



# ORDINARY

*Men*

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## Introduction to Ordinary Men.

The men of the church I attend in Panama have tried on several occasions to organize a men's fellowship. This was met with little success. One factor was that, because of the nature of the traffic and life in Panama City, meeting every week proved to be very difficult.

I felt the need to try something different and so on two occasions invited the men to our house to share in a barbecue and the chance just to sit and talk together. This opened the door to discussing a possible retreat for the men of our church. The topic of the retreat would be, becoming a "man of valor." In Spanish the word "valor," besides meaning courageous, also means a person of worth, a person who is useful, a person of strength and a person who has morals.

As we talked, I looked at the group and realized that in many ways we were ordinary men wanting to understand God's Word better and to become men of valor. As I thought about this idea I remembered the book called, *The Prayer of Jabez*; a book about an ordinary man, who wanted to serve God.

As we discussed the topic, we also discussed how we could find a time to meet and continue this process. At that point I suggested that we try meeting once a month. This would make it easier for the men to make a commitment; one that they could reasonably keep. I also volunteered to prepare a Bible Study each month based on the ordinary men of the bible.

That commitment has led to the following collection of stories and studies. These stories are fictional. Hopefully they reflect the context in which the Bible lists their names and the comments made about the individual. After each story are four suggested

studies to expand on the ideas presented. I hope they will be useful in learning that, in God's plan, there really is no such thing as **ordinary men**. All of us are special, and when we commit ourselves to His plan, we will accomplish the work He has given us and we will touch the lives of others so that they will be drawn to God.

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# Jabez

## **Jabez – Painful Reality - 1 Chronicles 4:9-10**

Just one more burden in an already difficult time. Those foolish men didn't know what they were doing. First this man, then another went off to the local shrines hoping to find an answer to all the troubles they were experiencing. I know better. They just wanted to see the women. They hoped that they might get a chance to lay with a goddess. A lot of good that will do. Sleeping with a prostitute and fooling themselves into believing it will put them in contact with the gods.

If that wasn't bad enough Alsenaph, yes my husband Alsenaph, decided he would join them. I tried to talk him out of it but he wouldn't listen. He wouldn't listen to the old prophet either. Thought that he knew better. He said that if God was going to abandon us then he might as well go and see what those other gods had to offer. He had heard that up in the north all of the people were doing it and the rumor was that they had all the food they need.

At first he only went once in a while, then it was once a week, then it was so often I never saw him at home. Life was getting very hard. He lost interest in his marriage and in me. When he did come home we just fought. There were nights when he didn't come home at all. During that time is when Jedan showed up. He was passing by and asked I invited him in for a drink. We started chatting. It was so good to have someone take an interest in me. Over the next month things got more serious. I never intended it to

happen but one day he just stayed for the evening meal and one thing led to another.

Alsenaph showed up early. Fortunately we heard him coming and Jedan escaped out the back. He stopped by the next day but I told him not to come back again. But it was too late, I was pregnant. In a few months everyone would know what happened, especially my husband.

The next month the Amalikites attacked our village. My foolish husband, as usual, had gone to the temple of that goddess again. The fool was so drunk he didn't know what he was doing. He tried to fight one of the soldiers. A farmer against a soldier; well you can imagine what happened. Now, not only was I pregnant, but a widow as well.

The Amalekites were raiding on a regular basis and it is was soon time for me to give birth. What was I going to do? No one cared what happened to me. I had nowhere to go. Every day the people laughed at me. "There's that woman who committed adultery, whose fool of a husband followed after that false God." The baby growing inside of me was a reminder of all the bad that had happened to me. I decided that if it was a boy I would name him Jabez, because he would remind me and others of the pains of life and all the sorrow it brings.

### Years Later

Jabez speaks to his mother. "Mother, it is time for us to make some serious choices. All these years we have suffered and I believed it was because of my father's sin in choosing to follow after that false God. However, the judge came through here yesterday. He told us that we needed to recognize that our choice of denying God has led us down the path of suffering. We are the ones responsible. Mother I have decided that it is not life that is the cause of our pain. It is our wrong choices that bring us pain. We have the opportunity to choose. Today I choose to return to the worship of the God of our fathers."

"Mother, there is no dishonor in admitting one's sin and confessing it to God. The judge said that God is willing to forgive

us if we will return to him. I know that your life has been hard. We have had to work hard to survive. You may think that God abandoned us, but really we abandoned God. Today I choose to serve God. Today I am going to ask Him to be my God."

"Today, I will ask him to open my eyes and expand the boundaries of my vision so that I may see what He has for us. Today, I will ask Him to bless us. Today, I will ask Him to be with us. Today, I will ask Him to free me from the pain of my past and protect me from the consequences of my sin. Today, I will tell Him that I will serve him and no one else. Mother, hear me and what I say. Believe me when I tell you that when we trust God, He will care for us and change our pain to joy because He is with us."

#### Week One – Read Psalm 31

Think about something in your past that has made your life difficult and brought pain to you. What can you learn from the Psalm that will help you deal with your pain and be like Jabez?

#### Week Two – Read Psalm 16

Think about the limits or boundaries that exist in your life. Why do they exist? What effect do they have on you? Who set those boundaries? How do they affect your ability to serve God? What will you need to do so that God can expand your area of ministry?

#### Week Three – Read Isaiah 41:8-16

How does one know when God is with them? Why do you want God to be with you? What changes need to be made in your life so that God will be pleased to be with you?

#### Week Four – Read Matthew 6:9-13; Proverbs 30:8-9; 2 Timothy 4:17-18

Take a moment to reflect on what each of these passages is referring to when it talks about evil. What does evil represent in



your life? What is the source of the evil you deal with? How is evil different from sin? What do you need God to do in helping you deal with evil?

# Bezalel

## **Bezalel - Using one's gifts - Exodus 31:1-6; 36:2-5**

When I was a child I loved to draw pictures of buildings and other objects. Then I would try to build what I had drawn. I used sticks, stones and anything I could find to make a model of my drawings. My parents saw what I was doing and asked to a neighbor if I could be his apprentice. He taught me to use my skill to make tools and pottery. I also learned about carving and casting metal. I was very happy and enjoying my life.

Then they came. My parents had told me about them. They told me they owned us. Until that day I did not understand what it meant to be a slave. We had our own villages and we cared for our own needs. I knew that every day people from our village, even my father and older brother, left the village to work on various projects for someone called Pharaoh. Our life was hard but I had no idea what it meant to be a slave, until that day, when they came and took me away from my family.

That day a foreman was in the village for inspection. What he really was doing was checking to be sure that everyone who could work had gone to work. But when he stopped at our shop and saw what I was doing. He told the soldiers to take me to Pharaoh's workshop. They didn't even let me say good-by; they just took

me. I tried to fight them but they beat me. I tried to runaway but they chained me to a post. I refused to work and they threatened to kill my family.

In the midst of my anger and fear, my father was brought to me. He did not threaten me or criticize me. He did not even seem to be afraid. Nor did he plead with me to do what they asked so that my family would not be killed. Instead, he shared with me something unexpected; he asked me to do something I didn't expect to hear. He told me to make use of this opportunity to learn all that I could.

When I asked him why, he said he believed God had something special for me to do. He believed God was watching over our people and that he would send a deliverer one day, maybe soon. He had heard about a man named Moses who had defended a Jew when attacked by one of the slave masters. He told me that many believed that God had heard their cries and seen their suffering. My father challenged me to do my very best at this new shop so that when God needed my skills I would be ready to serve Him.

That day I respected my father even more and I chose to listen to his words. I learned everything I could about how to work with wood, stone and metal. It wasn't always easy because it often involved making images of the gods of Egypt. But there was much to learn and the years passed by. At times, I wondered if the God my father trusted in and believed in really existed and really cared about us. The treatment by the Egyptian slave masters became harsher. They seemed driven and almost fearful in their desire to control us and destroy our spirit. Life became more and more difficult.

Then that man my father had mentioned, Moses, returned and suddenly we were free and leaving Egypt. It was almost impossible to believe. All that happened was incredible.

And now we are here at God's holy mountain, Mount Sinai. Moses has just told me and another craftsman Oholiab, that God has chosen us to be responsible for the construction of a tabernacle for worshiping the God that has freed us. Moses says God will guide us in understanding what he wants and will provide all the

resources we need. Already, my mind is filled with designs and ideas. It is incredible.

But what is even more significant is how the words my father shared with me on that day so long ago have come to pass. It is hard to imagine why God chose me but it is clear that if I had not obeyed my father and learned all I could, God could not use me today. I would not have the skills needed to honor God as I should.

Week one – Read James 4:13-16

Do you know what will happen tomorrow, in a week, in a month or in a year? How will the decisions you make today affect what will happen in the future? How important is it to live by faith and obedience today for the work God has for you tomorrow?

Week two – Read Luke 14:28-33

What will it cost you to become proficient in what you want to do? What commitments will you need to make? How will these decisions affect you and your family?

Week three – Read 2 Kings 5:17-19, Daniel 3

Unlike Bezalel, you are not a slave, or are you? Do you have the freedom to choose where you work and what you do? What will you do if you are asked to do something that violates God's law?

Week four – Matthew 25:14-30; Colossians 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:11-15

Reflect on how you can improve in your skills and abilities. How can they be used to serve God? Does everyone have an ability which God can use in his service?

# Aquila

**Aquila – Tentmaking - Acts 18:1-5, 18-19, 24-26; Romans 16:3-6; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19**

Excerpt from the Journal of Aquila, a tentmaker.

I don't know with whom to be more mad - the Romans, that crazy group of ultra conservative Jews, or the Christians. I know the Romans do not like anyone threatening their peace and tranquility. But to drive all of the Jews out of Rome because of the action of a few, that is just crazy. How are the Romans going to handle the economic impact of that decision? Claudius is not much of a Caesar if you ask me. But it is a typical response of the Romans. Their justice exists only for those who are Romans, everyone else beware.

That brings me to my fellow Jews. Most of us have learned how to live among the Romans. I changed my name so that it would be easier to live here and be able to conduct my business. I have learned that as long as you keep quiet, the Romans are pretty accepting of the different beliefs and culture of others. Just so long as you don't cause trouble. And that is how most of us live, quietly and often profitably. That is until someone from Jerusalem came here and started talking about a man called Jesus and how he was trying to destroy our faith. They came looking for anyone who had decided to follow this teacher.

I am not against teaching the truth and protecting our faith from heresy and idolatry. It took us generations to learn how important that is, but to start attacking those who have chosen to follow the

teaching of a specific rabbi is crazy. I have met and heard a few of those who call themselves Christians and follow his teaching. They don't seem that extreme. Oppose them, teach the truth but to physically attack them for their belief, that's going too far, if you ask me. And that is just what has happened. The conservative Jews have gone too far and the Romans are tired of sending in the troops to quell another riot, another protest, and rescue another Roman who has become a Christian.

I think I know what is happening. The conservative Jews attack any Christian without checking to see if he is a converted Jew or a Roman citizen and so we all suffer. The Romans probably wouldn't react if we Jews were just attacking each other. They probably would be glad to see us destroy ourselves.

But none of this would have happened if it weren't for the Christians. Who is this Jesus anyway? What kind of teacher is he to cause such trouble? Doesn't he know any better, or have anything else to do?

For me, the best thing would be for all the Christians to just go away and leave the rest of us alone. I just want to find a peaceful place where I can work, care for my wife and family. And until yesterday I thought I had found just the place here in Corinth. That is, until my wife brought him home. You know, Paul, one of those Jews who follow Christ. And he is a Roman as well.

When she went to the market, she saw this man sewing tents and commented on his work. She told him we were new here and wondered how his business was doing. He said he had more work than he could handle and asked if we might be able to work together. My wife is the one with the business head and she knows an opportunity when she sees one, so she invited him home. We sat and discussed how we could work together. It looked like a good plan until he told us about his plan to establish a church in Corinth in his spare time. I almost exploded. I don't know how we got through the rest of the evening. Probably wouldn't have, except for my wife's skill in handling difficult situations.

Actually she often has a better grasp on what needs to be done than I do. I am the craftsman, she has the business and social skills. She convinced me that we needed Paul and the business he would generate. She was right, we were short on staff and business. So we combined our two businesses.

Things are going great now. Paul is a skillful worker and very patient with me. I have started listening to what he has to say and he makes a lot of sense. I am coming closer everyday to accepting the truth he has to share, and understanding why he is willing to risk so much to share his belief with others.

Week One – Read Ephesians 2:1-9.

Aquila did, in fact, become a believer and became a key supporter of the work that Paul was doing. As you read this passage reflect on where you are in your belief and what it will take for you to move from working for yourself to doing the good works God has prepared for you.

Week Two – Read Ephesians 2:10-13.

Aquila was driven out of Rome because of the hate some people had for Christians. He could have decided to hate them and lost the chance to find God. He was far from God. Consider how far you were from God before you became a Christian. What did it take for you to move from being separated from God to being a member of his family? What can you do to help others make the same decision?

Week Three – Read Ephesians 3:7-13.

Aquila became a follower of Christ and was willing to move his family and his business to Ephesus to help in the work. Later he moved back to Rome to support Paul while he was in prison. Then, finally he went back to Ephesus. In each of these places he organized a church in his home. What are you willing to do with your life, your business or employment so that others will be able to hear the truth? Are you willing to organize a bible study or fellowship in your house? What will you need to do so that your home will become a place where others can find Christ?

Week Four – Read Ephesians 3:14-21.

When Aquila left Rome he probably thought his life and dreams were finished. In reality his life was just beginning. He learned to depend on God, he learned to share his faith with others, and he learned the depth of God's love and power. Share what God is doing in your life to reveal his love and power. Consider how much more God could do as you understand his power, his love and his ability to provide. What do you need to do to make this possible?

# Joseph

## **Joseph - cost of parenthood - Matthew 1-2: Luke 1-2**

My friends, my brothers, my fellow fathers, many have heard of the love of a mother for her child and her willingness to make sacrifices (even of her own life) to protect her child. What is said is true and to be treated with respect.

On the other hand, fathers are often discussed from the realm of their responsibility and need to be an example to their children. I want to share with you today about the cost of a father's love and the challenges one faces as a father. While my experience may be considered unique, being the father, or surrogate father of Jesus, I believe much of what I experienced can be helpful as a guide in helping other fathers understand their role and their value.

As with all young men I desired to marry and have a family one day. I never thought that the one would happen before the other. I believed, as all hopeful men, that I would find a wife, enjoy a year

or two of blissful innocence before having to deal with being a parent. Blissful because one really has no idea what it will cost to be the father of any child, much less the Messiah.

For me, there was no interim time, no time of smiles and knowing nods from other men. No time to get acquainted with my wife and establish a home and income that would be sufficient to provide for her and our future family. The family arrived even before the marriage and in difficult circumstances. My child was born away from home, not in safety, not in the presence of loved ones. There were no words of praise and encouragement. No chance to be proud. Instead, only relief. Finally, we could get married and find a place where we might have some peace, a place where the child would not receive constant looks and whispers from others because things happened out of their proper sequence.

Then came the second blow. We had to flee. I had to take my family farther from what we knew into the unknown. I had to care for Mary and be a father to Jesus far from the support of our culture and in a foreign land. All the visions, all the prophecies, all the teachings did not prepare me for what it meant to be a father. I learned this as I struggled to be the father of the child who posed a threat to the king.

Finally, we were able leave Egypt, but we could not return to our home or to a familiar place. The threat remained so we went to an unknown place and began the work of becoming a family. But how does one raise the son of God? How can one be father to the Messiah? I had no answers to those questions other than to do what every other father was doing. I taught him what I knew, taught him to respect God and the scriptures; showed him how to do honest work and receive an honest wage. I helped him learn how to care for others as well as himself. I taught him our culture and way of life.

Then the other children came. They were my children, my flesh and blood. This only made the challenges greater. Oh it was so easy to work with Jesus. He was the perfect child everyone wants, everyone hopes for. Obedient, respectful, attentive and so helpful. The others were not bad children, they just weren't Jesus. It was a



challenge to keep everyone on an equal plane. It was not easy. For many years the other children resented Jesus and his readiness to do everything asked of him. I prayed many nights that someday they would understand each other. Jesus took their teasing, their anger, and their jealousy in stride. He did not respond as they expected and at times that made life more difficult. I knew Jesus wanted to be liked by them, longed to be accepted as their brother. They just couldn't see that or didn't want to. In time I hope they will see his love for them and how hard he tried to make their life better.

My life as a father has been different. I have had to learn to sacrifice my goals and desires for the sake of my children. At times that has meant risking being attacked. I have had to think about the cost involved. The cost of placing their needs before mine. I learned much from Jesus and from having caring for and protecting him in those early years. I learned to think not about what was best for me but what was best from my family, for my wife, for my children.

Being a father has come at a price. At first I was not willing to pay that price. I almost rejected Mary and the opportunity to be the father of Jesus. I almost rejected the cost when we learned of Herod's threat to kill Jesus. It would have been so much easier to run away. I learned that being a father is about accepting the responsibility, no matter what the outcome may be.

Being a father comes at a price. You will have to give up some dreams in order to have other dreams. You will have to make sacrifices in order to earn the benefits of being a father. You will have to accept the risks and there will be risks. Risks that may cost you, your pride, advancement, or positions in this world. But accepting those risks will bring you a wealth, a pride and a position that the world cannot give. They only come with the title of father.

Week One – Read Matthew 1:18-25

Consider the day you first learned you were going to be a father. What did you think about? Did you think about what changes you

would have to make so that your child would have a good father? What changes occurred when your child was born? How well did you handle those changes? Was it the same or different from how you envisioned it to be?

For those who are not fathers yet. Think about how the announcement of the coming birth of your first child may affect your life.

#### Week Two – Read Luke 2:4-7

How did the birth of your children affect your plans and finances? What kind of dreams did you have about how your life would be as a father? How are you doing in the area of providing for your children? Are you providing a safe, healthy, stable place for them to live and grow? What aspects of this are under your control? What areas are not under your control? Why?

#### Week Three – Read Luke 2:21-28, Matthew 2:1-14

Raising a child involves learning about and accepting certain responsibilities and risks. Think about what your responsibilities are to your child. Think about the risks you could face while raising your child. What will it cost you to properly raise and protect your child in the place where you are living?

#### Week Four Read Matthew 13:55-57; John 7:1-5; Mark 3:20-21; Acts 1:14; Galatians 1:19

There was a great change in the attitude of at least one of the Jesus' siblings towards him. Think about how this attitude affected the family? How does it affect you when your children do not get along? What can you do about this as a father? How long do you think it will take to help them value each other and learn to love each other? How does your relationship with your children encourage or prevent this type of problem?

Being a father is a challenge. The key for us, like Joseph, is this, what we are willing to sacrifice so that we will be a good father for our children?

# Epaphroditus

## **From the Diary of Epaphroditus - Serving faithfully - Philippians 2**

### **June of AD 51**

When they asked for volunteers to go and visit Paul and bring him a special cash gift I had to stop and think about what that would involve. I had never traveled outside of Philippi. Never been in a boat. Never thought about taking such a trip. Never been away from my family for more than a day or two.

But when the pastor asked, the first thing that came to my mind was Paul's previous visit to us. He had left his home to come to us. He had willingly suffered; being beaten and put in jail so that we could hear the gospel.

It became very clear that God wanted me to go. So with no small amount of fear, I told my pastor I would go. I became a little more frightened when no one else was able to go with me. That meant I would be alone, not usually a wise thing to do when carrying money.

The church prayed for me and the journey. I felt like Ezra depending only on God's protection when he was leading a group back to Israel. He believed that God was better able to protect him than the soldiers the king offered him. At least he traveled with others, I would be alone. That word alone weighed heavy on my thoughts.

Many walked with me from Philippi to the seaport. That was a great encouragement. We stood together on the shore and prayed

one last time before I got in the boat and waved as they returned home. Home. I wondered how long it would be before I saw home again.

The boat trip was a mixture of wonder and torture. The sea was incredible and carried us to such wonderful and exotic places, but my stomach rebelled constantly. Thankfully, it only took a few weeks to arrive at Italy and then I began my search for Paul.

Finding him was so easy. Everyone seemed to know his name and what he was teaching. Very quickly I arrived at the place where he was staying. The expression on Paul's face will remain with me all of my life. The mixture of surprise, joy and confirmation of his faith made me forget the difficulty of the trip and all my fears.

The gift I brought was an answer to his prayers and was exactly what he needed. When he understood that I planned to stay and help with the work that brought another response. You could see the lines of fatigue lift from his face. Paul wasted no time and immediately assigned me a group to teach and disciple. I also helped with cooking and cleaning and anything else that needed to be done.

I have never been so happy or fulfilled as when I was able to disciple those who had received our Lord as Savior. The only thing that could have made this time even better would have been having my wife and children with me to share in the work. But, then I became ill. It may have been the food I bought one day while talking with a vender or maybe I was just doing too much. The tonics and remedies did nothing to relive my sickness and Luke became very concerned. Nothing seemed to work and my strength lessened each day. I sensed that the others were worried that I might die. But I felt a great peace. I was doing God's work. I was helping people know God and his love. I began to understand that real life only exists in Christ and that death is not to be feared, but to be seen as a door that gives access to all of God's promises for all of eternity.

In that moment God showed me what I must do and then my health returned to me. Paul and I agreed that it was time for me to

return to Philippi and help with the work there. So, with Paul's letter for the church in hand, I headed home. This time the voyage was perfect because my stomach did not rebel and I realized my fears were gone.

When a person serves God, no matter what the risk, he has nothing to fear and can overcome any obstacle. I went home understanding that the true value of a man is defined by his dependence on God and his willingness to serve, no matter what the risks may be.

We are not a rich powerful church here in Philippi. But with the power of the Holy Spirit and the resources of our heavenly Father, we can accomplish everything God asks us to do.

Week One – Read 1 Corinthians 8:18, 22; Colossians 4:7-9; 1 Thessalonians.

Write a definition of the qualities of a true brother in Christ.

How does your life reflect the definition you have just written? Do you know anyone who does? What do you need to do to be called 'brother' the way Paul called Epaphroditus his brother?

Week Two – Read 2 Corinthians 8:23-24; Colossians 1:6-8; 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 3:1-5.

Write a definition of the qualities of one who is a fellow servant? Think about what Jesus said about the importance of learning to be a servant in the kingdom. Are you being a fellow servant? What will be required for others to see you as a servant in the kingdom?

Week Three – Read 1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Timothy 4:5. What does it mean to be a soldier in God's work? What are the qualities of a good soldier? Now read Ephesians 6:11-18. How does the armor make you a better soldier?

Week Four – Read Philippians 2:25-30 and the description of Paul about Epaphroditus. Now read 2 Corinthians 9:12-14. Write a definition of the word 'valor'. What makes a person a person of valor in the kingdom of God?

# Elkanah

## **Elkanah's diary - Giving one's child to God - 1 Samuel 1-2:11**

I remember the morning when my wife reminded me of a promise she had made to God and the fact that I had not opposed her vow. She then asked me if she still would be allowed to fulfill that vow. I responded as most men would, wondering why she had brought it up again. It had been maybe six months since we had had the discussion.

The day she first told me her vow, as I remember, was a strange day. We had made our usual trip to Shiloh to present our sacrifices to the Lord. She was really unhappy that morning. Nothing I did seemed to cheer her up or make a difference; it only made the situation worse and increased her frustration. So I gave up. She turned and headed for the tabernacle. I assumed that she needed to be alone and pray; something she did when she was frustrated.

When she came back to our tent to prepare our evening meal she had changed. She was calm and, well, joyful. I asked what had happened and that was when she shared her vow with me and asked for my approval. You see, in our culture a woman cannot make a vow, or enter into a contract or agreement, without the approval of her husband.

What she asked me to approve was amazing. She had vowed that if God allowed her to have a son she would consecrate him to God when he was born. The words took my breath away and it was some time before I could respond. You see, she had not been able to have children and this fact has caused a great deal of tension in

our marriage. So to willingly give up her first born child both shocked and amazed me.

Once I had recovered sufficiently I told her that I needed some time to think about what she had just asked me to do. This vow would affect me as well because she was talking about our future son. It would impact my life. Yet, I am ashamed to say, that was not the main focus of my thoughts. Actually I thought, “Why not? She will never have a son anyway.” It had become painfully clear that she was barren. So approving her vow would not be a problem and would likely bring a respite from the tension. So I agreed and life was much more peaceful in our house.

The next few months were great. She was happy; there were no fights about her barrenness, no questions of my love for her. Things were going well. So when she reminded me of the vow I wondered why she was bringing up it again. And then it hit me. We men can be such dopes. It had been several months since her last period. She was pregnant. The impossible had happened.

Then came the second shockwave. I had agreed to give away our first-born child. You see in our belief, to consecrate a child to God means to give him to God. It is not just a promise to raise him correctly but to place him in God’s service, not at home but at the tabernacle of God, which is in Shiloh, several days travel from us. This is the ultimate gift, the ultimate expression of our faith and confidence in God. It is a vow that cannot be broken without serious consequences. The only way out was to pay a very large sum of money called a redemption payment. This was money we did not have, then or now.

At first I was angry. I shouted my frustration at anyone and everyone. Many thought my anger was directed at my wife; and for a while it was. But, slowly, I began to realize that I was the real cause of my frustration. My wife had more faith than I and that made me angry. I was being humiliated, not by her but by my own failure in this matter. My wife had prayed and God had answered. I was about to be doubly blessed, but it wasn’t because of my choices or my faith.

I had supported her vow, but for the wrong reasons. I had been selfish. I had thought little of my wife. You know what I mean. She is a woman and I am a man. I thought that if God was going to speak to anyone it should be me. If God wanted something done he should ask me and I would tell my wife what to do, not the other way around. But, I, a man, had to submit to my wife and the vow she had made in faith to God.

That day I made a critical decision. A humbling decision. I swallowed my pride and chose to maintain my approval of her vow and learn about faith from my wife.

A lot has happened since those two events. One of the most difficult times was the day we left Samuel at the tabernacle. He was only three. My heart wanted to break over the pain, but at the same time, shout for joy about what God was doing.

I was losing my son, but he would be serving God. This had never happened before and maybe never would again. That act of faith has brought Hannah and me closer together and has brought other blessings as well. Our son has been chosen by God to receive his word and is now the judge for all of tribes of Israel. Oh, yes, one other blessing. Hannah has given birth to three other sons and two daughters. I am a father and we have an incredible family.

My fellow men. We can learn much from our wives about faith and love and service. But we will need to learn to be humble and willing to submit to them as equals before God. I often wonder what I would have lost if I had not married Hannah and had not approved her vow. What would have happened if I had not been willing to learn from my wife about faith and obedience?

Week One - Read Ephesians 5:21, 25-33; Co 3:18-19.

How does loving your wife relate to the idea of submission? How does one submit to their wife? What is the goal of submitting or loving your wife?



Week Two - Read Proverbs 31.

What is the role of a husband in making it possible for his wife to have a noble character and be able to accomplish any of the activities listed in this passage?

Week Three - Read 1 Pe 3:7; Ge 2:23-24.

Your wife is to be one flesh with you. What do you do in your life that reveals that she is truly your wife and has an equal part in your marriage and life.

Week four – Read two of the stories below and see how God blessed their marriage. Do you see your wife as a source of blessing in your marriage?

Sarah-Abraham = Isaac Ge 17:15-19

Rebecca-Isaac = Jacob Ge 25:21-23

Rachel-Jacob = Joseph Ge 30:22-24

Wife-Manoah = Samson Ju 13:1-25

Hannah-Elkanah = Samuel 1 Sa 1; 2:18-21

Mary-Joseph = Jesus Mt 1:16-22

Elizabeth-Zechariah = John Lucas 1:31-66

# Medad

## **From the diary of Medad – Called to serve - Numbers 11:21-30**

What a day it has been. Not like any I have ever had before. I am not sure quite how to interpret all that has happened. I feel like I am standing on the edge of a cliff and I will either fly or fall depending on what happens next. Let me explain

Moses has been really busy with the work of trying to teach us the word of God to keep us from doing something stupid and making God angry. It was just a few weeks ago that we decided to listen to the wrong group and not to Caleb and Joshua. They told us we could conquer Canaan but no we preferred to listen to the other guys. Well God got a little upset and told us to go back into the desert. Some didn't listen and tried to conquer a small city only to be defeated and get a lot of people killed.

Moses keeps trying to tell us what we should do but many refuse to listen. The grumble, they complain, they ignore what he teaches us and then we get in trouble. Then Moses has to spend time praying and talking with God so that God will not destroy us. What a vicious circle. The good news is that more and more people are beginning to see the value of what Moses is trying to teach us, but there is just not enough time for him to teach, guide, judge and intercede for all of us.

So, yesterday brought big changes. The messengers began to circulate through the camp saying that God had decided it was time for others to help Moses with the work of teaching and leading. They said that a list of seventy men had been prepared; men selected by Moses and approved by God. We were to go and

check the list and see if our name was there. If so, we were to be present at the morning sacrifice at the tabernacle.

I thought about the message for a few minutes but decided that it was unlikely that I was on the list. There were many others more qualified than me. Just because I am a leader in my clan and feel I am respected that didn't mean I would be on the list. Even if my name were on the list I am not sure I want that kind of responsibility. It would be a lot of work, more than I already have. I thought like many others think let someone else do it.

I heard from a neighbor that my name was on the list, but I didn't believe him. There are so many rumors in a camp this size. The only thing that you can be sure of is whether we are staying put or packing up and moving camp. That is because everyone can see the pillar of smoke or fire. If it rises and starts to move we pack and follow. If it stays in place we go about our daily routine. That was a sure thing; but my name on the list? No, the man had to be wrong.

Towards evening I overheard a group talking about the list and again I heard them mention my name. They were commenting about the different names, who they knew and didn't know. Most of them had never heard my name before or knew who I was. So I concluded it must be another Medad from some other part of the camp; although there are not many people with my name. Again I wondered why would I be on the list? How would Moses even think of me? As far as I could remember we said no more than the customary greeting to each other.

So this morning I chose to stay behind and not go to the tabernacle. I just had too much to do, and who was I to assume that I was the one they were talking about? So just in case it was me I began to formulate a list of reasons to defend my decision not to go. There are plenty of others to do the work. Besides I am not interested, nor do I feel comfortable in taking on such responsibilities. I am happy where I am, why take on the troubles of everyone else. Just let me do the work I have and that will be enough for me. Who am I to tell people what they should do? I am not a teacher or very gifted in speaking. God doesn't want me they

must have been mistaken or talking about someone else and got the names mixed up.

So I went about my business. However, I could hear the large crowd that had gathered at the tabernacle. Many had gone to hear about Moses' new plan. I could hear the crowd respond as they listened to Moses words and then I heard a lot of shouting, celebrating and other commotion from the crowd near the tabernacle. What happened next is very hard to explain.

I sensed something, you know like how you feel when someone is watching you. They are there, you can hear, smell, feel their presence. This was like that but even more intense; a strong intense emotional moment. Think about how you feel when your group scores that last point and there is a rush of emotion and you begin shouting and cheering. The emotion takes control and you have to tell everyone you see about what has happened. That is how I felt.

Suddenly, I began to speak and teach and a crowd formed around me. (Numbers 11:26) I began to explain to the group the importance of the law and how to keep the law. I began to see key aspects of what Moses had been trying to teach us and started explaining them to the group. I began to explain why we had failed to listen to Caleb and Joshua and why God's decision to send us back into the desert was correct.

It was incredible. My mind has never been so clear, so aware of God and his words for us. My heart has never been so full of love for God and confidence in what he is trying to accomplish. My faith multiplied in that moment as I saw the truth in God's promises to us and the reality of what our future would be as we walk with him.

I am still astounded, dumfounded, humbled by the fact that God chose me to serve him in this way. I also feel a little guilty for having tried to avoid accepting the call to service. I only thought of my abilities, my limits and not about what God could do if I accepted his call and submitted to his authority. I also feel a sense of loss at not being part of the official ceremony. My humility,

false humility, prevented me from honoring God completely and sharing that honor with all those who were present.

Thankfully God does not depend on us for his choices. He knows us for who we are and he knows the abilities he has given to each of us. Today day God chose to forgive my foolishness and bless me with his Spirit and his power. Today God overlooked my failure to obey and showed me what was possible when one submits to his authority. Today day God took me into his arms and wrapped me in his love and presence. I now know that I have nothing to fear and can adequately serve because God is with me no matter where I am. I, Medad, am a servant in the kingdom of God.

Week One – Read Exodus 4:13-14 and Jeremiah 1:6.

These men tried to avoid God's call on their lives. They made different excuses. Make a list of excuses you think people use to avoid obeying God's call.

Week Two – Read 2 Chronicles 20:14-18.

Try and write a description of Jahaziel. Why do you think God chose him to give a message to the king? What was the response of those who heard the message? Why did they listen to Jahaziel? Make a list of reasons people will listen to a preacher or teacher.

Week three – Read Jonah 1:3, 12; 4:1-3.

What are some of the consequences when we disobey God's call to service? Think in terms of the affect it will have on your life, the lives of those around you and on those God wants you to reach with his message. Make a list. Is there an area where you are unwilling to do what God is asking you to do? Why are you having a hard time obeying?

Week Four – Read Luke 10:27-37.

Is anyone excluded from God's call to serve in his kingdom? Is anyone exempt from sharing what God has given them with those who are in need? Is your opinion of your abilities of value to God?

What excuses are you making and what will you do to correct the situation?

A stylized, cursive signature of the name "Caleb" in a dark, textured font. The letters are fluid and interconnected, with a slight shadow effect.

**From the Diary of Caleb - Daring to have faith - Numbers 14, Joshua 14-15:20**

How often do we take time to reflect back on the decisions that we have made and the consequences of those decisions. I can think of two such times in my life and each of them meant taking risks to do what was right.

I have never thought of myself as someone special or any different than the next man. I have a wife and a family and do everything I can to care for them, protect them and provide the kind of leadership that one would expect from a follower of God.

To this day I do not know why I was chosen for the scouting party that was sent into the Promised Land to identify its boundaries, its resources, and of course, the nature of the enemies we would be facing when we entered the land.

It was very clear from the beginning that this group of twelve was going to be a divided group; those who would only see the dangers and difficulties and those who would see the blessings and possibilities. Actually there were only two of us that saw the good and believed that God could give us this land. Joshua and I did everything we could to convince the others. We even carried a

huge bunch of grapes back with us in the hope that it would somehow sway the rest of the group or at least influence the people to see what God was ready to give us.

But before we could even begin to share the wonders of the land the others shouted us down and began to poison the people against us and against entering the land. They spread their poison by focusing on stories of giants and fortified cities. They convinced the people that we would be better off returning to Egypt and slavery then entering this land and risking defeat and death.

No matter what Joshua and I said the people would not listen. They threatened to kill us. Even our families began to doubt us. I remember those moments and wondering when I would feel an arrow or spear in my chest. But we did not back down. God could give us the land, we could defeat the people. We were right and the others were wrong.

We paid dearly for that and ended up not being allowed to enter the promised land. Now after forty years of wandering only the two of us remain. God punished all those who did not trust him then and we, after a long hard journey, made even more difficult as we watched those who did not trust God and rebelled against him die. So many who were friends are no longer here.

But yesterday, now that was a day to remember! There before us lay the stronghold of Anak. My family thought I was crazy when I asked Joshua for the privilege of attacking this haven of the enemy. I knew in my heart that this land should be the inheritance for my children. All agreed that it was a beautiful, rich land and would provide abundantly for us. As I spoke I reminded my family of all that had happened before and that this time we needed to trust God. They began to see the truth of those words and joined me in the battle for Hebron.

It was a day of vindication for the words of faith spoken so many years ago. Those other ten spies had been so afraid of the fortified cities and the giants. The mighty warriors of the sons of Anak. Yet they were no match, no match for me and my group of warriors. I felt like I was a youth of 25 again, with boundless energy and

agility instead of my 85 years of age. The enemy had no idea what was happening. Our small clan defeated the giants that so terrified our nation those many years ago. Such a victory celebration will not be seen for years to come.

Now it is time to hand over the leadership of my clan to another, to Othniel the husband of my daughter Acsah. She is so much like me. She has convinced her husband to ask for extra land that includes springs. She is already planning ahead. As long as they keep their eyes on God nothing will be able to stop them from leading His people in victory and in service.

Week One -Read the following scriptures Isaiah 41:10-16; Jeremiah 20:1-2; 1 Samuel 14:27-29.

How does one make the right decision when others oppose them?

Week two

Enoch walked with the Lord (Genesis 5:21-25). Caleb believed that God could give them the land (Numbers 14). Elijah defied King Ahab to preach the word of God (1 Kings 18). What do we need to do to keep our eyes focused on God so that we can see what is right, obey God, and not be controlled by the fears of others?

Week Three

Read the story of Daniel's decision to keep on praying even when it meant risking his life. (Daniel 6) What can you learn from his example that will help you make the right decisions in your life?

Week Four

What people and events pressure you to deny God's promises and not obey him in every way possible? Read the following to understand why you should not give in to the fears of others and do all you can to follow God. Ephesians 4:17-20; John 2:15-17; 4:4-5; 1 Timothy 3:16-17; Proverbs 3:1-4



# Philemon

## **Journal Entry 60 AD for Philemon - Forgiveness - Philemon 1**

Today's events have brought one area of my life full circle. Onesimus is back working in the house. I never thought that would be possible. Especially considering what he did to me about 4 years ago.

I have always considered myself a fair man. I treat those who work for me with respect and I work hard to be sure they understand what I expect of them. Many of the others around me think that I am far too indulgent, far too patient. A few years ago that would not have been true. I used to be just like them. I was a harsh man, intolerant and quick to punish even the slightest mistake or sign of laziness. That was until a man named Tychicus showed up in our town and I met the Lord.

My life changed and I began to see clearly that there was a better way to run my business. My friends laughed at what I was doing. They said it would never work. But that didn't stop me. I changed how I treated my wife, my family and my workers. I tried to understand their needs and provide for their cares. It wasn't long until I began to see a significant change in their attitude and in the quality of the work they were doing. The work got done faster and was done better than when I used to criticize them, beat them and threatened them.

So I was stunned when one morning (about 4 years ago) I discovered one of the household workers had disappeared along with a large sum of money. I was so furious that when my wife began to remind me of the guidelines we had learned from

Tychicus I grabbed her and threw her to the ground. The action was so harsh she passed out.

As suddenly as I had become angry, I was now terrified at what I had just done. I looked around me and saw fear written on the faces of all my children and workers. They remembered how I used to act and knew how violent I could be. That look, the look of terror, shook me. I fell down on my knees and began to pray asking for forgiveness for my reckless act.

I turned to my wife and lifted her up. I looked into her eyes and saw something I never expected to see. I saw forgiveness. Oh how my heart leapt. In that instant I realized that though Onesimus had taken something of value I had almost lost something of greater value - my self-respect and my relationship with God, my family and even my workers.

As I turned and spoke, my words stunned them. Instead of berating them for letting Onesimus steal from me I asked them to forgive me for how I had behaved. I promised them that nothing would change and that we would continue to live by the rules and guidelines of love given to us by the Lord. Many of our family and workers made decisions to accept Jesus as their Savior in the days following that morning.

Onesimus returned this morning. When he walked through the gate I could feel the rage building. The sense of betrayal. But at the same time I was a bit confused. Coming back like this was a very risky decision. By law he could be executed for what he did; at best imprisoned for life or condemned to be fodder for the games. That would be a short life at best.

He was not alone. He came with Tychicus, one of Paul's helpers. His presence further perplexed me. When I asked what was happening he simply gave me a letter; a personal letter to me from Paul. That letter brought everything full circle. It explained that Onesimus had found Paul in Rome. He, Paul, the apostle, asked me to forgive Onesimus and accept him back not just as a worker but as a brother in the Lord.

How does one explain all that went through my mind? How does one set aside such a debt, such an insult, and not just forgive but treat one like an equal? I could only do that by remembering the price that was paid for me so that I could be accepted into God's family. Remembering that, truthfully, each of us is a thief who has robbed from God over and over and deserves to be punished. Remembering the price that was paid to restore us so that we could be called "child of God."

I looked up from the letter to Onesimus. He, a trusted servant, in a moment of weakness, fear, feeling helpless and trapped, had tried to solve his problem by stealing and running away. Then I saw myself. My actions and attitudes may have looked different, but before I met Jesus I was stealing from God and always running, just like Onesimus.

I realized what I needed to do. My friends were going to laugh at me, they were going to criticize me, and they were going to be afraid of how my action would affect them. But that didn't matter. God had set me free and so the right thing to do was set Onesimus free. He would no longer be my slave but my employee. If he wanted to. That was going to cause some changes in my life and work. Yet with God's help I would learn how to deal with each person and each situation so that they knew of God's love because of the love they saw in me.

#### Week One –

Reflect on your relationships with the people you work with or who work for you. Read Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25; 1 Timothy 6:1-2. Compare these scriptures with your attitude at work.

#### Week Two –

Have you ever had a friend steal from you or fail you in some way? What did you want to do? Compare that feeling with the

description of what our sin did to Jesus in Isaiah 53 and the forgiveness you have received.

Week Three –

Paul calls Onesimus a person who is now profitable. He also asks Philemon to understand what makes Onesimus a person of value. Read the following scripture 1 Peter 2:10; Luke 15:24, 32; Titus 3:3-8. What makes a person a profitable and valuable member of the family of God?

Week Four –

Paul encourages Philemon to use this opportunity to communicate his faith to others. Our actions must match our words for our testimony to have value. Read 1 Corinthians 9:12-14 and Philippians 1:9-11. Are there areas and attitudes in your life that are blocking people's ability to see the evidence of God's love through you?

# Centurion

**Centurion – Daily Report – July 25, 26 AD - Mt 8:5-13; Lu 7:1-10**

I have been in the army since I was old enough to enlist. In time, through hard work, I was finally appointed as a centurion in the Roman army. I have the responsibility to organize and lead a

hundred men who are committed to obedience and service to their country.

Recently one of my key servants became seriously ill. This fact and the events that followed have caused me to reflect on my life and how I arrived at where I am today and about the decisions that resulted in my servant being healed.

While serving my country, I realized very quickly the importance of obeying the commands of my leaders and the importance of placing my faith in their decisions. Of course, this was made easier when the commander was a wise man and cared about his men. I was fortunate in that those I served under were good leaders. Through them I learned another critical aspect of obedience. When a soldier does what he is told to do, it often results in saving the lives of others and in victory. A moment of indecision, disobedience, or even hesitation can be disastrous.

My desire to serve and obey resulted in my willingness to accept the assignment to go to Judea, which also led to my appointment as a centurion. In Judea I came into contact with a religion that was new to me, a religion that focused on obedience to a God who actually cared about those who served and trusted in him. This was something very different from the attitude and treatment that the Roman gods had for their subjects.

As I learned more about this faith I realized that this was the God that I wanted to serve. This change in my allegiance made me a better leader. I also learned that my honest concern for those who served under me resulted in a higher level of confidence and trust on their part.

When my servant became ill, it only seemed natural to ask the friends of my new found belief what could be done. Without hesitation they told of Jesus and his power to heal with a touch, even just a word. The decision was made to send them to ask Jesus if he would come and care for, maybe even heal, my servant.

As they went to meet Jesus I began to realize that if Jesus was truly God's prophet or Son as many were saying he was, then my request for him to come to my house was unnecessary. I had

learned, through experience, how authority works. So many times I simply sent my orders with a courier and what I required was done. My presence was not essential, as long as my authority was recognized.

Based on what I had heard about Jesus, I decided that as God's representative, no, as God's son (for only God himself could perform the miracles the people reported to me) he did not need to come to my house. He only needed to speak the word and my servant would be healed.

Today as I write these thoughts down, my servant is doing well. My faith in Jesus' authority was rewarded. I received back my servant and much more. I received the blessing that comes when one puts their faith in the ultimate commander of all. The creator of the universe. Today I consider myself not just a soldier in his kingdom but a child of the king.

Week One - Read Colossians 3:22 and 1 Timothy 6:1-2.

One of the most difficult things we need to learn in life is how to deal with those in authority. How do you respond to those in authority? Why do you obey them?

Week two - Read Mark 1:27.

What made Jesus' authority so different from that of the other religious leaders? Now read Luke 10:17-22 and consider which is more important - to have authority or be under one who has true authority?

Week three - Read Isaiah 56:3-8.

The centurion received back his servant and the respect and honor of Jesus for his level of faith. Reflect on the Isaiah passage above and what God wants to give you for your obedience and faith.

Week four - Read Hebrews 11 and James 1:2-7; 2:14-26.

What is the connection between faith and obedience? What kind of faith do you have and how do you and others know that your faith is real? Why are your actions so important in the area of faith?



### **Baruch – Serving in trying times - Jeremiah 32:1-16; 36**

I have grown weary of hearing people complain about their jobs, lives and problems. The world is full of complainers, lazy people who have no idea what it means to face real problems and real danger. So I decided it is time to tell my story, or at least a portion of it.

My name is Baruch. I was born into the family of Neraiah, a member of nobility. From my childhood I was told that I could go far and that I was a very talented young man. I excelled in my studies and was a member of the office of secretaries to the king. I was moving up the ladder and enjoying all of the benefits of my position.

Then I met Jeremiah. Even today I am not totally sure what attracted me to this man. He was a solitary person, given to great mood swings and often depressed, but he had a depth of insight that intrigued me. Our conversations about politics and society were incredible. He possessed an awareness of the true condition of our country, plus he was a prophet of God. He was not afraid to tell anyone who would listen exactly what God was telling him.

Normally being the friend of a prophet resulted in a greater level of respect from your peers. Prophets were generally respected and often held in awe because of their special relation to God. But these were not normal times and the words of Jeremiah could easily be considered opposition to the king and even treasonable. If I had been smart, one of those who only thinks of themselves and their career, I would have denied my relationship with Jeremiah and settled for being comfortable in my own little world.

But I could not escape the logic of the prophet nor could I deny the words he spoke as they came from God. We grew closer and he depended on me to help him when he was overcome by sadness and depression as a result of what God was telling him.

Then came the day when something changed. He called me to his room and told me to bring my writing instruments. When I arrived he presented me with a rather long scroll and said, "Prepare to write." I cannot tell you how long we worked on that scroll but hours stretched into days, days stretched into weeks. (It is no easy task to copy dictated material on a scroll and this was an especially long scroll. Only the writings of Isaiah and the Psalms are longer).

When we finished the writing I began to wonder what we would do with that scroll. Jeremiah's next request would forever change my life and place it in continual danger. Jeremiah had already been placed under house arrest for his words and teachings. Now he wanted me to join him in his proclamations against the king. He wanted me to go to a special window in the temple and read out loud the entire document.

I had to choose to place at risk all that I had worked for to proclaim God's word to the people; a proclamation that would definitely mark me as a traitor to most of the people. Even as he asked I knew I would do it. The next day I quietly sneaked into the room, barred the door and began reading to the priests and people in the temple. When I finally finished I let the guards into the room and they escorted me to the office of the secretaries. They asked me to read it again.



To my surprise they did not attack me. Instead they told me to go find Jeremiah and flee the city. We were to go into hiding immediately. It would be months later that we heard what happened the day we fled. The leaders took the scroll to the king who then told them to read it. As they read a section, he cut it off and threw it into the fire until he had burned the entire scroll. He not only destroyed a very expensive piece of material but also seemed to hope that by destroying the scroll he was somehow destroying the words of the prophet and denying the words of God.

As soon as Jeremiah heard this news he pulled another scroll out of his bag which was much longer than the first. He looked at me and I knew immediately that we were going to rewrite the entire scroll and much more. Again the hours turned into days and weeks. The work was further compounded by the tension that at any moment we would be discovered and imprisoned, even executed. Actually I was more afraid that we would not have time to finish the second scroll. It seemed like forever but we finally finished it.

They did find us and Jeremiah was thrown into jail. Miraculously I was allowed to go free. But I found myself always looking over my shoulder, wondering when I would be arrested.

During this time Jeremiah asked me to handle the purchase of a piece of land for him. I did so and then he gave me the papers for safe keeping. During this time the threat of conquest by the Babylonians grew. That deed for the land became a symbol of hope for us during the siege and suffering. Finally Jeremiah was released and he sent for the deed. We were leaving the city to go see the land when we were arrested by that fool Irijah. He had been one of those accusing us of treason and saw the chance to exact some sort of satisfaction. We found ourselves in prison. Each day we wondered if it would be our last.

Our imprisonment actually became the source of our salvation when the Babylonians finally conquered the city. We were spared while those who denied and opposed the words of Jeremiah were either killed or deported. We saw the words of God fulfilled; even

the words that had been given by God to encourage us that we would be spared.

Life is not the same. While we have gained a certain amount of respect, it is interesting how the people have not learned to trust the words and insight of Jeremiah. Even now our own people have arrested us and are carrying us to Egypt, in direct defiance of God's word to Jeremiah. We are again prisoners, but we have a freedom the rest will never know. We are free to walk and live in God's presence without fear. They will never know this freedom. All they will ever know is fear, depression and will spend their lives complaining and grumbling. They will always look back and think about what might have been and complain about where they are.

The really interesting fact is they will never see how they are the sources of what they are complaining about. It has been their decisions, their actions which have caused them to be where they are and to have the problems they are complaining about. They are also a prisoner but in a different way. We may be surrounded by the walls of this prison but our souls are free. They are outside but completely imprisoned by their lives and attitudes.

We may fear for our lives but when we stand before God we will not be afraid. They are a sad people made even sadder because of the great fear they have of the day they will stand before God and explain why they did not heed his words to them.

Week One – Read Philippians 2:19-22.

Paul uses the phrase “everyone looks out for his own interests.” How do your interests affect your ability to serve the Lord and share the gospel with those who have not heard?

Week two – Read Matthew 16:24-28.

Jesus talks about the need to deny ourselves in order to serve him. Think about your life and what you have or desire that is a barrier

to serving God. Is it worth risking your life and relationship with God to have?

Week three – Read Jeremiah 1:16-22.

The call of God to Jeremiah was not just about setting aside his desires to serve God. It also involved the possibility of placing his life at risk. What would you be willing to risk in order to do what God asks you to do? What do you have in your life that is of great value to you? Would you be willing to lose it to obey God?

Week four – Read Philippians 2:6-11.

Reflect on what Jesus risked so that you would have the chance to hear the truth, be saved and one day be with God in heaven.

# Boaz

## **Boaz – Doing the right thing - Ruth 2-4**

I remember the day when my parents struggled to produce enough food to feed our family. As the famine became more severe many of our neighbors left and went to other countries hoping to find places where they could work and survive.

My uncle Elimelech was one of those who chose to leave. He took his wife and my cousins and left for Moab. It would be the last time I saw them.

Years later, when Naomi returned, we learned the cost of his decision to leave the land promised to us by Jehovah. Elimelech and my two cousins died in Moab. All three left behind widows and no children to care for them. It was easy to judge them and to

see the fulfillment of God's promise of punishment and abandonment on those who failed to trust Him and serve Him.

But I found that my thoughts became confused and less certain as I learned more of the story. Ruth had decided to abandon her gods, follow Naomi back to Canaan, and follow only Jehovah. This was unlike most of the Moabites that I had met. Most were arrogant. They had attacked us and taken what they wanted even during the famine, leaving us even more destitute.

Yet here was Ruth, abandoning her family and her religion to follow Naomi and care for her. She set aside her pride and accepted our culture, our faith and her responsibility to serve and care for her mother-in-law.

Until a few weeks ago I had not seen Ruth. But when I saw her my confusion cleared. I had expected to see a person who was overwhelmed by her situation and frustrated with the weight of the burdens she had to bear. Instead I saw a woman at peace, a person who was confident that she had made the right decision to leave her religion and her country. She gleaned in the fields, but not in the frantic manner of one who had lost her way, rather as one who was confident that Jehovah would take care of her.

I am a generous man. So many have not recovered from the famine years ago and I believe that keeping God's law to help those less fortunate is important, especially the widows and orphans. But that day I surprised even myself with the orders I gave my workers. I began to understand why God had included foreigners as people that we are also responsible for and to help in their search for the one true God, our God.

As the days passed, I saw the reality of Ruth's humility and faith, the beauty of her care for Naomi, the sweetness of her spirit and generosity towards others. Imagine how my heart leapt when I found her asleep at my feet during the harvest. This is a custom that allows a person to express their dependence on another person and represents a promise to serve as needed. It reminded me that as a relative, our family had a special responsibility to provide for Naomi and her family.

Ruth's act meant I needed to decide how to honor the respect she had shown me and deal with our family's responsibility to Naomi and to Ruth. As I walked back to the city a plan formed quickly in my mind. It involved redeeming the land of my uncle, Naomi's husband, and marrying Ruth as instructed by our law. You see I was not the only one who had a right to buy the land.

I needed to speak to another of my uncles. I knew he would be more than happy to buy the land, but I was also certain he would not want to marry Ruth. And I was right; He was more concerned about his family and their future than caring for others. That day I bought the land of Naomi and married Ruth. Soon she gave us a son, whom we named Obed. Obed became the grandfather of David.

*I am a very old man now. Ruth and I have had a blessed life together, but I only realized yesterday just how important fulfilling one's responsibilities can be. Why, because yesterday Samuel arrived and anointed Jessie's youngest son, David, as the future king of Israel.*

*This blessing was only possible because of Ruth's decision to follow Jehovah and my decision to accept my responsibility toward her as a child of God.*

Week One –

What does the word responsibility mean to you? Make a list of your responsibilities and the people you are responsible for. Read Genesis 43:9. How does your definition of your responsibility compare to what Judah told his father.

Week Two – Read 1 Chronicles chapter 9:17-33.

This passage explains the responsibilities of various people and families in relation to the temple. What is your responsibility in relations to the church and its activities?

Week Three –

Are we responsible for how our actions affect others? Read Joshua 7, Jonah 1:7-10. How did the actions of the people in these stories affect others?

Week Four - Read 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1.

In this passage Paul discusses the nature of his responsibility for others. Are your decisions and actions determined by the needs of others and bringing glory to God? What can you do to improve in your area of being responsible for others?



### **Obadiah – serving in secret - 1Kings 18:1-15**

Do you know what it is like to keep a secret? Especially a secret that could cause a great deal of pain and suffering to you and many others. Have you ever known the truth but if you told the truth you would be ostracized, or worse, killed?

I love my job. It has so many facets and interesting opportunities. I not only do the work my employer wants me to do, but I also get to see and do different things while doing that job. My job gives me the opportunity to have access to so many people and markets. When I buy for my employer I often find something that I want, something I might not have had time to find if I had to do it in my spare time. I can shop for my employer and shop for myself. Usually when I make a large purchase for him, the merchant gives me a gift in thanks for the business I have brought his way.

I love my job. I have access to the best that Israel can produce and all the imports that come to Damascus via the traders and caravans from Assyria and beyond. Our house is filled with samples of the

wonders of the world. That also means my wife loves my job as well. I have access to the finest linens and household items from around Israel and the world. I am a lucky man because I have access to so many things that women love to have.

There is only one problem. I am a true believer in God, but my employer, who is also the king of Israel, is not. He has chosen to defy the teachings of the prophets and God's word and worship the god Baal. In fact, to please his wife Jezebel he has even threatened to kill any who claim to be a servant of God.

Very few have had the opportunity to read the writings of Moses given to him by God. But when I was young my father secretly used a copy that he had to teach me to read. I learned of God's love for his people and his promises to care for them as long as they served only him. But I also learned to guard this truth deep in my heart.

It has not been easy to keep this secret but it has been necessary. You see my job provides me with another special blessing, another reason why I love my job. It provides me with an opportunity that no one else would have. I can, for a minimal cost, provide for a group of prophets the food they need to survive in hiding. They dare not come out to work their farms or trade in the markets. As soon as they would try to do that did that then Ahab, my boss would surely find out and have them punished and even kill some.

I love my job. Because I am good at it King Ahab has rewarded me richly. It has been a challenge to make sure he does not discover that some of the rewards he gives me are being used to care for the very people he hates. It requires that I keep my secret and protect it well. At times it is not easy when I see the people worshipping other gods which invites the wrath of God and his judgment on them.

My desire to help feed those in hiding has been made very difficult by one prophet in particular, Elijah. He brazenly decided to come out of hiding and denounce the king and his worship of Baal. As proof that he spoke the word of God he declared there would be no rain for at least three years. Because of the drought, it has become

harder and harder to find what I need to care for the king's desires, and even harder to hide the fact that I am also feeding 100 others.

To make matters worse, Elijah shows up out of nowhere and declares he has returned and that it is time for Ahab to answer for his worship of false gods. I told him he was a fool. Everyone else who had defied Ahab had been killed. Then he spoke to me and declared that those days were past and that it was time to reveal the truth and for me to declare publicly my faith in God.

The words hit me like hammer blows. Declare publicly my faith in God?

As I listened to Elijah's plan and what God was telling him to do, I began to realize that maybe it was time for the truth to be declared by more than just the prophets. Actually, my wife and I had talked on many occasions that we were struggling with participating in the orgies that the priests of Baal declared to be the way to worship him. It was so demeaning, so vile, and so vulgar. How could a real god ask people to behave that way?

It was not an easy decision. I knew that it would probably mean the end of my career. It could even cost me my life, but if Elijah could survive on one pot of flour and a jar of oil for three years through God's provision then God could surely take care of me and all those who truly followed him.

I went and I told the king that Elijah was back and had called him and the priests to come and meet him on Mount Ebal. There Elijah would settle the issue about who was the one true God and what God expected of his people. Ahab was furious. But he was more concerned about dealing with Elijah than with my declaration of faith. He did warn me that once he had dealt with Elijah I had better be gone if I wanted to live.

I am still alive, but life is very different. But for once in my life I am not living in secret. I can publicly declare to all that I am a servant of God. Life has not been easy but God has never failed to provide what we need. It may be not as luxurious or exotic as it was in the past, but in a way that is hard to explain it is more



satisfying and fulfilling. Before, I depended on my skills. Now I have learned to depend on the God who provided those skills.

While I thought it was necessary to keep my faith a secret before, I have learned a deeper secret that God wants us all to know. He is always there and always ready to care for those who honestly serve him, no matter what the situation may be.

Week One –

In Isaiah 50:10 the prophet records a very important question for each of us to consider. Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? Think about what you fear most in this world. How does that affect your relationship to God and your ability to obey his word?

Week two –

In Ecclesiasts 7:18 the author makes this statement, “the man who fears God will avoid all extremes.” Obadiah had gone to one extreme. He had avoided letting anyone know of his faith in God. Is it possible to go too far in the opposite direction, of proclaiming our relationship with God to others?

Week three – Read Malachi 3:16.

This text tells that us about a book of remembrance that is being written. In this book will be recorded those who fear the Lord. Why do you think God is so concerned about the lives of those who fear him and proclaim his name in the world? What do you think God is recording about your life?

Week four – Read proverbs 29:25.

Here we are told that when we put our trust in God we will be safe. Reflect on what it means to trust God and publicly declare that trust to others. How will God keep you safe from those who hate God and who love the world?

# Mordecai

## **Mordecai – An Act of Kindness - Esther 1-2, 6**

Anyone who works with others knows about the types of discussions that go on around them in the workplace. Always there are the people who complain about the working conditions and the failures of those they work for. It is part of the life and reality of the worker. He is always hoping for something better and believes he knows exactly what is needed to improve his situation and the conditions around him. It is unusual to hear anything good about the work place and those who supervise it.

What is more interesting is how willing the workers are to discredit and criticize in private, yet they say nothing in public; and how quickly new employees join them in this activity.

In contrast, those who do try to present a more positive view of the work place are often ridiculed or seen as an enemy. They are viewed as spies for the establishment and often isolated by everyone else. They quickly learn to be silent and, to regain their position in the group, begin to join them in criticizing the company and leader bashing.

The wise person learns quickly not to be involved in either group.

I, Mordecai, found myself in this position, which was further complicated by the fact that I was a foreigner who had been chosen by the leaders. To avoid being ostracized by the group and not caught up in the negativity of the situation I learned to be silent and as invisible as possible.

Then one day I overheard a conversation that startled me. A few of the disgruntled workers were planning to take an action that would result in the death of my employer. Now I had a difficult decision to make. Would I remain silent or would I choose to report what I had overheard?

How does one make such a decision? How does one decide which side to be on? Does anyone deserve to die? Is there a good reason to sabotage an employer and affect the lives of others negatively? It is interesting how many people are willing to act in ways that negatively impacts their workplace and their employer. They do poor quality work, waste time and misuse the resources of the employer.

As a believer in God and one who believes in the truth of His law I often struggled with the behavior of those around me. I refused to do less than my best. I did everything asked of me and in a timely fashioned. Yet, day by day, I found it difficult to overlook the attitudes and actions of those around me. I knew that I would have to one day take an action that could result in placing me in a difficult situation.

So when I overheard this plan I knew I would have to report what I had heard. Over the years I had learned who I could trust among my supervisors. They too had come to trust my information and advice. We had developed an understanding that my comments would be kept in confidence. They knew that I was not interested in special rewards or recognition and advancement. I had learned from my study of God's word the importance of being content and the importance of trusting God for what I needed.

A few days later I learned that my information had proven to be true. The people involved were caught in the act of planning to kill the king. They were executed and life moved on. Little did I know how important my involvement, this act of kindness, would be and how God would use this to save my family and my people. My supervisors had not identified my part in what had happened. They knew how that could affect the attitudes of others towards me. Yet they had taken the time to write down in the records what had happened and my part in exposing the traitors.

A day would come when God would use my honesty and confidence in God, to bring honor to him and proclaim his name to the world. It is amazing what God can do when we care about others, even when it involves taking a risk. Acts of kindness will bear fruit. When we, as servants of God, show kindness to others and treat them with respect, it will become an avenue through which God can work and reveal himself to us and those we are called to care for.

Week One – Read Colossians 3:22-25; Titus 2:9-10.

Substitute the word employer and employee in the place of master and slave. Now evaluate your attitude in the workplace.

Week Two - Read Ephesians 6:5-8.

What are different kinds of rewards that people are looking for from their fellow workers, employers and others? How does that compare with what Paul is talking about in this passage?

Week Three – Read 1 Peter 2:18-21.

Not every work situation is good. Not every job we are asked to do is easy or pleasant. It is possible to receive both praise and criticism, no matter if we are doing a good job or failing in carrying out the work assigned to us. Reflect on what Peter is telling us about our attitude should be.

Week Four – Read Luke 11:33-36.

Apply this passage to your attitude and actions towards your employer and other employees.

# Araunah

## **Araunah – The consequences of one’s actions - 1 Samuel 24:18-25; 1 Chronicles 21:18-25**

I am an old man now. There are very few of my generation still alive who remember the day I gave/sold my land to the king. Today, I am standing on that land, where years ago I used to thresh my wheat. But, in place of wheat fields stand a temple. Today we are dedicating the temple of God that Solomon built for us to use in our worship of God. But let me start at the beginning.

I was a young man when this all began. I had only been married a few years and was just beginning to take over my responsibilities as the eldest for the operation of the farm and the care of my family and my parents. My father had taught me well. I had learned how to do the work and to direct those who were working for us. We also had an excellent location to do our threshing. On our property existed this very large flat rock that provided exactly what was needed for threshing, plus it was high enough that there was usually a good breeze for winnowing the chaff from the wheat.

I remember one particular day. Most of us were very concerned and very worried about a decision the king had taken to do a census of the men who were of age to serve in the army. There had not been a census like this since the days of Moses. (That census was done just before we entered into the Promised Land to reveal how God had cared for our people during the 40 years of wandering in the desert.) This census was different. For some reason David decided it was important to know how many eligible men there were. This decision was met with mixed response. Many in leadership and the military hailed it as a wise decision. It

is always important in war to know one's strength. A census, admittedly, would be helpful in planning for future conflicts.

But, it also caused many to worry about how God would respond to the king's action. Even the census takers were noticeably worried about how the people would respond and for their own safety. Many reasoned that knowing the number of soldiers and people available for service was irrelevant as long as we knew that God was on our side. This group feared that such a census might even cause God to withdraw his support and let Israel fight for itself. History had shown how dangerous this path could be.

Then we heard that the prophet Gad had gone to David to report that God was angry with his decision. David was given three choices; none of them pleasant. David chose to submit to God's judgment. That is when the plague began. Soldiers and others began to die. From the reports, it was clear that the judgment was moving toward Jerusalem.

I was standing on this very spot threshing wheat when I saw the angel of the Lord. He appeared to be waiting. It was a terrifying experience. Then from Jerusalem, David came to stand before the angel. He called out to God for forgiveness, for an end to the plague. Then he came to me and told me that Gad had told him to build an altar where the angel was waiting.

When David said he wanted to buy my threshing floor to build an altar I was overwhelmed. What does one say to the king, to the Lord, when asked to give so that others would know God's mercy, so that others would be spared God's judgment?

I quickly agreed to give David the threshing ground and my oxen and yokes so that he would have everything needed for the offering. David refused the gift. He said, how could he offer something that had cost him nothing? We agreed on a price and David built an altar and sacrificed the oxen. God answered David's prayer and the angel left us.

For many days after that I reflected on my decision to sell the land. What would my family think of my giving up our land? I had not consulted any of the family heads, not even my father that day.

Yes my action had saved many. Yes, I had been paid for the land. But it also meant we no longer could use the land. We would have to seek out other ways to do the work. This would make our work more difficult in the future. The money I received would never truly pay for what I gave up that day and its effect on our lives.

But today all the questions, all the doubts, all the added labor are forgotten. Today, I stand in the temple of God and have seen the cloud of God descend on this place. Today, I know that the land that I gave up so many years ago - What I did in that moment to save others - That action of generosity and obedience has made it possible for others to worship the God of Israel. It has become a testimony to the world of the greatness of our God.

Week One – Read Isaiah 32:8. Read Job 31:16-34.

The first passage talks about a noble man. The question we need to understand is how do we define the term noble? Read the second passage and then write your own definition for the meaning of the word noble. Was Araunah a noble person? Are you a noble person?

Week Two – Read Proverbs 18:16.

How does a gift open doors for a person? Who are the great men that are talked about in this passage? Now read Matthew 12:41-43. Consider who gave the gift and who the great person was that noticed the gift. Who are you seeking to attract with your giving? How will this affect the type of blessing you will receive? Are you seeking the blessing of men or of God?

Week three –

Compare David's comments about sacrifice in Psalms 40:6; 50:14; 51:16 and 54:6. Why does David at one point talk negatively about sacrifice or giving and in the next moment promise to do just that? What makes a gift or sacrifice acceptable to God? Was Araunah's gift acceptable to God? Do you think God is pleased with the gifts that you give to him?

Week four –

When Araunah sold his land to David, he had no idea what would happen as a result of his willingness to sell his land. He could have placed conditions on the sale, he did not. Actually he was willing to give it without being paid. He saw the immediate need and God used that event to make possible something greater. Take time to think about why you give and whether you place restrictions on what can be done with your gift. How freely do you give to God? How does your attitude affect what God can do with your gift?



### **Obed-edom - Shouldering the responsibility of obedience - 2 Samuel 6:1-19**

Do you know what fear is? Do you understand the concept of curse and doom? Do you understand what the opposite of a curse is?

I remember well the day I learned the difference between fear and safety, between curse and blessing. King David decided that it was time to bring the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. There was great celebration by the king and all those helping with the transport.

Yet some of us were very nervous about the way in which David transported the ark and the rest of the objects belonging to the tabernacle. There were those, like myself, whose ancestors had been given the task of carrying these things on our shoulders. But David used ox carts to provide the transportation needed.

As a member of the Levites, the tribe given the task of caring for the tabernacle, I had been instructed in the traditions and



responsibilities of each clan. Some were to carry the tent, some the objects used in sacrifices, and others to carry the various objects like the altar, the table, the basin and the Ark of the Covenant. All of this was to be carried by persons using poles on their shoulders. Included in our training and instruction were warnings of curses and punishments against anyone who disregarded these guidelines.

Ox carts are not noted for providing a smooth and secure mode of transport. They rock and shake every time they hit a rock or stone in their path. The road approaching my house was especially rough and the ark of the covenant was bouncing and looked perilously close to falling off the cart. As I and those with me watched the procession we became very concerned about this violation of the traditions and what God would do if anything went wrong. Then It happened. The ox cart bounced and the ark began to fall off of the cart.

One of those walking along the cart saw what was happening and reached out to prevent it from falling to the ground. I began to shout a warning that he should not touch the ark for fear that the curse of death would befall him. But even as I shouted he touched the ark. His action prevented the ark from falling but it also resulted in his immediate death.

The reaction of the king and those with him was one of terror. The people leading the cart froze. Those following behind fled away from the ark. The King collapsed to the ground, shaking like a willow in the wind. I had never seen the king overcome by fear before. I had never seen such uncertainty in our leader, a man who had led the army in victory, a man who had never known defeat.

To this day I do not know what motivated me but I stepped forward and suggested that the king leave the ark in my care. I informed him that I was a Levite tasked with the responsibility for the care and transport of the tabernacle and all that belonged in it. Something in my heart moved me to face the king and let him know that I was not afraid and the ark would be safe with me and my family.

The look of relief on the king's face was incredible. He told me to do whatever was necessary to move the ark and to care for it. The terror I had seen in his face changed to amazement as I called on others of my family to bring poles and we fitted them into the ark and moved it to a safe place. Then the terror returned as he realized how close he and others had come to being judged and killed for their disregard of God's guidelines for handling the sacred tabernacle and its contents.

The people moved away from us and stood at a distance. At first this confused me. Then I realized that they were still very afraid of how God would respond to our actions and did not want to be too close in case he struck out again in anger and judgment.

Once we had finished moving and storing all of the property of the tabernacle the crowd decided that they could leave. Still they posted watchmen a safe distance from our dwellings. They said it was for our protection but we knew that it was for the purpose of reporting anything out of the ordinary that might occur. Especially if we too, fell under the curse of God.

What happened caused even greater awe and a new level of fear. Maybe fear is not the correct word. Well yes, fear is correct; but it was a fear based on respect and awe for God. You see instead of falling under a curse we began to experience unusual blessing. It is hard to explain but nothing seemed to go wrong. None of our tools ever broke or needed repairs. Our food supplies never seemed to spoil. Our harvest was the best we had ever seen. No one was ever sick, not even a sniffle. The older members of the family seemed to regain their strength and vitality. We felt more rested and energized then ever before.

This went on for three months. Then King David returned. He had been reading the reports and wanted to know about the blessing. My only explanation was that when people know their responsibilities and carry them out as God requires then God blesses them. David asked in detail about the teaching we had received and brought the priests down so we could review the writings of Moses regarding what we had been taught.

David realized that just having a desire to serve God is not enough. We need to understand how God wants us to serve. From then on plans went forward to finish the journey and bring the tabernacle and the ark to Jerusalem. The day we carried the ark through the city gates was a day of rejoicing and praise to the God of our father's. That day we carried the ark on our shoulders in safety and not in fear. We carried the ark not in fear of a curse, but in the knowledge that God would honor and bless our actions because they were based in obedience and honor to Him.

Week One – Read Deuteronomy 30:19-20.

Consider carefully the consequences of disobedience and obedience. How do you feel when you know you are being disobedient? Compare this to the feeling that comes from obedience.

Week two – Read 2 Corinthians 2:9.

Explain what you think Paul means by being obedient in everything. Read Philippians 2:12. Consider the difference between being obedient when you are being watched and when not being watched. Is there ever a time when you are not being watched?

Week three –Read 2 Chronicles 31:20-21.

Hezekiah's obedience led to him prospering. Review the passage and make a list of items that define why his obedience resulted in him prospering. In spite of this Hezekiah was attacked by Sennacherib. Read 2 Chronicles 32 and evaluate what happened. Does obedience mean we will have no trials? How does obedience help us deal with the struggles that we will face?

Week four – Read 2 John 6.

John equates obedience with love. Read John 14:15-24. How is love expressed through obedience? Why do you obey the people around you? How would learning to love them affect your ability to obey?



## **Barzillai – Blessing the next Generation - 2 Samuel 17:27; 19:31-39**

My name is Chimham. If it was not for the actions of my father my name would never have appeared in the Biblical record. I am in a real way my father's son. Let me tell you why and what it means to have a godly man as a father.

I do not know the entire story of my father's past. He often regaled us with stories of hiding in caves and raiding Philistine villages. He especially loved to tell us the story of the day David met Abigail and how she became the wife of the future king. My dad was a romantic at heart. In his day he was a handsome man. He also was a faithful and committed husband and father. I wish I had the time to tell the story of how my father, the bandit, won the heart of my mother and how he rescued her from being taken by a raiding party. Yet in all the stories he was careful not to mention names and places.

Friends and family were very important to my dad, even more so than what he received from the booty of their raids. I say this because when the days of hiding and raiding had passed, my father wisely took his share of the booty and invested it in land, a home and his family. During this time he cared for us and taught us to care for others. When he saw a friend in need he was there to help. When a friend needed encouragement and support, he was there. He always taught us to love others the way God loves us. He read to us often the passages in the Law that talked about our responsibility to care for others in their times of need and that God would bless those who served humbly and obediently.

These lessons were etched deeply in our lives and thoughts. We saw him time after time provide for others even when it might place us in difficulty. And every time he did, we always seemed to have enough for ourselves and more. We were always in a position to help others.

Then one day he heard that his good friend from the days of cave living and raiding was in serious trouble. He was being attacked by his own son and had to flee for his life. He called to me and my brothers and quickly gave orders to load up a number of donkeys with food and other provisions. We also took a few extra donkeys to provide transportation for those who were with my dad's friend.

When we arrived at the meeting place, we were a little surprised to see that the person in need was our King, David. Although our father had told us many stories, he had never told us who the leader of his group was. We should have suspected the truth. We had heard many similar stories about the king and what had happened to him before he became king. But for some reason we never made the connection.

The reunion of these two men was like the reunion of two dear friends, friends who had shared life at a profound level, who had a relationship built on mutual respect and confidence. A life built on trusting God together. It was a glorious moment to see and we wished we could sit by the campfire and listen as they reminisced. But this was not to be. The scouts came and warned us that Absalom was coming and David and those with him needed to cross the river before sunrise if they hoped to escape.

We quickly said good-bye and slipped off into the darkness. The next few months were tense to say the least, as we wondered if Absalom would attack us for helping the king escape. We set guards to watch and listen and to warn us if Absalom was coming. The news finally came of a battle between David and his son. David's army had gained the victory and Absalom was killed. We also learned that the king was returning to Jerusalem.

Again our father called to us to prepare to go and meet the king. We arrived at the same place and met the king as he was preparing

to cross back over the river. This time the reunion was filled with joy. Again they took time to remember the past and how God had provided and protected. During the conversation the King invited my father to come to Jerusalem and stay with him. I knew in an instant that my father would turn down the king's invitation. It was not like my father to depend on anyone when he could care for himself, or to think only of his needs when so many others looked to him for help and encouragement.

Wisely my father used the excuse of his old age and wanting to die in his own time. That and not being able to enjoy the taste of food and other such nonsense. To say I was disappointed would be an understatement of grand proportions. To have the opportunity to go to Jerusalem to live in the palace - to be part of what was happening in the capitol - what a door to, to whatever the mind could imagine! At least in the mind of a young man. Then in the midst of my disappointment, I heard my father tell the king that he would send me in his place. The swing from sadness to joy was so incredible I almost fainted.

As I stumbled and struggled to maintain my balance my father came to me and put his arm around me. I did not hear the rest of the conversation with the king, but at one point my father leaned over and whispered words in my ear, words that anchored my life and kept me steady through all the incredible events that I would witness.

"My son" he said, "always remember to be generous. Always use your life to bring blessing to others. Always remember that what you have is from God and to be used to honor and glorify Him. If you will do this you will be the man God intended you to be."

Today I am here to witness the crowning of the new king, Solomon. The generosity of my father continues to bring me blessing for the king has told his son to never forget to care for me and my brothers because of an act of kindness, given at a time of desperation and need. I pray that I too, like my father, will be the source of such a blessing for my children, that they too will learn the meaning of caring about others and obeying God's Law.

Week One – Read Psalms 78:1-7; Psalms 145:1-21.

Consider the role of a father who teaches the next generation - his children - the importance of knowing God and his Word. How are you communicating your knowledge of God to your children?

Week Two - Read Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21.

What does it mean to exasperate or embitter our children? What about our lives encourages or discourages our children?

Week three – Read Proverbs 4:1-7.

This passage tells of a father talking to his sons about how they should live, what teaching they should follow, and about the need to find wisdom. He indicates that a key source to all of these is in his own words. Reflect on the times that you speak to your children. Do you talk to them about life and how to live or do you simply give them commands and directions? Do you only expect them to do what you say or do you take the time to explain why? Are you simply making them follow you or are you teaching them through leading them with your words and your life?

Week four – Read Genesis 49:28.

Fathers were expected to bless their children. This blessing was based on a knowledge of the child and how they had responded to their father's instructions. Now read Genesis 49:1-27 and review the blessings Jacob gave to each of his sons. Today, what blessing could you give to your children? Take time to reflect on who they are, and how much they are a reflection of you and the teaching you have given them.



### **Asaph – Musician and Poet - 1 Chronicles 15:16-19; 16:4-7**

Today is a very special day for me. Today one of my songs is being used as part of the dedication of the temple that Solomon built for the worship of God. Besides that I will be leading the music as one of the choirmasters and my four sons will be musicians in the group. We will celebrate the majesty of our God and lead the people in this special time of worship.

Many people ask me how I became one of the chief musicians of the temple. My career began simply enough. I was appointed to play the cymbals for worship when David brought the tabernacle to Jerusalem. Some might think that anyone can play the cymbals. If they were talking about the large cymbals, crashing used then they would be correct. But in Hebrew music we have more than one type of cymbal. We have smaller cymbals that require a great deal of skill to play. They are used to perform intricate rhythms used in many of the dances. They are also critical to establishing the beat in many of the songs that are performed as a part of worship. Until you actually hear them, it is hard to explain the amount of practice involved in learning to play these cymbals.

To make it easier to practice and improve my skill I also began to write my own songs. I used these songs to practice specific rhythms and to experiment with new types and styles. This did not always please my father who was what we call a traditionalist. I often had to find quiet places to practice these new concepts. The best places to practice were the inner storerooms. There I could practice undisturbed and unheard. Or, at least, I thought no one could hear.



I did write a simple song for our family meal time. My father enjoyed it for its simplicity and focus on God, the source of all we receive. Once I knew that he was happy I then wrote harmonies and variations of the melody. We often sang and played this song as part of our Sabbath meal preparation.

One day the king's secretary came to me and told me the king wanted to see me. As I followed him I became more and more nervous. He was taking me to the king's study. As we entered, I suddenly realized that the rooms I had been using to practice my music were actually directly below the king's study. Now I was getting very nervous. I already knew what my father thought of my attempts at new styles and rhythms. What did the king think? We all knew that he was the source of much of the music and guidelines for performance. I was definitely worried about what the king was going to say.

I was completely unprepared for what he said. The king asked me to serve as one of the three key musicians of the temple. Without thinking my jaw dropped wide open and I lost my balance, almost knocking over the lamp stand next to me. My attempt to hold onto the lamp and regain my composure only made my actions more comical. The king laughed at my reaction and then helped me to a chair. He assured me that he was serious. As I had feared, my practicing had been heard by the king, but instead of disturbing him, it had fascinated him. He told me how he began writing songs and had learned to play the harp while watching sheep. He told me that my practicing and experimenting reminded him of those special days under the stars where he learned to praise God through music.

We talked about the miracle of celebrating the wonder of God through song and music. Then he brought out his harp and presented me with a special set of cymbals. To further complete the surprise he began to sing one of the songs I had been practicing in the storeroom. This time the shock was at a more profound level. I learned that day that God had given me a special gift that could help others celebrate his love, his power, his presence. I learned that as I used the gift given to me I could help others better understand and appreciate the God that loved them

and cared for them. I could also help them understand the awesomeness and power of this God.

As I grew in my ability, I grew in my appreciation of who God is and then in my capacity to help others experience the reality of God and His presence. With the help of Solomon as our sponsor, we have started a school of music to help others develop their gifts. It is so exciting to see a new generation of young people learning to use their gift to honor God and help others in their worship as well.

We all have gifts that God has given us. These gifts are given with the intention of helping means others grow in their knowledge of God and in their relationship with God. Today we are here together at the temple to celebrate this truth.

Week One – Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7; 1 Peter 4:10-11.

One of the themes related to understanding the gifts of God is found in these passages. What is a key function of the gifts? How are you using your life and gifts to accomplish this?

Week Two – Read 1 Corinthians 13.

This chapter discusses the relationship of love to several of the gifts. Reflect on the relationship of love and your gift. Is it possible to use your gift without the presence of love? How will that affect what you do and the responses of others?

Week three - Read 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6.

This passage suggests that our ability to use a gift is not automatic, that in some way we need to pay attention and study how to use our gift. Think of the idea of leaning to play a musical instrument. One may have the ability to play but only with practice can the ability be developed to its full potential. How does this idea apply to the gift God has given you?

Week Four - Read 1 Peter 4:10.

What is the purpose of the gifts we receive? How can you use your gift to serve others?



### **Centurion at the Cross – a truthful confession - Luke 23:47**

I will not share my name with you today. This is a change in my attitude that has occurred because of recent events; events that have completely changed my concept of honor and renown. To explain what has happened I need to tell you a little of my story.

Twenty years ago I was serving in the legion of Rome that was stationed in the north. Our task was to protect and, if possible, defeat the Germanic army that had been a constant threat to Rome. We had lost several key battles but had managed to maintain our position. Then Rome decided to send a new general to lead us. Along with him came new recruits.

The general began a series of raids and we soon we managed to locate and engage the enemy. It was a fierce battle and at one point we were close to losing once again. But we stood our ground and began to move forward. Then their line broke and ... well I don't need to share the details. It was a great victory and, as usual, the victorious general and his troops were called back to Rome to receive their reward.

What a day it was as we marched triumphantly into Rome with our captives and the spoils of war. The general received his reward and new position and I, along with many others, was promoted to

the station of centurion. We were also allowed to choose our next place of service as part of that reward. I chose to stay in Rome and enjoy my life for the moment. After a few years I became restless and longed for a change. Once a soldier always a soldier.

I learned of an opportunity to be posted to Palestine. I had heard wonderful stories about the region and soon found myself on a boat with other soldiers headed for Jerusalem. There we met our new commander who told us that our job would be to keep the peace and that we would be serving under Pontius Pilate.

The first few years were quiet, but that was not to last. The people were a stubborn lot and fanatical about their religion. They were ready to die to protect it from Roman influence and it became apparent that Pilate just did not understand the dynamics of the situation. But that had little to do with me. As a soldier I carried out my orders.

Then a strange man appeared out of nowhere. He came from a remote region and began traveling through Galilee, Samaria and Palestine. The Jewish leaders became more and more agitated and angry with him. This further intensified the strained relationships between the Jews and Pilate. This man, called him Jesus, was seen as a threat to their authority and one who could destabilize an already unstable relationship between them and Rome. You see the Jews enjoyed an unusual amount of freedom. Very few of the conquered nations were allowed to maintain their religious belief and even fewer were given any kind of freedom to govern their people. Yet they were and the tension this created was growing.

This tension reached a peak during Passover. Usually we had little to do, other than watch for thieves. We were to avoid any confrontation with the pilgrims. But this year the stranger appeared in the temple and drove out all of the merchants. As expected, we were told to do nothing. I think Pilate was enjoying watching the Jewish leaders squirm as they tried to deal with this rogue fellow. He was also glad to not be the center of their attacks and venomous words for a change. He also was being very careful not to cause any trouble. He had made some serious errors recently and Rome was not happy.

This all changed suddenly when the Jewish leaders appeared in the judgment court and called on Pilate to sentence Jesus to death. Pilate was ready to throw them out when they made a statement that terrified him. They were willing to call Caesar their king if he would sentence this man to death. A refusal could result in another bloody round of retribution and even the possibility of a revolt. That was something Pilate could not afford. He was already in a great deal of trouble politically and knew that one more misstep could result in banishment and a loss of all he had worked for.

So instead of throwing them out, he gave in to their demands. I found myself leading a contingent of soldiers to the hill outside of Jerusalem, a hill that we had nicknamed ‘skull hill’ or Golgatha. We had made this trip many times to crucify criminals and dissidents. People that no one cared for and in many cases were glad to be rid of. We used crucifixion as our primary means of capital punishment. It was a frightening way to die and very effective in deterring others from pursuing a similar path in life. We had seen a significant drop in criminal activity and less activity in the area of dissidence.

Today would be different. As far as we could tell Jesus was innocent. But we had crucified others that had appeared innocent, who in a last attempt to avoid crucifixion had confessed their sin. No matter - they died anyway. But this man remained calm. Instead of confessing, sin he forgave sin. Instead of explaining his life, he listened to the confession of a thief and promised him forgiveness and a place in heaven. Instead of worrying about himself he focused on caring for the needs of his mother. He never complained, never cursed, never begged for mercy.

Then the sky went dark and the ground began to quake. He cried to his father. Then he said “it is finished” and died. In that moment, all the stories I had heard about this man began to make sense. We had heard of his unique teaching about a God who loved us. Many of us had stood on the walls of the fort to watch him as he healed people and taught them about the one true God. At the time it seemed like nonsense. But in that moment, I knew the truth. I knew that this man was different. I knew that he was truly the son of God, not just any god, but the one true God.

I then realized that all I had done to gain honor and respect were empty and useless tasks. They would bring me nothing of lasting value. THE name that I had worked so hard to gain - to be seen as a name of value and prestige - meant nothing. I have learned that there is a name far more valuable. It is the name Christian.

All my battles in the defense of Rome no longer mean anything. Now the greatest battle I will fight will be to tell others of this man and his lover for us. I will battle to win the souls of those lost in sin, lost in the emptiness of this world. I am no longer a centurion of the Roman Empire. I am now a soldier in the kingdom of God. Rome was great, but this kingdom is eternal. Rome was powerful, but depended on fear to maintain its power. Rome was vast but had its boundaries, its limits. This kingdom is limitless and knows no boundaries. This kingdom has a power, love, that cannot be defeated by any force.

Today I am a free man, not just an employee, but an heir of the kingdom of God. Yes, truly Jesus is the Son of God.

Week one – Read Romans 10:9-10.

Many people are willing to confess in their heart their need for Christ. But this passage talks about confessing with one's mouth. What does this mean? Why is this so important?

Week two Read John 12:42.

What is it today that prevents you from confessing your relationship with Jesus to those around you? Why is it hard to admit to others you are a Christian? What affect will such a confession have on your relationship with others?

Week three – Read Romans 14:9-12.

The centurion made a confession that could have resulted in his death by admitting there was a king greater than Caesar. This passage states clearly that a day will come when everyone will be forced to admit and confess there is only one true king. Consider the importance of making that confession now before standing in the court of God and being forced to make it.

Week four – Read Hebrews 13:15; Hosea 14:2.

These passages talk about the fruit of our lips. What is the relationship between this phrase and the word confession? What is the fruit of confession? How important is your public confession at church and in the world to bearing fruit for God?



### **Eutychus - Maintaining focus - Acts 20:9-11**

Today i am here waiting for my friend Timothy. Carpus asked me to deliver a cloak and several scrolls belonging to Paul for him so that Timothy can take them to Paul in prison. I look forward to speaking with Timothy and learning how Paul is doing. I only wish I could go with Timothy and have the opportunity to hear Paul speak again and thank him once more for the special place he has in my heart.

I was only a teenager when Paul came through Troas on his second missionary journey. My family became an active part of the group of believers who heard his message. We had previously been part of a group of gentiles who had listened with interest to the teachings of the Bible and of the coming of one who would bring new hope to the world. Paul's report of Jesus, and the fact

that this gospel was not only for the Jews but for anyone who repented and asked forgiveness, thrilled our hearts.

As Paul shared this message, he also shared his burden for those who had not yet heard. We listened to his prayers, asking God to show him where to go next. He spoke often about wanting to go further into Asia and how he had been unable to proceed. He asked us to pray with him that God would reveal where he should go next. Then one morning he came to us and told us about the vision God had given him of a man from Macedonia. It was of a man pleading for someone to come to them and help them understand the message of God. We were excited and eagerly helped Paul and Silas prepare for the journey. We provided what we could and helped them book passage on the next boat to Samothrace and the region of Macedonia.

It was several years later that we saw Paul again. He was on his way to Jerusalem with a gift to help the church because of the famine that was affecting so many. Everyone wanted to have a chance to hear what Paul had to say about his travels and all that God was doing. So many wanted to come yet somehow I managed to find a way in. The place was so full that I had to sit in a window, there just was no space left in the room.

As the night wore on became drowsy. Paul had so much to tell us and I wanted to learn all I could about what God had to say to us. But, I just couldn't help myself. There were so many people, the room was so warm and there were so many lamps burning that I lost the battle with sleep. The next thing I remember was Paul hugging me and telling everyone I was alright and that I was alive. To say the least I was thoroughly confused by Paul's comments and even more confused to find myself the center of attention and lying in the street below the window where I had been sitting.

Paul led me back upstairs and explained what God had done. Apparently I had fallen asleep and fallen from the window. Everyone immediately rushed down to where I landed. Luke declared that I was dead. I had probably broken my neck in the fall. No sooner had Luke made that statement then Paul arrived and lay down on top of me. Within in moments he declared to all



that I was not dead but by God's power had been given back my life. He did not chide me for falling asleep but helped me understand how God was working in each person's life to carry the message of the gospel to everyone.

When we returned to the room Paul made sure I sat near him. I am sure no one wanted me to fall asleep again and I noticed that no one else was sitting in the window. What a night we had listening to Paul speak and teach, even more intently than we had before. At daybreak we broke bread, had communion and escorted Paul to the ship that was to carry him on his way to Jerusalem.

It has now been several years since he last passed this way. At that time the weather was much more comfortable and we had the impression that he intended to return soon to spend a little more time with us. Little did we know that he would once again be arrested and put in prison. And so, as I walk, I am anxious to speak with Timothy and learn how Paul is doing and to share with Timothy a little about what God has been doing in my life.

That day when I fell I learned many things. And that day changed my perspective on my responsibility to speak to others about the truth I had learned about Jesus and God's offer of salvation. God has given me many opportunities to share with others what it means to die and live again. Not just physically, but spiritually. The truth is, each of us must die in order to be raised to new life. My life has been an example of just what that means. Life without Christ is one that will end in death. That death can happen now by our choice, or it will happen eventually because everyone will die.

If we choose to die to our past and our sin, and allow God to bury it all, then in a real way we experience a type of death. That death will allow us to receive from God a new life that is only found in Jesus Christ. Our sin yields death. We can choose to die now and receive new life from Christ or we can wait until our sin results in our final death. Then we will not receive new life but face an eternal death in payment for our sin.

My life became a dramatic example of that truth. I was given a second chance to know and understand the life God offers to

everyone. Each day is another opportunity to share with people what God did that day so many years ago. While I do not understand how or why God allowed me to die and receive back my life, I do know that I have a responsibility to share what I learned with everyone who will listen.

So many people may never have the chance to hear unless each of us realizes what God has given us and takes the time to share with them about the resurrected life that God wants to give each of us. I was not just given back my life. I was resurrected, given new life: a life that only God can give.

Here comes Timothy. It has been good talking with you but it is time for me to go. I trust that if you do not know Jesus and the life he offers each of us, you will choose to learn more. If you do know this life then be sure to share it with others before they die and it is too late. May God's presence and power be with you as you journey with Him.

Week one - Read Colossians 3:1-17.

Here is a discussion of what should happen when we die to ourselves and put on the new life that we have received in Christ. Review the areas that we should die to. Are any of these areas still alive in your life? What are doing that feeds them and keeps them alive? What needs to be done to end their existence in your life?

Week two - Read Colossians 3:1-17 again.

We are encouraged to live the new life or put on the new self. This is a process that renews in us the knowledge of God that was lost because of sin. Part of this process involves redressing ourselves and letting Christ's peace rule. What type of clothing are you putting on each day to help maintain this new life? Reflect on what it means to let the peace of Christ rule in your life.

Week three - Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-41.

A seed has been planted in your life. A seed that represents all that God wants to do in your life, both now and into eternity. What does that seed look like to you? How will the development of that seed in your life benefit yourself and those around you?

Week four - Read Colossians 1:9-12.

Paul states that he is praying that people will be filled so they will have the ability to live a life worthy of the Lord. A key part of this is bearing fruit. Consider what should be the visible results of your new life. How does living a life worthy of Christ impact your relations with others.



### **Purah - Being the bridge - Judges 7:10-11**

I want to tell you a story from my life: an event that forever changed me.

I was a servant in the house of Gideon's father and participated in the events that led to the defeat of the Midianites. In those days there were few of us that still believed in Jehovah the true God of Israel. It was not easy to watch the people follow the false idols of the nations around us. It was even more difficult to obey my master when he chose to construct an idol and worship pole to those gods.

Then one day Gideon, the son of my master, told me that God had come to him while he was thrashing wheat in secret. He told me that Jehovah had ordered him to destroy the altar and worship pole of his father. I gladly helped him carry out that command. It was a

daring action to defy his father and defy the god Baal. It was also very risky. I am ashamed to admit that I would not have dared to do so on my own. But Jehovah was speaking and it was time to act.

The next day we saw the evidence of the power of Jehovah over the god Baal. It did not take long for the people to discover what we had done and who had done it. They were afraid of what Baal would do and wanted to appease him by punishing those responsible. It is hard to describe how I felt as the mob approached Gideon's father to demand that we be handed over to them. Naturally I was afraid but I also felt a sense of pride that I had finally acted on my belief in the one true God.

The response of Gideon's father helped put things into perspective and to ease my fears. Instead of handing us over to the crowd, he challenged the people to let Baal demonstrate that he truly was a god and defend his honor. When nothing happened, the people quickly realized that they had been worshipping a false god. I became excited and ready to do whatever Gideon would tell us to do.

Gideon then took the trumpet and sounded the call to arms. My courage began to increase as I saw the tens of thousands who responded to the call. It grew until I began to walk among them and listen to them express their doubts and fears. Though they had heard the story of Baal's humiliation they were still in awe and fear of the great Midian army that was camped nearby. For years they had suffered attacks by this army and always the result had been the same. The Midianites took whatever they wanted. I realized it would take more than the destruction of Baal's altar to convince them of God's power.

Gideon's first words to this army were disconcerting and yet filled with wisdom. He told everyone who was afraid to go home. This was good because it is hard to maintain morale when the majority of the people are afraid. Better an army convinced of their purpose and of God's power than an army so afraid they might run at the first sign of difficulty. God would be more than able to give us the victory.

I was feeling very positive about the chance of winning when Gideon told me to gather the men. They were to be given a test to select only the most courageous and best warriors among them for the battle ahead. Gideon explained to me the test and I helped to identify those approved by God. Imagine how I felt as I watched an army of 32,000 be reduced to a small force of only 300 men. Even with the knowledge of Jehovah's response to the fleece test (Judges 6:37-40), I was becoming very nervous about what my faith had gotten me into.

I was standing next to Gideon when he told me that Jehovah had spoken to him one more time and that I was to accompany him on a little excursion into the Midian camp. He said God would give us the evidence we needed to help us all do what He was asking us to do. So off we went. When we got close we crawled on our bellies so we could hear the conversation of the soldiers at a security post. All they could talk about was a dream that one of them had and the interpretation that it meant the Midian army would be defeated by Gideon.

We left as quickly as we could to share what we had heard and get organized for the attack. We moved quickly into place and carried out the commands given to us. As one we broke our pitchers, raised our torches and blew our trumpets. What happened next is hard to explain. We stood and watched as the Midian army and their allies attacked and killed each other. God had given us the victory.

I, Purah, am a witness to the faithfulness of Jehovah to those who serve him faithfully. I only wish I had been more faithful and more courageous in challenging my people to trust Him instead of the false gods of the nations. Never again will I allow my fear of others and false gods to silence me. I will proclaim the truth no matter what the consequences.

Week one -Read Luke 9:25-26 and Matthew 16:26.

Each of us is living in the world and influenced by it in the decisions we make. Reflect on the decisions you make each day. Which has more influence in how you make those decisions, your

relationship to the world or your relationship to God? Is there any decision that you make that is not influenced by the world? What part should God play in each choice you make?

Week two - Read Luke 12:19-21.

Here we have the story of a rich man who focused on his possessions and making sure he would have everything he needed. Look at your life and your desires. How do they influence your decisions? How does our desire to be comfortable impact our relationship and commitment to God?

Week three - Read Luke 17:31-35.

The people mentioned in this short story are doing the same thing, yet one is left behind and the other taken into heaven. Why? What is interesting is they are not involved in a specific ministry. They were involved in the normal activity of life. What is the difference between the one taken and the one left?

Week Four -

Purah was chosen to go with Gideon to be a witness. Why was he chosen and not someone else? (Remember the story above is fiction. We do not know what Purah believed or what his part was in all that happened. We only know that God selected him to be a witness to tell others what he and Gideon saw and heard.) Would God select you to be a witness? Why? Why not?

# Joseph of Arimethea

## **Joseph of Arimethea - Declaring one's loyalty - Luke 23:50-54; Mark 15:43-46**

I am a wealthy, powerful man and a man of courage and daring. At least that is what I believe to be true. To become a man of wealth requires a person to have a certain type of courage and willingness to be daring, to take the risks others are not willing to take. You have to be willing to lose it all if you truly want to win. When you win enough you gain power and respect. As you move forward and take the risks, people begin to notice you and seek you out for advice and for help.

In our society, the greatest prize to be won is to gain a position on the ruling council of our people, the Sanhedrin. Only those who have become wealthy and powerful are considered worthy to be appointed to this council. I am proud to say that I am a member of this council.

At least that is how I used to feel. Now things have changed. The truth is, I noticed a change about a year ago. It was after I heard this new prophet, Jesus, speak. I was on a business trip to the city of Caesarea and he was in the market speaking to the people. His words amazed me and I began to wonder if he was not, in fact, the Messiah we had all been waiting for. While I was listening to him speak, a group from the Sanhedrin arrived and began to question him. They were not pleased with his answers and left angrily calling him a demon, a servant of Satan.

Later that day, at the inn, I sat at a table enjoying a meal when the group from the Sanhedrin arrived. They saw me and came to sit with me. They were still very angry. They promptly began to discuss again what had happened and how this man could not be a prophet. He did not observe the laws in the correct manner. They were not concerned about all the miracles he had performed that day. They were not concerned about the depth of his teaching. All they could talk about was that he was not one of them and did not respect their authority as Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin. They declared to everyone present that they were going back to Jerusalem to make sure anyone who listened to that man would be banned from the temple.

That day I said nothing. I thought it wise not to argue with them. Nobody wins an argument with those who are angry. I decided that it would be better to wait until I returned to Jerusalem and then talk to them in private. I also decided it would be wise not to be seen publicly listening to Jesus. Instead I would interview people so that I could learn more about him and his teaching.

The truth is that my wise decision was not about seeking the truth and discussing it. It was about avoiding being excluded from the temple and losing my place on the Sanhedrin. I never did talk to that group that I had met in Caesarea. My great courage and daring failed me. Instead of interviewing people I sent my servants to do my work but I always sent them to where Jesus was. I never asked them what they had seen or heard. Instead I would hide in the corners and listen to them talk among themselves.

When the Sanhedrin met I remained silent. I did not defend Jesus or contradict them, even when I knew what they were saying were lies. I saw what was happening but was too afraid to do or say anything. I became a man living in fear that someone would find out the truth; I was becoming a believer in the man Jesus and his claim to be the son of God.

Last week, Friday, I had to make a decision; a decision that may bring me a great deal of trouble. Most certainly I will lose my place on the Sanhedrin. On Friday they brought Jesus to trial. But it was an illegal trial. It was done in the night and with a large



number of false witnesses. Once i saw what was happening I could no longer remain silent. I spoke out and declared that I would have no part in the murder of an innocent man. I promptly left along with a few others. Unfortunately my action was not enough to stop them and later that morning Jesus was crucified.

I had been silent and living in secret. Fear had clouded my thoughts and now the man I believed to be the Messiah was dying. Finally I regained my courage and boldly went to Pilate to request that I be allowed to give the body a proper burial. I no longer cared what people thought. It was time to take action and declare my faith. That gave me the strength I needed to face my new found enemies from the Sanhedrin who were there watching and cursing me as I took down the body, wrapped it in burial clothes, and took it to the grave I prepared for my own burial. Some of them even followed us to the gravesite.

The only encouragement came from Nicodemus another member of the Sanhedrin who i had heard had a special meeting with Jesus. He like me had chosen to remain silent and keep their faith secret. That day he had joined me and left the council when it became apparent the Sanhedrin intended to crucify Jesus.

Today I heard from the ladies that followed us to the tomb that Jesus is alive. That the most incredible miracle has happened, even more wondrous than the resuscitation of Lazarus! Jesus has conquered the grave and we are to go to meet him in Galilee. This time I will go and I will proclaim for all to see that I believe and I will follow Jesus.

My fear of losing my property and my position almost cost me seeing the truth. It almost made me a willing participant in the crucifixion of the Messiah. I am ashamed at how I behaved. But now i have the chance to help others believe and overcome their fears. I now know the truth and it has set me free from my fears.

Week One Read Isaiah 53:9.

This passage includes a prediction about where and how Jesus would be buried. It states his grave would be among the wicked and the rich. Why would Joseph be considered wicked as well as

rich? What made him a wicked man? Why are you a wicked man? What does it mean to be declared wicked?

Week two - Read Mark 10:23-27.

Define what it means to be rich? Do you possess something that you would be unwilling to give up? Would that make you like a rich man? The "rich" of this passage represents a type of attitude, dependence on self and one's possessions. Why does this attitude make it so hard to respond to God's message? What is preventing you today from being fully dependent on God?

Week three - Read Proverbs 29:25; John 9:22; 12:42.

These passages discuss the impact of fear on our lives. What do you fear and how does that affect your life and the decisions you make? How often do you avoid talking about your faith to others because of fear? How many people do you know who only declare their faith when at the church? Is this the same or different from what Joseph and others did in relation to their belief in Jesus? How many of us are, in reality, only secret Christians out of fear?

Week four - Read Philippians 1:14.

Paul is in prison because he has publicly declared his faith in Christ. What does Paul say is the result of his action? What will it take for you to become bold and overcome your fear? What will it cost you? What will happen if you overcome your fear and boldly proclaim your faith in Christ?

# Jahath

## **Jahath – Musician and Overseer – 2 Chronicles 34:12**

My friend Obadiah and I are Levites and musicians. For many years the people around here were not very interested in hearing the kind of music that we knew how to play. You see our parents only allowed one type of music in the house and that was the temple music used when singing the psalms written by David and a few other people. But that religious music just didn't go well at the kind of parties and celebrations that were common back then. We couldn't play a song about Jehovah when they were celebrating a sacrifice to another god like Dagon or Baal or Astarte. It sort of spoiled the mood.

We didn't mind though. Some of us were listening to the words and were learning about the God who had rescued us from slavery and had made Israel a great nation at one time. We also began to understand why our world was such a mess and nobody was really happy unless they were drunk.

Then a new king came to power. I can't say what all happened but we heard that the priests were responsible for getting rid of King Amon and placing King Josiah on the throne. The new king was just a boy, but by the time he was a young man he made some big decisions. He listened to the priests and reviewed the lives of his grandfather, Manasseh and his father Amon and decided it was time that Israel returned to worshipping the one true God.

Well that decision changed our lives. There was now a demand for music that would help people better understand God and be able to worship him. There was only one problem. The place where the people were supposed to come and learn was a mess. The temple

was a disaster. There were all kinds of idols in the building and piles of rubbish from the crazy parties people used to have there. All of the furniture was ruined. So in order to have a place for people to meet and worship, and listen to the music we were to play, the temple and its courts had to be repaired.

The priest decided that Obadiah and I would be the perfect people to supervise the work. They knew that we had refused to learn the music that was so popular for the worship of the other gods and they knew we had faithfully studied and learned the music used in the worship of the one true God, Jehovah. They decided that we could be trusted to supervise the work and make sure it would be done right. Because we knew the songs, we would have the best understanding of how the people should work and what must be done to make the temple a true place of worship.

To tell the truth, we were a little overwhelmed by the scope of the work to be done. I mean cleaning up over fifty years of abuse and rubbish is a huge task. But we accepted the challenge and began the work. First we had to get rid of the rubbish and then organize the repairs. Buried in the rubbish we found some containers that looked important. We handed them over to Hilkiah the priest. He then gave it to Shaphan, the king's secretary. When he began to read from the book that was found inside the container, the king turned white like a sheet. This book was filled with instructions from God and what would happen if the people didn't obey those instructions.

The next day the king showed up at the temple and had the book read to all the people present. He then renewed the covenant with God and pledged to make sure that all the nation of Israel heard the words of the book and were taught how to live by them.

We were given more workers and funds to finish cleaning and repairing the temple. To encourage the workers, we began to play the music of the Psalms for them. The change in attitude was incredible. The combination of the teachings and the music had a marvelous affect on us all. We were able to finish the work in record time. When we finished we were given a special ministry.

We were to play for the Passover celebration that the king had organized to renew our covenant with God

Then the king told us to get organized because we were going to travel throughout the country and play our music for everyone and help them organize the removal of all the idols. We would also use the music and Psalms to teach the people how to worship the one true God, Jehovah.

What an idiot I am. I just realized that I have left out a very important lesson I learned. When we were told that we were to oversee the work of cleaning the temple, my friend and I were not happy. Think about it. We are professional musicians. They should have found find someone else to do that kind of work. But what does one say to the king.

So we accepted the work and made sure we did the job right. By doing a careful job we found the books and rescued them from the rubbish. Imagine if we had done careless work. We would still be worshipping those idols and the king would never have discovered how angry God was with our behavior. Sometimes it is in doing the unwanted, undesirable tasks, yet doing them well, that God will bring us unexpected blessings. Not just for us but for everyone.

Week one – Read Luke 12:42-44.

Consider what might have happened if the workers had not been responsible and had been careless? What can happen in the church if people are careless about the work they are asked to do?

Week two – Read Luke 16:10-12.

So many people want to be given the most important jobs in the church. How should we determine who to choose? What can we learn about the way people carry out the simple jobs? Which job do you think is the most important job? How do you respond when asked to do a job you consider less attractive or less important?

Week Three – Read Titus 2:20.

Why is our attitude so important? How does our attitude affect those around us and how the people around us do the work they have been given?

Week four – Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-6.

Think about the different kinds of service and jobs there are in the church. How can each of these be used to bring honor to God and draw men to God? Is there any job too small or unimportant in the church?



### **The leper – Doubly outcast – doubly healed – Luke 17:12-19**

I want to tell you my story, but for personal reasons, I am not going to tell you my name.

I am a Samaritan. That in itself may explain some of my reluctance to tell you all of my background.

I had a good life, as long as I avoided the Jews. To the Jews, we Samaritans are outcasts, pariahs. They treat us as though we have leprosy. They will never come to our house. They refuse to do business with us, especially those self-righteous Pharisees and Sadducees. Some Jews are reasonable and will at least talk to us. But those snobs won't buy an item if they think that we may have touched it. To them it is contaminated because we have touched it. That is the same way they treat those with leprosy; no contact with

the person and no contact with anything that has come in contact with them.

But I have to admit my feelings towards them were not that much better. I was arrogant and had no respect for the Jews either. They thought they were so high and mighty. To be honest, I too would do everything I could to avoid them and not buy anything from a Jew. But that was all about to change.

You see we have a disease in our country. It is called leprosy. Leprosy is one of those diseases that is not a respecter of persons. Doesn't matter who you are, wealthy or poor or where you live, Judah or Galilee. It doesn't care about your religious ideology, Pharisee, Sadducee, outcast, heathen. It attacks everyone equally without regard to social position or ethnic origin. And when you get this disease, you are an outcast to everyone. The only people who will even talk to you or even come near you are other people with leprosy.

It is so feared by everyone that there are strict rules about where a leper can walk, live and get their food. In fact, if you have leprosy you are to shout out to anyone you see that you have leprosy. That way they can avoid coming in contact with you and you can avoid the risk of spreading this disease to others.

So like I said my attitude towards the Jews and my own arrogance were about to be shattered. I woke up one day and noticed a spot on my foot that was bleeding. It was a white patchy area. When I touched it, I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't remember cutting it or bumping it. I went to the local medicine person and what he told me frightened me. I tried to hide it from my family but I couldn't. Actually the medicine person came by and told my family what he had seen. He is bound by culture to report this to the authorities and to the family.

Yes, you guessed it. He had brought the local officials with him. They told me to show them the sore and when they saw it, they quickly left the room. They were not alone. My family left the house as well. I was told in clear terms to leave immediately and not come back. As I left none of my family came to give me a hug.

Instead they began to tear down the house and build a fire on it. They were terrified of me and of the chance that they too might get leprosy.

Everyone knows where the lepers live. So I left the village and joined them. Turns out I was the only Samaritan in the group. Even more interesting was the fact that there were a couple of former Pharisees and a Sadducee in this group. What a twist of fate. Those who hated me for being a Samaritan were now the only persons who would talk to me and depended on me to help find food for the group.

I don't want to spend any more time talking about that. What I want to talk about is what happened much later. There were now ten of us, and as usual, we were wandering through the fields looking for anything we could eat. We saw a crowd coming and did as we always did. We began shouting "leper, leper" so they would not come near us and risk being defiled, or worse, getting the disease.

Only there was one person who just kept coming toward us. We suddenly realized who it was and remembered the stories about his ability to heal. So we shouted, asking that he would have mercy on us and heal us. He came closer and told us to go to the temple and show ourselves to the priest. We had nothing to lose and started off toward Jerusalem. It didn't take long before we realized that we were not struggling to walk, and as each of us looked at their hands and feet, we realized we were healed!

I stopped dead in my tracks while the others took off running. They were in a hurry to be declared clean and return to their former lives. How quickly we forgot where we have been. For my part I discovered something much more profound. I discovered that not only was I healed of my leprosy but it dawned on me that my healer was a Jew. He not only overcame his dislike for leprosy and but he didn't let that animosity Jews had for Samaritans to prevent him from healing me. I discovered that I was not an outcast in the eyes of God.



I had been healed of my disease but I had also been healed of much more. So I stopped and went back to thank him. That action brought another level of healing and helped me to see all people as my brothers.

Week One –

Read Matthew 25:24-40. Who are the least of these in your world? How are you treating them?

Week Two – Read Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:32-36.

How often do you decide to help someone based on the idea that they will be able to return the favor? Do you care for others because of their need or because of their relationship to you? How does this affect your testimony?

Week three – Read 1 Timothy 6:17-19.

What is the relationship between arrogance and generosity? How does one affect the other?

Week four - Read John 13:34-35.

Evaluate how you are doing at loving others the way Jesus loves you. What impact are your actions having on people believing you are a disciple of Jesus?



### **Nicholas of Antioch - Marked for service - Acts 6:1-6**

I want to tell you about a unique moment in the life of the church; a moment that prevented the church from descending into anarchy and being split into many factions.

Like so many others I had come to Jerusalem for the Harvest Festival which comes 50 days after the Passover. There was a group of us from Antioch and it was my first time to make the journey. Unlike most of the people I was not born a Jew. I am a proselyte, a convert from paganism to faith in the one true God. For many years I had observed the group who met at the synagogue near me and was impressed by their lives. As I listened to their teachings I realized their God was not like those of my people. Their God was honorable and reliable. What He said was true and you could depend on Him to act according to His word.

I made the decision to convert and go through the process of circumcision. Many of my family and friends scoffed at my decision. But I believed in what I was doing. The more I studied the Scriptures, the more convinced I was that I had found the truth. My new friends encouraged me to go to Jerusalem to participate in the Passover or at least in the Harvest Festival.

For various reasons I was not able to go for the Passover festival. That saddened me a little because it is such an important event, but I was still excited about going and celebrating with thousands of others our faith in God. It took us several weeks to travel to

Jerusalem. As we entered the city we found ourselves surrounded by a crowd of people and dragged along by them until we were standing in front of a roughly dressed man who began to speak about someone named Jesus.

We had heard the stories about a miracle healer. Such stories travel fast down the caravan lines. We had heard of the events that happened during Passover from those we met on the road. How he had taken over the temple. How he had defied the authorities and how they had organized his crucifixion. We had heard many such stories over the years. What was different about this man was the rumor that he had risen from the dead. The people mentioned the names of some of his followers and how they had run away in fear. Others told us they had been seen returning quietly to Jerusalem.

That crowd that we met stood in front of the key leader of those followers, Peter. He began to speak about the events and what they meant. He used scriptures that I knew from memory. As I listened my heart was strangely touched and then I realized why. I was hearing all of this, not in Hebrew, but in my mother tongue. It hit home like a hammer. God was talking to me in my language. Oh what joy flooded my heart as I heard those words and the offer of forgiveness. I joined about 3000 other people that day who stood and proclaimed their sin, asked forgiveness and were baptized.

Every day I went to the temple to listen to the apostles teach. Every day my faith grew and all the studying I had done before began to change my heart. Every day I told others about what I had learned and invited them to come and listen. It was incredible to see how God was working and changing lives. I found myself teaching others what I had learned, especially those whose knowledge of Hebrew was limited. God was blessing and I was honored to help others receive that blessing.

Then things began to turn a bit sour. There were many who came and had such great needs, especially those from outside of Judea and Galilee. They had no friends and family who could help them. We began to see the beginnings of a split as those from the area

seemed to receive special preference when the gifts were distributed among those in need.

The apostles heard what was happening and realized that something needed to be done. They needed people who could help them care for the needs of the people so they could focus on discipling, teaching and prayer. They suggested that deacons be appointed to watch over the receiving and distribution of gifts. The people responded by selecting honorable men, men filled with the Holy Spirit.

As the list of names was read we saw an amazing development. All the names presented were Greek names. Jews from other countries. To my surprise I heard my name called. Not only was I not a local, I was not a Jew by birth. God had moved and made it clear that service was not to be based on place of birth or cultural background but on one's commitment to the truth and service to others.

That decision resulted in another incredible wave of growth and ministry. It was so great that even some of the priests and scribes began to come and confess their sins and be received into the family of God. The leaders of the temple were not happy and we expected trouble. But we knew that God is sufficient, that we all have a place in the kingdom and that everyone is welcome.

I know that no matter what happens next I will always serve the one who saved me and gave me a place in his Kingdom. I will always be ready to serve him and those who follow Him.

Week one - Read 2 Corinthians 9:12-13.

Paul talks about the value of service. Reflect on what he says about service and the results that come from serving joyfully and willingly.

Week two - Read Matthew 5:14-16.

What is the relationship between service, called good deeds here, and letting your light shine before men? What kind of good deeds or service is Jesus talking about? (Matthew 9:41)

Week three - Read 1 Peter 4:7-11.

Reflect on the attitude one needs to have in serving. How does your attitude affect how people respond to an act of service?

Week four - Read Matthew 25:34-40.

Who is Jesus referring to when he talks about the "least of these?" Reflect on how you treat those around you. How do you decide what you will do and how you will serve them?

**Conaniah**  
**nsineno3**

### **Conaniah - Managing the details - 1 Chronicles 31:11-119**

The last three months has been one of the most exciting times in my life. I have had the privilege of watching a true leader, one who honors and serves God; lead the people back to God. I have watched as Hezekiah ordered the cleaning of the temple and the reestablishment of the rituals and worship in the temple. I have seen the people respond generously.

It has been incredible to see the people come to participate in the restoration of the temple and its daily routine. I watched the people celebrate and give like never before. The king, for his part, made sure that all were provided for and no one went hungry by hosting a grand celebration. The celebration was so incredible no one wanted to see it end and so the king gladly agreed to extend the Passover celebrations an extra week and to provide for all who chose to stay.

As the people went home they told others what they had just experienced. They, in turn, cleaned out their idols and began to send gifts and tithes to the temple. Things were getting a bit crazy around here and very disorganized. There was so much arriving everyday at the temple that it was just being piled up everywhere and as a result no one could find anything. So I got busy and began to organize things.

I really love being organized. The king knows this because my brother Shimei and I had been in charge of the planning for the celebrations. So when he saw what we were doing he responded by preparing special storerooms that we could use to take care of everything.

It was a time consuming project. We had to set up a plan for what was needed each day for the temple sacrifices, a plan for caring for all the priests and Levites who took care of them, and a plan for all the people who visited everyday to worship and bring their tithes and gifts.

Then we had to set up a system to receive the tithes and offerings and identify how and where they were to be stored. We also needed a system to be sure that perishable and non-perishable goods were properly stored. That also meant devising a system that allowed us to keep track of the perishable goods so they would be used before they spoiled.

This was only the beginning of the work. We kept records of who brought what and how much so the king would know what we had and what we still needed. He was concerned that there would not be any shortages that would affect the people's ability to come and worship or cause an interruption in the work of the priests and Levites.

As we began processing all of the mountains of materials we were able to inform the king of what it would take to maintain the programs we had designed. So they promptly assigned 10 people to help us with the work. We were also able to set up a program to help receive the offerings and contributions. Once it was in place Kore was assigned to watch over that area.

We put into place a distribution plan that allowed us to identify all the priests. This included their locations, duties and when they were to serve in the temple. This allowed us to know where to send their portions and meant that everybody received their portions, (we didn't call it a salary) according to where they were and what they were doing. As each phase was developed we asked for additional help and the king gladly assigned people to carry out the tasks involved.

My brother and I have the joy of seeing how God provides as we help everyone to share in that provision. While to many bookkeeping and management may not seem very exciting, we find it very rewarding. Many do not have the opportunity we have to listen to the stories of the people.

These stories take two forms. From those who are bringing their tithes and gifts, hear how God has provided and blessed them as they have learned to give and trust in him. From those receiving we have the privilege of hearing what those provisions mean to them and how the gifts have made it possible for them to their worship of God. It has been incredible to see God provide exactly what is needed when it is needed. Never too much and never too little.

Yes, I enjoy organizing things and maintaining records. I enjoy it because as i look at the storerooms and the books they become more than numbers on a page. They represent the blessings of God in the lives of his people and God's ability to care for those who serve and honor him. My books are special because they reflect the greatness of God.

Week One - Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-7.

What does it mean to give beyond one's ability? What does Paul mean when he talks about the privilege of giving?

Week Two - Read 2 Corinthians 8:13-15; 9:6-9.

Is it possible to give too much? Is it possible to receive too little? How does one know if they have given enough, if they have received enough?

Week three - Read 1 Chronicles 129:1-20.

This chapter includes a detailed listing of various gifts and a prayer regarding the source and purpose of those gifts. What can you learn about giving and proper management of giving from this passage?

Week four - Read 1 Timothy 5:17.

What is Paul referring to when he talks about the affairs of the church? Why is this so important? How does proper management make a difference in the life of a church? Is it important to be a good steward of what God has given you?

# Jairus

## **Jairus - a father's duty - Luke 8:40-41, 49-56**

I have watched many a father lose their child and not because of the child dying. So many fathers around me seem to be working overtime at killing their children. I don't mean physically, but bent on destroying the relationship they have with their children.

The fathers seem to think that just because they are the birth father their children will have to respect them and honor them no matter what happens. They don't seem to realize what a true father is. What is worse they blame others for the problem. Any sign of disrespect or disobedience is always the fault of the children or their mother.



I have seen fathers mistreat their children one minute and expect those same children to hug and kiss them the next. The sad truth is the children do exactly that, but not out of respect but out of fear. I have seen fathers ignore their children. They have no time for them except when it is time for the child to serve them.

I have seen fathers mistreat their daughters because they weren't sons. That is, to me, one of the saddest things that can ever happen. They seem to forget that their mother once was a daughter and that their very existence is dependent on a woman. Men can be such crude and ugly monsters.

That Proverb of Solomon's is so true and I see the fruit of it every day. Train a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it (Proverbs 22:6). Unfortunately so many fathers are not thinking about how the child should go. They don't really think about the fact that everything they do becomes a type of training. What is really sad is when these boys become men they behave towards their father the same way their father treated them. So many fathers are reaping an ugly harvest.

Oh I am so sorry. You didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of all that. But right now my mind is just overwhelmed by such thoughts because I almost became one of those fathers.

Let me explain. Just a few days ago I was busy as usual. Too busy to spend time with my daughter, my only child. I had gone to town to care for some business when a servant came running after me telling me that my daughter was very sick. Normally I would have become angry. Instead of bothering me he should have gone to the doctor. But somehow this was different, he was very scared. So I followed him home.

When I entered my house my wife was sobbing uncontrollably. All she could do was point to our daughter's room. What I saw terrified me. Suddenly it hit me that my child, my only child was dying. I crumbled at her bed. The realization of what I was losing came down on me like the crushing blow of a hammer.

I was dazed and in shock. Finally I realized my servant was shouting at me that there was only one hope to save my daughter. I

needed to go see Jesus. He had heard that he could do miraculous things. I flew out of the house, heading for the village. It was not hard to find Jesus. There was a huge crowd around him. When they saw me coming they let me through. You see I am a ruler of the synagogue. Jesus looked at me and patiently waited while I caught my breath. As soon as he understood that my daughter was dying he put his arm around me and began to lead me back the way we had come. I was only barely aware that as we walked a woman touched him. I believe he healed her and that fact lifted my spirits. That is until another of the synagogue rulers came and declared my daughter had died. He had that look of emptiness I had seen before. His words were like hammer blows to my heart. "Don't bother the teacher anymore."

I stumbled and almost collapsed. I had been such a vile father and now I would never have a chance to repair the damage I had done to my daughter and to my wife. The only thing that kept me on my feet was Jesus' strong arms and his words of assurance. "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." Without his support and those words I would never have been able to return home.

When we arrived the place was in chaos. My wife was beating her chest and sobbing. There were people all around wailing and shouting. The scene got even crazier when Jesus declared she was not dead just sleeping. The wailing turned to laughter and mockery. They told me I was insane to let this man into my house. Jesus wrapped his arms around my wife and she became calm. As he led her back into the house i was irresistibly drawn after him.

I am still in shock at what happened next. From the appearance of my daughter's skin i knew she was dead. I had seen a hundred it times before. But Jesus simply reached out his hand as if he were a parent calling their child to get up in the morning. He called her name and she just woke up. Her color immediately returned to normal and she said she was hungry. Her look was that of a child who wanted to know what the fuss was all about. She had no idea what had happened.

So that is how we treated the situation. Just like nothing had happened and everything was as it should be, but with one major

difference. Never again will I take my daughter or my wife for granted. Never again will I mistreat them. Never again will I see them as a waste of my time. I have been given a second chance to truly be a father and to be a husband to the mother of my child.

Week one - Read Colossians 3:21; Ephesians 6:4.

Have you ever thought about what your children think of you? What is it about you and your attitude that frustrates them? Why does that frustrate them? Do you spend enough time with your children so that they understand you? How will that change their attitude towards you?

Week two - Read Proverbs 4:1-4.

What are your children learning from you about how to live? What do you need to do to help your children learn to listen to you? Which speaks louder your words or your actions? Why?

Week three - Read Proverbs 20:7.

How are your children a reflection of your life? What will it mean to them if you truly walk with God and love them?

Week four - Read Deuteronomy 11:18-21.

Consider the best way to show your children how much you love them. When are you to be focused on them and their needs? How will this affect your decisions about time and family?

# ITTAI

## **Ittai - Decision making - 2 Samuel 15:19-22**

Reporter: "Ittai can we ask you a few questions?"

Ittai: "Sure why not."

Reporter: "We understand that you arrived here in Jerusalem just two days ago. We would like to know why you left your home and came here?"

Ittai: "Actually there is not much to say. When I was a child I heard many stories about David and the God he served. I also heard the stories about how the Israelites came to Canaan and all that their God did for them to free them from slavery and defeat all of their enemies. For years now i have watched and listened to see what would happen to David and see if, in fact, his God was able to carry out all His promises. I have been a bit slow in making this decision but I finally realized that I needed to stop serving the god of my ancestors and serve the only true God. So we came here to find David and pledge our loyalty to him, and worship the God of Israel."

Reporter: "We understand that you just had a meeting with David. Can you tell us what that meeting was about? What did David say to you?"

Ittai: "As you know we have arrived at a time of turmoil here in Israel. So it wasn't easy to get a meeting with King David. When my people and I arrived at the king's hall he greeted us warmly and expressed his regrets that we could not meet at a more

favorable time. He suggested that it might be wise for us to leave the city and come back later."

Reporter: "Do you know why he said that to you?"

Ittai: "Hard to say. As you know there are a lot of rumors that David is running away because one of his sons is trying to kill him so that he can be king. I guess David was concerned that we not commit ourselves to a course of action that might result in placing my family at risk. You see when I made my decision my family decided that I was right and they have all come with me. I believe he was concerned about the safety of my wife and my children. It is amazing that in the midst of all this he had time to meet you and think about your safety."

Reporter: "Ittai, threat to David is real. His son Absalom has gathered an army and plans to take the throne by force. David is organizing a retreat so that there will be minimal loss of life and destruction here in the city. But we also notice that there is a large group of soldiers with you. Can you explain to us why they have come with you?"

Ittai: "That is easy. I am a leader and in charge of a small group of men who have been organized to protect our families from the attacks of various raiding parties. We have met together many times to discuss my views about God and who we should serve. A large number of my men have decided that what I said was true and have come to pledge their loyalty to the king and to God."

Reporter: "Can we ask what you plan to do now?"

Ittai: "As you know David tried to convince me to stay here in Jerusalem and not go with him. That would have been the easiest thing to do and possibly the safest action. But easy and safe are not always correct. I have read through the law of God and realized that God is in control. I have also listened to the stories about David's trust in God and his willingness to wait on God to carry out the promises he received. What I have learned is that as long as David trusted God, David was blessed."

"We have just come from a meeting to review the reasons why we came here and have concluded that there is only one course of action. We will follow the one anointed by God. We have seen how God protects and cares for the ones who obey Him. This has been especially evident in the life of your King David. We have decided that it would be more dangerous to stay here in Jerusalem than to follow David into exile. We don't know what may happen but we know this there is only one place that is truly safe and that is in following God and his appointed leader wherever that may take us."

"I feel sorry for Absalom. Win or lose he will never know peace and will never receive the blessing of God. No we have decided to go with David and learn from him how to serve God."

Reporter: "Ittai thanks for your time and the chance to learn why you came to Jerusalem and your decision to follow God. We hope we will get a chance to talk again. If I understand what you are saying God will accomplish his purpose and you will be back to tell us how God has led and protected."

Week One - Read Philippians 1:21-26.

Paul knew his journey would end in prison. But he still chose to go. Why?

Week two - Read Romans 8:35-39.

What do you fear the most and how does it affect your decisions? Reflect on the effect of your fear and the promise of God in this scripture.

Week three - Read Joshua 24:14-21.

Joshua challenged the people to make a choice. He refused to accept their decision to serve God. Why? We are called today to choose. What will you choose? What will affect your choice and your ability to faithfully follow God no matter what the cost?

Week four - Read John 6:66-68.

Jesus confronted the disciples and asked them why they were going to stay with him. Can you explain why you are following Jesus? We all face danger, we all deal with fear. Reflect on Peter's answer. How will his answer help you overcome your fear?



### **Boy - A gift that multiplies - John 6:5-9**

Johab, I want to tell you a story about when I was your age. I know you have heard the story many times from other people. But it is time that I told you my side of the story. It is also why I always bake a few loaves extra each day.

I was about seven. In those days there were a lot of things happening in the world. The Romans had sent a new procurator and he was a very strict and dangerous man. But even more interesting were the stories about a carpenter from Nazareth who had settled in the town of Capernaum and was traveling all over the place. Every night there seemed to be a new story about what he was teaching. The adults would sit down and discuss what they had heard over and over. I would sit and try to listen but most times I fell asleep and woke up in my bed in the morning.

There were incredible stories. Stories about this man healing a blind man and raising a girl from the dead. It seemed like every day someone would come with another report. Sometimes it would be about a parable he told, or how he rebuked the Pharisees. I especially enjoyed the stories about the miracles.

Everyday people would gather and talk late into the night in front of our house. The reason for that was that my parents were bakers. Oh you already knew that because you remember when I took

over the business from your grandparents. Yes, we do make the best bread around. Your grandmother taught me how. And our bread is always fresh. People come from everywhere just to buy our bread.

Sorry, where was I? Well we heard that this carpenter name Jesus was coming to our area. I began begging your grandmother to let me go. I had almost convinced her when your grandpa returned from a trip to Capernaum with the news that the famous prophet, John the Baptist, had been beheaded. That made Jesus change his plans and head into a more remote area. I was so disappointed. I was positive your grandmother was going to refuse to let me go.

To my surprise she told me the next morning that she had an errand for me to do. Her brother had gone off to that remote place to hear Jesus. As he left he sent one of his sons over to ask her to send five loaves and two fish as soon as possible. Your grandmother was furious at how inconsiderate he was. She tried to convince your grandpa to go but she knew he couldn't and everyone else had gone off to work or to go hear this man.

So, reluctantly, she sent me on my way with six loaves and three fish. She told me I could eat one loaf and one fish as my breakfast. The rest had to be delivered to her brother as soon as I arrived and I was to return immediately. Well I could hardly restrain myself and took off running. After an hour I sat down and had my breakfast and then continued on my way.

When I finally arrived I was amazed at the size of the crowd and wondered how in the world I was going to find my uncle. I saw a man who seemed to be in charge and giving directions. So I if he could help me. He looked at me and saw my bag of loaves and fish and asked me to follow him. Instead of leading me to my uncle he led me straight to Jesus. My heart began to beat really fast as I began to realized that I was going to get to meet Jesus. I was even more surprised when I heard the man, he called himself Andrew, tell Jesus that he had found a boy who had five loaves and two fish. Then Jesus turned to me and said that the people here are very hungry. Could he use the bread and fish that I had to feed them?



When I saw Jesus' eyes - oh it's hard to explain - but I just thought, wow, he is talking to me and asking my permission. How could I say no? So I gave him the loaves and fish. I really believed that my uncle would not be mad at me because I had given his meal to Jesus.

Right away Jesus blessed the food and handed it out to the men that were with him. I stood there with my jaw wide open as I watched him pull loaf after loaf and fish after fish out of my small basket. I lost count after the first hundred and just slumped to the ground. Basket after basket was filled with bread and fish.

Andrew came and said he had found my uncle. Don't know how he did that but he pointed to where he was sitting and I ran to him shouting about the bread and that I was glad I had given it to Jesus and how everyone was eating his lunch. I know I didn't make sense but slowly my uncle began to realize what I was saying. As the truth set in he sat there and stared at the bread and fish that were left. He saw the disciples collect the leftovers. He began to talk to the others around him and learned that no one had thought to bring food. That the only food to be found among over 10,000 people was the five loaves and two fish my uncle had asked my mother to send.

To this day, it is still hard to believe what happened that day. I often wonder what would have happened if I had not given Jesus the food I had in my bag. Would he have found another way? Did he already know that I was coming and that I had what he needed? I think about the fact that he didn't order me to give the bread and fishes to him. He asked me if I would give them to him. He let me choose. My choice became the source of a blessing for thousands of people. I helped feed a multitude because i was willing to give Jesus what I had.

Johab, always keep this in mind. God is not looking for us to do great things. He is looking for us to let him do great things through us. That is what I learned that day when i was your age. That is why we always make a few extra loaves to give to those in need. That is why we follow Jesus, so that God can use us to do something great for another person.

Week One - Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-2.

We are told to do two things that seem strange, to throw our bread on the water and to give aid before there is a disaster. Reflect on these ideas.

Week Two - Read Proverbs 11:24-25.

How does a generous man prosper? How does helping others refresh us?

Week three - Read Mark 4:26-27.

Who is in control of the results of our acts of kindness? What does it mean when it states that all by itself the soil produces grain?

Week four - Read Isaiah 61:9-11.

What fruit does God want to produce from our actions? How does our attitude and our definition of prosperity affect his ability to produce that fruit through us?

# Lazarus

**Lazarus - In Silence Serving - John 11:1ff; Luke 10:38-41**

I am not famous for what I have done. Actually I am famous because I became sick and my friend chose to wait until I was dead before he got involved. Then he raised me from the dead. That event made me famous. After that everyone coming to

Jerusalem wanted to pass through Bethany to see the man Jesus raised from the dead.

Before I go any farther I should fill in some of the background. From the beginning I have been a follower of Jesus. I knew the first time I heard him that he was the Messiah. It was on a business trip to Capernaum that I first heard him. I was so enthralled by his teaching I almost forgot about why I had traveled to Capernaum. Then I realized that I needed to finish my business and head home. You see I have a family to take care of and they were probably wondering what had happened to me.

Before I left I was able to speak with Jesus. The short conversation cemented our friendship. I told him that when he came to Jerusalem he could stay with us. I know just how hard it is to find a place to stay in Jerusalem, especially during the festivals. Bethany is only a couple of miles away from Jerusalem. It is easy to walk into town and take care of one's business and be back before nightfall.

Actually, most of the times that you see my name mentioned in the stories it only states that Jesus was at my house and that we were friends. Then the stories focus more on my sisters, Mary and Martha. Even the day Jesus raised me from the dead there is more about my sisters than about me. Even when he came and stayed with us the week before he was crucified you read more about my sisters and what they are doing than me.

I could get upset over that. I mean it was my house that he was staying in. My sisters used my food to feed him and the disciples. Why was nothing written about what I saw and felt when I was sick, in the tomb and after I was resurrected? But none of that really matters in the end. My friendship with Jesus was not about what I could gain but about being able to serve.

In a way I appreciate how those writing the gospels have been so wise in what they have said. It has provided a measure of protection for me and my family. I did not realize this at first. But when I read the first gospel and noted there was no mention of what many called the greatest of Jesus miracles I went and asked

Peter about it. He told me something that made shake in my shoes. He told me that when the Pharisees were planning to kill Jesus he had heard them discuss arranging for my death as well.

I knew that the temple leaders were angry but did not realize that they were willing to go so far. Peter also shared with the fact that the apostles had discussed this situation and agreed that to say too much could cause us to be in danger even now. Jesus was gone, the authorities respected the apostles and seemed to be untouchable. They feared that in frustration the leaders might take their anger out on me and my family.

It was a humbling moment for me. It reminded me that none of this was about me. It was about making sure the truth was told and told in a way that focused on Jesus and not on me or my family. It reminded me of why Jesus came to stay with me. He knew that I was more interested in people hearing him. He knew that I was not interested in fame, just in serving. He also knew that in my house he could find the rest he needed. When he came we had some wondrous times together. Two friends talking about the world and what God was doing in it. That was more reward than anyone else could ever give me. To know that my Lord and King was happy to be in my house. Was happy to spend time with me.

That last week was a special one for me. Each day Jesus would rise and go into Jerusalem. Some days I would go with him. Some days I would stay at home. But every night we would sit and talk over the day's events. Two friends quietly reviewing what had happened, how the people had responded, what the reaction of the leaders meant. It was good to have my friend there and be able to provide what he needed each day.

Yes, most people know me because of an event I had no control over. John has told me that one day a full report will be made of those events and people will know that I was more than just another miracle, just another stop on the road for Jesus. They will know about my love for him and his for me. Until then, I already have the greatest blessing that a person could ever receive. Jesus came to my house because he knew he was welcome. I was the friend of the Son of God.

Week one -

This series of studies has looked at the ordinary men of the Bible. Reflect on this question. In the kingdom of God is there anyone who is ordinary?

Week two - Read Luke 7:28.

Who is Jesus referring to when he talks about the least person in the kingdom of heaven? Why are they as important as John the Baptist?

Week three - Read 2 Corinthians 11:1-33.

Paul reviews his life and compares it to others. What does he consider to be of true value? What do you boast about? How does it compare to Paul's comments?

Week four - Read 1 Corinthians 3:11-14.

Reflect on this passage and consider what you are doing and why you are doing it. What do you hope to gain? What will happen when your life is tested and reviewed by God? What will be left?

We are called to be servants of the Lord. Fame in this world means nothing. Being known as the friend of Jesus means everything. How does the world see you?