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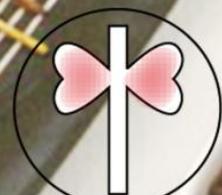
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Feast

Food for thought
and lessons for life

A 30 - day devotional Bible Study

By Naomi Aidoo - 1authenticheart.com



1authenticheart

Feast - *Food for thought and Lessons for Life* by Naomi Aidoo

www.1authenticheart.com

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Introduction

The Word of God is like bread from heaven. A feast, if you will. *Feast* is a 30-day devotional Bible study which explores the lives of thirty ordinary men and women of whom we read about in the Bible. *Feast* unpacks their lives and applies the lessons learned from them to yours. Each study is called a 'lesson' and each lesson has a title which resonates with issues we face throughout our lives. *Feast* is a Bible study in that it assists as you delve deeper into God's living and active word, taking a thorough look at the lives of each of the characters covered. *Feast* is a devotional in that it asks questions and features key points which you can apply to your own life as you study. Each lesson contained in the pages of *Feast* is separated like a menu, offering you a Biblical appetiser, snack, main course and dessert.

Do you find yourself constantly busy? Be that working full-time, raising a family, studying or a mixture of all of these things? Being too busy can often lead to less and less time spent with the Lord for fear of falling behind with other commitments.

The practical lessons learned in *Feast* will resonate with anyone who finds themselves in need of some time to pause. We can all feel unseen, like Hagar did, or cautious about our next steps, like Gideon was. My hope is that, with *Feast*, you will recognise the beauty of Jesus, found in His Word.

Feast brings the Bible to the forefront with both in-depth study and practical application. The busy reader can pick it up, and with each lesson, can choose to spend five minutes, or fifty-five. *Feast* gives you the opportunity to take even the smallest nugget of truth into your day, and come back for more later on.

The unique menu-style layout of *Feast* will give you a unique experience in studying God's word. This original layout gives you the flexibility and freedom to take as much from each lesson as you wish at any one time.

Feast offers you the opportunity to learn about key figures in Biblical history, such as Paul and Abraham, whilst also introducing the lives of characters we don't often read about in devotional material. It studies the ministry of Simeon and Anna, for example, and the life of Rahab. By exploring the rich and diverse stories of Godly men and women of the Bible, *Feast* provides a succinct, authentic and spirit-led devotional for anyone who longs to draw near to God amidst a hectic lifestyle.

So... Tuck in and enjoy! I'm praying God speaks to you as you explore His wonderful Truth.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Naomi". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

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Lesson One: Discernment - Person: Gideon

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. God can (and often does) call you as HE sees you and not as you see yourself.
2. God is more patient than you can ever imagine and is not frustrated by you asking for clarity.
3. Once you are sure God is speaking, you MUST act upon it!

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How do *you* usually discern what God is calling you to? What have you done about it so far?

MAIN COURSE

Call it insight, judgement or understanding- discernment is something we MUST walk in as believers. God absolutely calls us and uses us for His plans and purposes and He may well pluck us from one place and put us into another, but we must be sure this is GOD'S doing, before doing anything else.

Discernment was not something, which Gideon took lightly. Some might say he was doubtful, but others would say he was simply ensuring beyond all reasonable doubt that it was, in fact, God who was calling him. Whichever way you look at it, God allowed Gideon to continue to ask for confirmation. Perhaps He saw his consideration as careful as opposed to overly cautious.

We begin following Gideon's journey in the book of Judges, chapter six. God first speaks to Gideon in verse twelve:

"And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valour."

God carries on with this affirming rhetoric for a while and continues to identify Gideon as if he were a man used to fighting battles and conquering enemies. This is not true of Gideon's current status and therefore, at this point, he reminds God that he is nothing special. As if the Lord needed reminding.. **God will often call us to something bigger than our current capabilities can stretch to.** Our Heavenly Father sees our potential and not only our present. Gideon, just like us, is way too caught up in his present to recognise an ounce of anything 'mighty' about him, and so he calls God on it. He tells God of His weakness and low standing in society. This, of course, doesn't throw God off whatsoever. (We know, from 2 Corinthians 12:9 that our weakness is actually where God's power is made perfect- so Gideon was kind of throwing God a bone here!)

Unconvinced, Gideon proceeds to discern whether or not this is truly God speaking through a number of bizarre tests. You can read about them in the passages I've listed for dessert. What strikes me most here, is that God lets Gideon go through this

discerning process. This, to me just speaks of God's love, grace, and understanding. He recognises that we are human, we are frail and we are vulnerable. God knows that He could have saved the Israelites from the seven year oppression of the Midianites in a flash, but that for Gideon, this was a tall order.

God will ask you to do big things. So big, sometimes that you might even doubt that it is in fact God who is doing the asking. But what if it is? We learn from Gideon's life, that God not only lets you ask, but that He might just give you the confirmation you're asking for too! So, what happens when God asks you to do something and you're definitely sure it's Him? You DO IT. Gideon was cautious and took a while, but when he was sure, he acted on it. As you might read later, Gideon went on to defeat his opposition and God used him to save his people. It's a wonderful story of God's faithfulness partnered with a man who used discernment to move from cautious and unsure to obedient and victorious. What can you learn from Gideon's life today?

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Judges: Chapters 6-8



Lesson Two: **Willing** - Person: **Mary**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. God's plans are much bigger than you can comprehend. You don't always have to have it 'worked out.'
2. God sees the heart. Is your lined up with God's will and motives or your own?
3. Are you willing to believe God at His word no matter what, and say 'yes' to Him?

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How do *you* usually discern what God is calling you to? What have you done about it so far?

MAIN COURSE

Mary, the mother of Jesus was an extraordinary woman. We read snapshots of her life throughout scripture, but for me, her most fascinating moments come before anyone (but God) even knows of her connection to Jesus.

Although we're soon introduced to this woman as 'Mary', we're first told of the angel appearing "to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph..." (Luke 1:27a) The back end of this verse does read that 'the virgin's name was Mary', but that's not the first fact mentioned. Now, maybe it's just me, but I feel that anyone who is about to be made mother of the Son of God and is to be visited by an angel in order to be informed of this, should probably have some pretty established credentials. Virgin. Not yet married. Her husband's name mentioned before hers. All of this to me screams 'insignificant'. I think this is deliberate. **This verse makes much of God and minuscule of man.** The next significant point here is that a praying servant girl, soon to be made mother of the Most High, is told not to fear (verse 30). I've tried to put myself in Mary's shoes here. I don't think I can think of a more bewildering task to be called to, therefore fear, at this point, would pretty high on my agenda. Fear, doubt, worry, confusion and a lot more doubt. I think I'd question whether maybe I was hearing things, if I was dreaming. The whole situation is just far too big to comprehend. And that is God all over isn't it? How many of you, like me, have tried to second guess God, only to be proved totally wrong? Mary must have had a plan too. She was engaged to Joseph. Wedding planning may not have been quite as OTT as it is today back then, but I've experienced it first-hand. Organised is something you absolutely must be when it comes to preparing for your wedding day! Plans or no plans, God was coming into Mary's life ready to divinely intervene.

Verse 30 speaks of Mary 'finding favour' with God. Choosing Mary as mother of Jesus only appears bizarre to us. It was anything but to God. We're reminded elsewhere in scripture that, although man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7) This young woman, a virgin of no particular high social status, was deemed to be the person God would choose to bear His son. We see the attitudes of Mary's heart towards the end of the encounter she has with the angel. In verse 38 we read of Mary's response to all of this. "Behold, I am a servant of the Lord..." What faith! **Mary deeply understood that nothing was impossible for her Lord and so was willing to accept what she had been told.** As I mentioned earlier, Mary had her plans, it's not wrong to make plans after all. But what gives away the motives of her pure heart here, is that she was willing to put down the plans she had for those of the Lord. What about you? Do you welcome God's interruptions or get frustrated by them? **I know that when I'm irritated by His intervention, I need to check my heart.**

The last thing we read of Mary saying in this interaction is also found in verse 38. "Let it be to me according to your word." Essentially, Mary says 'yes'. Mary says yes before she understands the how or the why. She is willing to accept that this is what God has for her. She trusts Him enough to take the next step. So the question I'd like to leave you with today is - **Are you willing to say 'yes' to God before you've filled in all the blanks?**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Luke 1:26-38



Lesson Three: Conviction - Person: Nehemiah

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Nehemiah had God given conviction to leave what was comfortable and go back to help his people.
2. He understood the power of prayer and recognised that he was powerless to achieve results without God's help.
3. His convictions, reverence and right action led to favour and open doors.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Our world is broken. What in particular about the brokenness, convicts you?

MAIN COURSE

Nehemiah is the first character we've come across in this devotional series that has his own book dedicated to him. So before I begin today's message, I will say that today's 'dessert' section comprises of the whole book of Nehemiah. That might be a little much to take in in one day and so, if you'd prefer to read that over a week or so, please do! His story is a brilliant one and here I will take you through some aspects of it.

Nehemiah was a man with great conviction. God stirred his heart out of his comfort zone and into action. We are introduced to him as one of his brothers, Hanani reports to Nehemiah of the destruction of the wall of Jerusalem. Now, to give a bit of context here: Nehemiah was one of the Jews who had survived the exile and, as God would have it, he was now cupbearer to the king (Nehemiah 1:11). Not every one of the surviving Jews had had it quite as easy and some were forced to remain in Judah. Although they had survived, they were not living in the conditions Nehemiah was. He was in the king's palace! While, as Hanani reports in chapter 1 verse 3, the wall in Jerusalem had been burned down.

So, what does Nehemiah do? Would you, like me, think that this was a great shame and perhaps be stirred to pray for them, but inside be thankful that you were not in those conditions? Let's look at Nehemiah's response. Verse 4 indicates that he 'wept and mourned for days'. **The condition of the people he was once a part of, convicted him.** After this period, he prayed to the Lord. Nehemiah believed in and understood the power of prayer. He wasn't angry with God either. You can read his prayer in chapter 1 verses 4-11. It was contrite, repentant and humble. Nehemiah recognised that God is God and could therefore do what He liked. That didn't mean that Nehemiah stood by and did nothing though- he was compelled to action.

It is said that the beginning of chapter two actually took place some four months after the initial news of Jerusalem. That, to me shows Nehemiah's wisdom. **He didn't want to jump to any rash decisions; he wanted to steep his convictions in prayer before they became actions.** This is something I can definitely learn from. I often try to run ahead of God. His wisdom and discernment

certainly worked in Nehemiah's favour. We read of the interaction between Nehemiah and King Artaxerxes (his boss!) throughout chapter two. The king notices that Nehemiah is sad, something which was unusual for him. This then gives Nehemiah the opportunity to express his convictions to the king. Bear in mind that this is after prayer and fasting! He didn't run into the king's chambers demanding leave of absence. He recognised that God was convicting his heart, but this didn't mean for him that he would immediately act on it.

This prayerful attitude doesn't even stop during the conversation! Before Nehemiah makes any request of the king, he prays! Check out chapter two, verse four. After prayer, Nehemiah humbly requests that the king allows him to be sent to Judah on behalf of his people to help rebuild the walls. You can read the whole conversation in more depth throughout chapter two. Verse 8 tells us that the king grants Nehemiah's request and not only that, he agrees to provide resources and letters to the governing officials. **Nehemiah's reverence before God and humility before authority (the king) led to favour and open doors.** Nehemiah left to rebuild the wall.

You can read Nehemiah's story in full throughout the book. It wasn't all plain sailing. He received opposition on many sides. However, what strikes me about this man of God is that his convictions led him to prayer and discernment and when he was sure that his conviction and indeed, outrage was God given, he acted upon it. This action was blessed by the Lord and given the okay by those in authority over him. I believe that Nehemiah's story really teaches us what to do with God given conviction. What steps can you take regarding the convictions God has placed on your heart?

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

The book of Nehemiah



Lesson Four: **Unlikely** - Person: **Rahab**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. God can use, speak to and speak through whoever He wants... and He does!
2. People can recognize God at work in you before they are even following God themselves.
3. Faith without deeds is dead.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Have you ever ruled yourself or others out of being used by God?

MAIN COURSE

Those of you who are familiar with the Bible may well be aware that Rahab was openly known as a prostitute. It appears slightly unlikely that God would choose to use someone whose life and actions were in complete contrast to His, for His plans and purposes. But that is exactly what God does.

The main narrative of her story is found in the book of Joshua, chapter 2. Joshua had just taken over the tall order of leading a nation into the Promised Land from none other than Moses. We'll learn more about Joshua later this month, but today, my main focus is on Rahab. Joshua chapter 2 verse 1 tells us that two men had been sent by Joshua to go and spy out the land in Jericho. Upon their going, they arrive at the house of 'a prostitute whose name was Rahab...' If the fact that Rahab was a prostitute wasn't significant, I'm sure this detail could have been left out. But it's not, it's there for all to see. And that is the first point I want to address today- God can and will use and speak to whoever He wants. This comes as no surprise to me because when I think on my past (and even my present sometimes!), some of my words and actions- I'm continually astonished that God would speak to and use me. But He does! Rahab's story is one we should constantly have at the forefront of our minds as we go into our schools, colleges, universities and workplaces- God can speak to anyone. Even that 'unlikely' person you work with every day.

So, the spies sent by Joshua are hiding in Rahab's home. Sure enough, the men sent by the king of Jericho (Joshua's enemy) request that the men be brought out of her house. (1:3). Rahab, aware of the call of God on the lives of the men residing with her, thinks quickly. She tells the men that the spies have been and gone. This, technically is a bit of a white lie and therefore makes it even more unlikely that God uses this entire situation. But of course, He does.

Again, something striking from this story is that Rahab chooses to protect the spies. Later in the chapter (from verse 9) we understand why. She states that she 'knows the Lord has given them the land'. Rahab shows an awareness of the history of Israel that is again, unusual. But it just goes to show, that people are always watching and listening. There may well be people in your lives who, right now, do not believe in Jesus, but knowing that you do, are quietly observing what that means for your life. Rahab knew that these spies were operating in the Lord's plans and purposes. She even appears to make a confession of faith in verse 11: "...for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." I wonder if she'd have recognised this if the men were not operating within the plans and purposes of the Lord. Rahab continues to give the men counsel and advice and successfully tells them of the next safe place in which they should hide. She asks that, in return for this favour, the men will ensure that her and her people are safe. The men agree.

Although remarkable enough, Rahab's story doesn't stop here. She is, in fact mentioned in not only the genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of Matthew, but also in the book of Hebrews (11:31) and James (2:25). Both mentions indicate that because of Rahab's action in protecting the spies, she was saved. If we know something is true, let us act upon it. For, as we also read in the

book of James- faith without deeds is dead. Rahab could have well-made excuses, regarded herself (as others did) as the lowest in society and therefore good for nothing. But she did neither of these things. She recognised that she had a part to play and acted upon it. The application here is twofold. Maybe you feel as though God can't use you- that your past is unforgiveable and that there is no hope or purpose for your future. Allow Rahab's story to encourage you into believing that this isn't true. God can and will use hearts that are open to Him. On the other hand, maybe there are 'Rahab's' in your life, which you've ruled out? People, who you think there is just no hope for. Let Rahab's story to remind you that nothing is impossible for God and no one is too far from His reach.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Joshua 2



Lesson Five: **Resolve** - Person: **Daniel**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Resolve can often cause you stand out. Be sure you're resolved on doing the right things!
2. Although it's not always easy, being in the world and not of it is possible.
3. God blesses bold moves, which are taken in His name!

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Can you recall ever making a small decision, which had a big impact later on?

MAIN COURSE

We learn of Daniel's heart and commitment unto the Lord very quickly in his self-named book. Chapter one introduces us to him being taken with some other 'youths without blemish' into Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel obviously stood out, even before we know anything about his character. But, so did many other young people who were called upon by the king.

The passage doesn't indicate just how many of these 'royal and noble' young men were taken into Babylon but it's clear that Daniel (and his three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) were not alone in this.

So, what makes Daniel's 'resolve' so prominent if it wasn't only his competence and skill which made him stand out? The answer is, I believe, something which we can all learn from. Perhaps you have the ability to work hard and keep up just fine with your colleagues etc. Maybe you're actually 'top of the class' and you actually excel at all you do. That's fantastic, hard work is most certainly honouring to the Lord (see Colossians 3:23-24). But Daniel went one step further! It may have been easy for him to think 'well, I'm here in the king's palace, I've made it. Everything I could ever want is at my fingertips'. It may well have been normal for him to decide that since he'd been picked out for his skill and ability, this special treatment was exactly what he deserved. But he recognised that this state of luxurious living wasn't the be all and end all for him, and in fact, might actually be a distraction from what was most important. I'm sure you've heard it said that 'good is often the enemy of best.' This is so true for our lives. We can often be presented with an idea which looks good. However, taking up that offer may well be what prevents us from having God's best for us.

Verse 8 of Daniel chapter 1 reads "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine that he drank..." Although there wouldn't have been anything inherently wrong with eating and drinking the king's offerings, Daniel and his friends wanted to ensure their actions were 100% lining up with God's will. **Remember, the enemy can sometimes allow a good thing to appear as though it is a God thing.** Sure enough, Daniel's initial resolve proves successful and indeed, what sets him apart from the others. After being allowed a 'trial period' of eating only vegetables and drinking only water, Daniel and his friends look better than the rest of the young men. So much so, that the king switches up the diet of the others! (Daniel 1:14-16) It can't have been a popular decision for the young men to make, even awkward perhaps, but them taking this decision honoured and gave glory to God. **Never doubt that your small actions, even if unpopular, can bring God great honour.**

At the end of all their tests and trials, the king finds Daniel and his friends to be more outstanding than the rest of these gifted young men. This just further drives the point home that this stand out favour was God's doing and not their own. **God honoured their resolve.** The passage goes on to state that Daniel was given a divine understanding of interpreting dreams and visions. We later learn throughout the book of Daniel, that this gift was far superior to anyone else who had these sorts of abilities and thus resulted in Daniel being promoted in the king's palace. Not only this - more importantly, others began to pay homage to the Lord. (Daniel 2:47) Look at what one small act of resolve led to! Don't despise the day of small beginnings. Sometimes it can seem as though the small steps you are taking are insignificant. Remember - God sees it all and is blessed when you choose to honour Him.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

The book of Daniel



Lesson Six: Doubt - Person: Moses

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. If you've ever doubted God's ability to use you, you're in good company! Even people who seemingly 'have it altogether', like Moses did, have moments of doubt.
2. God may well use the very thing you have/are doing now for His glory.
3. It was God that qualified Moses for his call, not Moses' credentials.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

What excuses have you given God when He's asked you to do things?

MAIN COURSE

When we think about the Bible 'greats' we'll often recall people like Abraham and Paul etc. One of the key people, who would certainly make that list, is Moses.

There's a lot to say about Moses. He was, of course, one of the 'greats' we speak of. But, what always surprises me about this man of God is that he came out with statements such as:

"Who am I that I should go...?"

"I'm not eloquent enough"...

"What shall I say to them?"...

"Please send someone else!"...

Let's look at these proclamations in more detail... God speaks to Moses through a burning bush. A bush that is caught up in flames, yet never consumed by the fire. That sort of circumstance certainly has a ring of the presence of God about it!

Finally aware that God is trying to get his attention, Moses reluctantly agrees to listen. Essentially, God wants Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and the oppression of Pharaoh. Throughout chapters 3 and 4 of Exodus (which you can read in today's 'dessert' section) Moses comes up with a list of reasons as to why he is most certainly not the man for the job. God disagrees and has a response for each and every one of Moses' arguments. Even when Moses asks God outright to send someone else to do it! One of my personal favourites of God's rebuttals though, is this one:

"Then the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11)

When complaining that you're no good at public speaking, there really isn't a much stronger comeback than 'I created your mouth' is there? It's words like the ones in Exodus 4:11, which we need to be reminded of during our own seasons of doubt. As God's daughters and sons, **He's equipped us** for great works, **He's called us** to be His ambassadors. Once we realise that fully, we can begin to be all He desires us to be. **God is in control, God is our strength, our protection and our rear guard. Most importantly, He knows us inside and out. He created our capabilities as well as the areas we may need more of a push in. He knows us better than we know ourselves.**

God continually speaks to Moses throughout the book of Exodus and whenever I read through it, I am struck by how clear God makes His presence each and every time. Yet Moses still doubts. Moses still questions whether or not he is truly capable of fulfilling the tasks God lays before him. Remember, this is Moses, one of the 'greats'.

Despite distinct signs and pictures and even face to face conversations, Moses still struggled to grasp his place. Although burning bushes and face to face conversations with God are possibly not quite our norm, a lot of us are not strangers to Moses' excuses listed above. Just like Moses, we allow fear, doubt and anxiety to have a louder voice than the quiet confidence which whispers "maybe I can do this".

Now, you may be thinking that this was all very well for Moses and for those highly 'gifted and talented' people who just seem to be good at everything. Of course *they* can be used by God. But what have *I* got? What could *I* possibly have that Almighty God could use?

In Exodus 4:2, God asks Moses what's in his hand. He doesn't talk about all of the amazing things he's done and how wonderful he is, he simply asks him what he's holding. **Moses was a normal man. It was God who enabled him to do what he did.** Before Moses became someone who had regular interactions with God, he helped his father in law, Jethro, shepherd a flock. An actual flock. Of sheep. Therefore, he had a staff. And so at the point God asks Moses what's in his hand - that is exactly what was there. His staff. An ordinary staff. This same, ordinary staff is what God enables Moses to supernaturally use. Remember all those plagues that God sent so that Pharaoh would let the Israelites go? The staff is heavily featured!

So, what's in your hand? For Moses, it was a staff. What has God given you an ability or even an interest in? Even if you think it's useless, don't doubt it. Because the likelihood is, God will use it!

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Exodus 3-4



Lesson Seven: **Seen** - Person: **Hagar****SNACK**

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Like He did with Hagar, God can find you in the wilderness.
2. You are seen - God knows your name.
3. Don't despise the wilderness, sometimes it changes everything.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Have your wilderness seasons ever left you feeling as though God has forgotten about you?

MAIN COURSE

Hagar's story is seen in passages throughout the book of Genesis. She's not the central character and potentially someone whom one might overlook. So let's put a bit of context to this...

Hagar was Sarai's (Abram's wife) maidservant. Sarai thought that she was unable to bear children, despite the fact that God had promised Abram (her husband) back in chapter 15 that his 'very own son' would be his heir. (Random side note - Did Abram and Sarai even speak to each other about this 'casual' promise?! Marriage prep 101 - You should probably tell your spouse if God promises you offspring, which outnumber the stars.) Anyway, back to Hagar... Sarai sends her to sleep with Abram, as she thought she might obtain children by her. Hagar conceives. This does not go down well with Sarai. (I'm not sure what outcome she was expecting?) So she mistreats Hagar. As a result of this, Hagar runs away.

"The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.""

(Genesis 16:7-8)

I love these verses. **Firstly, God finds Hagar in the wilderness.** (Verse 7) Imagine Hagar's heart at this point. Made to sleep with her mistress's husband and then mistreated to the point of causing her to flee. Literal AND emotional wilderness. She's at her breaking point, no doubt. But God finds her there. **In seasons where things seem hopeless and we are close to despair, we must listen for God's still, small voice. Let Him find us in our wilderness.** In Hosea 2:14-15 there is a BEAUTIFUL passage about God alluring 'Israel' and bringing her into the wilderness, speaking tenderly to her and giving her hope. It reminds me of what happened with Hagar here. Perhaps God led her away from Abram and Sarai for a moment? Away from the noise and confusion and into the quietness of the wilderness where He could have her full attention. **Secondly, God calls her by name.** Prior to this, Hagar has been referred to as a servant. Here, in this wilderness, God reminds her that He knows her name. God tells her that she's pregnant and that she will have a son and is to call him Ishmael (meaning God hears). God calls her by name

and names her son. Hagar is overjoyed and for once, doesn't feel invisible. "So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me."" (Genesis 16:13). God calls Hagar back to Abram and Sarai's house. Hagar obeys, goes back, and Ishmael is born.

The wilderness encounter changed things for Hagar. She was no longer just a maidservant, she was a maidservant seen and known by God. **Remember, when our geographic location or even our circumstances don't change, our right standing in Christ changes everything.**

We find out later that Ishmael is not the 'son of promise' as read of in chapter 15. Jumping to chapter 21, Isaac is born. The chosen one. Abraham and Sarah (their names have been changed by this point) are delighted. But it's not all happy families. Sarah sees Hagar laughing with her son (21:9) and gets jealous. She wants Ishmael to have no part in Isaac's promise. She wants him and his mother, gone. Abraham isn't pleased. Ishmael is his son too after all. But God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah and that there are promises for Hagar and Ishmael too. Abraham agrees. Mother and son are sent away.

"So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba." (Genesis 21:14)

Hagar is back in the wilderness. But so is God. Again, this is where He speaks to Hagar. At breaking point, away from the noise, away from the confusion, weak, empty and worn out. Have you ever been in that place? Hagar's story tells us that we're not likely to end up there only once, but it also reminds us that God is right there with us. The rest of the story goes on to tell us that God hears Ishmael, tells Hagar not to fear, protects them both and opens Hagar's eyes to His provision once again.

Even when we're in the wilderness, God has not forsaken us. In fact, it is there, at the end of ourselves, where we may truly meet with Him.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Genesis 16



Lesson Eight: Dreamer - Person: Joseph

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Don't ignore your God given dreams.
2. Be wise with who you share your dreams with - not everyone will understand.

3. Even when you have been wronged, as Joseph was - God can use it for good.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How many times have we been given dream, vision, plans and purpose from the Lord, which we've then been ridiculed for?

MAIN COURSE

The main portion of Joseph's life spans across Genesis from chapter 37 to chapter 50. Many of us will be familiar with his story even if only for his special coat! Today's 'dessert' section contains the whole thing, should you ever want to give it a read. Today, I'm getting personal with application and so I haven't got the space to write the whole narrative...

Joseph is one of 12 of Jacob's sons. Genesis 37:3 states that Jacob actually loved Joseph more than his other sons! This understandably begins to cause some tension. The passage later states that the brothers found it hard to speak peaceably with him. Joseph begins to have dreams which circulate around Joseph's family bowing down and worshipping Joseph. He then proceeds to tell his (already annoyed) brothers all about these dreams - much to their distaste. Joseph's father, Jacob rebukes Joseph here. He had to play the role of 'peacemaker' somewhat. But what's interesting is that verse 11 says **his father 'kept the saying in mind'**.

I love this part as it reminds me a lot of our Heavenly Father. I think back to when I was 22 and, had just finished a church gap year, I had to weigh up my options for the future. It was too tight to call between being a church youth worker or a teacher - so I filled out the application form for both roles, but only ever posted one of them. I taught in secondary schools for seven years. (No points for guessing which envelope I posted.) I harboured a dream of what that 'youth worker' post might have looked like for most of my teaching career. I prayed about potentially being in church based ministry 'full time' often. God said no, just like like Jacob said to Joseph. But now, seven years later, I realise His 'no' was a 'not yet' as He's now far exceeded my 'ministry' dreams. I'm part-time on the staff team at my church *and* I write part time. So I've got the time to write devotionals like these. God is GOOD! Now, don't get me wrong, teaching wasn't all bad. I met some truly wonderful, wonderful people and had experiences, which changed my life. But after those especially tough days when I continued to ask God what I was still doing there, He was silent. Yet He held on tightly to those dreams of mine. **Father God holds onto our dreams, even when others want to rip them apart.** God may well have given you a dream to carry. I hope He has. Pray. Take it before your Heavenly Father before bringing it to any 'brothers' who might want to stop you before you've even started. Remember Hagar from lesson seven? Don't worry. God sees.

Back to our main man... His brothers first think about killing Joseph after exclaiming "here comes this dreamer" (37:19). The venom in their tone no doubt crushed Joseph's dreams that little bit more. They eventually settle with leaving him at the bottom of a pit. Still not great, and believe it or not - it gets worse! Judah, one of the brothers, decides that they should be making some money out of this bizarre and cruel scheme. They therefore decide to sell Joseph to some passing Ishmaelites and then tell Jacob that Joseph's death must have happened as a result of a wild animal attack. Not long after this, things start to look up ever so slightly. Joseph has been taken to Egypt and has almost instantly been recognised for his skill and talent. People even attribute it to the Lord (39:3). Potiphar (Joseph's master) had a wife. This wife soon put an end to Joseph's positive streak and ends up making a false claim about Joseph coming onto her (it was actually the other way round. Honestly! You couldn't make this stuff up...)

Inevitably, Joseph gets thrown into prison for his so called crime. I'm really rushing now, but he's there with two other men. The baker and the cupbearer. Both of these men have dreams. Joseph says he can interpret them. The cupbearer's dream interpretation was good - he was to be released in three days! Noting this favourable interpretation, the Baker wants in on the action and his outcome was, let's just say, not as great... As predicted, the cupbearer is released. Joseph asks one thing - that the cupbearer remembers him and speaks to Pharaoh so that he might get him out of prison. The fact that the cupbearer forgets is another of my points here... **Let's not only treat people well when we can get something out of it!** The cupbearer promises to speak to Pharaoh and yet, we're told that he conveniently, 'forgot'. I can't begin to imagine Joseph's frustration!

Two years later (two years!) and Pharaoh is having bad dreams. The cupbearer finally remembers this 'young Hebrew who was there with us' in prison. Sure enough, Joseph is released 'quickly' (41:14). Despite two years in prison and plenty more mistreatment alongside this, Joseph still attributes any skill or ability he might have in interpreting dreams, to the Lord.

"Joseph answered Pharaoh, "It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer." (Genesis 41:16)

How many of us, after going through the sort of hardship Joseph had experienced, would still be gladly saying that God is good and it is HE from which any good thing comes!

The drama continues to unfold. Joseph is promoted, his father dies, his brothers end up having to try and come up with a plan just so Joseph won't seek revenge on them. They needn't have bothered though. Because chapter 50, verse 20 reads:

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

Irrespective of his circumstances, Joseph was unwaveringly faithful to God. What trials and mistreatment might you have experienced, which inevitably, glorified the Lord? **God can TRULY** turn around what the enemy means for evil and work it for your good. Do not despair. **Might you still be facing trials? Don't lose hope- allow them to refine and not ruin you. Keep trusting that God's good purposes will eventually prevail.**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Genesis 37 - 50



Lesson Nine: Loyalty - Person: Ruth

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Ruth's loyalty came from a place of complete selflessness.
2. Ruth made an unusual decision and stuck by it. She was aware of the consequences and didn't feel the need to force her conviction on others.
3. God blessed Ruth's loyalty in a way in which she didn't expect at all!

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How easy does being loyal come to you when it comes at personal cost?

MAIN COURSE

A large part of the narrative of Ruth is that of 'love against the odds'. Or sentiments to that effect... A little more on that later. The 'dessert' section of today's message is the book of Ruth. It's a small book of only 4 chapters and so reading it in one sitting is manageable. If you've got the time, I'd really encourage you to read this beautiful story.

So, let's paint a little picture here, taking place right at the beginning of the story. Ruth is first introduced to us as the daughter in law of a recently widowed Naomi. (Ruth 1:3). Ruth, the wife of Naomi's son Mahlon, had a sister in law named Orpah, who was married to Ruth's other son, Chilion. We're told that this family unit of five settle in the land of Moab for a solid ten years until both Mahlon and Chilion sadly pass away. Evidently grieved at losing not only her husband, but also her two sons, Naomi wants to return to the comfort of her homeland of Judah. This is where the loyalty narrative first begins to unfold...

"But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." (Ruth 1:8)

Naomi is aware that Ruth and Orpah do not have any children and are both widows. She recognises that, for them to stay with her would mean no chance at a family or a future as a wives and mothers. She therefore urges them to return to their mother's houses and to begin to prepare themselves once more to become brides. The custom of the day was very much that security and stability was all tied in raising a family. Rushing forward a little - there is some interaction between the women. Ruth and Orpah both want to stick by their mother in law. Naomi continually points out that this is pointless. Orpah eventually reluctantly agrees...

*"Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, **but Ruth clung to her.**" (Ruth 1:14)*

Ruth clung to her. **Her decision was unwavering. Have you ever made an unusual, perhaps even unpopular decision with as much certainty as Ruth appeared to make this one?** Ruth made the decision to forgo her own personal gain entirely for the benefit of her mother in law. I can't see at this stage, any feasible reason that remaining with Naomi would have benefitted Ruth. But her love for her mother in law is what led her to do it. **Her happiness was put in second place.** What I also love is that we don't read of her enforcing that decision on Orpah. How often might we make a good, perhaps even honourable decision and then try to make others feel bad for not making the same choice?

Ruth did not have a martyr mentality about her choice. Naomi even tries to push her away once more, suggesting she should follow Orpah. The story goes on and reveals what I believe are the two most powerful verses in the entire book...

"But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17)

This level of devotion isn't even too common in the Bible, let alone our day to day lives. The Word says that "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." (*John 15:13*) Now, this was obviously speaking of Jesus Christ. But I think that Ruth did some of that laying down of her own life here. It wasn't a bold statement with no follow through. Verse 19 makes it clear that she actually went.

I don't believe that Ruth took action like this for any other reason than faithfulness to her mother in law. She didn't do it to be noticed nor for any reward or pat on the back. **What can we learn from Ruth's attitude? Can we be more selfless with our lives? In our relationships?**

And so to end this story. Ruth gets to work in her new hometown. She is working on a field and is spotted by none other than the owner of the field, a man named Boaz. Boaz pays special attention to Ruth ensuring that she's looked after on the field and kept close to the women who work for him. Ruth is just doing her job and is unsure as to why Boaz would be doing this for her. Let's quickly read his response...

"But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.

The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Ruth 2:11-12)

The selflessness and devotion Ruth had shown to her mother in law is what made her stand out to Boaz. To cut the story short, Boaz eventually becomes Ruth's husband. There's lots that can be said about the redeeming relationship between Boaz and Ruth but I wanted today's message to focus on Ruth's loyalty. In that fierce loyalty and devotion - God saw her. God saw her actions and also heard her quiet heart's desire for a husband. And God moved. Like Ruth, don't be worried about the consequences of your actions- God knows, God sees, God does.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Ruth 1 - 4



Lesson Ten: Different - Person: Joshua and Caleb

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Perspective changes everything.
2. Like Joshua and Caleb's were, your voice is important. Not everyone sees things like you do.
3. Don't be afraid to be speak boldly in faith, even if others don't want to listen. God honours courageous faith & action.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Have you ever spoken out on something you felt strongly about and felt that no one was behind what you were saying?

MAIN COURSE

I literally get excited writing about these guys. Joshua and Caleb were such courageous and faithful followers of God. Their story is such an encouraging one.

At the beginning of Numbers, chapter 13, God speaks to Moses. He wants him to send some men to spy out the land of Canaan. We learn almost immediately, in verse two that the land has indeed been promised by God. This task was obviously sent to teach the people something and not because God just wasn't sure what Canaan would be like! So, let's see what lessons were learned...

Moses gathers 12 men from the different tribes to go and do what the Lord had asked and they go. It's the report back that makes things very interesting! After forty days the men come back and say that the land is indeed 'good'. That it 'flows with milk and honey'... BUT. **Now that word 'but' isn't one of God's favourites unless His name follows it...** In this instance, the 'but' was that the people already living in the land were really strong and the cities very fortified. They saw a good and beneficial thing (the land) but saw the opposition as greater. All but one saw this. Imagine that one lone voice amidst the 12. It wasn't a quiet and timid voice either. It was a valiant voice, full of faith. Listen to what he says:

"But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it." (Numbers 13:30)

No one agreed. No one. Think about this for a minute. Maybe it won't be a far cry from something you've experienced in the past. If it isn't, follow Caleb's life here and be encouraged. Twelve people (plus a couple of leaders) in a room, talking about inhabiting a land which God had already promised them. Only Caleb says it's possible. The rest don't even do that awkward silence thing where you disagree but don't want to offend the person raising the point. They go one step further and literally oppose what he's saying. Loudly. Verse 33, though, to me is the giveaway as to why this happens. Fear. Look at the second part of the verse.

"...and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Numbers 13:33b)

The rest of the men saw the opposition as so much bigger than them. Their perspective of not the opposition, *but of themselves* changed everything. They saw themselves as insignificant 'grasshoppers' in the face of their opposition... "and so we seemed to them." **Their perspective of themselves enforced the view that their opponents took of them!** If you walk into a battle looking, feeling, acting and behaving like the underdog before it's even begun- what sort of impression are you giving off? **YOU HAVE THE VICTORY IN CHRIST!**

I had to shout that part because I believe it so, so strongly and that's why I get so excited thinking about this story. The other men looked at their opposition and then back at themselves and thought 'no way'. Caleb looked at the opposition and then back at himself and thought 'no way- BUT GOD!' and that's what changed the game. The people still don't agree and start moaning and complaining at anything they can think of. They even turn on their leader, Moses and start saying that they wish they'd have chosen someone else!

Now, although he obviously heard what Caleb had said, Joshua's been quiet so far. Numbers 14:6 puts an end to that silence though, and he's finally ready to be a part of Caleb's team. He speaks again of the land being 'good' etc. and then makes this bold declaration of faith in verse 8:

"If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey."

The fact that it's no longer only Caleb who thinks this, must have been greatly encouraging for him. But imagine if Caleb had never had said anything? The same goes for you and your voice! Has God promised you something? Are you sure of something others doubt? Don't be afraid to speak up on it. You may well, like Caleb, be alone at first. But that doesn't mean you'll stay there. Others might need to hear your voice so they can be bold enough to use theirs.

So, what of the end of this story? Well, let's look at it...

"none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it." (Numbers 14:22-23)

These other men had SEEN the hand of God throughout their lives. They'd been witness to literal miracles right before their eyes. But sadly, it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough for them to move from only looking at the limitations. However, as promised, God gave the people the land. But, who do we think entered it?

"Not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun." (Numbers 14:30)

Only Joshua and Caleb inherited the promise. They inherited it because they chose to believe God at his word and not give a bigger voice to fear. Note here, that even though it took Joshua longer than Caleb to step out in faith, he still eventually did it and his reward was exactly the same as Caleb's. Joshua eventually, like Caleb, followed God in faith and received the same promise. God is patient with you. He understands our human limitations. He created us! **Even if fear does get the better of you sometimes- do not let that be where you stay!**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Numbers 13 - 14



Lesson Eleven: **Avoidance** - Person: **Jonah**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. God can change and move things in whichever way He likes- but what if He's asking you to do something in order to teach you something?...
2. Saying 'no' to God once doesn't mean you've avoided doing what He's asked forever!

3. God is a God of grace and second chances.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Can you think of any occasions where you've run from God? What made you do it and what was the outcome?

MAIN COURSE

It's fairly easy to have the typical Sunday school understanding of Jonah. You know the one - Jonah disobeys God and so gets eaten by a big fish. It's a good summary! But we miss so many of the important lessons God wants to teach us through this short, but powerful book. Let's make a start...

God speaks very clearly to Jonah right at the start of the book and He gives very precise instruction.

"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." (Jonah 1:2)

God can in no way be accused of being unclear here... Jonah knows exactly where he needs to go and what he needs to do there. But we read that Jonah 'flees' in the opposite direction and ends up boarding a boat. When I think about fleeing, I'm thinking running away as fast as you can... Fleeing from an all-seeing God wasn't the best idea, though. Inevitably, Jonah doesn't get away with it for long... The boat, which he boards, encounters a 'mighty tempest' which God just so happens to orchestrate. Interestingly here, the sailors, who all worshipped a variety of pagan gods automatically, attribute the tempest to a higher power of some description and 'each cry out to his god'. (Jonah 1:5) Nothing happens (of course) and so they go to find Jonah (who's asleep) and wake him up to ask him to cry out to his God! This must have been so awkward for Jonah... here is the prophet, the 'man of God' running away from the one true Lord while these pagan sailors are the ones who seem to actually fear God at this point! **This is simply another reminder for us - it's our actions which declare our heart, not our title.** In the end - Jonah has to come clean...

"And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." (Jonah 1:9)

At this point, the sailors know that, whatever it is that's going on, is happening as a result of Jonah and so they endeavour to do something about it, and quickly. That something happens to be throwing Jonah overboard! That's where the big fish comes in... Again, like the tempest, this is no accident. The Lord 'appointed' this fish to swallow Jonah. After three long days and nights in the belly of the fish, Jonah finally prays. One fish. Three days. Three nights. **When you've run away from the plans and purposes which God has for you, what has He used to get your attention again?** For Jonah, it was a large fish! How long did it take you to listen? For Jonah it was three days and three nights. If God asks something of us, we're not always going to have the luxury of saying no. It's God who has the final say!

Jonah gets his second chance. The start of chapter three indicates *the 'word of lord coming a second time to Jonah'*. Unsurprisingly, Jonah is given the same word and the same message, only this time- he's learned his lesson and knows to say yes... How many of us have asked God what His purposes and desires are for us this week, month or year? **How many of us are hoping that He'll say something different to the same thing He's already asked of us because we don't want to do it?**

Jonah delivers the message and the people of Nineveh repent. This is truly a praise-worthy moment... isn't it? Well, not for Jonah, and here's where we understand the real reason behind Jonah's previous reluctance... Of *course* Jonah knows that God is gracious and merciful and shows kindness to all who repent. But Jonah doesn't especially like the people of Nineveh and doesn't really have any affiliation with them. So his previous reluctance came from a place of selfishness, unfortunately. **What can we learn at this point? God might ask us to go to unfamiliar places and to unfamiliar people. Unfamiliarity is no grounds to refuse God's instruction. Comfort zones don't stretch or grow anyone. God may well want you uncomfortable. As difficult as that may sound- we don't make the rules!**

We started with Sunday school and we'll end there too! Jonah's response to God is hugely childish. He sits in the sun and just watches- watches God being good to Nineveh, whilst getting more and more annoyed. God, merciful as He is (much to Jonah's annoyance, apparently!) appoints a plant to shade Jonah from the heat and the sun. Jonah was happy with that. But literally overnight, God gets a worm to attack the plant so that it withers. Jonah gets angry with God about destroying the plant and then, here comes the final lesson...

"And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:10-11)

I love how the Lord uses such a simple illustration to make His point. **We don't get to pick and choose how His character works. We don't get to bend and mould His will to fit in with ours. We partner with Him. We ask that He breaks our hearts for the things that break His. We step out of comfort zones. We learn to love, to trust and to fully follow.**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Jonah 1 -4



Lesson Twelve: Strategy - Person: Esther

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. God can turn any situation into an opportunity for His glory.
2. The very place you're in right now may be exactly where God wants to use you.
3. Never underestimate your influence. Esther was one woman who made a difference to and for many.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

What factors usually get in the way for you when considering the amount of sway and influence you have?

MAIN COURSE

There is a king named Ahasuerus who is reigning over 127 provinces. This is a man of some importance! He has a wife named Vashti and it appears from what we read of her, that King Ahasuerus doesn't treat her very well. He is hosting a banquet one night and after the men have had their fill of food and drink, the king calls on Queen Vashti to come and essentially parade in front of the men so that they could all stare out how beautiful she was... Crazy, right?! But it's true - you can read it for yourselves in Esther 1 verses 10-11.

Unsurprisingly, Queen Vashti doesn't take the king up on this offer, and so begins the story of Esther... The king's friends start to panic thinking that now the queen has had the audacity to say no to the king, all of their wives are going to start acting up. That settles it and essentially, the queen is quietly removed.

Not long after this, the king appears to regret the decision of banishing his wife somewhat. But his hands are tied - he's got lots of officials etc. to answer to. To take the king's mind off of things, his officials suggest that the king finds someone else who's beautiful to look at. The king agrees and so is set a decree to find all of the beautiful young virgins in the land to be brought to him.

Esther arrives on the scene and quickly wins the favour of all who meet her. We're told that she is beautiful (chapter two, verse seven) and also that she has lost both of her parents and is being brought up by her uncle. The fact that this point is made is the first thing I want to properly draw our attention to. You may have lost people close to you, you may be in an unusual situation, and you may even feel 'beyond' the reach of God as a result of your circumstance. But, as we'll read later, God used this woman for mighty purposes. Never discount yourself on the basis of your current situation.

Now, Esther has this opportunity to enter the king's palace. We read in chapter two, verse ten that her uncle Mordecai has warned her not to make it known that she is of Jewish descent. This is something which becomes key later on. Esther wisely listens to her uncle and says nothing on the matter at this stage. We read throughout the chapter that Esther appears to be being granted favour with all she meets. Esther is wise here. She might have been tempted to look back at her life circumstances and how tragic they were and seen this time in the king's palace as an opportunity to take it for all it was worth. But she doesn't. She treads carefully, doesn't take or ask for more than she should. This humble attitude is also taken with her as she enters the king's chamber after her six month beautifying process (!) Of all the women who have had this opportunity, Esther stands out above the rest and is quickly promoted to the position of queen (2:17).

Interestingly, at this time, Mordecai, (who has been sitting at the king's gate during this process so that he can check on Esther) hears of a plot. Two men are set to take on, overthrow and kill the king! Mordecai makes it known and the men are hanged. This event is noted in the Chronicles. Now, this all seems like a lot of context and background, but it's important. Maybe **you feel like your story is like that right now? There's a lot of events and circumstances, coincidences even, which have come together and been lined up and shaped in certain ways which make you think God's hand might be on this. But you've just not seen any actual fruit just yet. Wait on it! God is strategic and none of your circumstances have happened by accident.** Hopefully you'll be encouraged by what's about to happen with our heroine...

The king promotes one of his officials - Haman. He was to be above all the other officials and servants. This meant that whenever he came to the king's gate, all of the servants who were there (one of them being Mordecai) should bow. Haman had a history of not being gracious with the Jews and therefore, when it came to bowing before Haman, Mordecai was not about to disrespect his people like that. He refused. This obviously riled up newly appointed Haman. Before we know it- he's convinced the king that all of the Jews needs to be killed on account of them 'not obeying the king'. Now, remember the quite prominent Jew who happens to be quite close with the king? Esther hears of all of this and is ready to take action. Not least for her uncle, who Haman wants hanged. Mordecai relays some very apt words which we can all take something from...

*"Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. **And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"**" (Esther 4:13-14)*

I love those verses. Suddenly, everything seems to fall into place. The beauty contest, the favour shown to Esther, Mordecai being at the king's gate, Haman not being appointed until Esther was positioned as queen... all of it, for NOW! Esther is wise, though. She doesn't barge into the king's quarters and demand that he stop this right now. Maybe she could have- she's the queen after all. But Esther was wiser than that. Things had to be done properly. Read what she does...

"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:16)

Esther understands that this whole situation is bigger than her and that she needs the Lord's favour if anything here is to work out in the way she wants it to. And God moves. Remember that brief mention I gave earlier about Mordecai overthrowing the plot to kill the king? The king has thoughts about this, months later in a dream and asks if Mordecai was ever commended... These sort of 'Godincidences' continually happen alongside Esther playing her part and softening the king's heart towards her

even more by hosting banquets etc. At one of these banquets, the king asks Esther what she wants and says that she can have 'up to half of the kingdom'. Esther hasn't really asked for anything, remember - ever since she arrived at the king's palace. And so now, the time is finally right and the opportunity is seized. She uncovers Haman's plot to hang her uncle and kill all of the Jews (one of them being her!) The king is outraged and grants that this goes no further and in fact that Haman is hanged. We've run out of space here, but you can read of how Esther saves the Jews and Mordecai is promoted throughout Esther 8-10.

This is an example to us all of how to strategically use our influence for the greater good. All of the small seemingly insignificant circumstances of your life haven't happened by accident. God is using and crafting every single one of them to create and form what will be the right moment and the right place. Maybe that's already happening? Be prayerful, be strategic, and be wise. Esther's life is an example to us all.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

The book of Esther



Lesson Thirteen: **Worth It** - Person: Samaritan Woman

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Although we might try like the Samaritan woman did, we can't hide from Jesus. He is jealous for us and longs to pursue our hearts.
2. No matter our current circumstances, we are never beyond Jesus' love and grace.
3. Your testimony is something that others need to hear- tell it!

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Have you ever felt too unworthy or insignificant to be used by God?

MAIN COURSE

Time for one of my favourite ever Bible characters to make an appearance....

To put some context to this beautiful story, let me set the scene. Jews & Samaritans did not mix. Men speaking to women was certainly not the done thing. A 'sinful' woman was even worse. They were shunned by society and frowned upon by most.

John 4:1-45 documents a story often referred to as 'The Woman at the Well.' The story greets us with Jesus on a journey. Verse 4 indicates that, on this journey, he 'had to pass through Samaria'. Now, although geographically this was the normal route to take, strict Jews wouldn't take it in order to avoid defilement from the Samaritans. A Samaritan just like our unnamed woman who happens to be drawing water from a well at the hottest point of the day. She was guaranteed some 'alone time' as no one else would be drawing water at this point, preferring the cooler morning or evening shift. She could avoid the judgmental stares. So, back to this 'had to' phrase. This begins to tell us so beautifully that, Jesus meets us where we're at. He could have taken the longer but more 'appropriate' route through to Galilee, but he 'had to' meet this woman. Jesus will find you. Broad daylight or undercover - if your heart is open to an encounter with Jesus Christ, He can find you there.

Jesus speaks first in this conversation. 'Give me a drink' (Verse 7b). The woman is stunned on all counts. Here is a Jewish man drawing water from a well at a highly unusual hour. More than that, He's talking to her, a woman, unclean. NEVER doubt, because of your unfortunate past or even your present circumstances that Jesus desperately wants to be in communion with you. The woman has the expected response and essentially asks Jesus why He's asking her. This whole encounter makes no sense to her. So, in verse 10 He says... "If you knew...who it is..." Sometimes we can ask Jesus the 'why' and 'how' of an encounter with him and completely miss the fact that THE LORD is speaking... to us!

The woman makes excuses and notices that Jesus doesn't have anything with which to draw the water. In prayer, how often do we dance around asking Jesus for what we really want and need out of fear we'll be judged if we actually hit Him with the reality? Jesus of course, is very aware of this apparent oversight. As thirsty as He may have been, I don't think water was His key aim here! He just wants to spend some time with this woman and get the message of the Good News across to her. No hidden agenda. Jesus talks about being thirsty again in only drinking physical water - verse 13. Jesus is trying to lift this woman's gaze higher than simply what is in front of her by highlighting that earthly things wear out and that she'll never be 100% satisfied by them.

So, if not this water at the well, what?

"But whoever drinks..." (verse 14) Jesus was making a point of this not being an exclusive invitation for a few people only, but rather an invitation for anyone who was willing to accept. "Will never thirst..." It is clear here that Jesus is talking about something spiritual and not practical. A deeper thirst, which cuts beyond the surface - a soul thirst. It's funny, we would never think of depriving ourselves of natural food and water, but yet we can so often deprive our souls of fulfilling our spiritual needs, daily...

The next verse gives us an indication as to why this is... The woman says (Verse 15) "Give me this water..." Our society is a quick fix society. We want everything straight away and right now. The only issue with this can be that if we don't get what we want straight away, we then settle for second best. Can we do this with Jesus? Can we wonder why nothing's automatically changed in any given situation and therefore just 'throw in the towel' and do something else, not realising that

waiting could have resulted in something far greater? The woman here isn't interested in the how and the why, she's simply interested in the result and NOW. Jesus doesn't want to give someone a quick fix, though, He wants to reach hearts.

Jesus realises he's not getting anywhere with this method. He hasn't got her attention. She's not interested in eternal life with God; she's interested in what He can offer her. This can be the same with us can't it?

So in our story, Jesus changes tactic and picks up on something, which He knows will get her attention- her marital status, (or lack of it as the case may be!) He is not about to give her some mystery medicine and set her on her way. God is JEALOUS for us. He wants our whole hearts. So He knows He needs to get her in a place where she's ready to listen.

I love how Jesus gets her attention. Look at verse 16. He doesn't get irritated and shout "You don't get it, you're not listening!" He says one simple sentence...

"...Go, call your husband, and come here."

What? They were talking about water and now it's got onto husbands. So how does the woman reply? "I have no husband," she says. This must have been embarrassing. It got her attention, but it wasn't something she wanted to talk about. The truth was, she wasn't married, she had a live-in boyfriend and she'd had five before that... But Jesus hadn't given up on her. Jesus came to THIS well at THIS time. To speak to her. Maybe we can relate to this woman? Done wrong thing after wrong thing, and then someone tells us Jesus loves us and we can't get our head around it. "Jesus loves me?" "How do you know? You don't know what I've done, where I've been"...

But Jesus does. Jesus knows it all, but He still comes after us with open arms. Jesus is still gentle and loving with her- He doesn't say "Exactly, no husband, you're filthy, you're sleeping around etc..." He just says, "You're right." He doesn't condemn her there and then, He just agrees that what she said is true. We often don't need to be told that something we're doing is wrong. We just know it. But it's also often not something we are ready to stop and so it's hard to talk about.

Following suit, the woman changes tactics too. She's decided that this man talking to her must be a prophet of some kind because He's told her about her life. But her life isn't one she's too proud of, so she changes the subject. She starts talking about where the correct place to worship is. She puts a smoke screen over her deepest need to keep Jesus out.

Jesus knows He's got her attention because now she's uncomfortable and saying things that don't really make sense. And so Jesus makes this amazing declaration that the position of worship doesn't matter anymore, it's about your heart.

This message is so true for us today. We don't have to look any further. He's here. He longs to meet with us. Yes, He shows us our past, not to shame us, but to show us that we're still thirsty. Maybe we feel as though we get that and we're chasing Him with everything. Well, we don't stop there and sit on this amazing revelation of Jesus we've received. Once the woman understands what's just happened, she goes back and tells her whole community! She's amazed and knows that other people need to hear about it. She brings people to Him. (Take a look at what verses 39-42 say.) The people came to believe in Him because they themselves had had a personal revelation that He really was who he said He was. Have you? Tell others. It's one of the main reasons we're here. Still waiting? Jesus will meet you exactly where you are. Just allow your heart to be open to His truth. No one is too far from His reach.

A beautiful story of grace, love and hope for us all.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

John 4:1-45



Lesson Fourteen: Conviction - Person: Paul

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Gifts are great, but they are not what's carrying us.
2. If our fear and reverence of man is greater than our fear and reverence of God, we've missed something.
3. Less of the flesh leads to more of the Holy Spirit... which leads to endless hope.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How would you define true wisdom?

MAIN COURSE

We've had quite lengthy character studies on particular people over the past few days. Today I'm looking at Paul - not his life so much as a key theme he teaches on. His lessons on where our foundations should lie have direct application to our lives as followers of Jesus Christ today.

Proverbs 1:7 says:

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."

It's so backwards in our self-absorbed society to believe that there's something we can 'get' without relying on our own strength to get it. This proverb essentially states that we know nothing until we know God. It sounds dramatic, but Paul supports this notion as we will see today in our passages from 1 Corinthians 1 & 2. Paul addresses a particular church in Corinth

as he opens the chapter. Nearly the first theme he mentions is that of division in the church. The reason this is a problem is because the group absolutely haven't understood the Proverb I quoted earlier! The church are arguing and dividing on who they should follow and where they should go. Now, leadership in of itself isn't a bad thing. We know this. But remember, God sees the heart and these people's hearts were not quite getting it. They had got so caught up in being with the right person, the right crowd - that they had forgotten who those people themselves were actually following. Paul breaks it down very clearly in verse 13:

"Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

Although Paul sounds rather sarcastic here, the message is clear and could certainly be applied to our today. **Church leaders and traditions are all well and good, but do we hold to them more than we do the very Gospel of Jesus Christ?** Paul recognises the challenge that he has here. The way in which he begins to go about finding a solution is one we can all learn from. Paul brings this church back to the cross. Paul longs to make it abundantly clear that without the cross, these church leaders and traditions the people are so vehemently following, simply wouldn't exist. The cross of Jesus Christ brings meaning and context to everything else. Calvary is where we begin.

If we are more impressed with the eloquence of the speakers, the melodies of the band and the technical genius of our audio/visuals, we've totally missed it. A message like this one of Paul's could not be more apt for today's 21st century consumerist society. Missing the majors yet getting heavily bogged down with the minors sounds all too familiar. It was hard for a people who were used to their way of doing things to understand this, though. As of course, it is hard for us. The church in Corinth were clearly quite fond of their particular church leaders. So Paul has to bring the attention right back to the congregation themselves. Verses 26-31 ask the church to consider their calling - did they have it altogether before Christ? Is that why they were 'picked'? Of course not! We know all too well what it is to live and breathe before a Holy and perfect God as hopeless sinners. Interestingly, though, the Corinthian church were probably happy enough to admit their own flaws and shortcomings but just couldn't fathom these church leaders as 'mere men'. **The glory of the messengers was diluting the message.**

Chapter two begins with Paul squashing this hope that the Corinthian church has of their leaders being these perfect beings. He is hugely intentional about them recognising that he had many imperfections, just like they did. I find this massively refreshing. **How easy do we find it to attribute the thanks and praise we're given by people, back to God? He's the one who's enabled us to do these things after all.** Paul puts it like this:

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:2-5)

The whole of chapter two, although short, is very powerful. It totally encapsulates the mystery of the cross. **We do not and will not understand the power of the cross of Christ by trying to!** If that were the case, the people with sway and say on how things operate would be seeking Jesus for wisdom. Instead, most look to themselves and other mere men. This inevitably makes Jesus a threat as opposed to the Saviour. It was the same case in Paul's day too. In verse 6, he alludes to the fact that the Jewish rulers (Pilate etc.) sent Jesus to die. As Christians, this sort of behaviour evidently sounds horrific. However what Paul is trying to get across is that, except for a work of the Holy Spirit- that would be us too! **We haven't been awarded this 'special' privilege, we've encountered a holy and perfect God.**

One of my favourite quotes, which always reminds me of the same glorious truth Paul speaks of in these verses was said by a reformer from the 1500's named John Bradford. He said the following:

"There but for the grace of God go I."

What truth! It is the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit who have helped us to understand the little we do know of Him. 1 Corinthians 2:14 spells this out:

"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

Once we understand that the things we know of God are because of God, there is no limit to where He might lead us. But we must leave our pride at the foot of the cross. Along with our jealousy, our bitterness, and our people pleasing. If you continue to read into chapter 3, you'll notice Paul saying that he couldn't begin to address the church as mature believers because they were still so divided. Let this not be us! Let us walk in maturity and wisdom, led by the Holy Spirit - into ALL that He has for us!

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

1 Corinthians 1:10 - 3:4



Lesson Fifteen: Conviction - Person: Jacob

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Taking something which doesn't belong to us is never going to end well.
2. God's grace is entirely sufficient for all of your mistakes.
3. Like Jacob, we should learn to wrestle with God for the things we truly desire rather than immediately throwing in the towel.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Have you ever attempted to rush ahead of God rather than trusting the process? What was the outcome?

MAIN COURSE

There's lots which happens in Jacob's life and so I'm going to take the liberty of summarising lots of it whilst addressing some key points. Of course, if you've got the time, please do read the story for yourself - the references are in the 'dessert' section. Jacob's story comes into its own in Genesis 27. His father, Isaac is about to die. He tells his other son Esau that before he dies, he wants to bless him. Esau is the older brother and so is entitled to this blessing - it's his birth right if you will. Now Isaac's wife, Rebekah, favoured Jacob over Esau and so in overhearing this conversation about blessing, she wants to get her favourite in on the action. Essentially, Isaac blesses Jacob because he thinks it's Esau and Esau naturally gets hugely angry. Helpfully, this happens in Genesis 27:42:

"But the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, "Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you."

Taking something which doesn't belong to us is never going to end well. Yes, God can redeem and restore all things and Praise God, He does! But when we tread on others' toes in order to get something we want, it says something about our hearts. **If we wrongly claim a promise our heavenly Father never intended for us, we're communicating a lack of trust - a lack of belief that God can and will come through for us in the end, even if He appears not to be now.** Jacob did this with his earthly father and ends up having to flee his home in fear of his brother's threats.

Genesis chapter 28 documents Jacob leaving his father's house. Isaac tells Jacob to go to a particular place and a particular people. More on this in a moment. He also has a very significant dream. The grace of God is seen in abundance here when this promise is made:

"And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Genesis 28:13-15)

Jacob has done wrong by his brother. God promises that this mistake won't haunt him forever. Remember that. **If you've done wrong by someone and you've truly apologised and sorted it out between you and God, His grace is sufficient.** Jacob trusts that truth and continues on his way. He arrives at the field of his Uncle Laban, the place Isaac told him to go. Laban is a shepherd with two daughters, one of whom, Rachel, appears on Jacob's arrival. Jacob is instantly attracted to Rachel and makes it known

to Laban. It becomes clear that Jacob is indeed a kinsman to his daughter and therefore eligible to marry her. However, Laban is not an entirely honest man, and deceives Jacob into thinking he will indeed marry Rachel.

I've spoken on Leah (Laban's other daughter) in lesson sixteen of this series. However, for now, let me keep my focus on Jacob. Laban wants him to work for his daughter and not to simply 'take' her. Because Jacob is so besotted with Rachel, he dutifully agrees. What's ironic here is that after the deception of Isaac at the hands of Jacob, it is now Jacob who is deceived at Laban's hands. Jacob dutifully works for seven years. (**When you really want something- you'll work for it!**) When the day arrives for Jacob to finally take Rachel as his wife, Laban brings out his eldest daughter, Leah. He speaks about family duty and lots of other details. This of course angers Jacob, but he works another seven years just to get Rachel! What perseverance!

Jacob basically ends up working for Laban for 20 years before he finally calls it quits. He plucks up enough courage to leave when reminded of the promise God gave him about returning to his father's house. **God's timing is perfect.** So he takes his wives, his children and his livestock and he goes. He gets the message out to Esau that he's on his way home. Of course, he's apprehensive after all that happened. Word gets back that Esau will meet him, but that he's coming with 400 men! This scares Jacob and he doesn't know what to do. In his panic, he splits his family in half and sends them off in two different directions. (His thinking is that if Esau attacks one half, at least he'll have the other!)

Now it's just Jacob. Jacob on his own in the wilderness thinking 'how on earth did this happen?' Have you ever had those moments? Those reflective moments of silent cries before the Lord? Admittedly, a lot of the things which had happened were at the hand of Jacob himself, but he hadn't exactly been dealt the greatest hand either.

"And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:24-29)

Perseverance was not an attribute that Jacob had only saved for being given a wife! Here, he wrestles with God Himself! We find in later chapters that Jacob had nothing to worry about - Esau held no animosity against his brother. Perhaps it was God who wanted to bring Jacob to this place, though. Alone with his thoughts and ready to cry out to the Lord. **There is such a lesson to be learned here.** Even (and especially!) when things get tough, we are to *run to* God, not from Him. He wants to hear the cries of our hearts, however much it hurts. Do not mistake your vulnerability and honesty at the foot of the cross for weakness - that's exactly where Jesus will meet you.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Genesis 27 - 32



Lesson Sixteen: Overlooked - Person: Leah

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Even when we're overlooked by people, we are NEVER overlooked by the Lord.
2. Seeking attention and affection in order to fill our personal needs will not benefit us in the long run.
3. Removing ourselves from the need to be affirmed by people as opposed to God is something we have to keep doing

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

When you feel overlooked or forgotten about, what is your typical response?

MAIN COURSE

Have you ever had one of those seasons where you feel as though everything is happening *around* you? Almost like you're 'in the room' physically but not quite mentally or spiritually? How about those moments of being spoken about rather than spoken to? That feeling of being overlooked was certainly not uncommon for Leah.

Whilst studying Jacob's story in lesson fifteen, I really felt for his eldest daughter, Leah. The first time she is mentioned in Genesis 29, she is described as having 'weak' eyes. Other translations describe her eyes as 'tender' or even 'pretty' but regardless of this...

"...Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance." (Genesis 29:18b)

Rachel was Leah's younger sister. The sister who Jacob really wanted to marry.

"And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn."... So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years." (Genesis 29:25-26 & 30)

I so feel for Leah at this point. I envision that blur I spoke about earlier. Jacob and her father, Laban discussing her fate. Amidst all of this though, Leah is silent. Perhaps she doesn't know what to say. Maybe she's trying to stop herself from bursting into tears. Who knows? What we *do* know is that she was spoken about as though she was an object with a price. A price that Jacob was essentially forced to pay. It was one of those moments where Leah may have felt the need to apologise for her very presence despite the fact she'd done nothing wrong. **Have you ever been manipulated by someone and ended up in a position you never asked to be put in?** All of this had happened to Leah at the hand of her father, Laban.

What I love though, is that Leah's Heavenly Father had no such intentions for Leah. He saw her and loved her deeply.

"When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren." (Genesis 29:31)

I love this verse because it's just so real and vulnerable. Nowhere in the text before this does it say that Leah was hated. I believe this verse shows us that God saw what Leah felt. Leah must have felt pretty low - manipulated by her father, seen as second choice to her sister by her new husband. It was just quite messy. Yet, God saw. He saw, and He blessed her by 'opening her womb.' (Just as a side note here - this wasn't a punishment for Rachel - God opens her womb again later!)

Although God does this for Leah. She's not ready to stop trying to win her husband over just yet though... She eventually gives birth to their first son Reuben. *"And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me." (Genesis 29:32)*

People pleasing is a slippery slope, especially when it involves other people. Remember, Leah was married to Jacob through an act of deception at the hands of Laban. Now it almost seems as though this child has been brought into the world so that Jacob will love Leah more. Imagine if Reuben eventually found that out? In what ways would he then hurt people? Do you see what I mean? It's a slippery slope indeed. This unfortunate pattern happens for another two children. Leah is desperate for Jacob to look at her the way he looks at Rachel. The truth Leah had to contend with is that, that might never happen.

So then what? What happens when you've exhausted every avenue trying to persuade someone into loving you, following you, trusting you, choosing you? What happens if, after all that, the answer is still no? Leah had reached this point. But thankfully she recognised that the end of herself was only the beginning for God.

"And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing." (Genesis 29:35)

Something had clicked in Leah. She'd realised that doing this for Jacob was not resulting in anything positive. I can imagine her, rejoicing in each new child, only for Jacob to remain disinterested in her. It must have been heart breaking. But let's remember - as God created human beings, we have an amazing ability to bounce back from difficult circumstances. Leah recognised that she didn't have to keep walking that same people pleasing path and this time she simply praises God for the blessing of new life. **How many times have we repeated words and actions in order to impress people before recognising that we don't have to give anyone that kind of permission?**

My final point to this message is that living before an audience of One is a daily commitment. Leah lives in the freedom of the Lord for a while, but she must have started getting insecure and angry again and found herself bargaining with Rachel one day. Again, Reuben is involved. He's been out in the field gathering mandrakes and on his return, Rachel asks Leah if she can have some. The bitterness Leah once had seems to have resurfaced and this is how she responds:

"But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes."

I'm sure you can guess what happens now... After stopping and realising she didn't need to do this once, Leah finds herself gradually slipping back into what she'd done before. She ends up bearing Jacob six sons! Soon after though, Rachel's womb is reopened and she bears Jacob a son. At this point, Jacob is ready to speak to Laban and leave so that he can finally set up his own home with his wives and children. Jacob didn't have this sort of reaction when Leah was bearing him children! Leah's life is

a lesson for us all. Think wisely about where you are spending your resources. Whether that's time, money, or relationships. Remember - your Heavenly Father favours you always and it's Him you want to be living for!

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Genesis 29:15 - 30:24



Lesson Seventeen: Obedience - Person: Abraham

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. The first step to obedience is to listen for God's voice.
2. Obedience can be painful and confusing at times. Jesus sacrificing His own life being the ultimate example of this!
3. Even when it seems as though obedience comes at a price, God will find a way in which to provide.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How do you view obedience unto God? Restrictive? Risky? Exciting? Can you recall where this type of obedience has led you in the past?

MAIN COURSE

Although, today, I will only be focusing in detail on one portion of Abraham's story, his entire life is littered with obedience unto God. The beginning of it is documented here in Hebrews:

*"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. **And he went out, not knowing where he was going.**" (Hebrews 11:8)*

He didn't know where he was going! This story is told in Genesis 12 if you want to read it further, but let's just imagine the levels to this obedience for a minute. He literally had no idea where he was going, yet he trusted God enough to get up and go. Not only this, he was 70! He also took his wife and children and possessions... Abram (pre-name change) uprooted his life because God told him to. So we know from the off that this was a man of faith. A faith which he not only spoke about, but lived.

So, to our passage today... The first thing I want to draw our attention to is the very first verse...

"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." (Genesis 22:1)

Abraham was in close relationship with God. I know this because he heard His voice. How often are we so surrounded by the distractions and cares of our worlds, that we can't hear the voice of the Lord amidst the noise? This wasn't the case for Abraham (whose name had been changed by this point - you can read all about it in Genesis...) Abraham was connected enough with God to hear Him when He called. This is something we can all learn from.

Next, God involves Abraham's son, Isaac! It's now pretty personal as this is Abraham's 'only son' 'whom he loves'. This might not seem so bad, if it wasn't for what God actually asked Abraham to *do* with his son...

"He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Genesis 22:2)

Although I am not yet a mother, I can only *imagine* what sort of response I'd want to give at this point. Even re-reading it stresses me out... Why would God do this? How does this make sense? Those are just my initial thoughts. As for obedient Abraham though, verse three states that he rose 'early in the morning' and 'saddled his donkey'. Now, it doesn't say which particular morning this was, however, something tells me that this was the next day. **When God asks us to do certain things and we're clear it's Him, are we quick to act on it? Or do we prefer to procrastinate?** I know, for me, that especially with something this major, I would be doing all sorts of tests to discern whether this was actually, really God. (Remember Gideon from lesson one? That's more my natural sort of obedience levels!)

So they're off. Father and son, climbing up this mountain. Verse four indicates that this was at least a three day journey. Can you imagine the tension? Abraham and Isaac walking in silence, Abraham nervously anticipating the inevitable, Isaac slightly confused as to why they're even there in the first place. It gets to the heartbreaking moment where Abraham has even attached the wood to Isaac, ready to make the sacrifice. At this point, Isaac, (naturally!) asks where the actual sacrifice is. Abraham answers in faith, still trusting that God will intervene in this seemingly awful scenario.

"Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together." (Genesis 22:8)

Still unsure as to whether or not God is going to intervene here, Abraham *"reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son..."* Slaughter his son. Wow. The Word really doesn't hold back here and I think that's deliberate. **Obedience can be painful and excruciatingly tough.** However, Abraham hasn't given up on the fact that God can and will do something here. And

do something, God does! Again, it's key that Abraham knows God's voice, because this time Abraham's name is called out twice.

"But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."" (Genesis 22:11-12)

This is so like God. This last minute intervention just when it seems as though all hope is lost. **Are we able to wait for God, or do we have a timeline on our obedience? Are we okay to say yes up to point, but stop when it seems He's taking too long?** God takes Abraham up to the wire... and He doesn't disappoint! Even when it seems as though there is no way, God can make one. God is GOD, we should be able to trust Him with all we have, but unfortunately, so often, we can't quite wait for Him. It's so hard. Abraham is an example for us, though. Someone who clearly heard God, trusted Him and was able to be obedient at personal cost. And of course, God provided another sacrifice.

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Genesis 22:1 - 14



Lesson Eighteen: Service - People: The Apostles

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Service will inevitably lead to some form of opposition. However, panicking over people's opinions of your words and actions is a distraction.
2. A life of service unto God does not always look like the best option, yet it *always* is.
3. Even when you feel as though the weight of the world is on your shoulders, remember that it is in fact CHRIST ALONE who needs to carry it.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Although essential to the Christian life, service is definitely a balance of both 'triumph and tragedy'. Can you reflect on moments of both sadness and joy during your times of ministry? How have those moments shaped your present reality?

MAIN COURSE

As opposed to just focusing on one character this morning, I want to look at a life of service from the point of view of the Apostles. Paul documents some thoughts on this in 1 Corinthians 4.

Paul opens the chapter by talking about the topic immediately. He uses both the words 'servant' and 'steward' in verse one. We could be fooled into believing that the use of these two words means that a 'regular Joe' could, in no way, fill this sort of position. Paul dispels this myth later in the passage. But it's also important to note that the nature of the words shouldn't even strike up fear! Imagine a steward as a managing agent of a property. There's still an owner! **Both a steward and a servant are simply doing what someone else has asked them to do. For us, we are servants in the work of GOD, not owners, but stewards of the things which HE has called us to handle.**

"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself." (1 Corinthians 4:3)

This next statement of Paul's is most definitely the bench mark when it comes to a life of service. He makes it clear that he and the apostles have had to completely disregard the opinions of people when it comes to this sort of life. Not in a way which is insensitive and rude towards others - but rather, learning to let criticism and opposition wash over them as opposed to absorbing it. This is so crucial. In doing anything for God, it's likely we'll be hit with lots of reasons why we shouldn't. There's a passage in 1 Peter 5:8 which talks about the enemy 'prowling like a lion seeking whom he may devour'. The 'enemy' doesn't necessarily mean the devil, literally. But rather, people and things which might distract us and lead us away from what God wants. If we're easily swayed by people's opinions of us, we can just as easily be knocked off course! I remember when I was considering applying for a church gap year when I had just graduated from university with a degree in Performing Arts. To lots of people, this idea made zero sense. I'd just finished studying and rather than look for employment in my field, I wanted to take a year out to understand God better. There was definitely 'opposition' but I ended up going for it and it turned out to be one of the most pivotal years of my entire life.

And that's the second point. No one *wants* to be mocked and disapproved of for making certain life choices. But sometimes, that's just part and parcel of our walk with Jesus. This is by no means, easy, but it is worth it. We're told by Jesus that we'll 'have trouble' in this world. But also, that He has overcome the world. (John 16:33) Paul in fact says, in verse 9: *"For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men."* He says this because the church he's writing to in Corinth are living it up! They seem to be doing very well

for themselves despite not really acknowledging God as they should. Which then begs the question- 'why live that sort of life at all then?' Firstly, it's because Jesus told us to...

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matthew 28:19)

"Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' (Matthew 25:45)

Not serving is basically not doing what He's asked.

But also, there is SO MUCH MORE in store for us if we live the life we were created to! Who knows creation better than its Creator?

Paul says of himself and the apostles in verse 10 that they are 'fools for Christ'. This really takes the pressure off. **We don't always have to get it all right. In fact, sometimes we might make some pretty bad mistakes. But the fear of making those mistakes and offending/annoying people will hold us back from taking any steps at all.**

And where would that leave us? Stagnant? Stuck? Frustrated? We were made for more! Remember the point Paul made in verse 3? We really have to get over this idea of being led by what people think. This is something I have to remind myself of every day. I'm reminded of a time during my penultimate year of teaching secondary school. I was teaching drama and the syllabus directed that I needed to produce a play with the students based on a 'pre-existing novel/story'. I decided to email the board and ask if that meant I could choose a Bible story. This was obviously a slightly bizarre request and one which I felt a little apprehensive about making. But equally - I saw it as an amazing opportunity to show my students the love of God whilst doing something they enjoyed. And they loved it! It was honestly one of the best performances they ever put on. It was a wonderful and emotional moment for me. **And remember, it's those pockets of joy you hold onto! Those moments where you're not mocked for a word or action and in fact, God blesses it and makes it something you never expected!**

That's the character of God all over, and the reason why Paul says what he does at the end of the passage:

"For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church." (1 Corinthians 4:15-17)

Paul was not in the business of giving a load of churches a hard time for no reason. He was more concerned that they recognised that glorifying God in their service was of benefit *to them!* He describes himself as a father figure. This makes a lot of sense when we look at Paul's ministry - He was keen to train up others, wasn't afraid to confront issues but yet loved people dearly. He didn't do this on his own, nor did he want to.

"For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power." (1 Corinthians 4:20)

Paul and the apostles recognised that they could sit and discuss what God was going to do all day. It would certainly build knowledge. But it, of course, wouldn't have the desired response! Remember the first thing I covered? **We're servants and stewards, not owners. So, when it all just feels too much, give it back to God and ask for His guidance, because THAT'S really where the power is!**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

1 Corinthians 4



Lesson Nineteen: Prayer - Person: Elijah

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Bold prayer takes big faith, not a special type of person.
2. You don't have to see all of the components of a miracle in order to believe that there is one on the way.
3. You might be the only one praying for a particular situation- but one person is enough!

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How often do you pray prayers so big they scare you?

MAIN COURSE

"Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth." (James 5:17)

I love this verse on so many levels! Here is Elijah being described as a man having a 'nature like ours'. A totally normal person you might just meet on the street. Yet, his faith in his God allowed him to pray bold prayers. Notice, also in this verse, the fact that he prayed 'fervently'. **He didn't pray with an attitude of compulsion, he was passionate and persistent about it. In order for us to be passionate about prayer, we've got to be passionate about the God we're praying to.**

Now, as amazing as this verse is, I actually think it speaks quite modestly of what God really did through Elijah. He did pray for the rain to stop but he also foresaw it starting again! Alongside this, he also managed to silence a group of 450 baal worshippers by praying that God would show himself (which He did - More on that in a minute.) And as if that weren't enough,

he prayed for a dead child to come back to life along the way. We read of Elijah's story in the book of 1 Kings, starting at chapter 17. What I find instantly quite striking is the conviction Elijah has behind his prayerful words.

"Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the *LORD*, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." (1 Kings 17:1)

Do we pray for things half expecting that our prayers won't actually do anything? Or do we pray standing firmly on the truth that God can move at the sound of our intercession? Elijah had faith enough to believe that praying would absolutely move the hand of God. The words he predicted came to pass and God then sends him to a place called Zarephath. There, he is to stay at a widow's house. Some time passes and the widow's son becomes sick. In another bold move of faith, he prays for the boy.

*"Then he stretched himself upon the child three times and **cried to the LORD**, "O LORD my God, let this child's life come into him again." And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah. And the life of the child came into him again, and he revived." (1 Kings 17:21-22)*

Did you notice what I put in bold there? The LORD OF LORDS LISTENED TO A MERE MAN! **God listens when we pray. We are not praying as a simple act of religiosity.** This was no small thing either. This was literally life and death!

Moving on, some time has passed and Elijah is now told by God to show himself to a man named Ahab (aka Obadiah) and that in doing so, God would 'send rain upon the earth'. So Elijah goes. However, before the whole issue of rain is dealt with, there seems to be another matter at hand. Israel was full of 'fence sitters'! People that couldn't quite make their mind up about the one true God and therefore kept switching sides. One day, God and the next, an idol. Elijah saw this and was quite literally stopped in his tracks:

"And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the *LORD* is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word." (1 Kings 18:21)

This verse can be quite convicting can't it? With God, there's no 'middle ground' as such. Not that we're perfect and always get everything right. Far from it, in fact. But more, that we are fully persuaded when it comes to the decision we've made to follow Jesus. We then pray daily that our actions line up with our convictions. Elijah is obviously hugely angry at this 'wishy-washy' atmosphere. Some following God, others following idols, some unsure! So he decides it's time to take action. Now, there are 450 people professing to worship 'Baal' the false god. Elijah is on his own with regards to true God worship. But that doesn't faze him. **This shouldn't faze us either. Even when we are outnumbered on every side, we're serving the one true God. Absolutely nothing and nobody else compares.**

So, what does Elijah do? Well, you can read the whole story in the dessert section of today's message. But just to summarise. He basically gets the people to set up altars. One for Baal and one for God. He then calls the 450 Baal worshippers to call on Baal while Elijah was to call on God. Whoever's God consumed the altar by fire would be proved right. The story in its entirety is quite funny. Elijah is literally mocking the Baal priests because stuff like this happens...

"And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made." (1 Kings 18:26)

... It just sounds quite awkward, doesn't it? Elijah rubs it in somewhat and taunts them about it. But then he decides that enough is enough and it's time for God to shut this down. Which naturally, He does.

"Answer me, O LORD, answer me, that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God." (1 Kings 18:37-39)

This is just amazing. One man prays a faith filled and bold prayer in the presence of at least 450 people who doubt that anything is going to happen and God moves powerfully. So powerfully in fact, that the others have to bow down to the one true God. What amazing witness. **This should serve as huge encouragement for us, shouldn't it? Nothing was really in Elijah's favour. Not number, nor support. Only God. And that's all he needed.**

In closing, remember I said that Elijah also foresaw the rain coming back? There's a wonderful interaction between Elijah and Ahab in 1 Kings 18:41-46 about how Elijah can hear the rain and Ahab can't. But Elijah remembers God's promise from back in verse 1 of chapter 18. Elijah knows that God is faithful to keep His promises. Even if He's slower than he'd like him to be. **Don't forget that God is faithful to keep His promises. Don't stop fervently praying for that thing you've nearly lost hope in and don't doubt the fact that God can and will use you, even if you're the only one!**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

1 Kings 17-18



Lesson Twenty: Give and Take - Person: Hannah

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. God can reopen what He once closed.
2. God understands the cries of your heart even when no one else does.
3. We must hold onto what God's given us loosely. It all belongs to Him.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How easy do we find it to accept that all we have has been lent to us by the Lord? Are we able to freely give back to Him what He once freely gave to us?

MAIN COURSE

Have you ever been so passionate about something that it consumes you? It consumes your thoughts, actions, prayers etc. We are introduced to Hannah in the book of 1 Samuel chapter 1 and we are greeted with this verse:

"But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb." (1 Samuel 1:5)

Now, the one giving 'double portions' here is Elkanah, Hannah's husband. We find out in verse two that Hannah wasn't his only wife. He had two. This other wife of his, Peninnah, had children. Hannah didn't. We read in the verse above that the Lord had closed Hannah's womb. We're not 100% sure of why, but we certainly learn from later on in this story, that her waiting was not in vain. **That's something to bear in mind here. Whatever it is you're waiting for, be it a job, a spouse, a child - your wait will not be wasted.** As we read in the verse above, we're fully aware that Elkanah loved his wife. Whenever he'd go to make sacrifices, he'd always bring Hannah back a double portion because of the love and favour he had for her. It almost sounds romantic doesn't it? This doting husband who longs to cater for his wife's every need despite the fact they may never be able to have a family together.

It wasn't romantic for Hannah. Have you ever had one of those moments? Where it's not like you have anything *major* to complain about, but you can't seem to shake that big dream you've not quite seen fulfilled yet either? This was certainly the case for Hannah.

Despite having this loving husband, there's something missing for her. Elkanah tries to soften the blow in verse eight by asking *"Am I not more to you than ten sons?"* This is the thing when it comes to having a dream. Sometimes people just won't understand it. People may think it's because we're ungrateful or dissatisfied at our present circumstance. But I believe God wants us to *give everything* to Him. Both triumph *and* tragedy. Let's remember, God sees our hearts. Our desire should be for Jesus more than anything. If He is where our treasure is, we can't go far wrong.

It's documented in verses 10 & 11 that Hannah weeps bitterly and asks God to restore her. She asks that God might still bless her with a child and that if He does she will dedicate the child's life to God. **Are we able to say that same sort of thing with a level conviction? That whatever God gives us, we'd be happy to give back?**

In verses 12-13, Hannah prays silently in her heart asking God to open her womb. Next, we see a moment where Eli really gets the wrong end of the stick...

"As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman."

Eli believes that Hannah is drunk as she's not praying out loud but only in her heart. In verse 16 she says she is "speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation." - I find it encouraging that Hannah is anxious and vexed but she gives it to God... This is a challenge to us! Eli tells her "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him." - This is also encouraging. Sometimes we must leave our problems at the foot of His cross and trust that God has heard our cries. Hannah trusted ("*...her face was no longer sad.*")

So, we move on with the story...

"They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked for him from the Lord.'" They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked for him from the Lord.'"

Some of the description here is so precious. 'The Lord remembered her' and it was 'due time' for her to conceive. That makes it so clear to me that God had been shaping her, ready for this new blessing. She must have, no doubt learned many lessons in the waiting. And now and only now, it was time. I find it so interesting that the news of Samuel's birth took place when had Hannah had stopped crying about not having any children at the time. It's not a 'model' as such. But I have found, that in my own life, if I make a big bold step which means sacrifice of something I hope/dream for, the same thing I was willing to give up on, can resurface very quickly! God is good and the keeper of our hopes and dreams. We need not worry about giving them to Him.

...Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, "Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord." And he worshiped the Lord there. (1 Samuel 1:19-20, 25-28)

The Lord 'remembers' and blesses Hannah with the son she cried out for. But it's also important to note that Hannah remembers the Lord! She does what she said she would do and dedicates Samuel to God. We'll look at Samuel's amazing life in another message. But in closing, let's think about Hannah's example. **Do we promise God things falsely in the heat of the moment? Or do we honour Him and see our promises through?** Hannah's life of prayer and humility before the Lord is certainly one we can learn from.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

1 Samuel 1 - 2:11



Lesson Twenty-One: Calling - Person: Samuel

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. It's important to learn lessons from those who have gone before us. We should never be too proud to receive guidance and instruction.
2. Just like Samuel, we might not be expecting God to be speaking to us. But maybe He is. Listen for His voice.
3. Anyone who's available for the Lord, can be used by the Lord.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How easy do we find it to say 'here I am' to God?

MAIN COURSE

Before I begin looking at Samuel, I must pause for a moment and reflect on how wonderful mothers (and fathers!) are. In lesson twenty, we looked at the cry of Hannah's heart - a cry for a child. The child she bore was named Samuel, who grew to be a man after God's own heart. A man who, just as his mother had promised, was of service to the Lord. Samuel gets a lot more mention than Hannah throughout the Bible, but let's not forget the prayers, tears and pain that birthed his very existence. In the book of 2 Timothy, chapter one verse five, we read of Timothy's mother and grandmother. Both of these women had a huge impact on Timothy's spiritual life. The tiny bit we know of them is enough to tell us that. And so, parents, when it seems like all you're doing is underappreciated and forgotten, remember that the Lord of Lord's and King of King's sees you. Also, you never know, you may be raising a spiritual giant whose name will go down in history!

So, onto Samuel. He has two books of the Bible named after him and so his entire life isn't quite something I can cover in a short reflection. In this message, I will be looking at his 'call', which is documented in 1 Samuel chapter 3. As promised, Hannah has

'lent' Samuel to the Lord and from an early age he is ministering to God under Eli, the priest. Before we get to chapter three, there are a couple of verses I'd just like to pick out:

"Then Elkanah went home to Ramah. And the boy was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli the priest." (1 Samuel 2:11)

"Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy clothed with a linen ephod." (1 Samuel 2:18)

Now remember I mentioned that Samuel receives a call from the Lord in chapter three? Both of these verses are pulled from chapter two. I just love the fact that Samuel didn't necessarily have this divine revelation of who God was at this point (more on that in a minute.) He was just doing what he could before the Lord, following Eli's instructions. In both of the verses Samuel is described as a boy. When it comes to serving God, we can sometimes make excuses, can't we? We can say we don't have a specific 'purpose', we can say we're too young or too old. God doesn't say those things about us though! Even if those are things you do think about yourself, they don't disqualify you from being used by God in the slightest. What does 'ministering' look like for you today? Maybe it's preaching to thousands, maybe it's picking your kids up from school. Whatever you're called to today, do it as if unto the Lord. He is with you.

So, Samuel is doing what he can, where he can and is shadowing Eli in everything. While Samuel's doing this, Eli's own sons who 'didn't know the Lord' are actually hindering worship and making a mockery of the whole system of sacrifices. Eli is understandably frustrated, but supports his sons nonetheless. The consequences of this are pretty messy and we read about them as we get into chapter three...

God begins to call Samuel, yet Samuel doesn't realise that it's actually God.

"Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down." (1 Samuel 3:4)

The Lord is calling Samuel, but because Samuel's never heard this before, he thinks it must be Eli. God calls on Samuel three times before Eli recognises that it must be God. In the midst of all of this though, verse seven says something very interesting...

"Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him."

Samuel, the 'boy' who has been ministering under the guidance of Eli 'did not yet know the Lord.' This really is remarkable. Of course, Samuel knew all about the Lord and was doing all that he could for him in a sense. But this was all from a place of service and submission under Eli. Samuel didn't sit back and say 'until I get the exact direction of what I'm supposed to do for God, I'm not doing anything'. He just did what was in front of him. In addition to this, I find it interesting that the fullness of God wasn't yet known by Samuel. Do we know God intimately? Do we know His voice when He calls? Or would we prefer a surface level relationship with the Lord? Don't be afraid to go deeper. He can speak to you if you can hear His voice.

I just love that at this point, God was ready to speak to Samuel *Himself*. Sometimes we can be so used to going to our mentors, our pastors, our friends etc, like Samuel was with Eli. **This time, God was ready to cut out the middle man!** Equally important though - Samuel was ready to listen and receive what God had to say.

"And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." (1 Samuel 3:10)

Sadly for Eli, what God had to say to Samuel was not good news. Because Eli hadn't done anything to prevent his sons from blaspheming God, God had no choice but to punish his household. This must have been awful for Eli's young apprentice to hear. Imagine that being the first thing God communicates! Samuel, reflects on this overnight and then, naturally, Eli wants to know what was said. As difficult as it must have been for Samuel, he relays the message, we read in verse eighteen that Eli humbly accepts it.

"And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground." (1 Samuel 3:19)

All that Samuel spoke was fulfilled. How amazing! Starting off as a boy who barely knew what he was doing and then becoming a man who spoke the word of the Lord powerfully - Samuel's life is certainly an example. An example of how God can use whoever He wills - especially a willing heart. The start of chapter 4, verse 1 is quite special...

"And the word of Samuel came to all Israel..."

All Israel! Don't despise humble beginnings, like Samuel, you never know where you'll end up eventually...

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

1 Samuel 3 - 4:1



Lesson Twenty-Two: **Heart** - Person: **David**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Man might look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. Don't hold yourself to the standards of the world, only to God's!
2. God often prepares us for the big things while we're in obscurity. David tending his sheep built his character.
3. No one is totally blameless before God as all have sinned. That doesn't disqualify you from being used by Him.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How often do you disqualify yourself from being able to be used by God? Why?

MAIN COURSE

The greatest king of Israel, an ancestor of Jesus Christ and a man described by God as being 'after his own heart' certainly has some credentials. This was David.

"And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.'" (Acts 13:22)

It's amazing to read of yet another ordinary human being described in such ways by a holy and perfect God. I hope that, in studying these lessons, you're recognising that the 'greats' we so often speak of found in the precious word of God, were just normal human beings like us. David was no exception. His life is spoken of throughout scripture and most notably from 1 Samuel 16 - 1 Kings 2. Because there's so much to say about him, I'm only going to pick up on one or two key things here. You can read them in the 'snack' section too.

Let's first look at how David was called upon by God. We need to go back to 1 Samuel (where we've been for the past couple of lessons) and this time, chapter 16. Samuel has been called to the 'house of Jesse' to seek a replacement for Saul, who has been disqualified as king. When Saul arrives, he immediately stumbles upon 'Eliab'. Eliab was the eldest of Jesse's sons. Samuel definitely thought he was onto a winner here - Eliab certainly looked the part. But the Lord had other ideas.

"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.'" (1 Samuel 16:7)

It's important to recognise here that appearances can be deceiving. We're taught from an early age not to 'judge a book by its cover' but yet that's so often what we do with people, isn't it? Those with the perfect 'Pinterest' life or the immaculate Instagram feed are the ones we're interested in. Certainly not the guy looking after sheep in a field somewhere, right?

Wrong!

After exhausting all of the options with regards to Jesse's older sons, Samuel knew that he still hadn't found 'the one'.

"Then Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.'" And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.'" (1 Samuel 16:11)

Samuel is sure that this can't be it. However, Jesse places David so low down on his list, that he didn't even see it worthwhile bringing him out from the field. Notice, though, what Samuel says in response to Jesse's excuse. **Please remember that if God wants to appoint you to a certain position, nothing and nobody can hold you back or stand in your way.** There were times when I would stand in front of the 8 students I taught whilst leading an alternative education provision in North London and I would think 'what on earth am I doing here!?' We taught in another building away from the school, in a church basement. The senior leaders of the school barely came over. My colleagues and I certainly felt very isolated at times. It's in those moments that we are tempted to ask 'why?' isn't it? **Just remember, you never know what's around the corner - your job is to be faithful with your now.** David was a faithful shepherd. He had simply been doing his job, and then this happened...

"Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah." (1 Samuel 16:13)

Similar to the call of the disciples who had once been fishermen before becoming 'fishers of men', this call on David's life meant that he would no longer shepherd sheep. He would shepherd Israel! **I have no doubt that David was being prepared for this moment long before it happened. What do you feel that God could currently be preparing you for?**

Now, it would be easy to paint this as the overall picture of David's life and to some extent, it was. David was indeed a man after God's heart after all. However, just like any human being in the face of a holy and perfect God, David made mistakes.

Most of us are likely to be familiar with the story, but I will summarise as we close here... 2 Samuel 11 paints a very different picture of this king. David is, of course, quite comfortable in his role now. So much so, that he stays in Jerusalem while all the other men go out to fight. In the midst of this, he notices a beautiful woman named Bathsheba sunbathing on the roof. David lets lust get the better of him and ends up sleeping with her. To make matters worse, she is the wife of one of his own soldiers, Uriah. In a completely reactionary attempt to cover his tracks, David commissions to have Uriah killed. Committing adultery, arranging a murder plus plenty more aside is certainly not a track record to boast about.

One thing we can learn from this area of David's life, though, is that he was quick to repent. He didn't want to stay in his sin - he genuinely wanted to follow Jesus. This is something we must daily remind ourselves of. **God is looking for our hearts before him in the face of mistakes. Do we feel as though we're not worthy? Gone too far? God's grace is sufficient.**

The 'dessert' section of this message is Psalm 51. It's a beautiful Psalm, penned by David after his transgression with Bathsheba. What do you want to bring before God today? Areas you know might not go down too well with God. Well, let's use the words of Psalm 51 to help our prayers today. **In closing - remember that even when everyone else is looking for what looks best, God is looking at hearts. He can see yours even if you're in the middle of nowhere. Just because you're 'called', it doesn't mean you're without fault. But don't let those faults keep you away for long - God accepts genuine repentance and authenticity.**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Psalm 51



Lesson Twenty-Three: Wisdom & Worship - People: Simeon & Anna

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Religion is all very well, but to be a true follower of Jesus, we must have a relationship with God. This doesn't happen simply by coming to church. But rather, through the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. God is faithful to keep His promises He's made you, just as He was with Simeon's.
3. Like Anna, we should be worshipful before God in anticipation of Him and we must be sure to spread the word!

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

What promises of God are you eagerly and prayerfully anticipating that this time in your life will reveal?

MAIN COURSE

The beginning of the book of Luke is understandably packed with the news that our saviour, Jesus Christ has been born. In hearing of some of the greatest news of all time, it would be easy to overlook two elderly people who have something to say about it all, along with the rest of the world. But their words are documented here in scripture. In this message, we will look at the wise and worshipful words of Simeon and Anna.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him." (Luke 2:25)

We're first introduced to Simeon. His presence in the temple was one way it might have been known he was devout, but I think that what is more telling is the fact that 'the Holy Spirit was upon him.' What I find amazing is that this man, although advanced in years and probably used to the Jewish tradition of visiting the temple, had a genuine relationship with God. He was led by the Holy Spirit. **This is certainly something we can learn from. Are we more used to our church leaders/church family and our church buildings than we are the leading of the Lord through the Holy Spirit?** Simeon didn't reject going to the temple altogether of course, and the same should be the case for us. We go to church to worship God in fellowship and unity with our brothers and sisters. But what about our daily relationship with God once Sunday's over. Simeon's life reminds me of just how important that is.

"And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." (Luke 2:26)

I love this verse. It indicates to me, the closeness of Simeon's walk with God. It links back to the previous verse as well. In verse 25 it says that Simeon was 'waiting for the consolation of Israel'. Another word for consolation here could be 'comfort'. Simeon must have been waiting for this comfort with some level of confidence... We read in verse 26 that God had promised him that he would 'not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.' How incredible. **What has God promised you? What are you waiting on Him to come through for? Be encouraged by Simeon's story here. God came through on His promises. He can come through for yours- don't doubt that.**

Let's read the short prayer that Simeon prays once he finally sees Jesus:

*"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel."* (Luke 2:29-32)

There are many wonderful things about this prayer. The first is that Simeon's concern was clearly not only for himself. He was now able to depart 'in peace'. The comfort he longed for, for the sake of his people, had now arrived. He could rest safely in that knowledge now. More than this though, this is also one of the first indications that Jesus was not for the Jews only, but for the gentiles. This is a truth which reaches as far as you and I.

Before we no longer hear anymore of Simeon, we read that he rejoices and celebrates, but also that he has to deliver some harsh truth to Mary. Simeon's confidence in God no doubt led him to understand that although there was certainly triumph in the birth of Jesus, there would, of course, be tragedy.

"And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:34-35)

This final prophecy of Simeon's reveals the fall of those who will not turn and follow Christ alongside the joy which will be had by those who are found in Him. As well as this, it also tells of Jesus' crucifixion and the distress that Mary will experience seeing her son go through that.

Simeon's devout and wisdom-filled walk with the Lord, led to tremendous blessing, namely, seeing Jesus face to face.

And lastly, we read of a prophetess named Anna. Anna was an eighty four year old widow who 'did not depart from the temple'. As with Simeon, we quickly recognise here that the ritualistic acts which could be performed at the temple, were not the foundations of Anna's faith.

"and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem." (Luke 2:37-38)

Anna lived a prayer filled life of worship and fasting. It doesn't document here that, as with Simeon, she was waiting for the coming of Jesus as such. **Anna was faithfully worshipping and praising God. It just so happened that Jesus was brought to the temple- much to Anna's delight.** She would have, undoubtedly, known of Jesus. She was a prophetess herself, and the Holy Spirit had spoken through many of the prophets before her of Jesus Christ.

All first born boys of a certain age were brought to the temple after a certain period of time for purification and sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24) and so seeing Jesus wouldn't have been that out of the ordinary for some of the temple goers who were none the wiser. Not so for Anna. To actually *see Jesus* face to face must have been an incredible experience for her. So incredible that she couldn't keep it to herself. **Anna knew who Jesus was!** And so, as we read in verse 38, after giving thanks and praise to God, Anna starts to tell those in temple who this baby *really* is. She speaks to all who are there of the fact that, the redemption they are all so eagerly waiting for has come. Hallelujah!

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Luke 2:22 - 40



Lesson Twenty-Four: Leadership - Person: Deborah

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Being a leader doesn't mean taking the glory! Deborah was adamant that Barak played a significant role in their victory.
2. When you lead well, you are respected and honoured.
3. Leadership means being willing to tread where you are asking others to follow.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

What does good leadership look like to you?

MAIN COURSE

We've already looked at Gideon, one of the judges of Israel. In this message, we're going to look at another of these judges- a woman named Deborah. Deborah's story is recounted in the book of Judges, chapter 4. It states in verse 5 of the passage that people used to come up to her for judgement. Verse 5 indicates where I really want to start her story from.

"She sent and summoned Barak the son of Abinoam from Kedesh-naphtali and said to him, "Has not the LORD, the God of Israel, commanded you, 'Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor, taking 10,000 from the people of Naphtali and the people of Zebulun.'" (Judges 4:6)

Now Deborah is clearly leading here. She's a prophetess and a judge. However, that doesn't mean that it's up to her to involve herself in everything and do everything. In fact, there are probably some things, which she feels other people would do a better job at. This was no exception. Deborah summons Barak and reminds him of a task which, she believes God has commissioned him for.

*"And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops, **and I will give him into your hand**?" (Judges 4:7)*

Now, this is still God talking, as per the previous verse. But what's interesting here is that Deborah is clear on what God has said to Barak *'and I will give him into your hand'*. God has promised the victory here. If Deborah was one for glory hunting and for her name to be lifted above all others, she could have thought about ways in which she might have had this victory for herself. But she doesn't. Deborah is clear that this battle is Barak's. **When you feel that God has planted an idea in your heart or mind for HIS glory, are you too precious with it? Do you feel that it must be you who fulfils this or else? Yes, God gives us all individual hopes and dreams, but let's remember, the dreams are His. Perhaps there are others who can partner with you in seeing what God's given you come to fruition? Don't immediately presume it all falls to you.**

So, let's check out Barak's response...

"Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." (Judges 4:8)

There's lots of ideas centred on this verse. Some say that Barak was a wimp and it was pathetic that he would want a woman to go to battle with him. Others say that he was shying away from his true responsibility, or perhaps that he was afraid. But one thing which absolutely cannot be overlooked, is that Barak really respected Deborah. He wanted her to be a part of whatever it was that God was calling him to. **Many people speak about what this verse says of Barak's character, however they often overlook what it says about Deborah's. She was clearly a leader who was respected highly. It was no small thing for Barak to ask a woman for help! But he didn't do it for no reason. He knew that having her with him would be of huge value.**

"And she said, "I will surely go with you. Nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh." (Judges 4:9)

The last point I want to draw on here is Deborah's willingness to go with Barak. **Sometimes as leaders, we can delegate those we are leading to do things that we would never want to do ourselves!** Remember, in verse 5 it says that Deborah used to 'sit under the palm'. Sounds quite nice doesn't it! If Deborah was more interested in doing what was comfortable (staying under that palm!) she could have. She was the leader. However, she says she'll go, without hesitation. **Whether it's the menial tasks**

we'd prefer to shove to the side or the tasks that seem way too daunting for us to get to grips with, it could be so easy to pass responsibility on. But Deborah's example of being willing to get stuck in is certainly something we can learn from.

In the rest of the verse, Deborah says that the 'Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman'. Spoiler alert- the woman she's talking about isn't her! You'll have to read the dessert section of today's passage to find out what happens there... Chapter five is a victory song between Barak and Deborah. Just as they were together in the process and the planning, they shared together in the victory. Though the battle was drawn attention to and commissioned by Deborah, it was acted upon by Barak. So they shared in the victory and there was no hint from Deborah that this was all down to her. Definitely leadership traits we can learn from.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Judges 4 - 5



Lesson Twenty-Five: **Betrayal** - Person: **Judas**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. It's so important for us to keep in step with Jesus. Even when we think ourselves to be close, we may well be further from Him than we realise.
2. Following Jesus should never be rooted in a mentality which asks 'what can you give me?'
3. As Judas did, we will always regret betraying Jesus. We don't have to make that mistake.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

What do we practically do to ensure our *hearts* are close to God, as well as our words and deeds?

MAIN COURSE

Judas is a name which most of us are no doubt familiar with. The story of his betrayal is no longer reserved for the Bible alone, but in fact, continues to be referred to in a variety of ways, even to this day.

"Then one of the twelve, whose name was Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I deliver him over to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he sought an opportunity to betray him." (Matthew 26:14-16)

Judas was one of the twelve. This is the first point and perhaps one of the most striking. The man who betrayed Jesus was not a stranger who watched Him from afar. This was not a jealous man from a rival camp who wanted Jesus to 'get what was coming to him'. Judas was actually one of his twelve disciples. As I began to think about this, I was drawn more and more to think about what this must have meant for Jesus. Jesus loved Judas. He'd been walking with him for the best part of three years. Along with the other disciples, Judas had shared a close and intimate relationship with Jesus. One of the most sobering thoughts though, is that before this conversation has even been had with the chief priests, Judas was no doubt walking with Jesus. Perhaps even hours before. But this must have been in the physical sense only. **Sadly, we can so often be going through the motions of church etc. and not realise how far we've actually strayed from God! Walking with Him isn't as much an outward expression of our faith as it is an inward heart transformation. Let's ensure our hearts are close to His, even when it's tough!**

Judas' motivations also come up in the passage listed above. 'What will you give me?' Judas wasn't too concerned about the welfare of his friend. He was more bothered about what he could get out of betraying Him. A complete 'what's in it for me' mentality. **Jesus isn't simply a 'good idea' or 'nice to try when there's nothing else on'. He is SO MUCH MORE - Salvation, love, joy, hope, peace - Jesus is everything.** Judas didn't see it like that. He seemed to be following Jesus until something better came along. Something better like money. **This is another reason for us to check our hearts before the Lord. What are we treasuring? Is He above all else or simply a 'gap filler'?**

"Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him." (Matthew 26:48-50)

Judas' betrayal was carried out in one of the most underhanded ways possible. He wasn't bold enough to speak outright to Jesus about what he'd done. He even masked his falsehood in a seemingly affectionate kiss and greeting. Of course, Jesus knows what's about to happen and spends no real time trying to change Judas' mind. Instead, He says those interesting words we find in the verse above. **We cannot hide from God. He knows our hearts and our minds and He knew what Judas had come to do without anything being said.** But graciously, Jesus responds in a way, which must have really got to Judas. Jesus calls him 'friend'. This just shouts of God's grace. That, even in the midst of being betrayed by one of His closest companions, Jesus would turn and call Judas 'friend.'

"Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." (Matthew 27:3-4)

Judas changed his mind. If there were ever a poignant statement to reflect on in the life of Judas, this would be it. Three years of friendship, discipleship, teaching and learning - all to be forgotten about and trodden underfoot. Three years spent recognising that this was indeed the Messiah who was promised. Now, all that was left to show for it was a bag of coins. **Judas realised it wasn't worth it and he changed his mind.** This makes me think about the times in my life where I have forsaken Jesus - decided that something which completely goes against His will is more appealing. All of that to be left with nothing. Yet, Jesus

promises everything. Judas recognised this all too late. He'd sent a sinless Saviour to die. Inevitably it was destined to happen for Jesus. But what of Judas? If you don't know of his sad and tragic end, you can read it in the dessert section. Let Judas' story serve as a reminder that instant gratification in the place of the long term love of Jesus will never be more satisfying. We need not change our minds.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Matthew 26:14 - 27:10



Lesson Twenty-Six: **Passion** - Person: **Peter**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Don't ignore the storms which crop up in your life from time to time. Pay attention at what they might be trying to teach you.
2. Like Peter, we must listen for Jesus' voice. Once we hear it, let's learn to get out of our comfortable 'boats' and step into the unknown.
3. Our words carry weight. Let's ensure we do not allow our mouths to take us where our actions cannot keep us.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

What are the positive and negative aspects to having an 'all or nothing' attitude, do you think?

MAIN COURSE

"See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" (Matthew 19:27)

The words above belong to Peter. They sound like his voice. Enthusiasm, passion and drive marked his life. Not in an exaggerated either. Peter didn't appear to overstretch statements to make a point, he seemed to actually believe in what he was either doing or saying and therefore had no problem in acting upon it. Even as we look at how Peter was called, we see that strand of zeal and determination in Peter before he even knows what he's letting himself in for.

"While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him." (Matthew 4:18-20)

No questions. No confusion. Peter left the life he'd led for years in an instant because he knew that following Jesus was what he was born for. **Have you ever had one of those moments with God? One of those moments where, in an instant, everything changed.**

Peter's life story is littered throughout the Gospels too many times to mention. He walked so closely with Jesus. So in this lesson, I will just take us through one or two key moments I think we can all learn from. I've listed where you can read further in the 'dessert' section below.

First, let's look at the story of Peter walking on the water. Jesus needed some time alone with His Father and had therefore sent the disciples ahead of him on a boat in the midst of a storm. I think about this sometimes. I think Jesus definitely wanted some time with the Father, but I also think He may have wanted to see how the disciples would cope. The passage in Matthew 14 mentions that Jesus begins to approach the boat in the 'fourth watch' of the night. This was likely to be between 3 and 6am! Which means that the disciples had already been braving the storm for nine hours at this point. **Don't doubt that your 'storms' are there to teach you something. Even when it seems as though all hope is lost and God's somehow no longer in the picture, look out for what He might be teaching you and hang in there.** Ever loving Jesus doesn't leave the disciples in the wind and waves of course. He begins to walk towards them.

The story states that the disciples were 'terrified'. That they believed that Jesus was a ghost!

"But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid. And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. (Matthew 14:27-29)

I love this portion of scripture so much. Firstly, don't we just see the heart of Jesus? It says that as soon as He saw how terrified the disciples were, He 'immediately' spoke to them. Next, I love the fact that Peter knew it was His Lord. Jesus didn't say 'guys, it's me, Jesus.' He just said 'It is I'. That was enough for Peter. Enough for him to cry out 'Lord'. Now, we know that Peter steps out and that he then sees the waves and begins to sink... That's the part of the story we often remember. But a part often overlooked is that Peter actually gets out of the boat instantly at the call of Jesus. **Is God calling us to things even now, which we're too scared to do anything about? Let's live a little more like Peter did and dare to get out of our comfortable 'boats'. Let's stare into the face of Jesus and put one foot in front of the other. Let's ignore the storms, which can sometimes surround us.**

We find as we walk through scripture, that Peter is often the first to speak. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. When Jesus asks his disciples who they say that He is, for example, (Matthew 16) Peter is the first to say "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." He was never afraid of speaking his mind and making his opinions known.

There were one or two occasions where he perhaps spoke too soon though. In Matthew 26, the night Jesus is about to be taken up to be crucified, He starts speaking to His disciples. He declares that they will 'fall away' as He is taken. It doesn't appear as though there is much talking at this rather sombre point. Expect for some words on the matter from Peter, of course...

"Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" And all the disciples said the same." (Matthew 26:33-35)

Now, this is obviously a highly emotional moment and I am sure that none of the disciples knew quite what to do or what to say. However, Peter's passion, hurt and sorrow leads him to declare that he will never fall away from Jesus, that he will never deny Him even unto death. Some rather bold words. What I find interesting though, is that Peter must have felt he had something on the others at the point. He said 'though they all fall away because of you'. Quite a fleeting statement. **We must make sure that in our zeal and passion for the things of the Lord, we are not doing a disservice to our brothers and sisters by diminishing their faith and deeds.** Some of the other disciples may have felt that they weren't able to say what Peter did with such conviction, but in the end, they were swayed by him. ("And all the disciples said the same.") Interestingly, it's Peter's denial which is documented later on, just as Jesus predicted and not the denial of the other disciples. Yet Peter was the one who said he'd never do it. Now, of course, Jesus forgave Peter. But there's a lesson to be learned here. **Our words carry weight. Peter underestimated the test of faith he was soon to face and let his emotions lead him to speak out of turn.** Let us ensure that we prayerfully consider what to say and when to say it. Let us ensure that we bring our brothers and sisters up in faith rather than cutting them down with our words. Let us ensure we do not allow our mouths to take us where our actions cannot keep us.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Matthew 14:22 - 33 & Matthew 26:30 - 75



Lesson Twenty-Seven: Seeking - Person: Zacchaeus

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. When things get in the way of you trying to meet with Jesus (and they will, either physically or mentally) don't allow the barrier to become a blockage.
2. Our attitude in accepting Jesus' call is so important. When we're spoken to by God, do we, like Zacchaeus did, accept joyfully?
3. True encounters with Jesus should genuinely change us. His power is transformational!

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

What sort of things get in the way for you on a daily basis when you're trying to meet with Jesus?

MAIN COURSE

Zacchaeus was a rich tax collector. Sadly, he wasn't very well respected or even liked. He certainly wouldn't have been at the top of the list of those who were lining up to meet Jesus, we wouldn't think. Yet that's exactly where Zacchaeus was. The Word says, in fact, that he was seeking Jesus. He had all of the wealth and possessions one could ask for but yet he was dissatisfied and seeking. In his dissatisfaction, something must have been telling him that all that he had, as vast as it was, wasn't enough. Scripture actually states that Zacchaeus was 'seeking to see who Jesus was'. **Remember, we can hear about everything there is to know about Jesus and still never actually know Him.** Zacchaeus' seeking wasn't half hearted either. The Bible says that he was a man who was 'small in stature'. This didn't stop him though. Zacchaeus literally ran ahead of all the crowds and climbed a tree so that he could see Jesus. **When we're faced with barriers, do we allow them to become blockages?** Zacchaeus' barrier was his height. But where others might have seen that to be a problem, he found a solution. Imagine if he'd have thought 'what's the point?' He'd never have met Jesus. Don't allow anything to prevent you from meeting with Jesus today. Whether it's for the first time or the ninety first. Look beyond the barriers.

So, Zacchaeus has found who he was seeking. He's climbed a tree and has a pretty great view. He's still relatively far off though. But before we have a moment to decipher whether or not there's still a part of him who's reluctant to meet Jesus, this happens...

"And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully." (Luke 19:5-6)

Instantly, these verses tell me that Jesus was well aware of Zacchaeus' seeking. He was now ready to reveal Himself to Zacchaeus in a real and tangible way. Jesus calls him by name. But rather than being surprised by this, Zacchaeus' reply seems just as hurried and excited as the verses he started with. Just as quickly as he climbed up the tree, he climbs down again when called upon by Jesus. Not only does he hurry, he receives Jesus *joyfully*. This is exactly what he'd been waiting for. **When Jesus calls us, are we quick to respond? Or do we find ourselves making excuses as to why now is not quite the right time? More than this, are we actually eagerly anticipating that He wants to meet with us? Have we 'positioned' ourselves correctly to encounter the living God?**

Alongside all this, Zacchaeus also accepts his newest dinner guest with joy. **Is the voice of Jesus a welcome one to you or do we attach His voice to a string of unfortunate requests and commands and therefore run in the opposite direction? Remember, Jesus desires to work all things together for His glory and your GOOD. Don't run away from all He has for you.**

My last point focuses on the impact, which meeting with Jesus had on Zacchaeus.

"And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." (Luke 19:8)

Now, we don't know exactly what had happened behind closed doors, we don't know the words which were exchanged or the tears that were shed but we do hear this confession of repentance from Zacchaeus. Perhaps no words were exchanged. Maybe it was being in the very presence of God which transformed Zacchaeus' heart and mind, but one thing is for certain, he didn't leave Jesus in the same way he came to Him. **When we meet with Jesus in prayer, in worship, in study - are we ending our time with Him in the same way in which we start? Is there any sense that Jesus can, will and perhaps even has changed things for us? Walk into today in the security you have in His everlasting arms and have faith to believe that He can change any situation - nothing is off limits.**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Luke 19: 1 - 10



Lesson Twenty-Eight: **Distraction** - Person: **Mary and Martha**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. It's more important to actually meet with Jesus than it is to prepare to meet with Him.
2. Sometimes, even our 'works for God' can distract us from what's really important.
3. Just because our concern lies in one area, it doesn't mean everyone else's will... or should!

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

What elements of our 'action' for God can sometimes prove to actually be a distraction?

MAIN COURSE

Mary and Martha were sisters. They both loved the Lord and longed to serve Him. It must have been very exciting for them to both to hear that Jesus was passing through their village. The passage we're studying in this message (all of which you can find in the 'dessert' section) indicates that Martha is the one who opens the door to greet Jesus.

"And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." (Luke 10:39-40)

Martha's sister, Mary, didn't appear to be quite as concerned with the preparations for Jesus as Martha was. She didn't even open the door. But as soon as she saw Jesus, she wasn't as bothered about the state of the house or the food as she was with *Jesus Himself*. Martha, however, doesn't take too kindly to this and believed that Jesus (their highly esteemed guest!) should be having a go at Mary for... worshipping Him!? *"Do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."* Jesus wasn't annoyed with Martha for being hospitable, not at all. But equally, He wasn't about to tell Mary to get up and start the washing up! **There might be things which you see as huge priorities in life and you may sometimes find that others don't agree. It's important to note that, however frustrating, that doesn't necessarily mean you're right.**

"But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things..." (Luke 10:41)

So often we can be focussed on the wrong priorities, can't we? The passage makes it clear that Martha was actually *distracted* by the service she was giving. How often are we 'working for God' and, in doing so, forgetting to actually acknowledge the God we're meant to be working for? Martha was 'anxious and worried' about how best to prepare for Jesus. So much so, that she'd almost overlooked the fact that Jesus Himself was actually in their midst now. **She'd got so caught up in the preparation, that she'd forgotten the point!**

In studying this passage again, I was reminded of the lyrics to a song by Audrey Assad called 'Lament'.

"I'm Mary and I'm Martha all at the same time;
I'm sitting at His feet and yet I'm dying to be recognised.
I am a picture of contentment and I'm dissatisfied.
Why is it easy to work and hard to rest sometimes?"

Is that something which is true for you? **Do you, (like me sometimes) find it easier to work for God than you do to sit at His feet?** I really resonate with these lyrics. That notion that all we want to do is to sit at Jesus' feet and worship Him, spend some time in prayer and worship etc.... But let me just reply to that email, let me just make that call. Although they are not bad things, they are distractions. Sometimes people's seeming non-compliance with the very thing you allowed yourself to get distracted by can leave us getting frustrated. Frustrated that, things I might think are a priority might not be for everyone else. It's so easy to think like this. To adopt a 'poor me' attitude like Martha may have done. I have certainly been guilty of that. But, what does Jesus say on the matter?

"...but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:42)

Today's passage ends with Jesus commending Mary. The very opposite thing Martha wanted Him to do. Some translations render what Jesus says as 'Mary has chosen what is better'. Notice that He doesn't condemn Martha - it's not that she's doing

anything wrong. She just seemed to have missed the point. Distracted by her own priorities it seemed that Martha actually missed Jesus! We mustn't feel guilty about doing things we believe God has laid on our hearts to do. But equally, we mustn't feel as though everyone who doesn't join us has got it wrong. What if, this time, as with Martha, we have?

Jesus longs for us to sit at His feet. The Father loves it when His children lean on His everlasting arms. Let us not forget that. In the passage, Jesus says of Mary's actions, they 'will not be taken away from her'. He saw eternal value in Mary's devotion unto Him and wasn't going to stop that for works. Let's ensure that each of us carve out some time today to sit at the Lord's feet. He's waiting to meet you there.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Luke 10:38 - 42



Lesson Twenty-Nine: **Stand** - Person: **Stephen**

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Never doubt the character and gifts required by God to carry out what seems to be 'menial' tasks. Nothing in His eyes is overlooked.
2. As Stephen did, we should take every opportunity we are able to let our faith in God bear fruit.
3. Being willing to stand for what we believe in can involve tremendous risk.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

How often have you needed to make a stand for believing in Jesus?

MAIN COURSE

It's interesting to note that we are first introduced to the very first martyr of the Christian faith during a dispute over food! The start of Acts, chapter 6 (all of which you can read in the dessert section), documents a dispute arising between the 'Hellenists' (Greek speaking Jews) and the Hebrews. The Hellenist widows didn't appear to be getting any food when it was distributed daily. The twelve disciples therefore, at this point, need to make some important decisions. Of course it's not right for the Hebrew widows to not be receiving food, yet the disciples believe that they are called to another area of ministry. They therefore have to find someone suitable, who would be able to take on this task.

"Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty." (Acts 6:3)

The other disciples were asked to choose seven men to oversee this task. We'd be tempted to think at this point that 'it's only waiting on tables, couldn't they have just got any one?' This was not the case. We clearly see the qualifications required above.

"And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch." (Acts 6:5)

Stephen fitted the bill and was chosen for the task. Never rank tasks in what you deem to be 'order of importance' before God. Something which you may see as insignificant and irrelevant may actually be of huge importance before God and He may well be looking at your character in those moments just as much as He may be when appointing a pastor.

And so, what of this Spirit-filled man, Stephen? Scripture suggests that, with this new system in place, things seemed to be going well.

"And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7)

I think it's important to note here, that when everyone was operating in the correct roles for which they were appointed, the Kingdom of God grew! **Never underestimate the part you play even if it seems smaller than others. Your 'small' contribution may well be making all the difference.**

So, Stephen is doing his job. But he also sees it as an opportunity to allow the Holy Spirit to move through him as well. *"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8)* Not everyone liked this, though, and so more disputes arose. The Word then goes on to say that the men *'could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking' (vs 10)* and so inevitably, they start making up lies surrounding him in order to get rid of him.

Stephen is eventually brought before the council and so begins the speech, which, essentially leads to his death. It all begins with a question. In reference to the rumours and lies being spread about Stephen, the high priest asks- "Are these things so?" I wonder what we would do at this point. **When faced with the opportunity to defend our faith boldly, would we rise to it?**

You can read of Stephen's bold and eloquent speech in Acts, chapter 7. He goes through a fast paced history of the Old Testament. But he doesn't stop there! He then attributes the same sins of those who had gone before, to the very same men in front of him. Essentially, that they had rejected God too. Naturally, the chief priests do not take kindly to this accusation. The Word says they were 'enraged' in fact. And so, how does Stephen respond?

"But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55)

"And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:59-60)

Stephen was falsely judged, misunderstood and eventually stoned to death for his confession of faith. What risks are we willing to go to with ours? What I love about Stephen is that, even unto death, he kept his eyes on Jesus. Even unto death, he prayed for his enemies. Even unto death, He kept the faith. What a stand and what an example for us all.

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

Acts 6 - 7



Lesson Thirty: Love - Person: John

SNACK

No time for a full course right now? Take the main points from today's reflection straight into your day and come back for the rest later.

1. Intimacy with Jesus means a certainty of who and Whose we are.
2. When we know just how deeply we are loved by God, we will be compelled to love others.
3. Acknowledging the deep love of God for us changes His commands from dread to delight.

APPETISER

Something to chew on as you prepare for your main course.

Take some time today to reflect on what it means to you to know that you are truly loved by a Holy and Perfect Father God.

MAIN COURSE

John. A disciple, a fisherman and the author of 5 books of the New Testament. John certainly knew a thing or two about love. His life is documented throughout the Gospels as well as Acts and Revelation and so I won't be able to go in depth here. However, I do want to take some truths we can learn from John into the rest of our day and beyond.

"Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining." (1 John 2:7-8)

The call to love God and to love others hasn't changed. When God commanded Moses to write that instruction in stone, He meant for that love to run through our veins to the very end of the age. John makes it clear here that, although the command isn't new, Jesus has certainly added a new dimension to it (John 13:34) Jesus is a true representation and fulfilment of that love in His death and resurrection.

If there was anyone who knew anything about the intimate love of Jesus, it was John. One of the 'inner three' disciples, along with James and Peter, John was closely walking with Jesus all the while He walked the earth. ("And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James." Mark 5:37)

John described himself six times throughout his Gospel, as, 'the disciple who Jesus loved'. That might sound pretty arrogant. However, it was true. Some scholars say it was almost as if John and Jesus were best friends. As Jesus was being led to be crucified, for example, He entrusts the care of his weeping mother to John. (John 19:26-27).

So, what did the close walk with Jesus mean for John? **Intimacy with Jesus means a certainty of who and Whose we are.** There was no doubt in John's mind that he was loved by an everlasting Lord. That meant there was never a hint of insecurity about him- if anything, he was sometimes known for being a little on the arrogant and outspoken side. This is my prayer for us as disciples in the 21st century. That, as we walk intimately with Jesus, our identity in Him will grow increasingly every single day. We will walk fearlessly because we know that His PERFECT LOVE has cast fear out of our hearts, minds and lives. (1 John 4:18)

"Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness." (1 John 2:9)

John recognised that truly loving God meant that loving the people around him wasn't optional. The same goes for us. We can't profess to be walking intimately with God whilst holding grudges. That doesn't mean it's easy, but God's love has the power to drive us to forgiveness, even when we feel that people don't deserve it. Like John did, we must daily recognise that, in all honesty, our sin deserves an eternal punishment... but Jesus has already paid the price in full. When we realise our forgiveness on a level like that, forgiveness for other people becomes second nature.

So, where does this all leave us? Loved by God and loving others. Now what? Jesus' great commission documented in Matthew 28 is a good place to start. We're told to 'make disciples'... More followers of Jesus. Remember, we are whole in our identity because of Him and we are loving those we come into contact with, whether or not they treat us well. Who wouldn't want to live in that kind of freedom? So, tell people! That's what Jesus was talking about. Now, that might still sound quite difficult. John puts it like this...

"For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:3-5)

Now, God doesn't expect that we 'pay Him back' for the lavish love He has bestowed upon us. However, His love is compelling enough for that to kind of make sense, right? **Because of His amazing love, we truly want to do what He says.** And the cycle continues because, essentially, He wants us to love Him (by keeping His commandments) and love others (by making sure they know about Jesus!) This shouldn't be a chore. **Remember the lavish love Jesus has bestowed upon you today and beyond, and walk in all that it means!**

DESSERT

Still hungry? Tuck into the scriptures below to finish today's meal.

1 John: 1 - 5

