
Bitter Waters Made Sweet

David Young

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Introduction.....I Am With You

All the scriptures are taken from the New King James Version.

Although God is still able to make bitter waters sweet when hardship and difficulties are a result of bad choices or sin, the following study focuses on bible characters who went through tough times through no fault of their own.

God makes bitter waters sweet! Although quite a statement to make, as we progress through this short study we will find time after time God doing just that.....making bitter waters sweet. He never fails! There is no situation or circumstance which is too difficult for Him. There is nothing which is outside His control. He knows our beginning from our end. He sees into the deepest part of our being and is fully acquainted with every grief and every pain we could ever go through. In fact, we read in the Old Testament that Jesus actually bore our griefs and carried our sorrows as He hung on the cross at Calvary:

Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. Isaiah 53:3-4

No wonder God can make bitter waters sweet. No matter how deep the sorrow, no matter how bitter the pain, Jesus looks upon us with love and compassion. He is the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep. We are told a bruised reed He will not break. (*Isaiah 42:3a*).

Even in bitter waters there is ALWAYS an answer. There are no bitter waters that are impossible for God to make sweet. God has promised:

Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning. Psalm 30:5b

A few verses earlier in the same Psalm David declares:

O LORD my God, I cried out to You, And You healed me. O LORD, You brought my soul up from the grave; You have kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit. Psalm 30:2-3

What wonderful words, ***You brought my soul up from the grave.*** David who wrote the Psalm, knew times of tremendous sorrow and hardship. He was just a teenager when he was anointed king by Samuel and yet he did not actually become king until he was thirty years old. (2 Samuel 5:4). During this time he experienced great pain and grief as he was relentlessly pursued by Saul and on more than one occasion had to flee for his life as hatred and jealousy drove Saul to want to kill him. And yet as we have just read, David was able to declare, '***You brought my soul up from the grave.***'

The grave is a very dark place. It's a place of isolation, a place of deep loneliness, a place where all hope is gone and yet later in the same Psalm David writes:

You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, To the end that my glory may sing praise to You and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to You forever. Psalm 30:11-12

David, who earlier in the Psalm likens his experience to being in a grave, is still able to confidently state ***You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness....*** Only God can cause that to happen! Only God can turn our mourning into dancing or enable us to put off our 'sackcloth' in order to be clothed with gladness. Notice the Psalm does not say David enjoyed *some* gladness but rather states he was ***clothed*** with gladness. In other words his whole being was filled with joy. Mourning turned into dancing and sackcloth was exchanged for clothes of gladness.

There is absolutely nothing that takes God by surprise. Nothing can ever take place that God is not aware of. In the book of Ephesians we read these wonderful words:

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works ALL THINGS according to the counsel of His will, Ephesians 1:11 (Capitals for emphasis).

God works ***ALL THINGS*** according to the counsel of His will and because of this we can have complete confidence in God's ability to make our bitter waters sweet.

No matter how deep the sorrow or how bitter the experience there is nothing God cannot handle. As we consider several different bible characters in this study, we will find that truth being evidenced time and again.

Whether it be Naomi, Hannah, the Jews during the time of Mordecai and Esther, the Shunammite woman or Joseph, we will discover in every instance God makes the bitter waters sweet.

God's word is full of wonderful promises and yet there is one promise He does not make....He does not promise to keep us from experiencing hard and difficult times! He does however promise to always be with us no matter what we are going through:

But now, thus says the LORD, who created you, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. Isaiah 43:1-2

- *God does not promise to keep us free from difficult times, but He does promise to always be with us.*

Notice the wording; '*When you pass through the waters*' and '*When you walk through the fire*'. The words do not say, 'You *will not* pass through the waters', or 'You *will not* pass through the fire'. No, the words say *when* you pass through the waters and *when* you walk through the fire.... In other words, there *will be* times when life is hard and difficult, times when it will be like passing through the waters or walking through the fire. Nevertheless look at the promises:

Regarding the rivers....*they shall not overflow you.*

Regarding the fire ... *you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you.*

Why won't the rivers overflow us, or the fire burn us or even the flame scorch us? It is because of God's wonderful promise, '*I WILL BE WITH YOU.*' (*Capitals for emphasis*).

We find the very same promise mentioned even if the difficulties we face can be compared with walking *through the valley of the shadow of death*:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; FOR YOU ARE WITH ME; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23:4 (Capitals for emphasis).

God is with us no matter what! He is with us on the mountain top and He is with us in the deepest valley. He is with us in times of great joy and He is with us in the depths of despair. He is with us when everything is going right and He is with us even when it feels as though our world is falling apart. It is worth repeating once again, God has not promised to keep us from difficult times but He has promised to always be with us!

As we consider different bible characters we will discover they all have two things in common. Firstly, they all experienced very bitter waters but secondly, they all experienced God making those bitter waters sweet! Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (*Hebrews 13:8*) and He can do exactly the same thing for you and me....He can make bitter waters sweet.

Trial Of Our Faith

In two letters in the New Testament we find very similar things written regarding going through difficult times or trials:

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. James 1:2-4

And:

*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love.
1 Peter 1:6-8a*

In both letters we find the words '*various trials*' written. We understand two things from these two words. Firstly the word *trials* is plural meaning we do not just go through *one* trial but *many* trials. And secondly the word *various* tells us the trials can come in many different ways.

In the above scriptures Peter says '*you have been GRIEVED by various trials.* (Capitals for emphasis). When we look at the Greek word for grieved (*lupēthentes*) we find it can also mean distressed. From this we understand trials represent going through difficult and distressing times. Whilst some trials may be quite short lived others may continue for a much longer period. Some trials may be less distressing than others. Whatever form the trials take there is one thing we can be certain of, it's not pleasant when we go through them!

We have already noted both James and Peter use the same words '*various trials*'. It is also worth noting both of them also mention our faith in relation to trials. James puts it this way:

.... knowing that the testing (or trying) of your faith produces patience. James 1:3

Whilst Peter puts it slightly differently:

.....that the genuineness (or trial) of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested (or tried) by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:7

Both writers make it clear that trials test or try our faith. James tells us that the testing or trying of our faith produces patience and Peter explains that the genuineness or trial of our faith is more precious than gold.

None of us would ever *want* to go through a trial, however we can be encouraged to know that good fruit can be produced as a result of it. Patience is produced and our faith is proved to be genuine.

Can we avoid trials? Definitely not:

My brethren, count it all joy WHEN you fall into various trials, James 1:2 (Capitals for emphasis).

Notice James uses the word '*when*' not the word '*if*'. In other words we are going to fall into various trials and it is just a matter of timing not a matter of it might or it might not happen.

We also note that James tells us to count it ***all joy*** when we fall into various trials. On the surface this almost appears like a complete contradiction. After all what sane person would want to count it all joy when going through difficult and distressing times. We could understand if James had encouraged us not to lose hope when we go through trials, or had encouraged us to fix our eyes on Jesus during the time of trial but to count it all joy! However as we look beyond the trial itself to see the good fruit that can result from it such as patience and our faith being purified we can begin to ***count it all joy***.

When we go through trials we always have a choice. We can either allow the trial to make us bitter or we can allow the trial to push us deeper into the Lord.

What did James say in regard to going through trials? He said....***count it all joy when you fall into various trials.....***We don't have a choice as to whether or not we go through trials but we do have a choice as to how we react to the trial while we are going through it. We can't avoid the trials but we can count them as joy knowing that God will cause good fruit to be produced. We can allow them to push us into a deeper walk with our Lord.

- *When we go through a trial we always have a choice. We can either allow the trial to make us bitter or we can allow the trial to push us deeper into God.*

As we bring this chapter to a close, let us take great encouragement from the words written by Peter towards the end of his first letter:

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 5:10-11

Naomi

We now begin to consider several bible characters who all experienced very difficult and often painful times. Our first bible character is Naomi:

Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband. Ruth 1:1-5

Who was Naomi? We discover in the book of Ruth that Naomi was an Israelite married to Elimelech and they lived with their two sons Mahlon and Chilion in Judah.

Naomi's name means 'my joy', 'my bliss', or 'pleasantness of Jehovah'. In today's society names more often than not are chosen based on liking the name. This was not the case in bible times. In bible times the names given to people were highly significant, we have only to consider Jacob to realise this.

The name Jacob means 'holder of the heel' or 'supplanter':

So when her (Rebekah) days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. Genesis 25:24-26

From the above verses we can immediately see how Jacob received his name. He came out of the womb holding Esau's heel and the name 'Jacob' was given to him which means '*holder of the heel*'.

The word '*supplanter*' means '*something or someone who wrongfully takes the place of another.*' As we continue the story in Genesis we find Jacob deceives his father Isaac and by doing so gains the blessing that was rightfully due to his brother Esau. Once again we realise the significance of the name 'Jacob' as we read how he robbed Esau of his inheritance. (See Genesis chapter 27)

To further emphasise the significance of a name in bible times we find Jacob's name eventually being changed to Israel. (See Genesis chapter 32). This happened as a result of him '*wrestling*' with God. The name Israel means '*God Contended*', '*Wrestles with God*' or '*Triumphant with God*'.

Simply using Jacob as just one example we can begin to appreciate how the name given to a person in bible times was signification. The reason for noting this will become more apparent as we continue our study of Naomi whose name as we have seen means '*my joy*'.

As a result of a famine Elimelech along with Naomi and his two sons Mahlon and Chilion left Judah to go to live in the country of Moab. The Moabites unlike the Israelites, did not worship Yahweh but worshipped the god Chemosh. The worship of Chemosh was truly an abomination. In *2 Kings chapter 3* we find the king of Moab offering his first born son as a sacrifice to the god Chemosh.

We have noted the importance of the name given to a person in bible times. We have also appreciated that the name Naomi meant '*my joy*', '*my bliss*' or '*pleasantness of Jehovah*'. From this we can conclude that joy was associated with Naomi. No doubt she brought joy to others as well as experiencing joy herself. At the risk of reading too much into scripture, I am confident that should you or I have sat down with Naomi to have a conversation with her we would have found the conversation to have been interwoven with joy. And yet by the time Naomi returns to her homeland after living in the land of Moab, she demands to no longer be called *Naomi* but to be known as *Mara* which means *bitter*! How could such a change happen?

We are about to discover the pain and hardship Naomi endured. She would have appreciated the name of a person depicted their character. Because of the intensity of the hardship she had endured and its effects on her, she knew it would be completely hypocritical to continue being known by the name *Naomi* and therefore demanded to be known by the name *Mara* meaning *bitter*!

What a contrast and complete turn a round. The two words 'joy' and 'bitter' are almost opposites in their meaning. What has happened to Naomi for this drastic change to take place?

The hardship for Naomi really began the moment she left Bethlehem to live in the country of Moab. She was no longer in familiar surroundings. Many of us love to visit and discover new places or even experience the excitement of moving somewhere new. This was not the case for Naomi. She was no longer amongst people who worshipped Yahweh the One true God but lived amongst a people who worshipped the false god Chemosh.

Who were the Moabites? They were a tribe descended from Moab, the son of Lot, born of an incestuous relationship with his oldest daughter. (See *Genesis chapter 19*). Not exactly a good starting point for a nation of people. The Moabites worshipped the god Chemosh which was truly an abomination. We read in *2 Kings* how the king of Moab when faced with military defeat, took his first born son and offered him as a sacrifice on the city walls:

And when the king of Moab saw that the battle was too fierce for him, he took with him seven hundred men who drew swords, to break through to the king of Edom, but they could not. Then he took his eldest son who would have reigned in his place, and offered him as a burnt offering upon the wall; and there was great indignation against Israel. So they departed from him and returned to their own land. 2 Kings 3:26-27

The mere experience of having to move to an unknown land living amongst a people who not only worshipped a foreign false god but worshipped a god with practices that were an abomination to the true living God Yahweh, would have in itself been sufficient to cause hardship and difficulties for Naomi. However, as we continue to read the account of Naomi we find this was only the starting point of her pain! Things get worse! Sometime after moving to live in the country of Moab we read the following:

Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons.

Ruth 1:3

We are not told how long it was after moving to Moab that Elimelech died but this was another step deeper into the waters of hardship and difficulties. Naomi is in a strange land and has lost her husband but at least she has her two sons for support. At some point after the death of her husband, Naomi's two sons takes wives from the women of Moab:

Now they (the two sons) took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years.

Ruth 1:4

On the surface there doesn't appear to be anything wrong with this. In fact it could be considered a very natural thing to happen and to prompt a time of celebration not only for the two sons but for Naomi also. But was this really a time to celebrate as far as Naomi was concerned?

Remember the Israelites worshipped the true God Yahweh but the Moabites worshipped a false god Chemosh. Not only that but God had commanded that His people the nation of Israel were not to intermarry. God knew if they were to intermarry the Israelites would be drawn to go after other gods prompting God's discipline upon His people:

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. Deuteronomy 7:1-4

This was yet another 'blow' for Naomi to have to deal with. She had moved from the familiarity of her homeland, her husband had died and now her two sons disobey God's commandment by taking wives from the Moabite people. Surely just one of these events would have been difficult enough to deal with but having to deal with all three in a relatively short space of time is surely a level of pain which could be described as unbearable. And yet there is still more pain and distress awaiting Naomi.

After living in Moab for at least ten years we read the following words:

Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband. Ruth 1:5

Not just one son but both sons die! We don't know the exact length of time from moving to the country of Moab to when the sons died. Neither do we know how much time lapsed between the death of each son! But we are told all of these distressing events took place in the space of approximately ten years.

This now a desperate situation for Naomi. She has had to adjust to living in a foreign land where the people worship a false god. She has lost her husband, she has gone through the pain of her two sons disobeying God's commandment by intermarrying and as though that wasn't enough pain to have to deal with, her two sons have died!

It is after the death of her two sons we read that Naomi hears how the Lord has visited His people by giving them bread and so she decides to leave Moab to return to her homeland Judah:

Then she (Naomi) arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread. Ruth 1:6

Considering it to be the best thing to do, Naomi encourages both of her daughters in law to return to their mother's house but Ruth refuses to do so confirming her total commitment to Naomi. When they both arrive in Bethlehem Naomi makes it clear she no longer wants to be known by that name:

Now the two of them (Naomi and Ruth) went until they came to Bethlehem. And it happened, when they had come to Bethlehem, that all the city was excited because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"

Ruth 1:19-21

In the above scriptures we read how *all* the city of Bethlehem is excited about the return of Naomi. They are obviously really pleased to hear she has returned home but little do they realise the person who has returned to the city is not the same person she was when she left! The person who left Bethlehem ten years ago was known as Naomi meaning 'joy' but the person who has now returned home demands to be known as Mara meaning 'bitter'.

The following words reveal the depth of grief Naomi had experienced since leaving Bethlehem approximately ten years earlier when she says ***“Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the LORD has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?”***

As we read the above words it is apparent Naomi considers it is the Lord who is the cause of her heartache. She declares it is ***the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me***. She goes so far as to say ***the Almighty has afflicted me***. These are very strong words and convey why she no longer wanted to be called Naomi. It was Naomi who left Bethlehem but.... it was Mara who returned!

There is no doubting the bitter waters Naomi had gone through had greatly impacted and changed her. And as we have seen, the words she spoke to those who excitedly came out to meet her conveyed a message of deep pain. And yet in the midst of the pain was God's provision of kindness and care. And that provision was Ruth.

To fully appreciate how God's provision of kindness towards Naomi was shown through Ruth we need to go back a few verses to see what took place prior to Naomi returning to Bethlehem.

When Naomi made the decision to return to the land of Judah as a result of hearing how the Lord had visited His people by giving them bread, she realised the importance of her two daughters in law Ruth and Orpah needing to stay in their own land or order to find husbands:

But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!” Ruth 1:11-13

There is no doubting the strength of Naomi's reasoning in encouraging her daughters in law to remain in their own land. As a result of this Orpah heeds Naomi's words but Ruth is insistent she will go with Naomi. Not only is Ruth insistent in going back with Naomi, but listen to her words of total and complete loyalty:

But Ruth said:

“Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me.”

Ruth 1:16-17

What incredible words! Phrase followed by phrase of complete commitment to Naomi. Words of faithfulness, words of devotion. Words conveying the reality that no matter what the consequences may be for Ruth she will not leave Naomi. Was it mere coincidence that Ruth should become Naomi's daughter in law? Absolutely not! Ruth

was God's provision of care and love for Naomi. Not only that but she was the very person God would use to cause the bitter waters to be made sweet.

Possibly many of us over the years have heard sermons based on the above verses in relation to our commitment to the Lord. Commitment which is unwavering through the bad times as well as the good. And yet how important it is particularly during times of great difficulty, to remind ourselves of the wonder of the Lord's total commitment to you and me. A commitment so strong and so complete that the Lord says the following words:

“I will never leave you nor forsake you.” Hebrews 13:5b

These aren't just words on a page. These are words spoken by God Himself to His children. The One who created all things, the One who is without beginning and without end promises ***I will never leave you nor forsake you.*** That is surely a promise worth reading again, ***I will NEVER leave you nor forsake you.*** (*Capitals for emphasis*). The word 'never' is time encompassing. It includes the past, it includes the present and it includes the future. God never has left us, He is with us now, and He will never leave us in the future.

When we go through the good times God is there. When we go through the valley of the shadow of death God is there. When we wander off the path following our own ways rather than the Lords, God is still there lovingly drawing us back. Through the joy and through the tears

God is there. His promise is true no matter what, He will never leave us nor forsake us. When there just seems to be no let up to the intensity of the difficulties we face God's promise is still the same...*'I will never leave you nor forsake you'*.

It may well feel right now as though you are walking through a barren wilderness place but the One who promises never to leave or forsake you also promises:

Behold, I will do a new thing, Now it shall spring forth; Shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness And rivers in the desert. Isaiah 43:19

Only God can make a way in the wilderness and only God can cause rivers to flow in the desert.

Let's return to the story of Naomi.

Soon after arriving in Bethlehem Ruth discovers Naomi's husband had a relative of great wealth and so she asks Naomi's permission to go into the field in order to glean the heads of corn:

There was relative of Naomi's husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech. His name was Boaz. So Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Please let me go to the field, and glean heads of grain after him in whose sight I may find favour." And she said to her, "Go, my daughter." Ruth 2:1

It isn't long before Boaz who is a Godly man, discovers Ruth came back with Naomi from the land of Moab. And Ruth soon realises she has found favour in the eyes of Boaz and inquires why:

And Boaz answered and said to her, "It has been fully reported to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, and how you have left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before. The LORD repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge." Ruth 2:11-12

Nothing is hidden from God and as a result of all she had done for Naomi, Ruth not only began to experience God's favour towards her but also discovered for herself a place of refuge under the wings of the Lord God of Israel.

Boaz being a Godly man and realising he was related to Ruth as a result of her marriage to Mahlon Naomi's son, sought to do the right thing in order that the family name of Elimelech might not be cut off from his brethren. Boaz knew there was a closer relative who should continue the family name. However upon realising the closer relative was unable to fulfil his duty, took Ruth for his wife. (*For the full account see Ruth chapter 3 and 4*):

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife; and when he went in to her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a close relative; and may his name be famous in Israel! And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her bosom, and became a nurse to him. Ruth 4:14-17

Having arrived towards the end of this short but amazing book we read some wonderful words in the above verses. Just look at the words of blessing the Israelite women spoke over Naomi....***Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a close relative; and may his name be famous in Israel! And may he be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him.”***

Naomi who had previously declared she had gone out full but the Lord had brought her home empty (*Ruth 1:21*), is now hearing the women speak a blessing over her. The blessing she hears spoken is that the baby boy would be a restorer of life to her and a nourisher of her old age. What a blessing to hear spoken. Not only that but she hears that his name is going to be famous in all Israel. Finally Naomi is told that her daughter in law Ruth who loves her and bore the child, is better to her than seven sons.

Naomi had lost two sons but she is now being told Ruth is better to her than seven sons! And what does Naomi do after she has heard the women speak these wonderful words? She takes the child and lays him on her bosom and becomes a nurse to him.

What a turn around! How God had woven His plan in love to cause the bitter waters for Naomi to be made sweet. I wonder what thoughts went through Naomi's mind as she looked at the young child as she held him. If anyone had asked her at that moment of time what name she wanted be known by I am absolutely confident that without giving the question a second thought she would have replied, "*My name is Naomi!*"

There is no questioning the harsh and painful time Naomi experienced as one tragedy followed another whilst she dwelt in the land of Moab. But equally there is no doubting the joy which must have overflowed from her as she nursed her first grandson. The name of her first grandson Obed meaning '*servant of God*' would be famous in Israel. And we certainly discover this to be the case. Obed eventually had a grandson who became king David:

Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David the king.
Matthew 1:5

Not only was Obed's grandson king David but as we continue reading the genealogy from ***David the king*** onwards we eventually come to verse 16 where we read:

And Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ. Matthew 1:16

How amazing to find as we read through the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew chapter one Obed is mentioned.

As Naomi lovingly nursed her first grandson little would she have realised the relevance of the descendants who would follow the one she was holding. What an incredible and wonderful story and what better way could there be to finish this account than by once again reading these encouraging words which surely sum up the latter part of Naomi's life:

***You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;
You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with
gladness,
To the end that my glory may sing praise to You and not
be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to You forever.
Psalm 30:11-12***

Hannah

We find the account of Hannah recorded in the first two chapters of 1 Samuel.

Hannah's husband Elkanah was a Godly man who every year went from his city to Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to the Lord. In addition to Hannah he had another wife called Peninnah:

Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim Zophim, of the mountains of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. And he had two wives: the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. This man went up from his city yearly to worship and sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. Also the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, the priests of the LORD, were there. 1 Samuel 1:1-3

As we read the above scriptures we discover a stark difference between Elkanah's two wives. Peninnah had children and would therefore have been considered especially blessed by God. However in contrast Hannah was barren because the LORD had closed her womb:

And whenever the time came for Elkanah to make an offering, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, although the LORD had closed her womb.

And her rival also provoked her severely, to make her miserable, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it was, year by year, when she went up to the house of the LORD, that she provoked her; therefore she wept and did not eat. 1 Samuel 1:4-7

Being barren would have been a heavy burden for Hannah to carry but the grief caused by this was greatly aggravated knowing that Elkanah's second wife Peninnah had several children. The distress for Hannah didn't stop there! Every year when Elkanah made the journey to worship the Lord taking his two wives with him, we read Peninnah provoked Hannah severely making her miserable because the Lord had closed her womb. As a result of this Hannah *wept and did not eat*.

It would have been painful for Hannah if this had just happened once but we read it happened *year by year*. This wasn't an isolated incident this was an annual event! Every year Hannah was provoked severely to the point of being made miserable. I'm sure as the time approached each year to make the journey to Shiloh the feeling of dread within Hannah would have been almost unbearable knowing that she would once again have to face the cruelty of Peninnah's harsh and taunting words.

I'm sure we can now begin to appreciate the pain Hannah was enduring. She was barren added to which she had the knowledge that every year she would have to face ridicule and humiliation. In addition, seeing Peninnah's children would have also been a constant reminder of all that she was missing not having any children of her own.

Hannah must have felt in a hopeless situation. The continual sense of shame because of not being able to bear children. And as we read the words '***the LORD Had closed her womb***' initially there is ring of cruelty to them. But we do not worship a cruel God! In his first letter, John makes it abundantly clear that God is a God of love and that He demonstrated that love by sending His own Son into the world that we might live through Him:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. 1 John 1:7-9

God is love and manifested or demonstrated His love in the greatest way possible....He gave His only Son to be the Perfect Sacrifice for you and me. The fact that the Lord had closed Hannah's womb was not an act of cruelty but an act of an *all knowing* and *all loving* God! A God who knows the end from the beginning and had a perfect plan for Hannah just as He does for each one of us.

Although Hannah at this time was unable to realise the love of God towards her because of the pain she was enduring, nevertheless as we will discover the Lord had a special purpose for Hannah to fulfil.

Many of us have no doubt heard the phrase '*there is a bigger picture*'. In other words things are not as they initially appear, there is much more to it.

And how true it is in our daily walk with the Lord that we only see part of the picture. But God knows the beginning from the end and therefore sees it all. He sees the whole picture!

Imagine for a moment going into a friend's home and noticing a partly finished jigsaw puzzle on the table. As you look at the unfinished puzzle you find yourself trying to imagine what the finished scene will look like. There are still so many pieces yet to be put in place that although it is possible to make out part of the scene it remains impossible to fully imagine what it will look like when it is complete.

Only the skill of the careful craftsman who designed the puzzle could keep the finished scene a mystery until the remaining few pieces had been slotted into position.

The time comes round once again for Elkanah, Peninnah and Hannah to make their annual visit to Shiloh to worship and honour the Lord. Hannah's heart must have been filled with dread as the day approached. But this time was going to be different! Little did Hannah know that the next 'piece' of the picture was about to fall into place and would result in a miracle from God.

Whilst on this particular visit to Shiloh we read the following words:

So Hannah arose after they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the tabernacle of the LORD. And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish. 1 Samuel 1:9-10

As we read the above scriptures it is as though we are provided with an 'open window' allowing us to see into the depth and intensity of pain Hannah was going through. She was in ***bitterness of soul*** and as she prayed to the Lord she ***wept in anguish***.

As Eli sat on a seat by the door post of the tabernacle of the Lord he sees Hannah and observes her mouth moving but does not hear any words. Hannah was crying out to the Lord from the depths of her heart and although her lips were moving she was not speaking any words. Because of this Eli assumes she is drunk and rebukes her with the following words:

So Eli said to her, “How long will you be drunk? Put your wine away from you!” 1 Samuel 1:14

Hannah replies:

But Hannah answered and said, “No, my lord, I am a woman of sorrowful spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor intoxicating drink, but have poured out my soul before the Lord. 1 Samuel 1:15

Once again the words ***I am a woman of sorrowful spirit*** convey the intensity of suffering. This wasn't a short lived or superficial suffering, this was something which had touched the very core of her being. And it is out of this place of deep, deep sorrow that Hannah pours out her soul to the Lord.

It is not hard to imagine that as Hannah pours out her soul to the Lord she tells Him about every bit of pain she has been experiencing. The pain of carrying the constant shame of not having children. The suffering resulting from the constant severe provocation from Peninnah. The grief of seeing Peninnah's children realising she had no children of her own. I don't think this was a short momentary prayer Hannah made to the Lord. Instead I believe she literally emptied herself before the Lord telling Him everything she had gone through. Equally as we read the words Hannah prayed to the Lord I don't believe for a moment this was a prayer of 'bargaining' with God that if He would grant her a male child she would give him back to the Lord. No, this was a prayer rising up through all the pain from the very depths of her being to the very heart of God expressing that if He were to grant her a male child she would show her complete and total gratitude by gratefully giving the child back to the Lord:

And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the LORD and wept in anguish. Then she made a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a male child, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head.”

1 Samuel 1:10-11

After realising his mistake in assuming Hannah to be drunk and discovering instead she had been crying out to the Lord bringing her request before Him, Eli reassured her with the following words:

Then Eli answered and said, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him.” Samuel 1:17

Moments earlier Hannah had been pouring her soul out to the Lord and now we find Eli telling her to ***go in peace***. What a contrast! And the reason that Hannah could go in peace? It was because of the promise... ***the God of Israel grant your petition which you have asked of Him***.

- *God's promise had been birthed in Hannah's heart as she cried out to Him.*

Hannah may have come to Shiloh on this particular occasion in bitterness of soul but she left with peace in her heart knowing she was carrying the promise of God that her petition had been granted. The baby may not have been born yet but without any doubt the promise of God had been 'birthed' in Hannah's heart as she cried out to the Lord. God is faithful to His word and in the process of time Hannah conceived and bore a child calling his name Samuel meaning '*heard by God*':

Then they rose early in the morning and worshipped before the LORD, and returned and came to their house at Ramah. And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. So it came to pass in the process of time that Hannah conceived and bore a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, “Because I have asked for him from the LORD.” Samuel 1:19-20

God had indeed made the bitter waters sweet for Hannah. Not only did Hannah conceive and bear a child, but she gave birth to Samuel who became a great prophet used by God to speak His words to the nation of Israel! What an honour to give birth to a son who God would mightily use amongst His people.

As we continue to read the account of Hannah we discover that God blessed her with more children:

And the Lord visited Hannah, so that she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. Meanwhile the child Samuel grew before the Lord. Samuel 2:21

We can surely take great encouragement from the account of Hannah. No matter how difficult things may appear God is able to turn them right round for His glory. Year after year Hannah faced what appeared to be a never ending and hopeless situation. However a sense of hopelessness changed to a heart filled with hope as a result of Hannah hearing the word of promise from God spoken through Eli. Irrespective of our circumstances, we too can know a heart filled with hope as God's word becomes alive in our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hope

I believe it is relevant at this point to take a small detour in order to consider the importance of hope.

Because of our everyday language we have largely lost the value of hope and the huge importance it plays in our walk with the Lord. At the end of 1 Corinthians chapter 13 Paul mentions *hope* along side *love* and *faith*. Many of us have no doubt grown up hearing many words preached on love as well as on faith but it is probably true to say we have heard far fewer sermons preached on hope. And yet Paul places hope in the very same verse he mentions love and faith.

One of the reasons we have sadly lost an appreciation of the importance of hope is because of the way it is used in our every day language. As we will discover, the way we so often used the word 'hope' is definitely not the way the bible talks about hope.

Our use of the word hope is often more in the context of what could be described as 'wishful' thinking. For example we may say things such as the following:

“I hope it doesn't rain on Saturday when we have our BBQ.”

“I do hope you have a lovely birthday party.”

“I'm sorry to hear you are needing to have your car repaired. I do hope the bill is not too expensive.”

In all of the above examples the word 'hope' is used in a very weak and wishful way. In other words it might happen or it might not happen. Using the above examples, it *might* rain on Saturday for the BBQ. The birthday party *might not* go as well as expected. The bill for the car *might* be very expensive.

As we can see from the above examples our use of the word 'hope' has lost any sense of certainty. Biblical hope is completely different. It is not some form of wishful thinking that may or may not happen but holds a real and solid sense of assurance. In fact we are told in the book of Hebrews that biblical hope provides an anchor for the soul. How does biblical hope do that? It's because it anchors us to the word of God which is more than sufficient for providing complete assurance :

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast....

Hebrews 6:19a

When the anchor of a boat is dropped and falls to the seabed it becomes 'fastened' to the seabed itself providing stability for the boat. This is exactly what biblical hope does. It provides tremendous stability particularly during times when the going is rough. In the same way the anchor needs to fasten to the seabed in order to produce stability for the boat, so hope that gives our lives stability needs to be firmly fastened or anchored to the word of God. Without the word of God hope has no true basis and becomes little more than wishful thinking.

Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians refers to hope as '*the hope of salvation*' and he likens it to a helmet:

But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. 1Thessalonians 5:8

The Greek word for salvation in this verse is (sōtērias) which includes the meaning of 'deliverance'. So it would be just as correct for us to read the last part of the above verse in the following way:

***.....and as a helmet the hope of deliverance.
1Thessalonians 5:8b***

Now we can begin to see the importance of biblical hope. When we are going through hardships and difficulties and times where naturally speaking there is no hope, we can still put on as a helmet the hope of salvation. Even in the midst of hopelessness we can have hope. Why? How? Because God is our source of hope:

For You are my hope, O Lord God; You are my trust from my youth. Psalm 71:5

We find in Abraham a wonderful example of someone who had hope in a hopeless situation. Not only that but we discover the hope Abraham experienced was firmly anchored to God's word of promise.

In Genesis chapter 12 God's promises Abraham that He would make him a great nation. At the time of God making this promise to Abraham he does not have any children! Year passes after year and despite the promise God gave, Abraham and Sarah remain childless. Nevertheless with the passing of time God continues to reassure Abraham of His promise:

And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered.
Genesis 13:16

And:

Then He (God) brought him (Abraham) outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." *Genesis 15:5*

Even when the time came where Sarah was passed passed the age of child bearing, God still reminds and reassures Abraham of His promise:

Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her."
Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" *Genesis 17:15-17*

Abraham (previously known as Abram) was seventy five years old when God called him to leave Haran to go to a land God would show him. When God spoke to Abraham in the above verses we read he is now one hundred years old! Twenty five years have passed! Sarah has gone beyond the age of being able to bear children. Naturally speaking it is now impossible for the promise to be fulfilled and other than the promise given to Abraham the situation is hopeless. But God did give His promise and not only did He give it but He continued to remind Abraham of the promise given.

Twenty five years is a long time for Abraham to maintain hope that God will be faithful to His word, and yet we read these words in the book of Romans:

(as it is written, “I (God) have made you (Abraham) a father of many nations”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “So shall your descendants be.” Romans 4:17-18

Notice the above words... ***who, contrary to hope, in hope believed....*** Naturally speaking Abraham was in a hopeless situation. Sarah had passed the age of being able to have children and yet in this hopeless situation, we read Abraham had hope! How could Abraham maintain hope in a hopeless situation? The answer is because God had

given His word of promise. Not only did God give His word but several times during the twenty five years God reminds and reassures Abraham of the promise. It is because of the word God gave to Abraham that he was able to anchor his hope into the word of promise. Again, hope without the word of God is nothing more than wishful thinking, but when it is anchored firmly into God's word we can have hope even in a seemingly hopeless situation.

Abraham was far from perfect. On two occasions he lied about Sarah being his sister and despite God's promise he allowed Sarah to persuade him to go into her Egyptian maidservant Hagar in order to have children. (*See Genesis chapter 16*). And yet despite his failings we see in Abraham a wonderful example of someone who contrary to hope was still able to maintain hope! Without God's word of promise Abraham would not have had hope but.....because of God's word of promise he was able to have hope in what appeared to be a hopeless situation.

As we walk through difficulties and hardships from which none of us are exempt, having hope becomes so very important. Hope won't change our circumstances but it will change us on the inside! It will keep us from giving up. When the going gets really rough and it just seems as though the Lord is not hearing or answering our cries for help, hope will protect us from sinking into the deep pit of despair and depression. It will keep fear and despair at bay and will enable us to know peace even when the storm is raging.

If there is one thing that we need when we walk through bitter waters it is surely hope! What better way could there be of finishing this chapter than taking great encouragement from the following wonderful scriptures about hope:

*Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart,
All you who hope in the LORD. Psalm 31:24*

*For in You, O LORD, I hope;
You will hear, O Lord my God. Psalm 38:15*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God;
For I shall yet praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God. Psalm 43:5*

*My soul faints for Your salvation,
But I hope in Your word. Psalm 119:81*

*“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
And whose hope is the LORD. Jeremiah 17:7*

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Romans 15:4

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. 1 Peter 1:3

Esther

At the time of Esther the Jews were in exile under the rulership of King Ahasuerus who reigned over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. Mordecai was a Jew who had adopted his orphaned cousin Esther and brought her up as his own daughter.

Unknown to the Jews at this time they were about to go through very bitter waters. However as we will discover, Esther and her uncle Mordecai were God's provision for such a time as this and would be the people God would use to bring deliverance to the Jews!

In the third year of his reign, King Ahasuerus made a feast which lasted seven days for all his officials and servants—the powers of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces. At the same time Queen Vashti also made a feast for the women in the royal palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.

On the seventh day of the feast the king requests the presence of the queen in order to show her beauty to all those present, however Queen Vashti refuses to come. As a result the king seeks counsel as to what should be done to her because of her refusal to attend the king's feast. He is advised to make a ruling that the queen cannot come before his presence ever again and her royal position to be given to another. The king finds this counsel acceptable and acts on it.

As we continue reading we find the king's servants suggesting to the king that beautiful young virgins should be brought before him and the young woman who pleases the king should be made queen in the place of Queen Vashti.

This advice pleased the king and Esther along with many other young women were taken to the king's palace. Esther finds great favour with the king and is eventually made queen in place of Vashti. (Esther at this time had not made known her people or her family as Mordecai had charged her not to make this known):

The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Esther 2:17

It is worth pausing at this point. Neither Esther, Mordecai or any of the Jews had any realisation what was about to take place... but God knew! Esther becoming queen was neither an accident or a coincidence but was God's provision for the safety and deliverance of Jews.

We have already realised we cannot avoid going through very difficult times, they are a part of our Christian life. Nevertheless, we can be assured that God knows about every difficulty we will ever face and He has already made provision for us. What great encouragement when we are going through trials and hardships to realise that God has known about it before hand. The circumstances we face may have come as a complete shock to us but we can be totally confident they were no surprise to God!

The news the Jews were about to receive would be absolutely devastating prompting great mourning throughout the land but God had got His servants Esther and Mordecai in place and through them He would bring miraculous deliverance to the Jews.

Towards the end of chapter two we read of something occurring which is of particular relevance:

In those days, while Mordecai sat within the king's gate, two of the king's eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, doorkeepers, became furious and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. So the matter became known to Mordecai, who told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name. And when an inquiry was made into the matter, it was confirmed, and both were hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king. Esther 2:21-23

It becomes known to Mordecai that the king is in danger. As a result of this he informs Esther who in turn tells the king. Because of this the king's life is saved. This event as we shall shortly discover, has real significance with respect to the outcome of the Jews.

As we continue with the story we find King Ahasuerus promoting Haman and setting his seat above all of the princes. Due to this all of the king's servants who were within the king's gate bow and pay homage to him but Mordecai being a Jew refuses to bow or pay homage to Haman. When Haman hears about this he is filled with wrath. This wrath however is not just directed towards Mordecai, but becomes directed towards all of the Jews:

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the princes who were with him. And all the king's servants who were within the king's gate bowed and paid homage to Haman, for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai would not bow or pay homage. Esther 3:1-2

And:

When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow or pay him homage, Haman was filled with wrath. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone, for they had told him of the people of Mordecai. Instead, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus—the people of Mordecai. Esther 3:5-6

Notice the wording, Haman ***sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus—the people of Mordecai.*** Haman who now holds an extremely influential position is determined to destroy not just some but ALL the Jews throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerrus.

This is huge! One man in an extremely influential position is now about to seek consent from the king for all of the Jews to be destroyed. Irrespective of age, *all* Jews are to be destroyed!

Suddenly and without warning this has become an extremely dangerous time for the Jews. Overnight they have moved from a position of carrying on with everyday life as normal to one of fearing for their lives.

God's 'positioning' of Esther now begins to become fully into focus. It was not an accident that Mordecai and Esther were in the land at that particular time. It was not a coincidence that Esther had been chosen to be queen. This was ordained by God.

So many times as we read through God's word we appreciate over and over that God has his people in the right place for the right time. Moses who had come to an end of himself wandering in the wilderness looking after sheep was exactly the person God required to be the prophet to go to Pharaoh demanding that he let the Israelites go free. Joseph released from prison was the right person in exactly the right place for the right time to be the one who God used to save Jacob and his family (the Israelites) from starvation. Nehemiah was the right person in the right place at the right time as cup bearer to the king and therefore able to ask for the materials he required to fulfil the vision God had given to him of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. And now we read of Esther. Having been chosen to be queen, Esther was the right person in the exact right place at exactly the right time.

Driven by hatred Haman tells King Ahasuerus all about the Jews living in the land explaining that because their laws were different they did not keep the king's laws. Haman subtly uses these facts advising the king that they should all be destroyed. Upon hearing these words the king agrees to the Jew's destruction and therefore has letters to this effect sent throughout the land:

And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions. Esther 3:13

Notice the strength of the words used in the above scripture,.... ***to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day...***

With this threat having now been decreed throughout the land no Jew was safe. There was now no escape just the expectation of total annihilation. The sense of fear, desperation and confusion must have been palpable! These were bitter waters indeed for every single Jew living in the land.

Because we know how the story ends it is so easy for us to miss the depth of anguish and total despair there must have been for every single Jew at this time. And of course this pain was equally felt by Mordecai:

When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city. He cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went as far as the front of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. And in every province where the king's command and decree arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes. Esther 4:1-3

It isn't too long before Esther hears about Mordecai being in sackcloth and ashes. At this point of time she has absolutely no idea what has happened and is simply concerned to hear that her uncle is in sackcloth. As a result she arranges for garments to be sent to clothe him but Mordecai refuses. Esther therefore sends Hathach one of the king's eunuchs to go to Mordecai in order to discover what the problem is.

Mordecai explains the situation to Hathach and asks Esther to make petition to the king on behalf of the Jews. On hearing this Esther sends a message back to Mordecai reminding him that if any man or woman goes in to the inner court of the king without having been called, the law demands that they are put to death. The only exception to this rule being if the king should hold out his golden sceptre as a sign of granting permission to approach the king. In other words, to approach the king without invitation was at the risk of being put to death!

What a dilemma for Esther. She is a Jew and would therefore have fully related with her people. She would also have carried a tremendous sense of gratitude for all that Mordecai had done for her and yet she knew only too well the risk she would take in approaching the king without being invited. As a result of this she sends a message back to Mordecai explaining she has not been called before the king for the last thirty days and is therefore unable to approach him due to the law demanding the death of anyone attempting to come before the king in the inner chamber without having been invited.

As we turn our attention back to Mordecai we find one verse which speaks volumes regarding his faith in God. When Mordecai receives the message from Esther explaining that she is unable to approach the king without being requested the following are the words Mordecai speaks to her messengers:

And Mordecai told them (the messengers) to answer Esther: “Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king’s palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

Esther 4:13-14

As we read the above scriptures it is totally clear that Mordecai was not placing his trust in Esther but in God. Instead of falling into despair on receiving Esther's reply rather he says:

For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place but you and your father’s house will perish.

Esther 4:14a

What words revealing the confidence Mordecai had in God protecting His people. But equally what sobering words for Esther to hear realising that if she keeps quiet she and her father's house would perish! (At this time King Ahasuerus does not know Esther is a Jew). Mordecai finishes his message for Esther with the words:

Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Esther 4:14b

As we read the full account of Esther there is no escaping the fact that God had planned for her to hold the position of queen for just such a time as this. As a result of hearing the words of Mordecai Esther has a change of heart. She requests that the Jews who are present in Shushan, fast for three days neither eating or drinking making it clear that she and her maids will do the same.

Although there is no mention of the Jews calling upon God during the three day fast, I think it is safe to assume that much prayer would have taken place during this time. The fact that Esther had called for there to be the fast suggests that she recognised the need to call upon the Lord before attempting to go before the king and as a Jew she would have been familiar with the importance and effectiveness of fasting:

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: “Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!”

Esther 4:15-16

After putting on her royal robes Queen Esther stands in the inner court of the king's palace. When the king sees Queen Esther she finds favour in his sight and he holds his golden sceptre out to her. Permission to approach the king has been granted. The king asks the queen what her request is:

So Esther answered, “If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him.” Esther 5:4

At the feast Esther does not make her request fully known but instead once again invites the king and Haman to a second feast.

The significance of Mordecai making known to King Ahasuerus how his two eunuchs Bighthan and Teresh had sought to kill him, now becomes apparent. The night before attending the second feast the king is unable to sleep and so requests for the book of the records of chronicles to be brought to him:

And it was found written that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, the doorkeepers who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. Then the king said, “What honour or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?” And the king’s servants who attended him said, “Nothing has been done for him.” Esther 6:2-3

What an amazing and clear intervention of God. The fact the king couldn't sleep and therefore asks for the records of chronicles to be brought to him changes everything!

As the book of the records of chronicles is read the king becomes reminded of what Mordecai had done and therefore asks what honour or dignity had been bestowed on him. As a result of discovering that no honour had

been bestowed on Mordecai the king seeks to rectify the situation. As Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace and because of the position he held, the king asks Haman what should be done for the man whom the king delights to honour. (Haman immediately assumes because the king delights in him he is wanting to know how to honour Haman).

This is a major turning point for the Jews! Haman answers the question of the king in the following way:

Now Haman thought in his heart, “Whom would the king delight to honour more than me?” And Haman answered the king, “For the man whom the king delights to honour, let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on its head. Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king’s most noble princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honour. Then parade him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him: ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour!’ ” Esther 6:6b-9

Haman is about to receive a dreadful shock. Assuming King Ahasuerus would be pleased to accept his advice and that Haman is about to receive honour of the highest kind he hears these words:

Then the king said to Haman, “Hurry, take the robe and the horse, as you have suggested, and do so for Mordecai the Jew who sits within the king’s gate! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken.” Esther 6:10

What a complete turn around! Haman who was responsible for seeking to have all of the Jews including Mordecai killed, is now greatly humiliated not only as a result of Mordecai receiving the honour Haman had expected to be his but even more so as a result of being the very one to parade Mordecai around the city square riding the king's horse.

Needless to say his anger towards Mordecai at this point is seething! Following this tremendous humiliation he returned to the second feast the queen had asked he and the king attend.

It is during the second feast the queen reveals to the king Haman's wicked plot to have all of the Jews killed:

So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther. And on the second day, at the banquet of wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request, up to half the kingdom? It shall be done!" Then Queen Esther answered and said, "If I have found favour in your sight. O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Had we been sold as male and female slaves, I would have held my tongue, although the enemy could never compensate for the king's loss."

So King Ahasuerus answered and said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?”

And Esther said, “The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!” I Kings 7:1-6

As a result of all the king hears, Haman is hung on the very same gallows he had prepared for hanging Mordecai on!

Mordecai finds great favour with the king and is promoted to a high position as well as being given the king's signet ring signifying the authority Mordecai now held. The king also gives permission to Esther and Mordecai to write a decree concerning the Jews. This is sealed with the king's signet ring and is sent throughout the land to one hundred and twenty seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. The Jews are not only saved but are granted permission to destroy their enemies thereby being able to live in peace.

What an amazing story. The Jews who had been in fear for their lives with the expectation of being completely annihilated and are now victors over their enemies:

So Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, with a great crown of gold and a garment of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. The Jews had light and gladness, joy and honour. And in every province and city, wherever the king's command and decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a holiday. Then many of the people of the land became Jews, because fear of the Jews fell upon them. Esther 8:15-17

The Jews who had been terrified for their lives now have ***gladness, joy and honour***. Their latter state is better than their first state....they now have honour!

The Jews may have walked through bitter waters but God had the right people in the right place at the right time. The waters that once were bitter have now been made sweet!

The Shunammite Woman

In 2 Kings chapter 4 we read of Elisha visiting Shunem and a notable woman persuading Elisha to have something to eat at her home. As often as Elisha passed by that home he would regularly have something to eat there and as a result of recognising that Elisha was a 'holy man' the woman asked her husband to make a special room for him where he could stay the night whenever he was passing through:

And she (the woman of Shunem) said to her husband, “Look now, I know that this is a holy man of God, who passes by us regularly. Please, let us make a small upper room on the wall; and let us put a bed for him there, and a table and a chair and a lampstand; so it will be, whenever he comes to us, he can turn in there.”

2 Kings 4:9-10

Because of the kindness the Shunammite woman had shown, Elisha asks what he can do for her only to find she doesn't make any specific request. Elisha's servant Gehazi informs Elisha that the woman does not have a son and her husband is old. On hearing this Elisha calls for the woman so that he can prophesy over her:

So he (Elisha) said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood in the doorway. Then he said, “About this time next year you shall embrace a son.” 2 Kings 4:15-16a

This is quite a prophecy! The woman has not asked for a son but Elisha knew he had a word from the Lord for her and brings the word God has given him to speak. Despite the woman recognising Elisha to be a man of God, on hearing the words she responds in unbelief:

And she said, “No, my lord. Man of God, do not lie to your maidservant!”

2 Kings 4:16b

We do not read of Elisha making any comments in response to the woman's apparent unbelief but the very next verse confirms the validity of the words Elisha spoke:

But the woman conceived, and bore a son when the appointed time had come, of which Elisha had told her. 2

Kings 4:17

I love the word '**but**' at the beginning of the above verse. It's almost as though God was saying,
“You may not have believed the word I have spoken through My prophet, but I am faithful to My word and it will be fulfilled.”

We can all take encouragement by this. God is still faithful even when we find ourselves in a position of doubting what God has said or in a position of unbelief. Of course there is a difference between us being in wilful unbelief as was the case of Thomas when he made it known that unless he saw the nail prints in the hands of Jesus he *would not* believe (see *John chapter 20*) and when we are struggling to believe simply because what we are hearing seems impossible to be fulfilled.

This was the case with the Shunammite woman. She must have been so surprised to hear the words Elisha spoke to her that it was difficult for her to believe. Despite her struggling to believe, the woman did conceive and she did give birth to a son at the appointed time Elisha had said.

The overwhelming joy the Shunammite woman and her husband must have experienced. They would have known this could only have happened because of the miraculous working of God. Everyday as they looked at their son they would have been reminded of God fulfilling the promise He had spoken through the prophet Elisha. The Shunammite woman had not asked for a child she had simply shown kindness to the prophet when he passed through. But God had rewarded her kindness with the miracle of a son.

As we continue the story we read the boy has grown up. We are not told how old he was but it is apparent from the story that he was old enough to go out to his father who was with the reapers in the field. When the lad reaches his father he complains of having a problem with his head:

And the child grew. Now it happened one day that he went out to his father, to the reapers. And he said to his father, "My head, my head!"

So he said to a servant, "Carry him to his mother." When he had taken him and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died. 2 Kings 4:18-20

What an abrupt statement.... *he sat on her knees till noon, and then died.* We can only assume from the scriptures that there was very little time between the boy complaining of a problem with his head and him dying. There was no real time for the parents to prepare for this awful incident. It is as though one moment all is well and the very next the boy is dead! This of itself would have represented excruciating pain for his parents but to make the situation even worse he died while he was sitting on his mothers knees! Again we can only try and imagine the shock, the pain and the horror the parents without any warning were faced with.

At the risk of reading more into the word of God than is actually there, I think it is reasonable to assume there must have been a multitude of emotions and thoughts affecting the lad's parents at this time. It would have been devastating enough to have lost the child under normal circumstances but for the Shunammite woman and her husband there was an added issue they were now having to deal with....why did it happen! The parents had not asked for a child but God through the prophet Elisha had promised they would have a son. At the appointed time the prophecy was fulfilled resulting in his birth. The parents had experienced a miracle and now the fulfillment of the promise... their son, had just died. Not only are the parents having to cope with the potentially devastating emotions of the loss of their son but they are also having to deal with the mental anguish of coming to terms with what has just taken place.

There are many things we go through in life which we do not understand. Sometimes it is only with the passing of time that understanding comes. With other things any sense of understanding may not take place until the day we go to be with the Lord. God does not ask us to understand but He does ask us to trust.

- *God does not ask us to understand but He does ask us to trust.*

As with so many stories in the bible we often miss the depth of pain a person is experiencing simply because we know how the story ends and therefore fail to appreciate what they may be going through. This is certainly the case with the Shunammite woman and her husband. Those of us who are familiar with the story know that the lad is brought back to life. However if we put the brakes on at this part of the story we begin to appreciate that the parents had no way of knowing that was going happen. All they knew was that one minute their son was alive and the next minute he is dead. The waters that once were sweet had now suddenly turned very bitter!

But wait! This may appear to be a situation which is hopeless but something is happening in the depths of the Shunammite woman's heart. As we read on we are given a small but wonderful glimpse into what is really going on in the mother's heart. She has not accepted the death of her son! She has not blamed God and she has not tried to reason it out, but instead we see her reaching out towards God in the only way she knew how which was to run to the man of God Elisha:

And she went up and laid him (her dead son) on the bed of the man of God, shut the door upon him, and went out. Then she called to her husband, and said, "Please send me one of the young men and one of the donkeys, that I may run to the man of God and come back."

2 Kings 4:21-23

Wow! The woman has just lost her son and yet there is no indication of her having given up. Just the opposite, there is the real sense that her faith is very much alive and it is being translated into action.

- *Her faith is very much alive and is being translated into action.*

The Shunammite woman knew Elisha was a prophet and God spoke through him. She knew if she could only reach Elisha she would hear God speak. No only that but she knew God worked miracles through Elisha. The woman certainly needed a miracle! God had performed miracles through Elisha before and she knew He could do it again. No this wasn't the time for giving up.....it was the time for action!

There is no question the Shunammite woman still had hope. Had this not been the case she would not have attempted to find Elisha. But what a contrast with her husband who showed by his reply that there was little point in looking for him:

Then she (the Shunammite woman) called to her husband, and said, "Please send me one of the young men and one of the donkeys, that I may run to the man of God and come back."

So he said, “Why are you going to him today? It is neither the New Moon nor the Sabbath.”

*And she said, “It is well.” Then she saddled a donkey, and said to her servant, “Drive, and go forward; do not slacken the pace for me unless I tell you.” And so she departed, and went to the man of God at Mount Carmel.
2 Kings 4:22-25a*

Did you notice that? Look at the woman's reply to her husband:

And she said, “It is well.”

The woman has just lost her son and yet she replies to her husband **“IT IS WELL!”** (*Capitals for emphasis*). How could she say such a thing after experiencing the death of her son? There is surely only one answer...she still had hope in her heart. This wasn't a false wishful 'hope' but this was a hope which gave birth to action causing her to seek out Elisha in the knowledge that in finding him God would once again cause a miracle to happen.

Hope allows us to look beyond our circumstances, it allows us to look beyond our natural reasoning, it allows us to look beyond our grief to see the God of all hope! I don't think for one second the woman was in denial to what had happened and was therefore not accepting the death of her son. She had undoubtedly accepted that he had died but as far as she was concerned even the death of her son was not the end of the story! Had she stopped at this point and simply been like her husband and done nothing, I think it is reasonable to assume the lad would not have been raised back to life. However she didn't stop.

Although it is clear from the account the woman is in **deep distress** she still had hope and because of this was eager to find Elisha.

- *Even in the midst of deep sorrow or hardship there can still be hope.*

Eventually the Shunammite woman manages to get to Elisha who on seeing her realises the distress she is in:

Now when she came to the man of God at the hill, she caught him by the feet, but Gehazi came near to push her away. But the man of God said, “Let her alone; for her soul is in deep distress, and the Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told me.” 2 Kings 4:27

We get a glimpse of the determination of this lady as she caught hold of the feet of Elisha. It is interesting that the Lord had not revealed to Elisha what had taken place.

When Elisha realises what has taken place he instructs his servant Gehazi to go on ahead taking with him Elisha's staff. Elisha tells him to go in haste and not to be distracted by anyone but to lay Elisha's staff on the face of the child.

Gehazi is obedient to Elisha's instructions but returns with these words:

Now Gehazi went on ahead of them, and laid the staff on the face of the child; but there was neither voice nor hearing. Therefore he went back to meet him, and told him, saying, “The child has not awakened.” 2 Kings 4:31

Is this now the end? It is time for the Shunammite woman to give up. After all she has achieved what she set out to do, she reached Elisha who on hearing the news sent his servant with his staff with the mission of raising the boy. But....nothing happened and Gehazi reruns with the sad news there has been no change.

What more can the woman do? The hope she so apparently had in her heart carried her to the feet of Elisha but the miracle of resurrection had not happened.

The news Elisha hears does not deter him and Elisha continues to the Shunammite woman's home. When he arrives he sees the child lying dead on his bed and we read Elisha does two things:

He (Elisha) went in therefore, shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. 2 Kings 4:33

The first thing Elisha does when he arrives at the home and sees the child is he shuts the door so that there is only him and the dead boy in the room. Why would he do that? To shut out all distraction. To shut out hearing any words of unbelief or doubt that could be spoken from anyone looking on. He closes the door so that his full attention can be on the Lord. How do we know this? Because the second thing we read Elisha does is he ***prayed to the Lord***. Elisha knew a miracle was required and he knew there was only One Who could perform that miracle and that was the Lord God Himself.

When we are in the midst of difficult circumstances and are in need of seeing a mighty intervention of God, there are times when we also need to ***shut the door*** with respect to the multitude of thoughts seeking to find room in our thinking. We need to close the door on doubts, on fear and discouragement. We need to close the door on human reasoning and actively close the door on any thoughts that contradict the word of God. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians puts it this way:

....bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 2 Corinthians 10:5b

After shutting the door the second thing we find Elisha doing is he prays to the Lord. We are not told what Elisha prayed or how long he prayed but we do know before he did anything he turned to the Lord in prayer. After praying we read the following words:

And he (Elisha) went up and lay on the child, and put his mouth on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands; and he stretched himself out on the child, and the flesh of the child became warm. He returned and walked back and forth in the house, and again went up and stretched himself out on him; then the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.

2 Kings 4:34-35

Notice Elisha did not give up until the miracle was complete. The first time Elisha put his mouth to the boy's mouth, his eyes to the boy's eyes and his hands to his hands the boy became warm but it is apparent that the miracle is not yet complete. We read:

He (Elisha) returned and walked back and forth in the house..... 2 Kings 4:35a

We can only imagine what Elisha did when he walked back and forth in the house but I think we can be confident he was reminding himself of the many miracles he had experienced. We can surely be confident Elisha's eyes were fully upon the Lord and his greatness and no doubt he was talking to the Lord as he walked back and forth.

Irrespective of what Elisha actually did as he walked back and forth we are told that when Elisha returned to the boy repeating what he had previously done the boy miraculously came back to life:

.....and again (Elisha) went up and stretched himself out on him; then the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. 2 Kings 4:35b

The miracle happened! The birth of the boy was a miracle and now him coming back to life was yet another miracle!

What a wonderful story of how the Shunammite woman maintained hope whilst walking through bitter waters. The temptation to let go of the hope she had must have been great. But she didn't let go. Instead she allowed the hope in her heart to translate into action. There was no doubting the reality of the deep pain and anguish she experienced but equally there was no doubting the hope she held on to. Even in the depth of the dark place she found herself in, there was still the bright light of hope within her. A hope so solid that she was not hindered by her husband's discouraging words before she left. A hope so sure that it kept her from being deterred as Gehazi tried to push her away from Elisha. And even though Gehazi had failed to revive the lad there is still no indication that the Shunammite woman gave up hope.

When we go through desperate times, when the waters we walk through are truly bitter and the temptation to give up is great, stories such as the one we have just considered can encourage us to maintain hope even when everything appears hopeless.

Importance Of Remembering

It is time to take another short detour in order to give some consideration to the importance of remembering.

In Exodus chapter 12 we read the wonderful story of God delivering His people from slavery.

The Israelites had been slaves for approximately four hundred years living under the harsh rulership of Pharaoh. But the time came for God's people to be delivered and set free. The Israelites were told to kill a perfect lamb and to take some of it's blood putting it on the two door posts and the lintel:

And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two door posts with the blood that is in the basin. And none of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning.

Exodus 12:22

We then read:

For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two door posts, the Lord will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you.

Exodus 12:23

God did pass through Egypt killing the first born of every family but the Israelites were kept safe. Whenever the Lord saw the blood of the lamb on the lintel and the two door posts He passed over them just as He had promised.

As a result of this tenth plague the Israelites were miraculously delivered from the hand of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Even though this was a truly mighty work of God delivering His people from Egypt, God knew how easily they would forget. Because of this He commanded the Passover to be kept throughout generations as a reminder:

And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever. It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service. And it shall be, when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ that you shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.’ ” So the people bowed their heads and worshipped. Exodus 12:24-27

In the next chapter we read the following words:

*And Moses said to the people: “**REMEMBER THIS DAY** in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out of this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. Exodus 13:3 (Capitals used for emphasis).*

God through Moses instructed the people to **remember!** Why did God say that? Because He knew they would forget! So God instructed the Israelites to keep the Passover as a continual reminder of God setting His people free.

Just as the Israelites were delivered from the bondage of Egypt and the authority of Pharaoh because of the blood of the lamb so we have been delivered from the kingdom of Satan and slavery to sin because of the blood of the Perfect Lamb of God...Jesus. But just as God instructed the Israelites to keep the Passover as a continual reminder, so believers have been instructed to keep the Lord's Supper as a continual reminder of all that Jesus accomplished at the cross of Calvary:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."
1 Corinthians 11:23-25

Notice in the above verses the phrase '*in remembrance of Me*' is used twice.

When Jesus had the last supper with His disciples we read the following words:

And He (Jesus) took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." *Luke 22:19*

Once again we note Jesus using the phrase '*in remembrance of Me*'.

What does this tell us? I believe it tells us two things. Firstly that God knows how easily we forget the greatness of our God and how easily we forget all that He has done for us. But I believe there is a second reason. The very act of remembering Who God is as well as remembering all that He has done for us is powerful. As we remember we find our vision starts to be filled with the Lord and His goodness. No longer is our focus on our problems, our difficulties or the pain we may be going through. The very act of remembering causes our focus to become completely centred on the Lord. This is why God did not want the Israelites to forget being set free from Egypt. And this is why God does not want us to forget the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

Each time the Israelites celebrated the Passover they would have been reminded how God delivered them from their strong enemy to lead them into their inheritance the Promised Land. Each time we engage in the act of communion we are reminded of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour. As we remember the body of Jesus being broken for us, as we once again remember Jesus shedding His blood for us, our hearts once again become filled with the knowledge of His great love for us. The very act of remembering has once again brought about a change in our hearts. As we remember the great sacrificial love of the Father in sending His Son to die for us our own heart becomes 'warmed' towards the Lord and love flows back to the Lord in gratitude for all He has done.

David knew the importance of remembering and towards the end of Psalm 20 wrote the following words:

Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; But we will remember the name of the LORD our God. Psalm 20:7

It is interesting to note the words David uses. He is obviously showing how some people would put their trust in chariots and that some would put their trust in horses. It would therefore make sense to have finished the verse by mentioning about trusting in the Lord God. Had David written in this way, the verse would have read as follows:

Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; But we will trust in the LORD our God.

By writing the verse as above it would have become very apparent that David was showing the importance of not putting trust in human things such as chariots and horses but instead trusting in the Lord our God. However, rather than writing about trusting in the Lord our God, David writes.... ***we will REMEMBER the name of the LORD our God.*** (*Capitals used for emphasis*).

David had learned from personal experience the power and authority of the name of the Lord.

We are all familiar with the story of David defeating the giant Goliath. In 1 Samuel chapter 17 we read how David approached Goliath simply with a sling in his hands and five stones. We also read how Goliath looked down at David and mocked him with the following words:

So the Philistine said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!” 1 Samuel 17:43-44

Now look at part of David's reply to Goliath:

Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. 1 Samuel 17:45

Did you notice that! David is telling Goliath you may well be coming to me with a sword, a spear and a javelin but ... ***I come to you IN THE NAME OF THE LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. (Capitals for emphasis).***

Everything naturally speaking indicated David would be slaughtered by the giant Goliath. Goliath had the stature and for weapons he carried his sword, his spear and his javelin. In comparison David would have appeared quite small against the intimidating height of Goliath. Not only was there a tremendous difference in the build of the two men but David was without any protective armour and the only weapon he carried was a sling and five stones.

As we read the account of David and Goliath there is no doubting David's complete confidence in defeating the giant. His confidence was not in the sling he carried and the five stones and it certainly wasn't in his own ability. His confidence was completely ***in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel.***

- *Goliath put his confidence in his sword, spear and javelin but David put his confidence in the name of the Lord.*

I am sure that as David wrote Psalm 20 he *remembers defeating* Goliath. He remembers how Goliath taunted him and cursed him by his gods. He remembers carrying the sling and the five stones. But most of all he remembers boldly approaching the giant fearlessly declaring to him that he is coming in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel. Even though Goliath came with a sword, a spear and a javelin David knew there was no greater weapon and no greater power and authority than the name of the Lord. David's complete confidence was in the name of the Lord.

No wonder when David mentions in his Psalm about some people trusting in chariots and others trusting in horses he says '***But we will remember the name of the LORD our God.***' David had experienced first hand the authority of the name of the Lord but he also knew the power there is in remembering! He knew that even in times of great defeat as he began to recall all the great things God had done, hope would begin to rise up pulling him out of the pit of despair.

As we turn to Psalm 42 we find the author, who was quite possibly David, providing the solution to dealing with times of feeling downcast and heavy:

O my God, my soul is cast down within me; Therefore I WILL REMEMBER YOU from the land of the Jordan, And from the heights of Hermon, From the Hill Mizar Psalm 42:6 (Capitals used for emphasis).

What is the psalmist's answer to a downcast soul, it is choosing to ***remember*** the Lord.

In another of David's psalms we once again appreciate how he knew the importance of remembering:

Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget not all His benefits: Psalm 103:1-2

As we read the above words we can imagine David actually talking to himself and telling his soul to bless the Lord. But he doesn't just exhort his soul to bless the Lord he also exhorts his soul *not to forget* all of God's benefits.

Why would David find the need to tell his soul not to forget? It is because he knew how easy it is to forget. Even David who had experienced God working tremendous and at times miraculous victories through him, knew how easy it is to forget! The same is also true of you and me. We forget the many answer to prayers. We forget the times we were faced with seemingly impossible situations how God made a way where there seemed to be no way. We forget the many times God turned our sorrow into joy. We forget how time after time God has shown favour towards us even though we have not deserved it. Yes it is true we so easily forget but it is also true there is tremendous victory in remembering all God has done.

Remembering Who God is and all that He has done is both powerful and effective. It causes our eyes to be taken off ourselves and the difficulties we face to be lifted towards the Lord. Our vision becomes filled His greatness. Change begins to take place. Our circumstances and the difficulties we face may not change but *we* begin to change! The change takes place inside us. We find a sense of hopelessness being replaced with hope. We discover problems which moments earlier appeared enormous and insurmountable, begin to shrink in the light of God's greatness.

- *Remembering Who God is and all that He has done is both powerful and effective.*

As we bring this chapter to a close, let's once again turn our attention to David.

In 1 Samuel chapter 30 we read of David and his men returning to a place called Ziklag which was on the southern most boundary of Judea. It was part of the inheritance given to the tribe of Judah (*Joshua 15:31*). Little did David know that he was about to be hit by a real crisis:

Now it happened, when David and his men came to Ziklag, on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the South and Ziklag, attacked Ziklag and burned it with fire, and had taken captive the women and those who were there, from small to great; they did not kill anyone, but carried them away and went their way. So David and his men came to the city, and there it was, burned with fire; and their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive. 1 Samuel 30:1-3

When David and his men arrive at Ziklag they find it has been invaded by the Amalekites and burned down. Not only that but they discover the women, both small and great, have been carried away. They also find ***their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive.***

As a result of all this we read:

Then David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep. And David's two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, had been taken captive. 1 Samuel 30:4-5

There is no doubting the depth of sorrow and pain the people were going through and David was by no means exempt from this. His two wives Ahinoam and Abigail had been taken captive along with all of the other people. On top of all of this David finds himself facing an additional crisis causing him great distress:

Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. 1 Samuel 30:6a

The depth of grief felt by the people returning to Ziklag discovering all that has taken place is so great they want to vent their anger and distress towards David by stoning him.

David is truly in a hard place but the last part of the above verse speaks volumes regarding the depth of the relationship David had with the Lord. Instead of sinking under the huge pressure of grief or giving way to fear knowing his life is in immediate danger, he does something quite amazing:

***But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.
1 Samuel 30:6b***

In the midst of crisis David turns his attention away from the critical situation he now faces and begins to strengthen himself in the Lord. We are not told how David actually strengthened himself in the Lord. I have no doubt he would have cried out to God for His help, but I think we can be completely confident that he would have looked back over his life *remembering* how time and time again God had intervened bringing him deliverance and victory. He may even have spoken to his own soul the words we read earlier as he strengthened himself in the Lord:

***Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me,
bless His holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, And
forget not all His benefits. Psalm 103:1-2***

For some of us reading this study we may be facing very difficult circumstances and it really does feel as though we are walking through bitter waters. Let us take a moment to consider the critical situation David faced at Ziklag and like David let us strengthen ourselves in the Lord by remembering the greatness of our God and the great things He has done for us.

Joseph

It would be difficult to not include in a study such as this the story of Joseph.

We are all very familiar with the story of Joseph who from the moment of having his two dreams to the time of becoming second in command to Pharaoh experienced many ups and downs. In fact his journey could be likened to a ride on a roller-coaster with it's highs and lows. However each 'down' part of the journey seemed lower than the one before. In other words, rather than things improving for Joseph they seemed to get worse.

Joseph was born in Paddan Aram and was the eleventh of twelve sons. When he was six years old he travelled with his family to live in Canaan. At approximately age seventeen he had two dreams and was later sold as a slave. (*See Genesis 37:2*). At the age of thirty he became second in command to Pharaoh. (*See Genesis 41:46*). Between the time Joseph had his two dreams to the time of him becoming second in command to Pharaoh was a period of thirteen years.

This thirteen year period carried with it a great deal of pain for Joseph and yet despite the pain Joseph carried in his heart two God given dreams which both had the same interpretation. Whether Joseph choose to remember the dreams or not did not alter the fact that God had a very special purpose and plan for Joseph's life.

Although it took Joseph thirteen years from being sold as a slave to being promoted to second in command to pharaoh it took another seven years to the fulfillment of the two dreams. In other words it took twenty years from the time the dreams were given to their fulfillment. This is a long time! Nevertheless whether it is one day, one week, one year, twenty years or even longer, God is faithful to His word. God's word is not weakened or diluted by the course of time. The passing of time may affect the freshness of God's promises in our heart, but the passing of time has absolutely no impact on the word accomplishing what God sends it to do:

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:11

How much Joseph recalled the dreams he had in order to find a place of peace during the difficult years we are not told. What we do know is when God gives His word He gives it for a purpose.

There are two things that become abundantly clear as we look at the account of Joseph. Firstly God had a specific purpose for Joseph to fulfil at a specific point in time and at a specific place. Secondly, as we look at each segment of the journey Joseph travelled, although we see hardship and pain, we read the Lord was with Joseph and because of this he found favour:

The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made all he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favour in his sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. Genesis 39:2-4

And:

But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing. Genesis 39:21-22

We can take great encouragement from the above scriptures. We find in both passages Joseph is in a hard place. Firstly as a slave within the house of Potiphar and secondly a prisoner in the king's prison. Despite these difficult circumstances God was with Joseph and because of this he found favour.

What can we learn from this? God being with us does not exempt us from hard and difficult times but.... God being with us does mean even in the midst of hardships we can still know God's favour on our lives.

- *Even in the midst of hardships we can still know God's favour on our lives.*

At this point let's rewind a little to when Joseph was seventeen years old:

Joseph was just seventeen years old when God spoke to him through two dreams. At this time his brothers hated him. They hated him because they were aware he was their father's favourite son and their hatred was further provoked because Joseph would tell his father of any wrong doing the brothers were involved in. To make matters worse, Jacob gave his son Joseph a coat of many colours. The issue was not so much about the gift of the coat itself, it was more about what it represented. As far as the brothers were concerned the coat represented their father's favouritism towards Joseph. Not only that but it is also possible they saw the gift of the coat representing family rulership. This of course should have been passed on to the eldest son but because the coat had been given to the youngest son Joseph, they now saw it indicating Joseph would be the head of the family when Jacob died. Whether this was the case or not, there is doubting the fact that the coat made the brothers hate Joseph even more.

It is in the context of all this hatred that Joseph has two dreams. Both dreams are different but carry the same meaning which is.... one day all the family will bow down to Joseph!

Now Joseph had a dream, and he told it to his brothers; and they hated him even more. So he said to them, "Please hear this dream which I have dreamed: There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Then behold, my sheaf arose and also stood upright; and indeed your sheaves stood all around and bowed down to my sheaf."
Genesis 37:5-7

It would have been bad enough for Joseph to have told his brothers the first dream, but he then has a second dream with the same interpretation:

Then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, "Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me." Genesis 37:9

We have already appreciated the hatred the brothers had towards Joseph but now hearing not just one dream but two dreams informing them that one day they would bow down to him stirred the hatred even more:

So they (Joseph's brothers) hated him even more for his dreams and for his words. Genesis 37:8b

Not only do we find the brothers hating Joseph but after hearing the second dream we also read of another strong and potentially destructive emotion....envy:

And his brothers envied himGenesis 37:11a

These two potentially destructive emotions were brewing away in Joseph's brothers just waiting to explode as soon as the opportunity presented itself. And as we will soon discover the opportunity did present itself.

It is worth noting the timing of the dreams Joseph received. When he received the two dreams he had absolutely no idea the journey he was soon to take. A journey which in every sense of the word would have seemed to have contradicted the dreams and yet God is faithful to His word and watches over it:

Then the Lord said to me (Jeremiah), “You have seen well, for I am ready to perform My word.” or (watching over My word ready to perform it ESV).

Jeremiah 1:12

God watches over His word to bring it to pass. We read in another place:

***So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:11***

When God speaks He speaks for a purpose and His word will not return to Him void but will indeed accomplish what it was sent to do. God gave His word to Joseph through two dreams and God certainly watched over it bringing it to pass. Circumstances do not affect God's word but God's word certainly does affect circumstances.

- *Circumstances do not affect God's word but God's word certainly can affect circumstances.*

Joseph may have received two dreams regarding his brothers bowing down to him, but his world is about to be turned upside down. All of the hatred and the envy in the brothers is shortly to be vented. Joseph is about to move from a position of security enjoying being the father's favourite son to one of darkness and fear huddled at the bottom of a pit not knowing if he is going to be left to die!

Whilst Joseph's brothers are tending the flocks Jacob sends Joseph to find them to check on their welfare. This is now their moment of opportunity!

Now when they (the brothers) saw him (Joseph) afar off, even before he came near them, they conspired against him to kill him. Then they said to one another, “Look, this dreamer is coming! Come therefore, let us now kill him and cast him into some pit; and we shall say, ‘Some wild beast has devoured him.’ We shall see what will become of his dreams!” Genesis 37:18-20

When the brothers spoke these words, “...***We shall see what will become of his dreams!***” little did they know that one day they would *see* what had become of Joseph's dreams, they would indeed bow the knee just as God had revealed would be the case.

So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colours that was on him. Then they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no water in it. Genesis 37:23-24

One minute Joseph is enjoying being his father's favourite son and all that represented and the next minute he is set on by his brothers intent on killing him. We can only imagine the horror of this experience for Joseph and this is just the beginning!

As mentioned earlier, from the time of receiving the dreams to Joseph seeing them fulfilled took approximately twenty years. The first thirteen of those years experiencing a very bumpy ride with it's ups and downs before becoming second in command under pharaoh and then a further seven years before Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy grain. (*Genesis 37:2, 41:46 and 41:53*).

This was no short journey from the time the word was given to the time of its fulfillment. And yet we often find this pattern taking place in scripture where God gives His word followed by lengthy period of time before its fulfillment.

From the moment Abraham received God's promise of becoming a great nation to the point of Sarah giving birth to Isaac took approximately twenty five years. (*Genesis 12:4 and Genesis 21:5*). David was just a teenager when Samuel anointed him king but he was thirty years old when he began to reign. (*2 Samuel 5:4*). It took forty years for the Israelites to enter the Promised Land after leaving Egypt. (Of course it needn't have taken this length of time had the Israelites not rebelled against God!) The Promised Land was the Israelites rightful inheritance but it took many years and many battles under the leadership of Joshua to claim their inheritance. Jesus was thirty years old when He began His ministry.

What can we learn from the above? There is often a delay between the word being given and the fulfillment of the word being experienced. Despite there being a delay, God will watch over his word to bring it to pass. During the waiting period we have a choice. We can either believe God is faithful and will fulfil His word or we can allow doubt and fear to rob us of the peace God intends us to enjoy whilst waiting to see the fulfillment of the word.

- *There is often a delay between the word being given and the fulfillment of the word being experienced.*

And now the roller coaster ride for Joseph begins! He has just been thrown into a pit not knowing whether he will be pulled out and returned to his father or whether he will be left to die. Of course as we know, most of the brother's intentions were that he should be left to die at the bottom of the pit although it was the intention of Reuben to return to the pit to rescue him and return him safely to his father. However as the story of Joseph continues, we find the brothers selling him to a band of Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver rather than killing him as planned. He is then sold in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of pharaoh and captain of the guard.

In a relatively short space of time Joseph had gone from a position of enjoying the love and security of home to now finding himself in a foreign land working as a slave. But God had not forsaken him and as we read earlier Joseph found favour in the sight of his master. As a result of this he was made overseer of his master's house. All that Potiphar had was put under Joseph's authority.

So Joseph found favour in his Potiphar) sight, and served him. Then he made him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority.

Genesis 39:4

Joseph is now at a high point of the roller coaster ride. He was thrown into a pit then sold as a slave but now he is finding great favour and enjoying a very privileged position in the house of his master Potiphar. It might not be home and he is still away from his family, but considering he was sold as a slave I am sure Joseph

would have appreciated the position he held. I wonder if during this time Joseph gave any thought to the two dreams he had received from God. Or if he had any thought of seeing his family again. On those points we can only speculate because we are not told but I think it is fairly safe to assume that Joseph recognised God's hand on his life as he appreciated the privileged position Potiphar had placed him in. Little did he know at this point that this wasn't going to last and that very soon he was about to take yet another emotional dive!

It is quite probable that Joseph enjoyed this position for approximately eleven years but things were about to take a turn for the worse as far as Joseph was concerned.:

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And it came to pass after these things that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Look, my master does not know what is with me in the house, and he has committed all that he has to my hand. There is no one greater in this house than I, nor has he kept back anything from me but you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Genesis 39:6b-9

The temptation Joseph faced must have been immense. And he wasn't presented with this temptation just once but we read:

So it was, as she (Potiphar's wife) spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her. Genesis 39:10

Joseph faced continual temptation as we read Potiphar's wife *spoke to Joseph day by day* tempting him to lie with her. It is at this point that we gain a real insight into the character of Joseph. He so respected his master and the position he had been placed in that he knew despite the pressure he was under day after day he could not succumb to the temptation. As a result of Joseph refusing to lie with Potiphar's wife she lies to her husband about him wrongly accusing him of attempting to rape her. On hearing this Potiphar is extremely angry and has Joseph thrown into the king's prison.

At this point it is incredibly hard to imagine what must have gone through Joseph's mind. He had been thrown into a pit by his own brothers then sold as a slave. He had enjoyed something like eleven years holding a privileged position in the house of Potiphar and now he suddenly faces the cruel walls of the prison for something he didn't do.

I am sure we would all agree this is a great deal to have to cope with mentally, emotionally and physically. And what about the dreams? God had given His word years previously and now it seems they are further from being fulfilled than ever. I'm sure we would have sympathised with Joseph if at this point he had given up. And yet despite the awful circumstances Joseph now faces God's favour is still on him. Joseph may have been wrongly accused. He may have exchanged living in a privileged position of authority to now being under the authority of the head of the prison. He may have moved from the relative comfort of Potiphar's home to being in the appalling conditions of the prison but we still read God's favour is on him:

But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him mercy, and He gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners who were in the prison; whatever they did there, it was his doing.

Genesis 39:21-22

Joseph's life has once again been turned upside down. Outwardly he had the walls of the prison confining him, but inwardly he would have had to deal with the mental and emotional battle. Moments earlier he had been overseeing Potiphar's house and now as a result of remaining faithful to his master, he is wrongly accused and finds himself once again in a very dark place. Could God really be with him? How could all this happen if God was truly with him? Had the dreams been true or had he simply imagined them? What had he done to deserve all of this? No doubt so many questions and so few answers. Once again Joseph is experiencing the full flow of the bitter waters and yet in the midst of these extremely difficult circumstances we read the Lord was with Joseph and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison:

The keeper of the prison did not look into anything that was under Joseph's authority, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper.

Genesis 39:23

I wonder if it ever crossed Joseph's mind that what he was going through was God's training school preparing him for the task ahead. Preparation before ministry is often God's way. We see this principle in Moses coming to the end of himself in the wilderness before God calling him to confront Pharaoh instructing him to let the Israelites free. We see God preparing Joshua for the task of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land by his close association with Moses hearing all he said and observing all he did. We observe David going through a season of preparation prior to fully reigning over God's people as he learns time after time to trust God as a result of King Saul's relentless pursuit of him. The disciples going through the school of preparation as they spend time with Jesus listening to His teaching, observing His miracles and being sent on the mission field to heal the sick and to deliver the demonic oppressed. So many times we find this principle of preparation before ministry and this is exactly what Joseph is experiencing.....preparation prior to moving into the position God has for him. Had he not gone through the preparation process he would never have coped with the position of being second in command to Pharaoh himself.

Joseph may be experiencing God's favour in the prison but that doesn't change the reality of the confines of the prison. Not only that but he is about to face one final blow with potentially discouraging consequences!

In Genesis chapter 40 we read that both Pharaoh's butler and baker are thrown into the king's prison. Whilst in the prison they both have dreams and God gives Joseph the interpretation for each dream. The interpretation of the dream for the butler is that in three days he will be restored to his original position whilst the interpretation of the dream for the baker is that in three days he will be hanged. When Joseph explains the dream to the butler informing him that he is going to be restored to his original position, Joseph says the following words to him:

But remember me when it is well with you, and please show kindness to me; make mention of me to Pharaoh, and get me out of this house. For indeed I was stolen away from the land of the Hebrews; and also I have done nothing here that they should put me into the dungeon.”
Genesis 40:14-15

Suddenly there is a bright ray of hope for Joseph. At last there now looks as though there is a way out of this seemingly hopeless position. All it will take is for the butler to tell Pharaoh about Joseph and Pharaoh will surely cause Joseph to be released. In Joseph's mind it at last looks as though the time of hardship and suffering is about to end.

The butler was restored to his original position just as Joseph had correctly interpreted his dream but.... Joseph's hope is about to receive a heavy blow:

Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him. Genesis 40:23

Incredible, the butler forgot about Joseph! I wonder how many days, weeks or even months it took Joseph to appreciate that he was not going to be released. His hope of release had been struck with a heavy blow:

Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But when the desire comes, it is a tree of life. Proverbs 13:12

I wonder if this was Joseph's experience as it dawned on him his time of release was not imminent. It's one thing not have hope but it is another thing to have hope only to find that it is deferred! And as we read the above scripture we find there is a fruit of hope deferred...it makes the heart sick. I think we will all agree that this was a major blow for Joseph who surely had hope of release only to find it didn't materialise. But God's timing is perfect. Had Joseph been released at the same time as the butler he would never have been made second in command to Pharaoh because the timing was not right. Joseph had to wait a further two years until Pharaoh had a dream which no one could interpret. As a result of Pharaoh's dream the butler's memory is suddenly prompted and he remembers Joseph. Recalling how Joseph correctly interpreted both his dream as well as the baker's dream, he tells Pharaoh all about him:

Then it came to pass, at the end of two full years, that Pharaoh had a dream; Genesis 41:1a

And:

Then the chief butler spoke to Pharaoh, saying: “I remember my faults this day. When Pharaoh was angry with his servants, and put me in custody in the house of the captain of the guard, both me and the chief baker, we each had a dream in one night, he and I. Each of us dreamed according to the interpretation of his own dream. Now there was a young Hebrew man with us there, a servant of the captain of the guard. And we told him, and he interpreted our dreams for us; to each man he interpreted according to his own dream. And it came to pass, just as he interpreted for us, so it happened. He restored me to my office, and he hanged him.”

Genesis 41:9-13

Literally overnight Joseph goes from 'rags to riches'. One minute in the prison and the next in the palace. It may have taken thirteen years but the time for the call on Joseph's life to be fulfilled has finally come.

How things can change in just a single moment of time. We see this so often in God's word. After fleeing from Egypt Moses spent forty years wandering in the wilderness looking after sheep. Then one day his attention is caught by a bush which is burning but is not consumed. Suddenly he has an encounter with God and in a moment of time is taken from wandering in the wilderness looking after sheep to becoming a prophet of God with the task of instructing Pharaoh to let the Israelites go and in leading them to the Promised Land.

David as a young lad looking after sheep is suddenly in a moment of time brought before the prophet Samuel to find himself being anointed as king. In the New Testament we read of Saul making his journey to arrest and persecute Christians and in a moment of time has an incredible encounter with the Son of God and as a result being suddenly and miraculously born again.

And so we could go on. God is not limited by time and He is not bound by time. And what is more, in a mere moment of time, He can miraculously change what is taking place. Joseph from the prison to the palace, Moses from a shepherd in the wilderness to a prophet called by God to deliver His people and David a mere lad looking after sheep to being anointed king. Saul in hot pursuit of all believers seeking their imprisonment and harm being miraculously born again to become an apostle mightily used of God. All of these events took place in a moment of time and we can take great encouragement knowing that no matter how difficult the circumstances we face, no matter how long we have been enduring the pain, irrespective of the numerous disappointments we may have faced, God is still God Who knows the beginning from the end and in a moment of time can turn things round beyond what we could imagine or even think.

And so it is as a result of Pharaoh having two dreams, no one being able to interpret them and the butler remembering Joseph that Joseph comes face to face with Pharaoh.

After explaining to Pharaoh that he does not have the ability to interpret dreams but only God can provide the interpretation, Pharaoh explains his two dreams to Joseph. As a result of hearing both dreams Joseph provides Pharaoh with their meaning explaining that there is going to be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine.

After providing Pharaoh with the interpretation for the dreams he provides him with the following wise counsel:

“Now therefore, let Pharaoh select a discerning and wise man, and set him over the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, to collect one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt in the seven plentiful years. And let them gather all the food of those good years that are coming, and store up grain under the authority of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. Then that food shall be as a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which shall be in the land of Egypt, that the land may not perish during the famine.” Genesis 41:33-36

After hearing the counsel Joseph gives, Pharaoh does not hesitate to promote him to a very high position over the whole land of Egypt only second in command to Pharaoh himself.

Sure enough seven years of plenty are enjoyed in the land of Egypt, but just as God had revealed, following the seven years of plenty came the seven years famine. Thanks to

the dreams God had given to Pharaoh which Joseph interpreted the seven years of famine did not come as a surprise. Preparation had been made for when this time came. However we read that the famine was not only in the land of Egypt but was over all the face of the earth as a result all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain:

The famine was over all the face of the earth, and Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians. And the famine became severe in the land of Egypt. So all countries came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine was severe in all lands.
Genesis 41:56-57

We soon discover that Jacob and his family were not exempt from the famine. Due to this Jacob sends Joseph's ten brothers to Egypt to buy grain. Little do they realise they are going to come face to face with their brother Joseph and without recognising who he is will bow down before him fulfilling the dreams Joseph had received when he was just a teenager.

Now Joseph was governor over the land; and it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed down before him with their faces to the earth. Joseph saw his brothers and recognized them, but he acted as a stranger to them and spoke roughly to them. Then he said to them, "Where do you come from?" *Genesis 42:6-7a*

It may have taken twenty years for the dreams to have been fulfilled but God is not bound by time he is outside time. As we saw at the early part of this chapter, God watches over His word that it might accomplish what it is sent to do. God had given His word to Joseph in the form of two dreams and in the above scriptures we see the word fulfilled. We are not told whether Joseph remembered the dreams he had been given whilst walking the path of hardship, but we can surely be confident that as his brothers bowed before him with their faces to the earth the dreams Joseph had had twenty years previously would have come flooding back.

Eventually Joseph reveals himself to his brothers as well as meeting his youngest brother Benjamin and his father Jacob.

The account of Joseph is such a wonderful story it is little wonder that hundreds, if not thousands, of great messages have resulted from this story. There is obviously so much more that could be said about Joseph than has been said in this chapter but the names Joseph gave to his two sons convey the extent to which God had indeed made bitter waters sweet:

And to Joseph were born two sons before the years of famine came, whom Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On, bore to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: "For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father's house." And the name of the second he called Ephraim: "For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction."

Genesis 41:50-52

Joseph's first son was named Manasseh. Why did he choose that name? It was because he was able to boldly proclaim ***“For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father’s house.”*** The second son he named Ephraim. And why did he choose that name? It was because he was able to boldly proclaim ***“For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.”***

The path Joseph had walked from the time he had his two dreams to the moment of being released from prison was without doubt a difficult and painful path to walk. Yes there were the relative high points when things appeared to ease, but equally there were many low and distressing times for Joseph. Despite being set upon by his brothers and sold as a slave, despite being wrongly accused and thrown into prison, despite being forgotten for two years after interpreting the butler's dream, Joseph showed no signs of resentment or unforgiveness. God so turned things completely round for Joseph he called his first son ***Manasseh: “For God has made me forget all my toil and all my father’s house.”*** And he called his second son ***Ephraim: “For God has caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.”***

I think we can safely conclude that bitter waters were certainly made sweet for Joseph!

Waters Of Marah

It is probably appropriate that we conclude this study with the account of the bitter waters of Marah being made sweet. After all, it is this account which inspired the study!

The Israelites have been set free from the land of Egypt after being in slavery for about four hundred years under the rulership of Pharaoh. God miraculously brought about their deliverance and after the Egyptians experienced ten plagues of judgement culminating in the first born of every Egyptian household being slain. This was the last straw as far as Pharaoh was concerned resulting in him finally letting the Israelites go.

After their release the Israelites journey to the Red Sea. Once again like many times previously, Pharaoh has a complete change of heart and decides to pursue them with his army of chariots. Suddenly it appears as though the Israelites are completely trapped. The Red Sea in front of them and Pharaoh with his army behind them. There is no escape! The Israelites are hemmed in. But God has not delivered the Israelites from the land of Egypt for them to become captured at the Red Sea.

Naturally speaking there was no way through for the Israelites. Naturally speaking they couldn't go forward because in front of them was the sea. They couldn't go backward because behind them was the terrifying army of Pharaoh and the Egyptians with all of their chariots. But with God there is always a way through. Even when there seems to be no way, with God there is *always* a way. Why? Because God the creator of heaven and earth is a miracle working God.

Once again through the hand of Moses God performs an amazing miracle making a way where moments earlier there was no way! He divides the Red Sea allowing the Israelites to go forward through the midst of the wall of waves on each side to safely reach the other side.

What tremendous hope we can take from this incredible act of God. Let us just for a moment imagine ourselves standing with the Israelites. We look forward and see nothing but water. Wave upon wave crashing towards the seashore. We turn round to see huge clouds of dust thrown into the air caused by the huge Egyptian army racing towards us. Fear begins to fill our hearts. What conclusion can be drawn from all of this. There is absolutely no way out of the dilemma we now face. All that waits us is instant death or to be once again returned to Egypt to face the horror of being slaves under the cruel rulership of Pharaoh.

But wait, what is Moses doing. I think he is moving forward towards the sea's edge. Yes it is true he really is moving forward I'm not just imagining it. Now what is he doing? Its his rod! That rod I have seen him use so often! He is lifting it towards heaven over the sea. Wait! What's happening? Can this be true....the sea is parting. Yes it is true, it really is parting. A way is being made right through the midst of the sea. A way is being made where moments earlier there was no way. Suddenly fear is driven out and hope returns!

God truly did make a way where there was no way. What encouragement you and I can take from that wonderful truth. Whatever impossible circumstances we might face right now, the truth still remains....God can make a way where there seems to be no way.

- *God can make a way where there seems no way.*

When Pharaoh and the Egyptians attempt to pursue the Israelites by driving their chariots through the midst of the sea, following God's command, Moses once again stretches his rod over the Red Sea and as he does so the waters return destroying Pharaoh and his complete army:

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians, on their chariots, and on their horsemen.” And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and when the morning appeared, the sea returned to its full depth, while the Egyptians were fleeing into it. So the LORD overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. Then the waters returned and covered the chariots, the horsemen, and all the army of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them. Not so much as one of them remained. Exodus 14:26-28

And:

So the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Exodus 14:30

Not only had the Lord destroyed Pharaoh and all his army but as we read in the above verse, ***Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.*** God had delivered the Israelites but it was so important that they actually *saw* the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Why was this so important? Because had they not seen with their own eyes the reality that Pharaoh and his army were destroyed they would have continued to have carried fear in their hearts that one day Pharaoh and his army might return to capture them taking back to Egypt as slaves under his harsh rulership.

That day God not only delivered the Israelites from their enemy without.....Pharaoh and his great army, but He also delivered them from their enemy within.....fear.

In the book of Colossians we read these wonderful words:

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

Colossians 2:13-15

We all recognise we are in a spiritual battle with an enemy who seeks our harm. An enemy who loves to bring fear, discouragement and a sense of hopelessness especially during times of hardship. And yet just as God caused the Israelites to see their enemy the Egyptians dead on the seashore, so the Lord would bring us back to this tremendous truth, Jesus disarmed principalities and powers including Satan as he hung, suffered and shed His blood on the cross at Calvary.

Once on the other side of the Red Sea with Pharaoh and his army completely destroyed there was a tremendous celebration of victory. Moses and the Israelites sang a wonderful song to the Lord (*See Exodus chapter 15*) after which Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, picked up her timbrel and sang the following words:

***“Sing to the LORD, For He has triumphed gloriously!
The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!”***
Exodus 15:21b

If only the Israelites had kept their eyes on the Lord their Deliverer, their Protector and their Provider how different their journey through the wilderness would have been. Sadly, despite all they had experienced their eyes were not on God. Instead they blamed Moses for every difficult situation or circumstance they faced. And this is exactly what happened when the Israelites not long after crossing the Red Sea, arrived at the waters of Marah!

So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea; then they went out into the Wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. Now when they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter. Therefore the name of it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" Exodus 15:22-24

Time and again the Israelites had seen God's miraculous intervention and yet when they arrive at the waters of Mara finding them bitter and impossible to drink, instead of looking to the Lord for the answer they complain to Moses. How quickly they had forgotten the tremendous miracle God had performed in providing a way for them through the midst of the Red Sea. Now all they are concerned about is that they are thirsty and the waters in front of them are bitter and cannot be drunk. The greatness of God did not fill their vision instead the greatness of the problem filled their vision!

- *The greatness of God did not fill their vision instead the greatness of the problem filled their vision.*

What a contrast to the Israelites we find with Moses. He is faced with exactly the same situation as the rest of the people. He has travelled the same distance the Israelites have travelled. He is just as tired as they are. He is just as thirsty as they are. The circumstances he now faces are no different to the circumstances the Israelites face and yet rather than complaining he looks to God for the answer:

So he (Moses) cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet. Exodus 15:25

Because Moses cried out to the Lord, God showed him a tree. Moses could have chosen to complain just like the others but he didn't. Instead he cried out to the One Who holds the answer to every circumstance and difficulty we could ever face. As a result of crying out to God, the Lord shows him a tree!

Now let's take just a moment to think about this. The Israelites are thirsty and have come to the waters of Marah which are bitter and can't be drunk. Moses cries out and God shows him... a tree! What has a tree got to do with bitter waters? How can a tree help! Moses still holds the rod in his hand. The rod which when he raised it previously resulted in God parting the Red Sea. Can't he do the same again? Can't he just raise his rod over the bitter waters causing them to turn sweet. But no, God simply shows Moses a tree.

Isn't this so true of you and me? There are times when we are faced with difficult situations and circumstances and as a result we cry out to the Lord who responds by showing us the answer. The only problem is the answer doesn't seem to make any sense at all to our natural reasoning. But the ways of God are far beyond our natural reasoning. God doesn't ask that we are able to reason everything out, but He does ask us to trust. Even when to our natural thinking things don't make sense God still asks us to trust.

It didn't make any sense at all to the servants when Jesus at the wedding of Cana asked them to fill the water pots with water and to draw some out to take it to the master of ceremony (*John chapter 2*). It may have not have made sense but the miracle of water turning into wine still happened. It didn't make any sense at all when Jesus gave to His disciples a small amount of bread and fish and then instructed them to feed over five thousand people, (*Mark chapter 6*). It may not have made any sense but the miracle happened and over five thousand people were fed from just five loaves and two fish. It didn't make any sense at all when Jesus commanded the stone in front of Lazarus tomb to be rolled away, (*John chapter 11*). It may not have made any sense but when the stone had been rolled away Jesus spoke the word and the miracle of Lazarus being brought back to life happened.

It may not have made any sense to Moses as he stood by the waters of Marah that God should show him a tree, but as a result of him throwing it into the bitter waters, the miracle happened, the waters were immediately made sweet!

What a miracle. The Israelites saw the problem...the bitter waters! Moses saw God's answer....the tree.

It wasn't long after the Israelites experience at the waters of Marah that they arrive at Elim:

Then they (the Israelites) came to Elim, where there were twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees; so they camped there by the waters. Exodus 15:27

The Israelites journeyed from the waters of Marah to Elim and there they found twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees and camped there. God's wonderful provision....twelve wells of water! Previously they had found water which they could not drink due to it's bitterness but now there are twelve wells of water to drink from. Not only that but there were seventy palm trees to provide shade and protection from the harsh heat. God had brought them from the bitter waters of Marah to the place of rest and refreshment and we are told ***they camped there by the waters.***

Right now we may be experiencing the 'bitter waters of Marah' but not only is God able to make those bitter waters sweet, He is also able to lead us to 'Elim' the place of rest and refreshment.

We are not told how long the Israelites camped at Elim but one thing we can be certain of, they were refreshed, they were strengthened and they were restored before continuing on with their journey.

God never promised to keep us from hard times. He never promised to keep us from having to pass through the waters or walk through the fire (*Isaiah chapter 43,*) but He has promised He will always be with us.

I wonder what part of the journey you may be on right now. Is it the place of rest and refreshment enjoying the wonderful Presence of the Lord bathing in his love and peace or is it a time of walking through bitter waters not knowing how or when it is all going to end. Whatever your experience right now might be, there is one thing we can all be completely confident about.....God makes bitter waters sweet!

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