

And the Spirit of God Was Hovering over the Waters

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Genesis 1:1-2

The Scriptures are known to be full of plain assertions and profound mysteries. Sometimes, both can be found together. And this is how the Bible begins.

Here we have four statements concerning the origin of things. The first is straightforward and unpretentious: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* This assertion agrees with what is inbred in the constitution of the universe and cannot truly be denied by reason of misunderstanding or intellectual argument. As someone once explained the truth of the “big bang theory,” “God spoke—and bang, it happened.”

The next two statements are more mysterious: *Now the earth was formless and empty and, darkness was over the surface of the deep.* What was

Where is the Spirit of God hovering at this moment?

the primordial state of this place we call earth? Formless. Empty. Non-existent it seems. There was no light. But what about “the surface of the deep?” How was it that there was water before creation? These are age-old mysteries that continue to captivate scientist and theologian alike.

But it is the fourth and last statement that intrigues me the most: *And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.* Here is a depiction of the Spirit of God in purposeful, almost intense, anticipation. He is known to be hovering—or brooding—over the *face of the deep*. He is just waiting, as it were, for the Word of God to come forth so that he can move from his position of readiness to bring about the spoken command. Here we see a vivid picture of the Spirit of the Living God as the ready and able agent of the will of God. It seems to be his nature to be poised in anticipation of creative action. If this is the nature of the Spirit of God in the “beginning,” we can expect his creative energies to manifest in and through us as he broods over the waters of our lives. He is no different now than he was then. He has not retired from acting upon his nature.

Where is the Spirit of God hovering at this moment? What is he waiting to bring to pass? What will it take for him to be released for new and life-giving acts of creation? Let the word of the God of Genesis be spoken, again. Let the Spirit of God, who hovers over the waters of your life, be engaged in creation, again.

You Must Master It

Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” -Genesis 4:6-7

In Genesis Chapter 3 sin came into the world. In Genesis Chapter 4 God warns the firstborn of Adam and Eve about its nature. And ever since, every human being ever born, including the sinless Lord Jesus, has had to contend with this stalking prowler known as sin. And ever since, only Jesus has been completely victorious contending with the world, the flesh and the devil.

Until Jesus' victory over sin by 1) His own sinless life, 2) Bearing the penalty of every sinner by His death on the cross and 3) His resurrection from the dead, our struggle to master sin was a losing battle. But for those who by faith have the Christ living in them, the power to master sin has arrived. Here are four New Testament principles that we can use to master the sin that still desires to have us:

The power to master sin has arrived

-Remember that no temptation has overtaken you that Jesus doesn't already know about. The promise of the word is that every time temptation comes, God provides the way of escape because he is faithful and does not want you to fall (see 1 Corinthians 10:13).

-We are free to act according to our conscience and our desires but every action must be addressed with two questions: Is it beneficial? Am I being mastered by it? (see 1 Corinthians 6:12).

-The thought life is the door where sin crouches. We can guard our thoughts and trust Jesus to answer the door when temptation knocks by taking every thought captive and making them obedient to the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 10:5).

-Jesus has disarmed all evil powers and authorities making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (see Colossians. 2:15). His death is our death and his life is our life. He has given us authority to overcome all the powers of the enemy (see Luke 10:19) and the devil must flee when we resist him (see James 4:7).

Sin is crouching at the door. Is it possible to master? Not only is it possible, it is imperative.

And He Walked with God

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. -Genesis 6:9

To be known as righteous and blameless among the people of your time would be an exceptional thing. To be identified that way in the days of Noah would be truly remarkable.

The Scriptures describe in no uncertain terms the condition of the society in which Noah lived. Man's wickedness had become great, the earth had become corrupt in God's sight, it was full of violence and every inclination of the thoughts of the heart of man were only evil all the time. Things—or more accurately, people—had gotten so bad, and the Lord had become so grieved (the Bible says that the Lord's *heart was filled with pain* (v6)), that the best and possibly only thing he had left to do was to put an end to the entire generation. But in the midst of that unthinkable depravity Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord, and in so doing literally saved the human race from complete extinction. The next time you see Noah, you might want to thank him.

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But how did he do it? It seems tough enough to live in the mixture of virtue and immorality that constitutes our own society. What kind of test would it be to live in a society where every inclination of the thoughts of everybody you knew was nothing but evil all the time?

Noah was able to be counted righteous and blameless among the people of his time because of one simple thing. He walked with God. Very basic, yet very effective. It wasn't his discipline, his dedication or his doctrine. It was his relationship. He walked with God. He knew him and kept in step with him. And in so doing he kept completely out of step with what was going on around him. Micah 6:8 says it so well: *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

As our society continues to look more and more like Noah's (one of the key indicators of this shift is the breeding of violence (see Genesis 6:13)), it will be that the only way that you will be able to avoid the increasing prevalence of societal sin is to genuinely walk with God. If you do, you will be walking in the footsteps of Noah and will be known as righteous and blameless among the people of your time.

But When They Came to Haran, They Settled There

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. -Genesis 11:31

Sometimes there are stopovers on the way to the promised land. Sometimes even some settling down.

Most of us have heard the story of Abraham and how he left the land of Ur in Chaldea to go to Canaan, the promised land. Some may not realize, however, that it took awhile before he actually got there. As the story goes, Abram (as he was known then) and his wife Sarai were living in Ur with his extended family, including his father and a couple of brothers and their families. After Abram's brother, Haran, died, Abram's father, Terah decided to take Abram, Sarai and his grandson, Lot, son of Haran, and leave Ur. Destination: Canaan. But as a group, they never made it. The scripture says, *But when they came to Haran, they settled there.*

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A number of questions which are not directly answered by the biblical account come to mind. How was it that Abraham's father, Terah, was led to leave Ur and head for Canaan? Did he know about the prophecy in Genesis 9 that a curse would be upon Canaan, son of Ham and that the Canaanites would become the slaves of the descendants of Shem, (which included Terah)? Why did they stop in Haran? Was there some sort of hangup? Was it not the will of the Lord for them to continue on towards Canaan? Why was the land that they settled in called Haran, the same name of Terah's deceased son?

Whatever the case, Abraham didn't get to the promised land right away. Sometimes neither do we. Terah actually never made it at all. Maybe that's OK. Maybe it wasn't his destiny. But it certainly was Abraham's, and after his father died the Lord called him to leave Haran and his father's household to go to the promised land. A move that would set into motion events that would not only birth a nation, but forever affect the history of the entire world.

You may be on a stopover on the way to your promised land. You may have even settled down for awhile. But to get to Canaan you will have to leave Haran. The hour will come, and may even be now, when the Lord says, "It's time to move on." So, don't stay in Haran too long. The promised land awaits.

I Am Your Very Great Reward

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." -Genesis 15:1

There is line from a Wayne Watson song that says, "All I know is that where Jesus is/That will be/Heaven for me." Does that resonate with you? It did with Paul who didn't care about anything else compared to "the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Php 3:8).

The Lord is many, many things to us. And he gives us many, many things. But when it comes right down to it, nothing can compare to the richness of just knowing him. Jesus has become for us wisdom and righteousness and holiness and redemption (see 1 Corinthians 1:30), but these really are just the by-products that exude from a relationship with him. Jesus said, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3).

Knowing God doesn't come from having eternal life, eternal life comes from knowing God.

***What else really matters if you have him?
And does anything matter at all
without him?***

The Lord came to Abraham in a vision and said, "I am your shield, your very great reward." In so doing, he wasn't strutting some form of cosmic egotism. He was sharing with Abraham the secret to fulfilling the very purpose of his existence. There could be no reward greater and no honor higher than to know God. Yes, he would be Abraham's shield, but only because he would be Abraham's God. No other proposition could compare to the one the Lord was making to Abraham.

The irony of the gospel is that the all powerful one who lives in inapproachable light offers the ultimate reward to everyone—while refusing to do so for one. And yet the reward is not a thing. The reward is a person, the Almighty himself. What could compare? What else really matters if you have him? And does anything matter at all without him?

It is not wrong to worship God for what he does. The Psalmist says, "Praise him for his acts of power" (Ps 150:2). That is part of who he is. And the more we know him, the more that we will know—and want to know—that part of him. But beyond all question there could be no greater reward than what the Lord God promised Abraham on that starry night long ago: Himself.

If Only Ishmael Might Live under Your Blessing!

Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" -Genesis 17:17-18

Why was Abraham so adamant about Ishmael being the one to live under the blessing of God? Didn't he know that the child of promise was yet to come? Well, maybe not.

Consider this: Some twenty-four years before this incident here in Genesis 17, the word of God came to Abraham that the land of Canaan would be the inheritance of his offspring and that counting them would be like trying to count the dust (Genesis 13). Then about ten years later, when Abraham takes the matter up with God that he has no children yet, God takes Abraham out under the night sky and confirms his covenant that the number of his descendants would be like the stars in the sky. God tells him that there would be a son coming forth from his body, but as of yet, no mention of Sarah has been

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made (Genesis 15). Sometime later, at Sarah's suggestion, Abraham takes Hagar as Sarah's surrogate and Ishmael is born to him (Genesis 16). Contrary to the popular notion that Sarah should have known better, it was actually a reasonable thing to do, especially in that time and culture. We often make the assumption that God had given them the promise that Sarah would have a son. Not true. Perhaps at the beginning they had hoped it would be Sarah, but the only promise they had for sure was that Abraham would have a son.

Now in Genesis 17, Ishmael is thirteen years old and Abraham is convinced that it will be through Ishmael that the Lord's promise will be fulfilled. He has believed this for thirteen years. Then the Lord drops this bomb that Sarah will be the mother of nations and kings through a miracle baby about to come. Maybe Abraham laughed not so much because of unbelief but because of surprise. And one of the surprises that he couldn't come to grips with just yet was the idea that the promise would not be through Ishmael. So, he called out for the blessing of Ishmael and God granted it.

Yes, Isaac would be the child of the covenant, but that didn't mean that Ishmael didn't have a place in the heart of Abraham or the heart of God.

Bring Them out to Us So That We Can Have Sex with Them

...all the men from every part of the city of Sodom--both young and old--surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." -Genesis 19: 4b-5

A famous preacher has said that if God doesn't judge America soon, he will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah. Well, that is either underestimating the sin of Sodom or overestimating the sin of America. Western culture certainly has its similarities with Sodom and is well on the way to judgment, but the godlessness of that place still overshadows what we can point to in our society. In this story in Genesis 19 we see the ravenous nature of unconstrained sin which can lead only to the degradation of society. In Sodom's case, the degradation was so complete, there was no chance for redemption--only annihilation

When two men, who were actually angels, came to investigate the sin that was crying out against Sodom they ended up at the house of Lot. To the Sodomites this meant

The nature of sexual lust is that it is never satisfied

one thing--new meat in town. The nature of sexual lust is that it is never satisfied. It always wants the new experience with the new person or the new fantasy. Now when all the men from every part of the city show up at Lot's door to satiate their insatiable sexual appetites, you know that self-control had ceased to be a byword many moons prior. The fact that the Sodomites were not interested in Lot's less than valorous offer of his daughters as an alternative show that the entire population of men had gone beyond the parameters of conventional wantonness among the sexually impure and had entered a state of the soul that beggars description. Their perverse sexual drive was completely unchecked and no natural force could have restrained their mad lust as they tried to break down Lot's door. They had gone about as far as they could go down the road of obscenity.

Please remember that it takes a long time to become that blatant in your sinfulness. Your conscience will not allow it. These men did not arrive in that dark place in a day. But if your journey is unabated by personal, societal or peer restraint, it can lead to the unmentionable. The restraints anchored by conviction, convention and companions are indispensable, but it is the austerity provided by the Holy Spirit that is most effective. May his influence dignify our lives and save us from the fate of Sodom.

Your Son, Your Only Son

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering..." - Genesis 22:2

For parents who have lost a child to death, their greatest fear could well be that they would lose another. And if there is just one other child left, the fear can be intense. I'm sure it has happened (although to no one that I know personally) that parents have lost the first, then the last of their two children. How difficult that would be is far beyond the scope of all of us who have been kept from such a misfortune.

In this amazing story where God tests Abraham's fidelity, He says to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering." Now think about this. Was Isaac Abraham's only son? No. We know that Ishmael was still living and we know that Abraham loved him very much. So why would God call Isaac Abraham's "only son?" It certainly wasn't because God had rejected Ishmael because Ishmael was still under the blessing and promises of God.

Abraham had already given up one son at the command of the Lord

I believe that the Lord wanted to convey to Abraham that he understood the magnitude of what he was asking Abraham to do. When he said, "your son, whom you love," God was not taunting Abraham here. He was assuring him that he knew of his love for his son. When God said, "take your son, your only son" I am convinced that he was letting Abraham know that He knew of the depth of pain that he had at losing his first son. It was no small thing for Abraham to have to send Ishmael away. When Sarah said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son," the Scriptures tell us that *the matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son* (Gen 21:10-11). Ishmael indeed was his son, but the reality of the situation by the time of Abraham's testing with Isaac was that he had already given up one son at the command of the Lord. When the word of the Lord came to Abraham about Isaac being his *only* son, it was a confirmation of sorts that Ishmael was indeed no longer a part of his life. This would have made the decision to offer up Isaac all the more difficult.

Abraham's test was perhaps even more difficult than we realize. Next to Jesus going to the cross, it was probably the most difficult in the biblical record. That he found the grace to pass it is astounding.

Get a Wife for My Son

In Genesis 24:4 Abraham sends the chief servant of his household to the land of his relatives with this charge: “*Get a wife for my son.*” It was Roy Hession who first brought the concept to my attention that Genesis 24 can be seen a picture or “type” of effective evangelism. Consider these uncanny parallels as keys to understanding the Heavenly Father’s heart to provide a bride for his Son:

-The father commissions his servant to find a bride for his son. This assignment has top priority (vs 2-4).

-An angel (who may correspond to the Holy Spirit) will be sent ahead to prepare the way for the mission (v 7).

-If the one to whom the servant is led is not willing to become the wife of the son, that person’s choice will be honored and there will be no coercion (v 8).

Genesis 24 is a picture of effective evangelism

-The servant went out and positioned himself in the most favorable place to encounter the one he is supposed to find (v11).

-He prayed for success (v12).

-He looks for the divine appointment and a confirmation that he has found it (vs13-14).

-Without hesitation, he initiates the divinely arranged encounter (v17).

-He looks for a person with a willing heart (vs 19-20).

-In addition to speaking, the servant makes quiet observations to discern on what is transpiring with the prospective bride (v 21).

-The servant is able to show the woman evidence of who he is, and more importantly, who has sent him (vs 22, 30).

-He is not distracted from completing his assignment (v33).

-He faithfully recounts the story of why he came (vs 34-48).

-He calls for a clear answer regarding his appeal (v 49).

-His testimony is accepted because it has the unmistakable stamp of the Lord on it (v 50).

-He gratefully worships the Lord for the success of his mission (v 52).

-The messenger reveals that there are gifts that are given to the bride of the son (v 53).

-The servant does not allow a chance for the woman to stay in the old life and risk the possibility of not being able to bring her to the son (vs 55-56).

So Esau Despised His Birthright

Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, "Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!"...Jacob replied, "First sell me your birthright." "Look, I am about to die," Esau said. "What good is the birthright to me?" But Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob...So Esau despised his birthright. -Genesis25:29-34

History reveals a litany of bad deals—nearsighted ventures where something of vastly underestimated value was sold off. Babe Ruth was sold by the Boston Red Sox, Manhattan by the Indians, and the Louisiana Territory by the French. These happen to be cases where it at least seemed reasonable at the time. But such is not the case with Esau and the selling of his birthright.

There were two things at work in Esau as he sold his inheritance for some bread and a bowl of stew. The first was the ascendancy of his flesh. He could not delay the gratification of his appetite. Legion are those who would have been saved by delayed gratification.

How many of us have gone the way of Esau, grasping some temporary pleasure at the risk of losing things more profoundly important?

Second, and most notable, was his inconsideration of the real value of what he was selling off. A bowl of stew when you are hungry is great. But for your inheritance? Your destiny? Your birthright?

The Scripture says that *Esau despised his birthright*. He despised it because he did not value it. He did not really consider what he was doing. If he had, he certainly would not have been enticed by such a preposterous offer from his brother. And yet, how many of us have gone the way of Esau, grasping some temporary pleasure at the risk of losing things more profoundly important? Persons have thrown away their marriages, reputations and even their destiny in God because they did not pay close enough attention to the value of what was theirs.

The writer of Hebrews tells us to not be like Esau *who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son* (12:16). And even though he later sought the blessing of the first born with tears, it was too late. No temporary gratification can compare to the value of the good things that God has ordained for your life. Hold on to them. Value them. And whatever you do, don’t “despise” them.

Of All That You Give Me I Will Give You a Tenth

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." -Genesis 28:20-22

The principle of giving the Lord a tenth of all that we receive from him is established twice in Genesis as a precedent to the Law, and like the essence of New Testament doctrine, is a practice that goes beyond the Law.

The testimony of hundreds of thousands of contemporary followers of Jesus is that "tithing works." These persons found that when they began to give ten percent of their income to the local church, their financial means became providentially more effective and they experienced a marked decrease in money pressures and debt load. This has been my experience as well and there is no question in my mind that the Lord blessed my finances as I began to practice tithing early in my Christian walk. As I have reflected on this reality I have become convinced that it has been more the practice of firstfruits giving than the practice of tithing that the Lord was honouring. For most of us who have practiced tithing it really has been a cheerful, voluntary purposeful, putting-God-first kind of giving—more in line with the attitude of giving we see in the early disciples. I believe that the principle of giving yourself to the Lord first is the real key to receiving his blessing (see 2 Corinthians 8:5). I would contend that those who try to scrape together their ten percent at the end of the month are not at all receiving the same blessing from the Lord as those to whom their tithe is the very first priority and who make sure that they give to the work of the Lord before they do anything else with their income. The Lord does not want to be lesser priority in any area of your life and he does not want your leftovers, whether it is your money or your time or the exercise of your talents.

Now it seems that Jacob's vow was a conditional one. "If God will give me this and this, then I will give him that." And in a sense, that is the way it works. We give because he first gives to us. But in another sense, giving firstfruits is a faith statement that we believe that what we have comes from God and that he will continue to provide. This is the heart of the tithe of Jacob. It is a principle to which we can relate which will serve us well in our context.

It has been more the practice of firstfruits giving than the practice of tithing that the Lord was honouring

I Am Afraid...But You Have Said

"Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" -Genesis 32:11-12

Sometimes—many times—when we pray, we are not just talking to God, we are talking to ourselves. Jacob was preparing to meet his estranged brother, Esau, from whom he had fled twenty years earlier because of Esau's plot to kill him. Part of his preparation for this meeting was prayer. He knew that he needed to call on the Lord. In so doing he endeavored to build his own faith for what was to come.

It is a healthy thing to express your feelings in prayer, and that is what Jacob did. He said, "I am afraid he [Esau] will come and attack me..."

The statement here, "I am afraid" is not just an expression

of mild concern that one would use when saying, for instance, "I am afraid that the weather is going to change." The Hebrew word is "yare," which denotes fear or even terror. Fear is a familiar emotion of the human psyche. As such, it is often observed in the earnest entreaties of some very human persons as recorded in the pages of Scripture. And as it was with Jacob, so it should be with us. If we are afraid, we should tell the Lord about it.

But Jacob didn't stop there. He not only had a need to express his fear, he also used the occasion to express his faith. He reminded the Lord (or perhaps more likely he reminded himself) about the promises of God for his posterity of his descendants in the land to which he was now journeying. He said, "I am afraid, but..." He was combating his fear with the promises of God. Not a bad principle.

Some may argue that if he really had faith in the promises of God that he would have had no fear in the first place. Maybe. But there are times when all of us need a little help in facing our Esau's. Remember Gethsemane.

So, as we take our fears to the Lord in prayer it is good to remind him (yes, ourselves) of his promises. And if you want to use Jacob's formula, "I am afraid...but you have said," it just might be what you need.

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Purify Yourselves and Change Your Clothes

So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes. Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God..." -Genesis 35:2-3

Changing your clothes is likely a natural thing for you. You probably don't think much about it. Depending on what your day holds, you may change your clothes two or three times or more. There are clothes to work in, clothes to relax in, clothes to play in, clothes to sleep in. Changing your clothes regularly is actually a sign of physical, emotional, social and hygienic health. Of course, changing them too many times may be a sign of vanity or indecisiveness, but it is only the infirm, disabled, very young, destitute or deranged that are unable or unwilling to change their clothes.

In the Bible, changing your clothes often has spiritual significance. The priests who served in the temple were to put on clothes that were clean and consecrated for service. The New Testament uses this motif to symbolize the "putting off" of the old self and the "putting on" of the new with all the righteousness that goes with it (see Ephesians 4:22-24). John's Revelation paints a striking picture of the multitudes of the saints given pure white robes to wear in their heavenly dwelling (7:9).

In Genesis 35 Jacob is instructed to go up to Bethel (the "House of God") and build an altar. The first time he was at Bethel he was by himself. This time he is going up to this consecrated place with his household and he wants to make sure that they too are consecrated. He told them to do three things: Get rid of their foreign gods, purify (or cleanse) themselves and change their clothes. That Jacob would give these instructions before the law of Moses prescribed such things shows that he had spiritual sensitivity and insight. If there were any images used in false worship among them they were to dispose of them. Their purification was probably a washing with water that would have made them both physically and ceremonially clean. And once they were clean, they needed clean clothes.

As Christians, we are the new "Bethel." Through the blood of Jesus and the confession of our sins we have been made clean. What sense would it make then to put on the dirty clothes of the old life again? No—Jesus has clean clothes for us to wear. *Get rid of your foreign Gods, purify yourselves and change your clothes.*

The changing of clothes often has spiritual significance

He Brought Their Father a Bad Report about Them

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. -Genesis 37:2

When a seventeen year old tells his father about something his older siblings are doing wrong, is he a tattletale or a young man of integrity? What if that teenager happens to be Joseph?

The book of Genesis contains more about Joseph than any other character, including Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Noah messed up. So did Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But we find no such report about Joseph. He, along with Daniel, are the quintessential men of integrity found in the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures. And what is the very first thing that we hear about this man of virtue? That he brought his father a bad report about his brothers. I think that we can safely assume that Joseph was not a tattletale who, out of some sense of spite or competition, wanted to get his brothers in trouble. Throughout his life Joseph honored the truth, and the story of his life begins with him telling the truth.

Now, Joseph could have saved himself some trouble by not going to his father with the bad report. I'm not saying that keeping quiet would have eventually saved him from being sold into slavery by his brothers but Joseph, even here, begins to pay the price for his integrity—a price that he would have to pay over and over again in the course of his life. Joseph would learn firsthand that integrity eventually leads to honor, even if it results in jealousy and false accusation along the way.

Young people, especially, are faced with the pressure of deciding between peer acceptance and doing the right thing. Joseph's example is worth noting—and following. And if integrity has to start with bringing a bad report about somebody—then so be it.

If integrity has to start with bringing a bad report about somebody—then so be it

Tell Me Your Dreams

So he asked... "Why are your faces so sad today?" "We both had dreams," they answered, "but there is no one to interpret them." Then Joseph said to them, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me your dreams." -Genesis 40:7-8

The correct interpretation of dreams can be a profound help in a person's life. After all, God has spoken, and continues to speak, through dreams. Who of us has not experienced a dream that we knew to be from God that helped us to understand his will or even changed our lives? While some persons may get lost chasing the meaning of every sleepy image of the subconscious, few things can be as concrete and life impacting as a genuine and correctly interpreted dream from God.

As it is with many of the more mystical aspects of the Christian life, the new age movement has stolen some of the attention from the church in this area. To a large degree, the modern western church has sacrificed this God-given means of hearing his voice on the altar of unbelieving caution. Lacking a satisfactory protocol for interpreting dreams, the church has turned aside persons from both inside and outside the church who are longing to make sense of their night visions. Consequently, they have gone elsewhere for the means of stewarding the voice of God that has come through their dreams.

There are two principles evident in this story about Joseph that will help us to be successful in helping people interpret their dreams. Godly discernment is of first importance. Joseph's assertion, *"Do not interpretations belong to God?"* shows his recognition and dependance on the inspiration of God for worthwhile appraisal. Without this revelation we are left to human understanding, which is not always sufficient.

The second precept comes from Joseph's offer to do something about the dilemma of the dreaming twosome. When he said, "Tell me your dreams," I doubt he was planning to merely take a crack at it. Of course, if God provided no interpretation, Joseph would have had nothing to say. But Joseph's response indicates that he was expecting God to give him the meaning of the dreams.

We can be of major help to persons, as well as provide a witness for the power of the gospel, as God gives us the ability through the Spirit to interpret dreams. Who knows, it may even get us out of prison one day.

***When he said, "Tell me your dreams,"
I doubt he was planning to
merely take a crack at it.***

You Shall Be in Charge of My Palace

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you." -Genesis 41:39-40

You may see someone achieve greatness, but you may not know what it took to get them there. Joseph was promoted in a day, but he went through fourteen years of testing and preparation. Joseph's fortunes changed overnight, but his destiny had been established long before he knew there was a Pharaoh.

Joseph had a tough apprenticeship. He was rejected by his brothers, sold into slavery, accused and imprisoned unjustly in response to his own godly behavior and forgotten by one who should have helped him gain his freedom. In the kingdom of God, it seems the greater the destiny, the greater the suffering. A particular kind of suffering is required to

establish the character needed for true greatness (see Romans 5:3-4). Being sold into slavery was hard for Joseph. Being torn away from his father made it even harder. Being in prison was difficult. Knowing that he was put there unjustly made it even more difficult. But it was these very hardships that prepared him for his entrance on to the stage of world history.

In the course of dealing with the fires of rejection and injustice that Joseph endured, the Lord tempered those inequities with his ever-present favor. Even in slavery and prison, the hand of God on his life was evident to Joseph and those around him. Wherever he went and whatever he did he had success because God was with him (see Genesis 39:3).

The favor of God is two-edged sword. It brings both success and antagonism. The antagonism must come to counter the tendency in the human soul towards pride. But if humility is maintained, the favor of the Lord will be sustained to bring encouragement in the midst of the antagonism.

As it was in the case with Jesus, Joseph's life produced either a highly favorable or highly unfavorable reaction from people. People were not indifferent toward Joseph. And, as it was with Jesus, it was one primary observation about his life that explained this hot or cold reaction: *"Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God"* (v38).

By Providence, you too can be promoted in a day. But don't think that it can legitimately happen without the favor of God and years of preparation.

***The favor of God is two-edged
sword. It brings both success
and antagonism.***

Afterward His Brothers Talked with Him

And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him. -Genesis 45:15

What a phenomenal climax to an amazing narrative. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers who were jealous of their father's favor for him and rankled by his dreams that they would one day bow down to him. He winds up as a servant in the house of the captain of Pharaoh's guard and because God is with him, he is promoted to ruler of the household. When Joseph nobly refuses the sexual advances of the captain's wife she cries rape and he is thrown in jail. There he again finds favor, this time with the jailer, and becomes steward of the jail, though remaining as a prisoner. Later, he is brought before Pharaoh to interpret two dreams. Pharaoh recognizes the hand of God on his life and he is promoted to be the ruler of all Egypt.

***What did they talk about?
Everything.***

As the story climaxes with the unwitting brothers showing up and bowing down in Joseph's court, Joseph reveals his identity. In this scene, the pathos of Joseph and the bewilderment of his brothers is dizzying. For Joseph, a veritable volcano of emotion erupts while the eleven sons of Jacob are in absolute shock, altogether terrified. What now? What does all this mean? What do they do? How do they relate?

The first step is to weep, embrace and kiss each other. What other response is possible since it has been shown that Joseph has no intent to punish them? What better therapy to begin the healing than to hug each other and to cry together? Fourteen years of rejection, loneliness, anger, guilt, shame, and sorrow are being released as the twelve take the first step toward the reclamation of their brotherhood.

The next step is found in these words: "*Afterward, his brothers talked with him.*" This statement may sound like a kind of curious addendum to their story, but think about it. What needed to happen next? They needed to talk. And talk they did. Now the eleven could talk to Joseph as their brother and not as the ruler of Egypt. Now they, and Joseph, could begin to put words to their feelings. They had to.

What did they talk about? Everything. The seeking and extending of forgiveness. The remarkable events of the previous fourteen years. The state of the household of Jacob. And anything else that was important.

What a scene. What circumstances. And what a gift was given them that they could do something so simple and yet so momentous: Talk to each other as brothers once again.

When He Reached Beersheba, He Offered Sacrifices

And Israel said, "I'm convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die." So Israel set out with all that was his, and when he reached Beersheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. -Genesis 45:28-46:1

Israel, also known as Jacob, was leaving the land of Canaan. His eyes would never again see his homeland. As he and his sixty-six children and grandchildren traveled with all their belongings, they came to, what was for Jacob, a very significant place: Beersheba.

Beersheba was the southernmost point on the way out of Canaan toward Egypt. It was the final stop. The last chance for Jacob's senses to record what it was like to live in the land of promise. But that wasn't Jacob's prime incentive for offering sacrifices to God when he got there. No, Beersheba was important to Jacob because Beersheba was important to his history. This was the place established by Jacob's grandfather, Abraham when he planted a tamarisk tree and there called on the name of the Lord (Ge 21:33). This was the place where Jacob's father Isaac grew up. It was the place from which Isaac was taken by Abraham to be sacrificed and the place to which they returned from Mount Moriah (Ge 22:19). It was the place where the Lord appeared to Isaac and confirmed his covenant with him. It was the place where Isaac built an altar to the Lord and, like his father Abraham, learned to call on the name of the Lord (Ge 26:23-25). Beersheba was also the place of Jacob's boyhood home. And, it was here he received his father's blessing before fleeing to relatives in the north.

***If we attend those
Beersheba's in grateful
remembrance, he just may
visit us again***

As Jacob would leave Canaan for the last time, he would now honor the God of his fathers by worshiping according to the custom of his fathers. As Abraham and Isaac called on the name of the Lord at Beersheba, so now Jacob also offers sacrifices there to the Lord. And the God who met his fathers at Beersheba, met Jacob as well, speaking to him in a vision and bearing witness to yet a third generation of the promises of his great covenant.

Those of us who have any kind of personal heritage in the Lord have our own Beersheba's—places and times and customs that have earmarked our inheritance in the Lord. If we attend those Beersheba's in grateful remembrance, he just may visit us again to give us encouragement on our journey.

I Will Scatter Them in Jacob and Disperse Them in Israel

Simeon and Levi are brothers—their swords are weapons of violence. Let me not enter their council, let me not join their assembly for they have killed men in their anger and hamstringed oxen as they pleased. Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel! I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel. -Genesis 49:5-7

Jacob is *about to die* (Ge 48: 21). So he summons his twelve sons to give them each a parting prophetic word: “*Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come,*” he says. This is typically a time of blessing, but the word to Simeon and Levi about what will happen to their clans in the days to come does not fit into that category. Neither Simeon or Levi will receive a lasting inheritance of their own in the promised land. They will be scattered and dispersed among the territories given to their brothers.

You probably knew that the Levites would have no geographical segment of the promised land to call their own, but did you know that, eventually, the tribe of Simeon wouldn't either? It's true. When it came time for Joshua to apportion the land by lot in the presence of the Lord (Josh 18:10) *the Simeonites received their inheritance within the territory of Judah* (Josh 19:9). Evidently, Judah had more land than they needed, so Simeon was given land within the territory of Judah, in the southernmost part of Israel. But the land was never really annexed to them and years later when the rest of Israel split off from Judah to form a separate kingdom in the north, the territory of Simeon was no more.

So, Jacob's words came true. Spoken five-hundred years before they came to pass, we see both the prophetic accuracy and the enacting power of those words. And why did he speak these words about Simeon and Levi? Because *they killed men in their anger*. Simeon and Levi were the two who murdered all the men of Shechem to avenge the rape of their sister Dinah (see Genesis 34). Jacob was not happy with what they had done at the time and he still held it against them when it came time for him to be *gathered to his people* (Ge 49:33). But Jacob didn't just curse them, he cursed their anger: *Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel!*

I suppose, if you want to take one lesson from this story, it must be that if you want your blessing, you have to keep a check on your anger. Otherwise, there may be no lasting inheritance for your posterity.

When Israel split off from Judah to form a separate kingdom in the north, the territory of Simeon was no more

There I Buried Leah

Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron... There Abraham and his wife Sarah were buried, there Isaac and his wife Rebekah were buried, and there I buried Leah. -Genesis 49:29,31

I don't know about you but I always felt kind of sorry for Leah. She was the oldest of the two daughters of Laban, but she wasn't the prettiest. We are told that her sister Rachel was *lovely in form and beautiful*, while Leah's distinction is that she had *weak eyes* (Ge 26:17). It seems also that their names didn't help matters. Rachel means “ewe” while Leah probably means “cow.”

Jacob comes on the scene, falls for Rachel, offers to work seven years for her hand in marriage, and is so taken with her that the seven years seem like only a few days. Leah would never know what it would feel like to have a man want her like that. By the time the seven years are up no one has come knocking on Laban's door to ask for Leah's hand, much less offer to work seven years for her. When the wedding night comes, instead of sending Rachel into the darkened bridal chamber, Laban

In the end, Leah was honored

sends Leah. Jacob thinks he is making love to Rachel, when it is actually Leah. Never mind Jacob reaping the duplicity that he has sown in his life, how do you think Leah feels? How would you feel knowing the one who was making love to you was not really making love to you. How would you feel in the morning when your new husband is sick to find out you are his new wife?

The Lord saw that she was not loved so he gave her children. But the names that she gave her children reflect the deep and abiding pain that was hers because she had a husband who did not love her (see Genesis 29:32-34). When Leah gave birth to her last son she named him Zebulun which means “honor.” She said, “*This time my husband will treat me with honor because I have borne him six sons*” (Ge 30:20).

And in the end, Leah was honored. The burial ground of the patriarchs contained the bones of Abraham and his wife Sarah, Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and Jacob and guess who? Leah, not Rachel. And more significantly, it was Leah, not Rachel, who was honored by God to become the mother of both the Levitical priesthood and the line of the Messiah.

I still feel sorry for Leah. She no doubt bore the emotional scars of her rejection into the burial cave of Ephron. But if the Lord is the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, then he is also the God of Sarah, Rebekah...and Leah.

He Was Afraid to Look at God

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. -Exodus 3:5-6

When we have our first tangible encounter with the living God, it can, and perhaps it should, be a fearsome experience. What started off as an inquisitive investigation of a curious sight as Moses went to have a closer look at the bush that burned but was not consumed, quickly turned into a face to face episode with the Great I Am. Moses' reaction was hardly surprising: He hid his face in fear.

Moses didn't need any theological training to know that no one can see God and live. As he drew close to the burning bush, God warned him to come no closer. The manifest presence of God had turned the place where Moses was standing into holy ground. Even though the bush was not being consumed, Moses knew that he was in the presence of the One who himself was a consuming fire.

In time, Moses would have a different demeanor at the prospect seeing God "face to face."

But as time would go on, and as he would become more familiar with the great God of his ancestors, Moses would have a different demeanor when it would come to the prospect seeing God "face to face." Maybe it was because he was taken with and spoiled by many such encounters along the way. Maybe it was because of all the mighty miracles that he witnessed in association with the exodus. Or maybe it was because Moses had just become engagingly familiar with this God who had introduced himself so dramatically on the far side of the desert. In any case, by the time Moses reached Mount Sinai (Ex 33) he was no longer hiding his face from God in fear, but was in fact asking that he might see the God of Glory.

The Scriptures say that *no one has seen God* (Jn 1:18). Moses came close. Jacob thought he had, but what Jacob saw when he wrestled with God is what theologians call a "theophony," an encounter with God in a form that mortals can both relate to and be safe in seeing. But the coming of Jesus was more than a theophony. He was, and is, the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. At first, it may be a fearful thing to encounter the Son of God. But before long, we like Moses will be seeking more and more to know his presence and see his glory, face to face.

They Did Not Listen to Him Because of Their Discouragement

"I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God..." Moses reported this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage. -Exodus 6:6-9

Moses was always a little concerned whether or not the people of Israel would listen to him. The first indication of this was when he said to God, *"Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"* (Ex 3:13). God tells Moses His name and then assures him that the elders of Israel will listen to him (Ex 3:18). Then Moses says, *"What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, 'The Lord did not appear to you?'"* So God gives him three different miraculous signs that could be used to authenticate him as Yahweh's messenger (Ex 4:1-8).

Don't reject the messenger just because circumstances have taken a downturn

So, Moses shows up in Egypt, with his brother Aaron as his front man. They assemble the elders of Israel for the news that the Lord has seen their misery, is concerned about their plight and is about to deliver them. Aaron speaks and Moses performs the miraculous signs, and guess what? The people listen to and believe what they have to say. Imagine what that would have been like for the elders and the people. For years, decades, even generations, they have been crying out for deliverance. Along comes the messenger of God with the news their souls had been in anguish for, and it is confirmed with miraculous signs, no less. When they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped. But when Pharaoh responds to this new development by making life even more difficult for the Israelites, Moses is cursed and blamed. The Lord reassures Moses that the people indeed will be rescued, but when Moses delivers this encouraging report to them, this time, they do not listen to him. They had gotten their hopes up, but things had actually gotten worse, not better. The people are no longer with him.

The point? Sometimes, things get worse before they get better. Don't be surprised if the enemy of your soul stirs things up when deliverance is immanent. Hold on, take heart, and don't necessarily reject the messenger because circumstances have taken a downturn. And if you are the messenger, don't take the rejection personally. Keep pressing on.

I Have Made You like God to Pharaoh

The Lord spoke to Moses in Egypt.... "I am the Lord. Tell Pharaoh king of Egypt everything I tell you." But Moses said to the Lord, "Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me?" Then the Lord said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh. -Exodus 6:28-7:1

Let me share with you the process that I went through to come to an understanding of Exodus 7:1—a scripture whose meaning was not readily apparent to me.

When I first read the statement of the Lord to Moses, “*See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh,*” my evaluation does not go much beyond, “Hmm, that’s interesting.” Now, you have to know that I have received more than enough solid teaching on the transcendent nature of the Almighty to rule out a new age conception that Moses could be endowed with some innate divinity that Pharaoh would recognize. So, I ask the Lord to give me revelation as I search out the meaning of this passage.

***So, I ask the Lord
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of this passage***

From looking at a Hebrew/English interlinear Bible, I find that the word “like” isn’t in the Hebrew, so a literal translation would be, “I have made you God to Pharaoh.” Well, that makes it all the more interesting. By using cross-references, I then find that according to Exodus 4:16, Moses would not only be like God to Pharaoh, that he would be so to his brother Aaron. Well, that eliminates a couple of theories and means that for Moses to be God or like God to Pharaoh, it should apply to Aaron as well. So I pray some more.

I have a commentary that says that this means Moses “would speak and act with authority and power from above.” Ok, that makes sense, but it feels like there is more to it than that. So I seek further revelation and get something that goes a little deeper: Moses would be God’s representative—yes, but even more. When Pharaoh deals with Moses it would be as Pharaoh is dealing directly with God. It is not just Moses coming into his court, it is God. Pharaoh’s bent toward Moses will show his bent towards God. If Pharaoh receives Moses, he receives God. If he rejects Moses, he rejects God. The fact that this explanation corresponds to what Jesus said about who we would be to others as we go in his name (see Matthew 10:40) adds plausibility to the explanation and gives me satisfaction that I have, at least in part, an adequate understanding of what God meant when he said to Moses, “*See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh.*”

I Will Bring Judgment on All the Gods of Egypt

"On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn--both men and animals--and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. -Exodus 12:12

This hardening Pharaoh’s heart thing has always been a tough one for me to digest. The most difficult thing to swallow was the fact that all the Egyptian people suffered so terribly because God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. I’m not one to chalk things up solely to the mysterious and sovereign will of God, so there must be some mitigating factors in this harsh story. This is what I’ve observed:

-The story of Exodus begins with the severe suffering of the Hebrews (ruthless slavery and genocide) at the hands of the Egyptians. It was an entire nation responsible for inflicting the suffering and it would be an entire nation that would bear the brunt of the Lord’s reprisals.

-The Lord knew Pharaoh’s heart and that the king would not let the people of God go unless *a mighty hand compels him* (Ex 3:19). The petrifying of

Pharaoh’s already hard heart was to insure that God’s mighty hand would be revealed and that his *wonders may be multiplied without question* (Ex 11:9).

-It was the will of God that the fear of the Lord would both follow Israel out of Egypt and precede them into the promised land.

-The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart caused the Egyptian people to actually be favorably disposed towards the Israelites at the end so that they would pay them retribution as they left (Ex 3:21;11:3).

-Pharaoh at one point said, “*Who is the Lord that I should obey him...*” (Ex 5:2). He relented, but never repented.

-Through these events, the people of Israel were given a lasting testimony that their God was the one true God and that he indeed could see their plight and do something about it.

-Finally, the Egyptian people needed to know that their gods were no gods at all. The judgment they received at the had of the one true God was, among other things, a judgment on their “gods.” Three times in Exodus God says, “*Then the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.*”

Yes, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart affronts any sentient marrow within our nature. But there was a righteous purpose for it, nonetheless.

***I have looked for some
mitigating factors in this
harsh story***

No Foreigner Is to Eat of It

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "These are the regulations for the Passover: No foreigner is to eat of it..." -Exodus 12:43

Our God is exclusive and inclusive at the same time. We tend to think of exclusiveness as being bad and inclusiveness as being good. This is probably because being excluded makes us feel bad and being included makes us feel good. And rightly so, because acceptance and rejection are the two most powerful influences exerted upon the human soul. But exclusiveness can be good. Do you think that just anybody should be allowed to practice medicine or pilot a commercial aircraft? Or that a pedophile should be allowed to teach elementary school?

"Granted," you say, "but is allowing a foreigner to eat the Passover going to imperil the children of Israel? Why wouldn't a foreigner be allowed to eat the Passover?" The reason is simple.

We are part of a very exclusive family that just happens to be open to everyone

Eating the Passover was a sign that you belonged to the God of the Passover. If you were not a part of Israel then how could you be included in this commemorative meal of national deliverance? If you were not part of that nation, what meaning would it have for you? The same holds true for participation in the New Testament observance of the Lord's Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:27ff). Wouldn't it be hypocritical to receive the elements that represent the body and blood of Jesus when you have never received the one whom those elements represent?

In Exodus we find that provision was actually made for the Passover to be opened to foreigners. They could choose to become participants of Israel if their males became circumcised. If they wanted to be a part, they could. They just had to come according to the Lord's prescription. If they didn't, then they remained excluded.

Salvation is the same way. It is very exclusive. But it is not a "country club" kind of exclusivity where there is a dress code and a limited number of memberships available only to those who can afford it. It is the kind of exclusiveness that says, "Anyone who wants to can get there from here, but there is only road that will take you there. The road is narrow (Mt 7:14) but don't worry, it is fully accessible."

We are part of a very exclusive family that just happens to be open to everyone. Including foreigners.

The People of Canaan Will Melt Away

"In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling. The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia. The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling, the people of Canaan will melt away..." -Exodus 15:13-15

I know that you're not supposed to judge the children of Israel for all their wavering, grumbling and unbelief following the exodus ("after all, you don't know how you would have fared") but, really, they should have known better—especially when it came to entering the promised land. Goodnight—the whole thing was about getting them out of slavery and into the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers (Ex 13:5). When it came time for them to cross over, surely they could still remember the Song of Moses.

This song that Moses and the people sang after the drowning of the Egyptian army was powerfully descriptive, uncannily prophetic and should have been profoundly encouraging. The section of the song in verses 13-17 explicitly portrayed what their upcoming journey into the land of their inheritance should have been. *"In your love you will lead...In your strength you will guide...the nations will hear and tremble...the people of Canaan will melt away... you will bring us and plant us on the mountain of your inheritance."*

This song should have been a prophetic rallying cry that would have carried the nation up the gut of Canaan in a matter of weeks

Part of the reason for the Lord bringing them out of Egypt in such dramatic fashion was so that *terror and dread will fall on them* (v16), that is, the people of Philistia, Edom, Moab, and Canaan. This song should have been a prophetic rallying cry to carry the nation of Israel through Sinai and up the gut of Canaan in a matter of weeks. But no, their rebellious, grumbling and unbelieving hearts gave them an inheritance in a land flowing with sagebrush and dry sand.

The prophetic Song of Moses was not forever nullified by their unbelief. The next generation saw it fulfilled. Later, this song became a tradition in the ancient Jewish synagogue, sung every Sabbath afternoon. And in Revelation 15:3, we find the people of God still singing this very song.

It would have done the children of Israel well to have sung this song on their way to the promised land. It would have done them even better to have believed it.

The Work Is Too Heavy for You; You Cannot Handle it Alone

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. -Exodus 18:17-18

We all need a Jethro in our lives to impart wisdom to make our existence and work less complicated and stressful. One of my Jethros is Dr. James W. Bradley, a professor and friend who has literally amazed me at all that he can accomplish while being so relaxed. He taught a class on pastoral methodology, that was by far the most practical class of my seminary experience. He said a number of things that I still remember almost two decades later, including a rule of thumb that he gave us regarding the science of delegation. He said, "Only do the things that only you can, and do none of the things that someone else can."

Only do the things that only you can, and do none of the things that someone else can

Jethro saw that Moses was wearing both himself and his people out. He came to Moses and said, "What you are doing is not good." Oh, that we would have more Jethros who see what is wrong and are not afraid to tell us. And oh, that persons in church leadership would heed the advice of Jethro, because the work is too heavy and cannot be handled alone.

In Acts 6, the apostles found themselves overlooking the ministry of the word because they were attending to needs that could have been delegated to others. What they were doing was not good. They were neglecting their own calling while at the same time depriving others of theirs. They, like Moses, heeded the advice of Jethro and found capable men of proven character and appointed them to take up these important, yet distracting, responsibilities.

When Moses delegated according to Jethro's advice, three things resulted. 1) Moses' load was made lighter and he was free to devote himself to his calling: Intercession, teaching (vs. 19-20) and judging the difficult cases (v26). 2) Capable persons were given ministries that, no doubt, were fulfilling to themselves and a blessing to others (v22). And, 3) The people went home satisfied (v23).

The Scriptures tell us that *Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said* (v24). Smart man. The work is too heavy. We cannot do it alone. Jethro still speaks.

The Fear of God Will Be with You to Keep You from Sinning

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." -Exodus 20:20

The people of God have assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai because the presence of the Lord has come. What they see and hear makes them tremble: Thunder and lightning with a thick cloud and a loud trumpet blast. The mountain is covered with billowing smoke as the Lord descends on Sinai in fire. The mountain begins to shake violently and the sound of the celestial trumpet grows deafening. Not exactly a matinee in the park. At the risk of sounding irreverent, I would say that the whole scene was a bit theatrical. And yet, there is no pretense here. God is showing up. This is an unveiling of the fearsome power of Yahweh.

The fear of God is the holy reverence for the Almighty and the power he has to execute judgment

This is an image they are meant to not soon forget. And why does the Lord do this? Because the fear of God would

help keep them from disobeying the law he was about to give them. Is the fear of the Lord a deterrent to sinning? Certainly. According to Psalm 36:1 and Romans 3:18, the wicked are sinful because *there is no fear of God before their eyes*. The people at Mt. Sinai saw that God was a consuming fire and that knowledge needed to be with them to help keep them from sinning.

Although fear of consequence is not the purest of all motivations for not sinning, there have been numerous times that I was prevented from giving in to temptation because I was afraid of the aftermath. But the fear of God is not just about the dread of paying the piper. It is the holy reverence for the Almighty and the power he has to execute judgment. If the fear of God would have been mine more often, I would have been spared from the consequences that resulted in the times I did give in to temptation.

So, God came to test his people at Sinai so that the fear of God would keep them from sinning. Did it work? Well...no. It wasn't because the fear of God is ineffectual. It was because the people forgot the fear of God.

Isn't it interesting that Moses says to the people, "Don't be afraid...it's the fear of God." The fear of God keeps us from sinning while the love of God assures us that we never need be frightened.

Do Not Take Advantage of a Widow or an Orphan

Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. -Exodus 22:22-24

I know of a man who has robbed his widowed stepmother. I don't know if he resented his father remarrying after his own mother died, but when the father recently died and left this stepmother a widow, this man literally attempted to leave her penniless by taking control of the family assets, including the proceeds from the sale of the house where his father and stepmother lived for ten years. His actions have left his father's wife, who has a debilitating medical condition, with no money to even get a place to live.

This edict in Exodus 22:22-24 is the twenty-seventh statute in a series of social laws that the Lord gives beginning in Chapter 21. Everyone of the previous twenty-six has a prescription for restitution or punishment that is to be settled or meted out by the involved parties, select judges or the community at large. Number twenty-seven, however, is different. Taking advantage of a widow or an orphan is so distressing to the Lord that he says that if anyone does so, he will take personal responsibility to bring retribution. There will be no need for mediation, arbitration or deliberation. He will hear the cry of the widow and the orphan, his anger will be aroused and justice will be served.

And what is that justice? Only that the perpetrator's wife will become a widow and his children will become fatherless. The awful irony is that the one who takes advantage of the widow and/or the orphan has sentenced his own family to face the same plight of those he has wronged.

This is obviously serious stuff. If you take advantage of a widow or an orphan and they cry out to the Lord, you are in trouble. And they will cry out to the Lord because who else do they have? When the Lord hears their cry, he becomes as a husband to the widow and a father to orphan, and he will certainly take up their cause.

You know the guy that I mentioned earlier? I wouldn't want to be in his shoes either now or on the day of judgment.

He will take personal responsibility to bring retribution

According to the Pattern Shown You

See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain. -Exodus 25:40

To say that God is a God of detail would be an understatement. He really does think of everything. The wonder of biological form and function is probably the best illustration of his astounding attention to detail. It obviously matters to Him that things be established in an orderly and precise fashion with every necessity accounted for. The Master Designer is he.

The Lord is very precise when it comes to telling Moses about how the tabernacle of his dwelling is to be built and furnished. Everything is explicitly prescribed. Exact measurements, specific materials, particular designs, certain positions... all this has been given to Moses in such detail that, unless you have a yen for detail in architecture or design, it gets a bit cumbersome reading through it all. Talk about a contractor with specifications.

Talk about a contractor with specifications

The engaging thing about this attention to detail is that we know that there must be a reason for it all. Does our God do anything haphazardly or without purpose? The designs of God are so layered with meaning that a reverent pondering of them hardly ever fails to bring some new revelation about his character, his greatness or his ways, whether it be how he has designed nature, the tabernacle, or some other order of things.

The tabernacle and the things in it had certain specific forms that were meaningful for their primary functions, and yet we know that they were also "types" that would be symbolic of something greater that was to come (see Hebrews 9). It was clearly important to the Lord that Moses make everything exactly according to the pattern that was given him. Moses may not have understood the reasons, but the Master Architect had them, so straying from the pattern would have contradicted the purpose and genius of God.

We may not understand all the reasons behind the patterns that the Lord gives us, though I think we understand many. Patterns regarding marriage, family, work, ministry, the church, the way society is governed and the way we live our lives have been given to us from above. Some of these patterns may be open to interpretation but others are as unequivocal as the design for the tabernacle. We would do well to always follow the pattern god shows us from his holy mountain.

A Breastpiece for Making Decisions

Fashion a breastpiece for making decisions...put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron's heart whenever he enters the presence of the Lord. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites... -Exodus 28:15,30

The Lord gave the Israelites a unique and somewhat mysterious means for inquiry into his will. Part of the attire of the High Priest was a nine-inch square breastpiece that contained twelve precious stones representing the tribes of Israel. This breastpiece was hung from the shoulders by gold chains and then attached to the waist. The breastpiece also contained what was called the “Urim and Thummim”—indeterminate objects that were employed in discerning the will of God.

One plausible theory regarding how these objects were used, put forward by J.A. Motyer, says that they were two flat objects; one side of each was called Urim (which probably means “curses”) and the other side Thummim (which means “perfections”). They would be cast like dice and if they both displayed Urim then the answer to the inquiry would be negative. If they both displayed Thummim, the answer would be positive. And, of course, if they did not agree, the answer would be inconclusive.

A high priest with an authentic breastpiece of decision is kind of hard to come by

Not all is clear regarding the use of the Urim and Thummim. However, it seems that when David would make inquiry of the priest about the merits of a particular military pursuit, the answer would come in this manner. Because the Lord prescribed this as a way of learning his will, it was presumed that he would guide the process, especially since the Priest would do it *in the presence of the Lord*. In the Old Testament, the casting of lots was affirmed as a valid way to make decisions and even made its way into the New Testament record (Ac 1:26).

Most modern day Christians are uncomfortable with trying to replicate something of this process for making decisions—and for good reason. We can find plenty of divination and fortune telling in the form of crystal balls, tarot cards and psychic hotlines. Besides, a high priest with an authentic breastpiece of decision who serves in the presence of the Lord is kind of hard to come by. Since Pentecost, the church has been endowed with the spirit of prophecy and the mind of Christ which ensures the pledge of the Shepherd that we would hear his voice. And, as priests of the Lord, we now bear the righteousness of Christ—the breastpiece which covers our hearts as we serve before him