might he be feeling about this unanticipated interruption by an unimportant woman who thwarted his plan by stopping Jesus? Amazingly, Jairus does not rebuke this woman or chide Jesus for stopping to focus on her. Even with growing fears that his daughter’s life is slipping away, he is still willing to let Jesus have His way. This speaks to a measure of his faith. While Jesus pronounces *go in shalom* to this new *daughter*, Jairus is informed that *his daughter has died*. One woman receives “new” life while another loses her life. Upon hearing the news, Jesus informs Jairus, *do not be afraid any longer; only believe, and she will be made well.*

Is He Messiah?

What might be a reason for Jairus to believe that there is still hope with respect to his daughter’s life? From his perspective, the issue is no longer one of a serious illness, but of death. The laying on of hands by a miracle-working rabbi for curing a malady is one thing, but bringing someone back from the dead, well that is an entirely different matter. In fact the rabbis taught that bringing someone back from the dead could only be done when Messiah came.⁹ If that ever did happen, it would announce the messianic age.

Is it possible that Jairus might have known that just a day's walk from Capernaum, Jesus brought back to life the son of the widow of Nain on the day of his death?¹⁰ Most likely the news of that miracle of miracles quickly traveled far and wide. "Maybe," Jairus might have hoped, "Jesus can do the same for my daughter. Maybe He is Messiah."

Doing the Unthinkable...Again!

Finally arriving at Jairus' house, Jesus finds that the weeping and mourning is already underway. Since culturally this was done with professional mourners,¹¹ Luke is telling us that Jairus' daughter has been dead long enough for same-day funeral and mourning arrangements to be arranged and initiated. Luke also recounts that Jesus takes *Peter and John and James* with Him along with Jairus and his wife into the girl's bedroom where she lay lifeless. Amazingly, *Jesus took her by the hand*. That had to have produced a gulp deep in Jairus' throat because everybody knows that an observant Jew is forbidden to touch a dead person. That is the highest level of defilement. Yet at the same time, Jairus has to be relieved that Jesus does not allow the protocols of ritual impurity to be a barrier to restoring his daughter. When Jesus says, "*Child, arise*," Luke tells us that *her spirit returned and immediately she got up*.

Transference

When you look at this scene from a wider perspective, it takes your breath away. This is a culture that thinks diseases and medical maladies are transmitted by touch. That is part of the underlying rationale for the whole ritual purification system. In their understanding of things, it keeps people with diseases from transferring their maladies to others. The instant the woman with the issue of blood was healed, she could have momentarily thought that she just

transferred her "bad blood" problem to Jesus. In a sense she would have been right, although she would not have known the reasons.

Redefining Purity

In Jairus' case, Jesus, the Holy One, redefines purity when He touches a defiled lifeless body and restores life. The one who is pure touches the impure and makes the impure one pure while the Holy One touching the impure stays pure. In the woman's case, a very unclean person touches the Holy One of God and becomes clean. Jesus turns the ritual purification system of His day completely upside down. This woman and Jairus' daughter are some of the first to experience what will become the reality of Calvary. There Jesus takes upon Himself our sin-saturated "bad blood" with its curse of death and takes it to the Cross. There He sheds His blood and gives His life so that we can become clean and have eternal life starting in the here and now. What a miracle of miracles for those who believe and submit to Him. Welcome to the Kingdom of God!

Faith Implications

While we didn't deal with every verse in this passage, those we did consider are ripe with faith implications:

Regarding God

- He raises people from the dead. With Him, nothing is impossible.¹²
- He has His own timetable. It is a perfect timetable (with no unplanned interruptions). His purpose is to always maximize His Glory – accurately reveal who He is and how He does things – not necessarily to minimize the growth-producing challenges needed to mature our faith.
- He willingly responds to those who submit to Him even in imperfect faith.

- He is no respecter of status. Both the lofty and the lowly can be equal recipients of His grace.

Regarding the Adversary and Mutiny

- He will even corrupt religious systems as well as use crowds to marginalize and exclude people in order to keep them from Jesus.
- Mutiny comes in many forms. Many in the crowd came in contact with Jesus briefly, but only one submitted and received healing. Failure to submit to Jesus always sustains the mutiny.

Regarding the Human Condition

- Disease and death are a reality and a legacy of the Mutiny.
- Times of desperation come to all. When they do, how and who we respond to is the issue.
- Carnal Christian crowds (and churches and ministries) can easily exclude the very people in pain that Jesus wants to embrace. Often that is because we have
 - more of a passion for our version of orthodoxy than for people in pain.

- too narrow of an understanding of how much God's mercy and compassion permeates His "Good News." (Remember Chapter Three?)

- a distorted view of God – who He is and how He does things – as we both knowingly and unknowingly communicate our misshapen views of God to others.

Regarding Rescue and Restoration.

- It is centered in the person and power of the transforming "touch" of Jesus Christ.
- comes by submitting to the authority of Jesus.
- is never so bad that Jesus can't rescue and restore a person.
- is never too late for Jesus to intervene in a person's life.
- includes triumph over death.
- always points to the Cross where our bad blood and its curse of death get transferred to Him. It necessitates a Cross where His holy blood is shed to wash us, to pay the infinite cost (and absorb the infinite wrath) of the "bad blood" debt to the Father that we could never repay.

92 • Encounters with Jesus

- Is submitting everything to Jesus an issue for you? Are there still some parts of your life that are off limits to Him? Pray for a desperate desire to want to be totally set free by inviting Him into those remaining “prisons” today.

- Are you still waiting for something that seems so right, so good? Remember, God’s timetable is very different from ours! Remember, when all hope seems to be gone, God is still there. Ask Jairus. Ask this woman. Ask Zechariah and Elizabeth. Ask Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God’s Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

In the days ahead, take some time to meditate upon and contemplate this remarkable scene of two interwoven desperations. Become Jairus, then the woman. Immerse yourself in both of their realities and then let the Holy Spirit touch you in fresh and new ways.

*I sought the Lord, and He answered me,
And delivered me from all my fears.*

—Psalm 34:4

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

—Psalm 34:18

*The Lord is near to all who call upon Him,
To all who call upon Him in truth.*

—Psalm 145:18

Faith is the means by which the infirmity of man lays hold on the infinity of God.

—John Blanchard

Faith is the silver thread upon which the pearls of grace are strung.

— C. H. Spurgeon

Faith is the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see.

—William N. Clark

Faith does not operate in the realm of the possible.
There is no glory for God in that which is humanly possible.
Faith begins when man's power ends.

— George Muller

God does not expect us to submit our faith to Him without reason,
but the very limits of our reason make faith a necessity.

—Augustine

Faith makes things possible – it does not make them easy.

— Unknown

Faith will lead you where you cannot walk.
Reason has never been a mountain climber.

—E. W. Kenyon

Most people are brought to faith in Christ, not by argument, but by exposure to it.

—Samuel Shoemaker

A weak faith may receive a strong Christ.

—Thomas Watson

Sources and Notes

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²Dr. James C. Martin, et. al., *Exploring Bible Times: The Gospels in Context* (Bible World Seminars: Amarillo, Texas, 2003), p.86.

³Leviticus 17:11

⁴Mark 5:26

⁵Exodus 28:31

⁶Exodus 19:6

⁷David Miller, unpublished paper “A Double Healing,” 2002.

⁸John A. Bernbaum, “Shalom: Building a Biblical Worldview,” [www.shalom-project.org/Biblical Grounding/Building a Biblical Worldview](http://www.shalom-project.org/Biblical%20Grounding/Building%20a%20Biblical%20Worldview).

⁹Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1992), p. 463.

¹⁰Luke 7:11-17

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¹²Luke 1:37

11 Our Daily Bread

*You do not have because you do not ask.
You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives,
so you may spend it on your pleasures.*

—James 4:2c-3

Read: Luke 11:1-4

The Disciple's Prayer

W



While it is known as The Lord's Prayer, contextually this prayer might well be called the Disciples' Prayer. It was customary practice for rabbis to craft a special prayer for their disciples.¹ Such a prayer was something that each band of disciples coveted as part of their identity as a learning community. These corporate prayers were intended to be a succinct summary of each rabbi's distinctive approach to interpreting God's Word.² The desire for such a prayer helps to explain the Disciples' request when they came to Jesus one day and asked: *Lord, teach us to pray just as (rabbi) John also taught his disciples (added).*

Another Remez

In incorporating *daily bread* into His distinctive Disciples' Prayer, Rabbi Jesus was drawing upon a well-known *remez* that reached deep into Israel's history. As explained in the front of this book, a *remez* is a "hinted meaning" back to something that everyone knows and understands and for which no further explanation is needed. In this case, Jesus is making an intentional reference back to the wilderness of Zin, the site of daily manna, something the Disciples well understood. Therefore, to continue to unfold the intended contextual implications of praying *give us each day our daily bread*, we need to go back to the Wilderness of Zin and contemplate that desolate scene.

That Terrible Wilderness

The Wilderness of Zin is where the Israelites spent the vast majority of their 40-year desert experience. If you have ever been there or seen it from the air, you are immediately struck by how barren this region is.³ The

Bible refers to this place as *that great and terrible wilderness*.⁴ These early Hebrews complainingly describe this environment to Moses as *not a place of grain, or figs or vines or of pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink*.⁵

Daily Manna or Die

The geographical context explains why the morning arrival of millions of pints of manna was absolutely essential for the survival of this embryonic nation. In such an arid setting, there are no safety nets for food, no alternative sources of supply. Without God's daily provision of manna, this people group would have quickly perished from the face of the earth. That is the corporate historical context that Jesus is suggesting we evoke in our hearts and minds when we ask for *our daily bread*.

Total Sustenance and Dependence

In this Wilderness of Zin setting, daily manna symbolizes a conscious, continual posture of always acknowledging being **totally dependent** on the Lord for everything. In giving us that daily bread *remez*, it's as if Jesus intends us to be praying,

“Lord, please provide our community of faith with the necessities we require this day, and Lord may we live today acknowledging our need to be **totally sustained** by You because we are indeed **truly dependent** upon You for everything.”

That is the community's posture of heart, mind and soul that is best imported into the words *our daily bread* each and every time that *remez* phrase is recited in the Disciples' Prayer. And it is that contextual backdrop which raises the question: Are we even asking for *our daily bread* in the spirit in which Jesus intended?

Importance of Bread

In our twenty-first-century Western culture, we have lost the first-century significance of bread. In Bible times, bread was absolutely essential for every Middle Eastern meal.⁶ People did not have forks and spoons to eat with when they reclined to eat. Rather people used a piece of bread torn from a loaf for dipping into the various common food bowls set before them – one piece of bread for each dip of food. Bread was the vehicle that brought food from the table to your mouth to sustain your life.

Insignificance of Bread Today

In Western culture today, bread has become insignificant. When we have a protein breakfast, generally the focus of our attention is on the omelet and/or the meat, but not the toast that comes with it. When we stop for fast food, our mind and our stomach is usually much more focused on what's between the two pieces of bun than it is on the bun itself. When we only have a salad for lunch as part of being weight and health conscious, we often times intentionally avoid the bread. How does all this affect our understanding of what it means to ask our Father for *our daily bread*?

A Community Prayer

This Disciples' Prayer is a prayer that the community prays for the benefit of the community. In the Middle East, the community is always more important than the individual.⁷ Consequently, a person always sacrificed personal rights for the benefit of the community. Not so in the West! Here the individual always considers himself or herself to be more important than the rest of the community. As a result, community harmony is usually sacrificed for the sake of personal interests. This begs the question: What

kind of individual, self-serving lenses, filters and presuppositions are we implicitly bringing to the praying of this corporate Disciples' Prayer?

Necessities Not Niceties

The request to *give us each day our daily bread* is the only part of the Disciple's Prayer that deals with material things. As previously observed, "bread" is a necessity in the first-century village setting. Thus when it comes to material things, Jesus is encouraging His disciples to pray for today's community necessities, not today's niceties or creature comforts. When you reflect on your last 100 prayers for material things, how many of them were only for daily necessities? How many were for what the community of faith needs, not what your particular individual needs are?

Prayer and Our View of God

Maybe we are not even praying for *our daily bread* any more, at least not in the spirit that Jesus intended. Could it be that we collectively feel that we are quite able to furnish our own bread? Thus, it may not even be in our consciousness that God is somehow still needed to provide us with *our daily bread* necessities.

The nature of our prayers always reveal something about our (often flawed) view of God. If that is true, what might our we-don't-need-to-be-asking-for-daily-bread prayers be saying about our collective understanding of the scope and extent of God's Providence? What might our prayers (or the lack thereof) also be revealing about us?

Reflections to Journal and Share

- When it comes to material things, when you look at your last 100 prayers, what have you/we been praying for lately – daily necessities or niceties?
- Have you ever been in an economic position (like many in other parts of this world) where you were part of a community of believers who literally had to pray for God to supply your basic necessities each day? What was that like? How long did that last? What did that do to you?

- When we do pray for our daily necessities, is a concurrent acknowledgement of total dependency and total sustenance resonating in our collective soul as the foundational source for then asking for our daily bread? If not, what might that suggest?

- How can we consciously cultivate our hearts and minds to be in a dependent posture of living each day as if we are all perpetually residing in the barrenness of the Wilderness of Zin when the reality is we live each day in the abundance of the West?

- If the Lord's Prayer was indeed cast in the rabbinic tradition of prayers that uniquely capture distinctive aspects of a rabbi's teaching emphasis, what distinctive themes of Jesus' message and ministry do you find reflected in His Disciples' Prayer? (might want to revisit Matthew 6:9-13)

Ponder

There is great wisdom as well as practical guidance to be found in God's Word in the sequence of the words and thoughts that unfold in a passage. This petition to *give us this day our daily bread* is not the first sentence of the Disciples' Prayer. Note the context of the thought development that immediately precedes this request as recorded in Luke 11:2-4:

- First, Jesus has us start by collectively coming to *our Father*. That usage, an Aramaic child's word,⁸ *abba*, for "Father/Daddy" conveys an approachable, personal Father in an intimate family setting.
- Next, we immediately acknowledge *hallowed be Your name*, a phrase that reminds us of God's holy nature as well as our calling to revere and defend His Name.
- Then Jesus has us acknowledge *your Kingdom come*. This reminds us that as His disciples, it is all about His Kingdom, not our kingdoms (organizations, businesses, churches, etc.). It's all about doing "the Lord's work the Lord's way" – not doing His work our way.

Only with those attitudinal postures in place and with our souls continually affirming these three spiritual realities are we then in the right posture to now corporately ask for *our daily bread*.

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of Life;
he who comes to Me will not hunger,
and he who believes on Me will never thirst.*

—John 6:35

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

—Psalm 23:1

*I have called upon You every day, O Lord;
I have spread out my hand to You.*

—Psalm 88:9b&c

*In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice;
In the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.*

—Psalm 5:3

You cannot starve a man who is feeding on God's Promises.

—Unknown

Prosperity is not a sign that all is well.

—John Blanchard

Sources and Notes

¹Frank Gaebelien, et. al., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8 (Regency/Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984), p. 946.

²Ibid.

³See the "Wilderness of Zin" helicopter video clip from "*The Bible and Land*" DVD (Preserving Bible Times: Gaithersburg, Maryland, 2004).

⁴Deut. 1:19, 8:15

⁵Numbers 20:5b

⁶Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, second printing (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987), p. 123.

⁷For more on the contrast between the Middle Eastern world of Jesus' day and our Western world of today see the "Comparing Making Disciples THEN with (most) Discipleship NOW" table at the end of the "Rabbis and Disciples" Chapter of *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Rockville, Maryland, 2005), p. 36.

⁸Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1992), p. 618-619.

12

Pray Confidently or Persistently?

So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you...

—Luke 11:9a

Read: Luke 11:5-8

A Preposterous Story

On the surface, to Westerners it seems like a preposterous story that Jesus tells His disciples about a friend who shows up at midnight and needs to be fed an elaborate meal. After all, who of us has ever heard of such a thing? But according to Kenneth Bailey (the world's foremost expert in the cultural context of Lukan parables), Jesus intends this to be an outrageous story, but not for the reasons we in the West have typically assumed.



Different Paradigms

This parable illustrates again the difficulty that 21st-century Westerners can have in understanding first-century Middle Eastern village reality where the interests of the community always transcend that of the individual.¹ Sadly, in the West what's best for the individual always seems to transcend what's best for the community.

Thus in this story, Westerners, with their individualistic paradigms, tend to identify with the person at the door because they see this person as the one with a need (problem). However because of their community perspective, Middle Easterners more readily identify with the person inside the house because that person has the capacity to meet this sudden community need and thus preserve the honor of the village. Before addressing the passage itself, let's take a closer look at the cultural context embedded in Jesus' story about how He expects His disciples to pray the Disciples' prayer He has just given them.

The Cultural Setting

To a first-century Middle Easterner, having a visitor arrive at midnight,

while certainly unusual, would not be unheard of. Since it is very hot during the summer in many parts of the Middle East, travelers often walked (the usual mode of transportation) at night to avoid the hottest times of the day. That climatic reality can easily cause a visitor to arrive at a village late into the evening.

Because hospitality is mandatory in this culture, the extremes to which villages have gone to extend such hospitality are legendary. Why? Because it is an issue of village honor.² Thus, anyone who refuses to participate in extending the village's hospitality to a guest would immediately be shamed in the eyes of the village. Such news would spread like wild fire throughout the village.

Centrality of Bread

As was noted in the prior chapter, bread is served at every meal in a first-century Jewish household because it is used as the knife, fork and spoon at every meal. To eat, a piece of bread is torn from a loaf and dipped into the common food bowls set on the table. This dipped piece of bread is called a *sop*,³ and cannot be reused since it would defile the remaining food in that bowl. Thus, every *sop* (mouthful) of food requires a new piece of bread torn from the loaf.

Another part of this meal tradition is that a guest can never be offered a partial loaf of bread because that would be insulting.⁴ The host must, therefore, offer a complete loaf. Since Middle Eastern hospitality traditions require putting much more in front of the guest than he could possibly eat, multiple loaves of bread (in this story three seems to be appropriate) are needed to properly "set the table."⁵

Tongue in Cheek

Not always fully appreciating and understanding the Jewish village customs of hospitality and

meals; and furthermore, not understanding the literary form Jesus is using to tell this story, Westerners easily miss Jesus' intended tongue-in-check factiousness. Thus when Jesus says, *Suppose one of you or Which one of you* (ESV), He is asking, in using this literary style, "Can you imagine this ever happening?"⁶ He fully expects His disciples to resoundingly respond, "No, of course not. We could never imagine such a thing. Friends just don't act that way in the village, particularly when there is an urgent need."

A Closer Look

With this contextual backdrop and Ken Bailey's help,⁷ let's examine this parable more closely to see if we can discern what Jesus was conveying to His disciples in His first teaching (in Luke) about prayer. Note that

- Presumably **no one knew this guest was coming**. Thus, this parable is about a sudden, unexpected, immediate community need – bread to feed this guest now – so that village honor can be preserved.
- The friend at the door can be assumed to know who has fresh bread in the village. Baking is a communal activity whereby different families bake a several-day supply of bread on different days. Thus it would be reasonable to assume that **the petitioner at the door knows who baked today**, and therefore who has sufficient bread to meet this community need.
- The **request is a most humble one** – only for the minimum amount of bread – not for tableware or any of the other attendant items that will be needed to properly set the table. Thus, the person at the door could not possibly make a lesser request of his friend. It is a true need at the most basic level.

- There is **no knocking at the door**. That has unfortunately been back-projected onto this text because of what lies ahead in verse 9... *knock and it (the door) will be opened to you (added)*. In a typical one-room home where everyone sleeps closely together, knocking at night would be unnecessarily disruptive. In a densely packed Middle Eastern village, knocking would also be disruptive to sleeping neighbors. Furthermore, knocking is not necessary in the village because you are recognized by your voice.
- The **excuses put forth** by the “friend” inside for not responding to this urgent community need for bread **are not only flimsy, but also laughable**. This is the outrageous part of Jesus’ story. The noise of unlocking the door and possibly waking up the children and animals in the home is an utterly trivial matter in comparison to the village’s honor – and that is how Jesus assumed we would understand it.
- The **person at the door never repeats his request**. He has no need to since his request is immediately acknowledged and accepted. There seems to be very little elapsed time between the spoken request at the door and the acknowledged response from inside. In this parable, an immediate need is responded to immediately. This is a clue that the Greek word *anaideia* being translated in this passage as *persistent* doesn’t seem to appropriately characterize what Jesus is describing in this parable.
- While the person at the door only asks for bread, **this petitioner will get much more from his friend** inside. To appropriately honor this guest, the village will need more than bread to properly set the table. For example,

the village will want to put forth its best drinking goblets and tableware. Hence the expected appropriate community-oriented response: He will *give him as much as he needs*.

No Persistence Evident!

What is Jesus teaching in this can-you-imagine-this-response-would-ever-happen story? For starters, it certainly doesn’t seem to be about being persistent when asking for a legitimate, immediate need from a friend! There is no evidence in this story of persistence being demonstrated or even needed by the person at the door. Rather the emphasis is much more on confidently making the community’s needful request known to a friend in the village that everyone knows can quickly meet that need. Thus the question remains: How did this word *anaideia* end up being translated as *persistent* in this parable about two friends?

It’s About God’s Honor

Jesus is teaching that when the community unexpectedly finds itself truly needing something to preserve its honor, they can be confident that the need will not only be responded to immediately, but will often be met in a more expansive way. The friend you are bringing your need to knows full well all the other needs that come with this situation. Furthermore, your friend has the resources required to respond to these greater needs.

Jesus is underscoring the fact that **of course** your friend inside will respond to your need for bread. He is a person of honor and will do whatever is required to preserve his honor in the eyes of the community. Jesus is also saying that praying in this confident posture is precisely the understanding and sense of expectancy the disciples should have when praying for *daily bread*⁸ in the Disciples’ Prayer He just gave them.

From the Lesser to the Greater

In moving by implication from the lesser⁹ (the friend inside who has just received an urgent request at a very inconvenient hour while his family is sleeping) to the greater (Our Divine Father who is your Perfect Friend, who is never inconvenienced, who never sleeps, and who is even more willing to respond than we are to ask), Jesus is saying that when you have a true, sudden need, make that need known immediately to *our Father*.¹⁰ **Of course** *our Father* will respond; it is an issue of His honor, He knows the community is watching, and He will maintain His honor at all costs.

More than You Asked For

Furthermore, *our Father* loves you. His affection for you goes way beyond whatever affection the person inside the house might have for his friend at the midnight door. So pray confidently when you have a sudden unexpected need. *Our Father* indeed hears those who come to Him. And don't be surprised if you get more than you asked for (even the Holy Spirit¹¹) because *our Father* understands all that you need. Is that a great teaching by Jesus or what!

A Perplexing Question

Now let's deal with this perplexing question: What caused the historical emphasis in this passage on the persistence of the person at the door when the story is not about his persistence at all? How have we come to miss the thrust of Jesus' teaching emphasis in this parable?

Much of our apparent misunderstanding of this parable is due to an unfortunate translational choice for the Greek word *anaideia* found in verse eight of this parable. In early Christian

tradition, two very different meanings had evolved for *anaideia*: "persistent" and "shamelessness."¹² Western translators have historically preferred "persistent" as the most appropriate use for *anaideia* in verse eight assuming it was referring to the person at the door. Missing much of the village cultural context embedded in this story, it was understandable from their Western perspective why they chose "persistent" as the preferred usage of *anaideia* in this text. But when this parable is put back into its Middle Eastern context of mandatory hospitality and village honor/shame, the "shamelessness" meaning of *anaideia* makes much more sense, especially as it refers to the friend inside the house.¹³

Maintaining honor and avoiding shame is the reason why the friend inside will respond to this village need. Restated, the person inside will respond to his friend at the door because he is a person of honor and integrity, and therefore will not allow himself to be shamed in the eyes of the village by not responding.

Challenging our Paradigms

This rediscovery of the cultural context of "The Friend at Midnight" parable by Dr. Bailey may challenge some of our paradigms about "persistent" prayer. As such, it gives us some implications with which to wrestle. For example,

- Because the more appropriate contextual use of *anaideia* is "shamelessness," we are not being taught by Jesus in this passage to "persist" in continuing to pray for the same immediate community need once the request has been brought to God? Instead, Jesus teaches us that one needful request is sufficient. Therefore, you can confidently pray for what you truly need right now, and further-

more, don't be surprised if you get more in response to your request than you asked for!

- If we keep the traditional misunderstanding of *anaideia* as “persistence” in this passage, what might that be erroneously implying about God? How might this misunderstanding of *anaideia* as “persistence” be wrongfully shaping our understanding of God’s responsiveness to prayer? For example, might this misunderstanding
 - Suggest that even having brought our immediate need to God, we still need to persist in reminding Him about our need again and again?
 - Mean that with God, asking once is not sufficient?
 - Raise the questions: Does asking God repeatedly for the same thing somehow increase the chance that God will grant it? Is God somehow more persuaded by the repetition of our prayers? If so, how many prayers constitute enough?

- Suggest we need to “pester” *Our Father* until He gives us what we have been praying for?

Upon closer examination, the problems with keeping the traditional “persistent” understanding of *anaideia* in this parable are **much more faith perplexing, faith frustrating, than they are faith producing!**¹²

An Accurate View of God

Why does all this matter? Because misunderstanding God’s Word can easily result in misunderstanding God. Furthermore, any view of God or characterization of Him other than as He has accurately revealed Himself in His Word is an idolatrous view of God – a view of God other than who He truly is. It always matters how we understand and interpret the Word of God and how we then portray and represent Him to others.

In closing, obviously this chapter is not a treatise on prayer. That would require a multi-volume work. This chapter only addresses how we should be praying when it comes to sudden, immediate community of faith needs.

Reflections to Journal and Share

- We should always pray for what the Holy Spirit is prompting us to pray for, not for which our own flesh or our religious culture suggests we should be praying for. Agree or disagree?

- This parable is about true needs, not desires, wish-to-haves, or our own self-serving, moving-target definitions of what we think constitute our “real” needs for today. In evaluating your last 100 prayers, how would you place them on the Needs.....Desires spectrum?

- We are called to pray without ceasing. But being in a constant attitude of prayer is a very different issue from that of bringing the same unanswered prayer before God again and again. Strike any cords? Raise any issues?

- What thought(s) challenged you in this encounter? What is God’s Spirit whispering to you? What action is He prompting you to take?

Ponder

Praying consistently is not the same thing as praying persistently. If a different guest showed up in the village at midnight every night for a week, the village would have to *consistently* ask for bread each night. But having asked for bread each night from one who has bread, there is no need to persist with that request that evening. The one inside will respond to the need.

Prayer is multifaceted. It is much more about adoration, confession, thanksgiving and gratitude than it is about running through our list of “needs” or “I want” petitions that God is well aware of.

Prayer is much more about communing with the Lover of your soul, who is also our true Friend¹⁵ than merely an opportunity to do a core dump of what we think and feel we “need” today.

The Desert Fathers reflected upon this reality as they often got so caught up in adoration and praise to God in their prayers that they ended up forgetting to bring their petitions to Him. They also realized that when they spent time communing with *Our Father*, the whole nature of what they thought was an urgent need (from their perspective) began to change and suddenly didn’t seem to be quite so important anymore. Truly effective prayer always changes our perspective on what’s really important and what is truly needed.

*Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness!
You have relieved me in my distress;
Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.*

—Psalm 4:1

*I have called upon You, for You will answer me, O God;
Incline Your ear to me, hear my speech.*

—Psalm 17:6

*Shout out praise to God, all the earth!
Sing praises about the majesty of his reputation!
Give him the honor he deserves!*

—Psalm 66:2 (NET)

Let my mouth be filled with thy praise and with thy honour all the day.

—Psalm 71:8 (KJV)

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, O Lord my God, thou art very great;
Thou art clothed with honour and majesty.*

—Psalm 104:1 (KJV)

We dare not limit God in our asking, nor in his answering.

—John Blanchard

God can no more divest himself of his attribute of hearing than of being. The answer of our prayers is secured by the fact that in rejecting them God would in a certain sense deny his own nature.

—John Calvin

Surely he who feeds the ravens when they cry will not starve his children when they pray.

—Joseph Hall

Because God is the living God, he can hear;
because he is a loving God, he will hear;
because he is our covenant God, he has bound himself to hear.
Prayer should be definite. What a lot of praying there is that prays
for everything in general and nothing in particular.

—C. H. Spurgeon

Prayer is not monologue but dialogue. God's voice in response to mine
is its most essential part.

—Andrew Murray

Real prayer seeks an audience and an answer.

—William S. Plumer

We lie to God in prayer if we do not rely on him afterwards.

—Robert Leighton

Nothing is discussed more and practiced less than prayer.

—Unknown

Sources and Notes

¹For more on the contrast between the Middle Eastern world of Jesus' day and our Western world of today, see the "Comparing Making Disciples THEN with (most) Discipleship NOW" table at the end of the "Rabbis and Disciples" Chapter of *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* (Bible-in-Context Ministries, Rockville, Maryland, 2005) p. 36.

²Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, second printing (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987), p. 132.

³Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, p. 123.

⁴Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, p. 122.

⁵Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, p. 123.

⁶Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, p. 124.

⁷Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, p. 128-133.

⁸Luke 11:15, see Chapter 11 "Our Daily Bread."

⁹Luke 11:2a

¹⁰Luke 11:13b

¹¹Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, p. 125-127.

¹²John 15:15b

About the Author

Doug Greenwold is a long-time teacher of the Scriptures. He received his BS and MS degrees, as well as a MBA degree from the University of Michigan, where he also played basketball. For thirty-two years, Doug worked in general management and executive positions in Information Systems, Healthcare Services, and Life Sciences. He retired from the corporate world in 1999 to work with teaching ministries.

In 1978 Doug discovered he was called to teach the Scriptures, his true vocation. An ordained Elder in three denominations, Doug has been teaching the Bible, writing and leading retreats, conferences, and workshops for churches and para-church ministries ever since. In 1988, he first visited Israel on a study tour and realized the importance of integrating the context of the land with the biblical texts. Since then he has been an avid student and teacher of the Bible in its contextual setting.

Presently Doug is the Senior Teaching Fellow at Preserving Bible Times, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and presenting biblical truth through contextual restoration of the biblical record. Prior to that, he was a Teaching Associate at the C. S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C. Doug was also a Teaching Director with Community Bible Study and a Christian educator in the Washington, D.C. area.

Doug's first book, *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*, is a contextual revisiting of Luke's first chapter. This innovative book opens up this couple's remarkable journey of faith by telling "the rest of their story." His second book, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* contextually examines the

missing ingredients from "making disciples" in the First Century in our Western notions of "discipleship" today.

Doug's third book *The Rest of the Story* takes familiar Bible passages and contextually restores them so we can understand all the implications of the passage as if we were Middle Eastern villagers. His fourth book *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Those Stories* examines Jesus' interactions with Simon Peter, the leper, the paralytic, the calling of Levi, the rescue of the demoniac, the woman with the issue of blood, and others in a way that restores the First Century contextual richness of these encounters.

Doug's fifth book *Becoming a Judean Shepherd* revisits the 23rd Psalm through the eyes of a 12-year old boy learning shepherding from his father in Judea in the First Century. His sixth book *That Good Samaritan* contextually explores who is my neighbor and what does it mean go be neighborly. Doug's latest book *Those Prodigal Sons* contextually digs into "greatest short story every told."

Doug is the creator of PBT's "Bible Alive" multimedia weekend seminar and "Bible Alive" week-long intensives for pastors and teachers. He also leads PBT's multimedia seminars and conferences on "The Last Days of Jesus," "The Bible: It's Land and Culture," and "Making Disciples Jesus' Way."

Doug also co-leads contextual immersion trips to Israel (*The Life and Land of Jesus*) and Italy (*Paul's Roman World*). He is a frequent interview guest on Christian radio and is the author of over 50 articles on aspects of biblical context.

Presently Doug and his wife Nancy live in Columbia, Maryland, in close proximity to their children and grandchildren.

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Through revealing context, Doug Greenwold has done a wonderful job of drawing out profound understanding and applications from some very “familiar” passages in Luke. Young people today want to see and understand how Jesus and the Scriptures really intersect with life as they know it. Important pieces of contextual insight and information help make Jesus' interaction with various people come alive in fresh and new ways. This book is a wonderful resource to help anyone who truly wants to authentically interact with and apply the Scriptures.

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