

A cluster of dark blue grapes with green leaves is positioned in the center of the image, resting on a wooden surface. The grapes are ripe and have a slight sheen. The leaves are large and green, with some showing signs of aging or damage. The background is dark and out of focus.

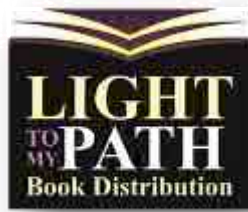
THE GRACE OF FRUITFULNESS

The Grace of God in a Fruitful Ministry

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

The Grace of Fruitfulness

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Light To My Path Book Distribution
Sydney Mines, N.S. CANADA B1V1Y5

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Special thanks to proof reader:

Diane Mac Leod

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Preface

There are numerous seminars and books in our day teaching us how to be more effective in ministry. Bible schools and seminaries offer instruction on how to be better preachers. There are conferences showing us how to plant churches and make them grow. These events can be very useful. Personally, God has used these occasions to shape my ministry. I can trace some of my spiritual growth back to such gatherings.

While this kind of training is significant, it is even more important for us to understand is that spiritual effectiveness and fruitfulness does not depend so much on our education or the techniques we use; it is dependent on the grace of God. We are useful for the kingdom not because we are skilled but because God, in His grace, has chosen to use us.

In my reading of Scripture, I have often been struck by the kind of people God uses. Perhaps you have spent years of your life training to be effective in ministry only to see someone who has had no formal training be powerfully used of God. Maybe you have done everything you can to live in holiness and integrity and wonder why God would use someone whose lifestyle is questionable. God is not limited to using only well trained and good living people. He has often used men and women of questionable back-

ground and integrity. I am coming to understand that fruitfulness is not so much a result of who I am or my giftedness as it is of God's wonderful grace.

The focus of this study is to examine the kind of people God uses. I do not want to take anything away from the importance of education and godliness. What I do want to show, however, is that effectiveness in ministry is a gift of God. Could it be that we dishonour the Lord God by taking credit for our ministry success and attributing our fruitfulness to our good education, skills or lifestyle?

As years pass, I am realizing that effectiveness in ministry depends more on God than it does on me. In fact, I have often failed to see my dependence and need of God because my education and experience have gotten in the way. I trust that as you embark with me on this study you will be reminded of your need of God and of the grace of a fruitful ministry.

F. Wayne MacLeod

Chapter 1-

The Deceiver and the Certain Promise of God

As we begin this study, our goal is to see the grace of God in the unfolding of His purposes through ordinary men and women with all their flaws and blemishes. How thankful we are that we do not need to be perfect to be used of God.

Let's begin with a look at a man by the name of Jacob. He was the son of the great Jewish patriarch Isaac. Isaac's wife Rebekah had not been able to bear children. God heard the prayer of Isaac, however and opened her womb (see Genesis 25:21). Rebekah conceived and gave birth to twins, Jacob and his brother Esau.

What is significant about this conception was the prophecy about these twins. During the pregnancy, Rebekah began to feel that something was wrong. The twins "struggled together within her" (Genesis 25:22). This troubled Rebekah and so she asked the Lord about it:

23 And the LORD said to her,
"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;
the one shall be stronger than the other,
the older shall serve the younger." (Genesis 25)

God had a plan for these two boys. They would be the fathers of two separate nations. God's purpose, however, was that the younger of the two be stronger than his brother and his older brother would serve him.

When the time for the birth came, the firstborn was named Esau. Jacob was the younger of the two. What is interesting to note is that when Esau was being born, Jacob, his younger brother was holding onto his heel. His parents took note of this incident and gave him a name that represented his action at birth. Adam Clarke says this about the name given to Jacob:

His name was called Jacob – Yaccob, from akab, to defraud, deceive, to supplant, i.e. to overthrow a person by tripping up his heels. Hence the name was given to Jacob, because it was found he had laid hold of his brother's heel, which was emblematic of his supplanting Esau, and defrauding him of his birthright. (*Commentary on the Bible by Adam Clarke (CLARKE) Electronic edition copyright © 2015 by Laridian, Inc., Marion Iowa. All rights reserved. "Commentary on the Bible by Adam Clarke." Marion, IA: Laridian, Inc., 2015*)

This defrauding nature of Jacob would become evident as the boys grew older. Genesis 25 describes an incident where Jacob was at home cooking stew (Genesis 25:29). Esau, on the other hand, was out in the fields hunting. When Esau returned home he was very hungry and asked his brother for some of the stew he was cooking.

Taking advantage of his brother's hunger, Jacob told Esau that he would only give him the stew if he sold him his birthright. Because Esau was the firstborn of the two boys,

his inheritance would be greater than Jacob's. Jacob appeared to resent this. Esau, feeling like he was going to die if he didn't get something to eat, swore to Jacob that he would give him his birthright in exchange for the stew. Having sworn this oath, Esau legally handed over his rights as the firstborn to his younger brother, fulfilling the words of prophecy spoken to Rebekah, his mother regarding the older child serving the younger. This privilege, however, was taken by deceit.

The defrauding and deceiving nature of Jacob can be seen not only in how he treated his brother in a time of need but also in what he did to his father in his old age. Genesis 27 recounts the story of how Jacob took advantage of his father's failing eyesight. Knowing that he was getting old, Isaac wanted to bless his eldest son with a special blessing. It should be noted that this was not a trivial matter. The blessing of the eldest son was a significant event. This blessing was not just from the father but from God Himself through the father. Esau's future was deeply connected to the words of his father in this blessing.

Isaac told his son Esau to go out and hunt some meat so that they could eat together and seal this blessing as father and son. Hearing that Isaac was about to bless his son Esau, Rebekah and Jacob conceived a plan to defraud Esau of that blessing. Rebekah prepared some meat for her husband from the flock. Jacob disguised himself by wearing Esau's clothes and covering his body with the skin of a young goat so that he would appear to be hairy like his brother. Jacob then brought the meat to his father and received his brother's blessing. Isaac, being blind, was unaware of the fact that he had given the blessing to the younger son. By this means, Jacob stole Esau's blessing from him.

We are struck here by the disrespect of Jacob for his brother and his position as the eldest son. We also see his willingness to dishonour his father in his old age by deceiving him in this way.

Because of his actions, Jacob was forced to leave home. The fierce anger of Esau toward him was such that Esau swore to kill Jacob the moment his father died. Esau, at least had enough respect for his father that he refused to grieve his heart by killing his brother while he was alive. To escape the anger of his brother, Jacob fled to Paddan-aram where his uncle on his mother's side lived.

As Jacob travelled to Paddan-aram, God spoke to him in a dream saying:

13... I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. 14 Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. 15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised (Genesis 28)

These words are strange in the context. Jacob is fleeing from an angry brother. He is doing so because he had deceived him and stole his blessing. Yet, as he runs for his life, he met the Lord God who gave him a promise of blessing. Through this deceiver all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God would not leave Jacob until he had fulfilled in him all that He had promised.

From the very beginning God had shown Rebekah that Jacob would be the one to receive the blessing of God. Jacob would be the stronger of the two children she had borne. Did this mean that Jacob was better than his brother? The story of these two boys would lead us to believe this was not the case. Jacob was a deceiver who failed to respect the people around him. He would willingly use people for his own advantage. This was the man God blessed that day in the dream. He was an imperfect man. The blessing of God had nothing to do with Jacob being worthy. It was an act of God's mercy and grace.

Jacob would find two wives in Paddan-aram. Through Leah and Rachel God would give him twelve sons. These sons would become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. The great purpose of God was fulfilled through Jacob, the deceiver.

Lest we think that there was no cost to the sinful behaviour of Jacob, let me remind you of a few more details related to the life of Jacob. The deception of Jacob would have its consequences.

First, Jacob would live a good part of his life fearful of his brother's revenge. When God called him back to the land of Canaan, Jacob would return with great fear in his heart. Genesis 32 describe the intensity of that fear. He would wrestle with the angel of the Lord over this matter. This broken relationship with his brother would be a burden he would bear for a good part of his adult life.

Second, Jacob would live with his uncle Laban. Laban promised him his daughter Rachel in marriage if Jacob would serve him for seven years. On the night of the marriage, however, Laban gave him Leah, his older daughter instead. When the deed was discovered, Laban required

that Jacob work another seven years for Rachel. The deceiver was deceived. Over the course of his relationship with his father-in-law Jacob would himself be cheated many times. Listen to what he told his wives in Genesis 31:

6 You know that I have served you father with all my strength, 7 yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages ten times. But God did not permit him to harm me. (Genesis 31)

Jacob, the deceiver found himself in a family with a father-in-law who was constantly taking advantage of him. This resulted in a very strained family relationship.

Third, Jacob's wives were constantly competing with each other. Rachel and Leah both struggled for the attention of Jacob. Rachel bitterly complained because she could not have children. Leah continually acted as an unloved wife. Jacob was caught in the middle of this with each wife seeking to take advantage of the other. Listen to the words Rachel when God gave her a son through her servant Bilhah:

8 Then Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed... (Genesis 30)

Jacob's family problems did not end with his wives. Genesis 34 tells the story of how his daughter Dinah went out with some of the young girls in the land where they were living and met a young man by the name of Shechem. Shechem deceived and raped Dinah.

When Jacob's sons heard what had happened to their sister they were very angry. Shechem and his father came to see Jacob about the incident. Shechem's father Hamor

asked Jacob to set a bride price and his son Shechem would marry Dinah. Listen to the response of Jacob's sons to this request:

13 The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah. 14 They said to them, "We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us. 15 Only on this condition will we agree with you—that you will become as we are by every male among you being circumcised. (Genesis 34)

The matter was agreed to and Shechem and Hamor went home and had all the males of their city circumcised. Notice, however, that Genesis 34:13 tells us that the sons of Jacob were deceitful in their request. That deceit became evident when three days after the circumcision, Simeon and Levi took their swords and attacked the men as they were still suffering and killed them all.

The deception of Jacob was passed on to his children. In this case, Jacob would have a heavy price to pay for this. Speaking to his sons that day he said:

30 Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household. (Genesis 34)

In Genesis 35:22 we read of how Jacob's firstborn son Reuben would dishonour his father by sleeping with his

concubine. The man who, himself had disrespected his father in his old age now experienced this pain and disgrace through his own son.

Jacob, struggled in his relationship with Laban who constantly cheated him. He lived with two wives who wrestled with each other and were constantly trying take advantage of each other for his attention. His sons had this deceptive nature in them and were responsible for the murder of the men in an entire city. This deception strained his relationship with the surrounding nations. Reuben, his firstborn disgraced him by sleeping with his concubine.

Would this be the man you would choose to be a father of the nation God was going to bless? His family seems to be in a mess. His personal life was not where it should be. His testimony in the community was at times questionable. Yet through this deceiver, the twelve tribes of Israel would be born.

After the incident with Shechem and Dinah, God told Jacob to leave the region and move to Bethel (see Genesis 35:1). Notice what Genesis 35:5 tells us about that trip:

5 And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. (Genesis 35)

The grace of God protected the children of Jacob as they travelled so that no nation dared to attack them.

God would change Jacob's name to Israel, which literally means "he who struggles with God." Yet to this one who struggled with God the certain promise of was given:

10 And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he called his name Israel. 11 And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation shall come from you own body. 12 The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and will give the land to your offspring after you." (Genesis 35)

The call of God to Jacob was to be fruitful and multiply. The Almighty God of his fathers would give him land and an offspring. Through that offspring, the ends of the earth would be blessed.

Jacob's testimony is far from perfect. Personally, he had many issues in his life. His family was at times quite a mess. His testimony in the community was strained because of his son's actions. God called this man to be "fruitful and multiply." God protected him and chose to use him. As Jacob looked back on his life, I am sure that he was aware of all his shortcomings. He also saw the painful result of those shortcomings in his personal life, family life and community life. Despite this, however, he was also aware of the wonderful grace of God that chose to bless and use him despite his many failures.

For Consideration:

- What was the purpose of God for Jacob, the youngest of the twins born to Rebekah and Isaac?
- How did Jacob receive the blessing and birthright of his older brother Esau?

- Jacob was forced to leave home because of his deception. How did the Lord meet him on his way to Paddan-aram? What was the promise of God to Jacob?
- Describe what was taking place in Jacob's family. Consider his wives and his children in this answer.
- After Jacob's sons slaughtered Shechem and the men of his town how did God demonstrate His presence with them? See Genesis 35:5.
- What was it that qualified Jacob for the blessing and the promise of God? Would you choose such a man to be the instrument of God's promise and blessing?
- What were the consequences of Jacob's deception in his personal life?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reveal anything in you that is not in line with the teaching of the Word of God and His purpose for your life.
- Thank the Lord that He has been merciful to you despite your personal flaws and shortcomings.
- Ask the Lord to give you wisdom as you seek to raise your family for Him.
- Have you had to face the consequences of your sinful actions? Ask the Lord for strength to walk through these issues in a way that will bring Him glory.

- Thank the Lord that He does not abandon us when we fall short of His standard.
- Thank the Lord for the way he used Jacob, despite his faults, to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Chapter 2 - A Man Without a Country and the Birth of a Nation

The life of Moses began in the land of Egypt. His father was a Levite (Exodus 2:1) and so he was born into the tribe God would choose to become His priestly representatives. The people of Israel did not have their own land. In fact, at the time of Moses' birth, they were being mistreated and abused by the Egyptians, among whom they lived as slaves. This abuse had become so cruel that Pharaoh ordered that every male child born to an Israelite woman was to be cast into the Nile river and drowned (Exodus 1:22).

Moses' mother tried her best to hide him from the Egyptian authorities, but there came a point when she knew she could no longer hide him. Preparing a basket from bulrushes (reeds) she placed him in the Nile river, committing his future to God. As it happened, the daughter of Pharaoh went down to the river to bathe and discovered the young child, Moses, in the basket floating among the reeds. Taking pity on the child, she chose to keep him and raise him as her own (Exodus 2:3-11). Moses was raised apart from his people as an Egyptian. While this exile from his own people was not unpleasant, it did trouble Moses.

Exodus 2:11,12 recounts the story of how, when he had grown up, Moses went out to see his own people. What he saw that day angered him. He witnesses an Egyptian beating an Israelite. Exodus 2:12 describes what he did in response:

12 He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (Exodus 2)

Moses killed this Egyptian because he was beating the Israelite slave. He knew what he did was wrong. The passage tells us that “he looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him.” Clearly Moses did not want to get caught. Acts 7:23-25 tells us why Moses was so willing to kill this Egyptian:

23 “When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. 24 And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. 25 He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.

Moses had a burden for his people and believed that he could help them. He was a man of influence and authority in the land, having been raised by Pharaoh’s daughter. He wanted to show his brothers and sisters in Israel that he could help them and that he was on their side.

This act of Moses shows us that while he had been raised in the comforts of Egypt, his heart was not there. He belonged to Israel and wanted to return to his own people

and help them in their time of need. His exile was physically comfortable but emotionally and spiritually Moses was not happy. He saw himself as a refugee, disconnected from his people.

Returning to his people on another occasion, Moses saw two Israelites fighting. He challenged these men and questioned why they were fighting among themselves. Their response must have been very shocking for Moses:

14 He answered, "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian? (Exodus 2)

These words must have cut deeply into the soul of Moses that day for two reasons. First, the words of the Israelite revealed that he knew Moses had killed an Egyptian and hid him in the sand. If the Israelites knew about this, it would not be long before the Egyptian officials also knew. Moses was guilty of murder and he feared the consequences of being caught.

The second reason the words of this man were so hurtful was because they revealed the heart of the nation of Israel toward him. "Who made you a prince and a judge over us?" Israel did not receive Moses as their prince and defender. They wanted nothing to do with him. In their eyes, he was not one of them. He lived in luxury while they were being beaten and forced to work for Pharaoh. Moses was raised by people who were their enemies, and they saw him as one of them. They did not accept him and certainly did not want his help.

Moses likely realised that day that he was a man without a country. Israel would not accept him. The moment Pharaoh found out that he was guilty of killing an Egyptian, he

would seek to kill him. Moses was forced to leave Egypt as a refugee without a country. He would spend the next forty years of his life tending sheep in the foreign land of Midian. In fact, when Moses and his Midianite wife had their first son, Moses called him Gershom. Notice the reason why he gave him this name:

22 She gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land. (Exodus 2)

Moses was very conscious of his exile. He was a man without a country, a refugee from a nation who did not want him and a country that wanted to kill him. He became a shepherd in the land of Midian and for forty years lived in exile.

It was not until Moses was eighty years of age that the Lord God appeared to him. Exodus 3 recounts the story of how Moses was shepherding his sheep and saw a bush in the desert that appeared to be on fire. God spoke to Moses out of that bush.

4 ... "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3)

Notice how God introduced Himself to Moses. "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." We cannot underestimate the significance of these words to a refugee without a country and a sense of belonging. God reminded Moses that day that

He was the God of his father Abraham. This identified Moses with the nation of Israel. For forty years, he had been raised as an Egyptian. Then he had lived in Midian as a shepherd for another forty years. God, however, is giving him an identity and a purpose. He reminds him that he was a child of Abraham, an Israelite. This was his identity before God.

This must have been a very special day for Moses. He had heard from God and had the assurance that before God he did have a people. Notice, however, that God does not stop at this. He went on to speak to Moses about the difficulties His people were facing in Egypt. God had heard the cries of His people and was going to do something about it. In fact, He told Moses that He had chosen Him to represent the nation before Pharaoh. He would be the one to plead their case before the most powerful leader on the earth at that time. Not only does God reaffirm Moses as a child of Israel, but He calls him to be His representative for that nation.

I don't know about you, but if I were Moses I am sure that I would not feel worthy of such a task. Surely, there was someone who had lived for these past eighty years among the people who could have represented them better than Moses. Notice the response of Moses to this call of God on his life:

11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt? (Exodus 3)

As he stood before God that day, he wrestled with this calling. The people of Israel had rejected him forty years prior to this. Egypt saw him as a murderer and traitor. He questioned his ability to speak. He had been a shepherd for the

past forty years and did not feel that this qualified him to be the leader of a nation.

There have been many times when I have looked at the call of God on my life and felt like Moses. Who am I that I should be writing and teaching the Word? Who am I that God would allow my material to be translated and shipped to many different countries? There are many others seemingly more qualified than myself who could do this ministry. The answer always comes back to the fact that God has called me. I have come to realize that what counts is not my qualifications; it is the call of God on my life. I am qualified, not because of my experience or ability but because God has called me. I step out feeling like Moses, unworthy of the task, but I step out confident of the call and purpose of God for my life.

As we watch Moses over the coming years, we see a timid man returning to Egypt. We see him following the leading of God and speaking His words both to Pharaoh and to Israel. We watch Moses go time after time into the presence of the Lord seeking wisdom and guidance. We see the nation of Egypt crumble as God worked through Moses. We see the release of an entire nation from slavery. We see the miraculous power of God demonstrated as the water of the Sea is held back to lead Israel into safety. We see the daily provision of God for well over two million people and their animals. God would use Moses, this refugee without a country to organize His people into a nation with laws governing their behaviour.

What qualified Moses for the task of building a nation? What made his ministry so fruitful? What made him the choice of God? It was obviously not his influence in the nation of Egypt. God stripped that from him. Nor was it that he had experienced the hardship of Israel's bondage, for

he had escaped the Egyptian whip. It was not in the fact that he had gained the respect of the Israelites, for they had rejected him as one of them. It was not in his natural ability because God waited until he was well in His eighties when that natural ability had diminished before He called him into this ministry. How easy it is to desperately search for human reasons for fruitfulness in ministry. Ultimately, however, in the life of Moses, the reason for his fruitful ministry had more to do with the grace of God than any personal qualification. He was fruitful because God had chosen Him for this task. Moses did not even want what God was calling him to do. Listen to the conversation that took place between God and Moses:

GOD: "I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people the children of Israel out of Egypt (Exodus 3:10)

MOSES: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel, out of Egypt. (Exodus 3:11)

GOD: "But I will be with you..." (Exodus 3:12)

MOSES "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" (Exodus 3:14)

GOD: "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am who I am.'" (Exodus 3:15)

MOSES: "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" (Exodus 4:1)

GOD: "What is that in your hand?... throw it on the ground." (and it became a serpent) (Exodus 4:2-3)

MOSES: "Oh my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue. (Exodus 4:10)

GOD: "Who made man's mouth? ... now therefore go. And I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." (Exodus 4:11-12)

MOSES "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." (Exodus 4:13)

There can be little doubt that Moses did not see himself as qualified for the task before him. In this debate with God, the Lord continues to bring him back to the fact that though he did not feel qualified in himself, God would give him all he needed for the task. Moses was successful because God called him and equipped him for the task. God did not choose Moses because of his excellent qualifications; Moses is very clear about this in his conversation with God.

What was it that made God choose a refugee to build a nation –it was His grace alone. God chose to use a broken man to lead a great nation through which He would bless the entire world. It was God's grace that empowered Moses. It was His grace that gave him the wisdom he needed when he did not know which way to turn.

As much as we would like to find something in Moses that influenced God in His decision to bless him with such a fruitful ministry, the reality of the matter is that this is not

how Moses saw things. He felt unworthy. He was a refugee without a home that God, in His grace, chose to use as an ambassador and leader of a nation.

For Consideration:

- How was Moses taken away from his own people?
- Was Moses happy being raised as an Egyptian? Where was his allegiance?
- How did Israel see Moses?
- What did the name of his firstborn son indicate about how Moses felt about being in the land of Midian?
- Did Moses feel qualified to receive the call of God? Explain.
- Would it be fair to say that the only real qualification of Moses was the call of God on His life? Was this enough?
- Why do we feel the need to find something in ourselves that makes us fruitful for the kingdom? To what extent was the fruitful ministry of Moses an act of pure grace on God's part?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to thank the Lord that He is willing to use people that we would reject.

- Thank the Lord for His patience with Moses who struggled to accept the call of God for His life. Have you struggled with God's call for your life?
- Thank the Lord that while we may not be naturally qualified for the service to which God calls us, we can trust Him to provide all we need to accomplish for Him.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to step out into His call for your life.

Chapter 3 - A Vengeful Strongman and the Defeat of Israel's Enemies

Sometimes we feel like those who have a powerful impact for the kingdom must be walking close to the Lord, otherwise how could they be so successful in ministry. This idea attributes success to faithfulness. It comes from a sense that God uses us because He sees something in us. It fails to see that fruitfulness in ministry is an act of God's grace and not something we earn because of our good efforts or faithful use of gifts and talents. Let's take a moment to consider the life of a judge in Israel named Samson.

Samson was born at a time when the Philistines were creating a serious problem for the nation of Israel. Listen to what Judges 13:1 says:

1 And the people of Israel again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, so the LORD gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years.
(Judges 13)

This verse shows us two things about the days in which Samson lived. First, the nation of Israel was not walking

with the Lord God. Second, the judgement of God was on them for their sin. This came in the form of the Philistines who oppressed them for a period of forty years.

Samson was born to a woman whose name is not mentioned in Scripture. She was the wife of Manoah. Manoah's wife was barren but one day an angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her that she would conceive and bear a son (Judges 13:3). The angel told Samson's mother that this son was to be set apart for the Lord all his life.

3 The angel of the Lord appeared to her and said, "You are barren and childless, but you are going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. 4 Now see to it that you drink no wine or other fermented drink and that you do not eat anything unclean. 5 You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines."

It is quite clear from her statement to her husband that Manoah's wife understood that this dedication of her child was to be for life:

7 but he said to me, "Behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. So then drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb to the day of his death." (Judges 13)

Notice the special requirements God placed on Samson. First, he was never to drink wine or fermented drink. Second, he was never to eat anything unclean. Third, he was

never to cut his hair. These were the signs of his dedication to the Lord and Samson would be required to live by these standards all his life. Notice also from the words of the angel that the Lord had a very specific purpose for Samson. He was going to use Samson to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines. Samson was a special child, born for this purpose.

As Samson grew up he went down to the city Philistine city of Timnah. We are not told why he was in the city of Israel's enemies but when he was there he met a young Philistine woman who attracted him. Returning home to Israel, he told his father and mother that he wanted to marry her. As you can imagine, this grieved the heart of his parents. Israelite men were not to take foreign wives. This matter concerned his parents even more because the Philistines were the enemy of Israel and the angel of the Lord had told them that Samson would deliver them from this enemy. Here we see Samson wanting to marry the enemy. This would make the enemy part of his family. His parents did not see how disobeying God in this matter could possibly be a good thing.

Despite their concerns about this marriage, Samson's parents went with him to speak to the family of the young Philistine woman. On their way, a lion attacked and Samson killed it and ripped it apart with his bare hands (see Judges 14:5-6). Returning sometime later, Samson was curious about the body of the lion he had killed. He went searching for it and found it. Noticing a swarm of bees in the body of this dead lion, Samson scraped out the honey with his hands and continued his way. He gave some of the honey to his parents, but did not tell them that he had scraped it out of the carcass of a dead lion (see Judges 14:9).

What is significant about this is that Samson touched the body of a dead animal. Part of his obligation before God as a Nazirite was that he was not to touch anything unclean. This dead animal was unclean. The fact that he did not tell his parents where he found the honey may indicate that he knew that he was breaking his vow before God. This did not seem to concern him.

Not only did Samson not take his vow seriously, but he seems to delight in the breaking of this vow. When the family was in Timnah celebrating the engagement, Samson and thirty of his companions were eating together. Samson made a bet with them. He told them that if they could solve his riddle then he would give them each a set of clothes. If they couldn't, they would each give him a set of clothes.

The riddle was quite simple:

14 ... Out of the eater came something to eat.
Out of the strong came something sweet. (Judges 14)

Samson seems to boast in how he broke his vow to God. Here in this verse he makes a joke out of what he did. Obviously, anyone who took their vows seriously would not see this as a matter of joking. There is no sense of Samson being ashamed here.

To get the answer to the riddle, Samson's friends threaten to kill his fiancée and her family. When she pressed Samson for the answer, he gave it to her. She told his friends and when the day came for them to give their answer to his riddle they answered correctly. To pay his bet, Samson went out and killed thirty Philistines and gave their clothes to his friends. Angry about how he had been deceived by his fiancée and friends, he left Philistia and returned home.

After a period of cooling down, Samson returned to Philistia to his fiancée. Ready to go through with the marriage, he approached her father about seeing her. Her father, however, had given her as wife to one of Samson's friends. Samson was so angry with his father-in-law that he went out into the fields and caught 300 foxes. He tied them in pairs and fastened a torch to each pair. Then he set fire to the torches and released the foxes into the grain fields. This resulted in significant damage to the crops and great loss to the farmers of the region.

Samson's motivation was revenge. What he did caused so much anger in the hearts of the Philistines that they sent an army of three thousand men after him. Taking the jawbone of a donkey, Samson fought them. That day he killed one thousand Philistine men. The people of Israel, recognising Samson's great strength and desire to defeat the Philistines, anointed him as judge over them – a position Samson would hold for twenty years (see Judges 15:20).

As a leader of Israel, Samson's moral life left much to be desired. In Judges 16:1 we see how Samson when to Philistia where he saw a prostitute and slept with her. We are left wondering what Samson was doing in the territory of his enemy sleeping with a Philistine prostitute. Not only would this have created an outrage in Israel but it also stirred up the anger of the Philistines. When the people of Gaza heard that Samson had come to their town and was sleeping with one of their prostitutes, they surrounded the house with the intention of killing him. Samson, however, escaped the city undetected.

Not long after this Samson fell in love with another Philistine woman who lived in the Valley of Sorek. Her name was Delilah. He moved in with her. Again, we are left wondering why a judge of Israel is not in Israel but had chosen

instead to live with a Philistine woman. We can only imagine how this would have caused confusion in Israel. Samson's presence in enemy territory was a thorn in the side of the Philistines. They were constantly trying to kill him. This does not seem to disturb Samson, who seems to be oblivious to their attacks.

Through the deception of Delilah, however, Samson is eventually taken prisoner. Having told her the secret of his great strength, she cut his hair and invited his enemies to capture him. They would pull out his eyes. As Samson was held in prison, his hair, the secret of his strength, grew back. When the Philistines brought him out to entertain them during a celebration to their god Dagon, Samson asked a young man to direct him to the pillars of the great temple where everyone had gathered.

In Judges 16:28 we read that Samson cried out to the Lord God:

28 ... O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes." (Judges 16)

This seems to be the only time we have a record of Samson crying out to God. Notice, that he does recognise God as the source of his strength. However, the motivation behind this desire to destroy his enemies is that he was seeking revenge on them for taking out his eyes. There is no mention here in these final words of Samson of the glory of God. Nor does he seem to be concerned here about the deliverance of his people. There is no prayer of repentance. Samson comes to God and cries out to God, not for the people he served, but for himself.

God answered that prayer and, pushing against two pillars in the temple of Dagon, Samson brought down the building on himself and all those who were there that day. Samson killed more Philistines that day than he did during his entire lifetime (Judges 16:30). The prophecy given to Samson's mother came true. God would use her son to deliver his people from the Philistines.

Consider the man God used that day. Samson was a man who disregarded his vow to the Lord. Not only did he break this vow, but he joked about breaking it. He also disregarded the law of God in seeking to marry a foreign wife. He slept with prostitutes, and lived with a woman who was not his wife. He appears to do so with no sense of conviction or repentance. When angered, Samson could be very cruel and vengeful. He was a self-centred individual who seemed to be careless about God's ways. This led him into situations where he appears to be tempting the Lord. The decisions he made in life showed no respect for his people or the call of God on his life.

In the end, all this evil caught up with him. The women he slept with would turn against him. The Philistines he tempted would pull out his eyes. His disregard for God's law would eventually see him end his life as a blind prisoner. Despite these things, however, he would be the instrument of God to deliver His people from the oppression of the Philistines.

Would you hire a pastor like Samson? Would you accept Him as the leader of your mission work? What was the secret of his success in the work God had called him to do? It certainly wasn't his godly lifestyle. Nor was it his humble attitude. The only explanation for the success of Samson's ministry is the decision of God to use him despite his many flaws. God used a vengeful, self-centred and disobedient

strongman to bring deliverance to His people. Samson was not faithful to God, but he was certainly used of God to accomplish His purpose.

For Consideration:

- What do we learn about God's purpose for Samson at his birth? What did God promise to accomplish through him?
- How did Samson disrespect his vows to the Lord?
- Give some examples of how Samson disregarded the law of God.
- Was Samson faithful to the purpose of God for his life? Was he successful?
- What is the difference between faithfulness to God and fruitfulness in ministry? Are the two always related?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is not limited in His purpose because of our disobedience and unfaithfulness.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be more faithful to Him. Ask Him to reveal any sinful ways in your life. Confess them to Him.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for times when you truly believed that the reason for your success in ministry was because of your ability and strength. Thank

the Lord that He works in us and through us despite our shortcomings.

Chapter 3 - A Struggling Father Impacts a Nation

The prophet Samuel was a very important figure in the history and development of the nation of Israel. His birth was miraculous and his calling was clear from the time of his birth. He was born to Elkanah and his wife Hannah. What was particularly striking about his birth was that his mother did not appear to be able to have children (see 1 Samuel 1:2).

This inability to conceive grieved Hannah very much. In fact, Elkanah's second wife Peninnah, who had borne children to him, often provoked Hannah.

6 And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her because the LORD had closed her womb. 7 So it went on year by year. As often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore, Hannah wept and would not eat. (1 Samuel 1)

On one occasion, as the family was at the tabernacle in Shiloh, Hannah prayed to the Lord in deep distress over this matter of being childless. That day she prayed:

10 ... O LORD of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head. (1 Samuel 1)

That day, in her desperate cry, Hannah committed this son to the Lord and made a vow of separation for him. As much as she wanted a child for herself, this child would be devoted completely to the Lord.

God heard her prayer and she conceived a male child. Faithful to her vow, Hannah cared for him until he was weaned and then at this early age brought him to the tabernacle where he would live in the care of the priest. Samuel would be trained and raised by Eli the priest. He would spend his youth ministering in the service of his God.

It was there in Shiloh that the Lord began to speak to Samuel. His first prophetic words were spoken to the man who had been raising him – Eli the priest. It appears that Eli's sons were unfaithful to the Lord. God told Samuel that the guilt of Eli and his sons would be on them forever and would never be forgiven:

13 And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. 14 Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever. (1 Samuel 3)

We can only imagine how hard it would have been for Samuel to speak these words to Eli, the one who had invested so much into his life. 1 Samuel 3:19-21 tells us, however, that from that time, Samuel grew in his relationship with the Lord and his prophetic calling – “the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground” (1 Samuel 3:19). In fact, Samuel’s reputation as a prophet became firmly established in Israel (1 Samuel 3:20).

Samuel’s influence is seen in 1 Samuel 7 where he challenged his people to get rid of their false gods to serve the Lord only (1 Samuel 7:3-4). In response, the people gathered at Mizpah, fasted and cried out in repentance to the Lord. See what happened as the presence of the Lord appeared to His repentant people:

10 As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered with a mighty sound that day against the Philistines and threw them into confusion, and they were defeated before Israel. (1 Samuel 7:10)

This was a powerful demonstration of God. The Philistines did not trouble Israel again during the time of Samuel, and Israel’s territory, taken by the Philistines, was restored to them (see 1 Samuel 7:13-14).

Samuel would travel in a yearly circuit to Bethel, Gilgal, Mizpah and back to Ramah where he lived. He judged cases and spoke the word of God in all these regions, pointing people to the will and purpose of God for their lives.

Samuel’s ministry was a fruitful and powerful one. What is striking about the man Samuel, however, is his family life.

We catch a glimpse of this in 1 Samuel 8. As Samuel grew older, he made his sons judges over Israel. Notice how 1 Samuel 8:3 describes these sons of Samuel:

3 Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice. (1 Samuel 8)

It was this very fact that caused the people to come one day to Samuel and ask for a king like the other nations.

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah 5 and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." (1 Samuel 8)

While the people had great respect for Samuel, they did not have that same respect for his sons who were evil and blasphemed the Lord in how they ministered.

Let's consider this for a moment. Remember that the very first word Samuel had from the Lord was to Eli the priest, his mentor. God rebuked Eli for not dealing with his sons who showed no respect for God as they carried out their priestly duties. He rebuked Eli's sons for their greed and immorality. Samuel, now found himself in the same situation. Like Eli's sons, Samuel's sons took bribes and perverted justice. Samuel appointed them judges and left them in their position just as Eli did. He was guilty of the same sin that he had spoken to Eli of when he was young.

Samuel's sons were responsible for turning Israel away from God, their king. Instead of turning people toward God, Samuel's sons turned toward the nations around them. Samuel was not able to pass on his faith to his children.

He struggled as a father to raise children who would honour the Lord.

Samuel was a powerful prophet. He was one of the great prophet/judges of Israel. We see how he travelled far and wide proclaiming the truth of God and pointing people in the ways of the Lord but his own sons rejected his message and did not walk in God's ways. It was this struggling father who impacted the nation of Israel so powerfully. King Saul respected Samuel and often came to him seeking advice and counsel. Samuel would also have an impact on the life of the greatest King Israel ever knew, King David. Samuel was the one who would anoint David to be king.

Many lives in Israel were touched by Samuel as he travelled from town to town each year. He advised the king and challenged his people to walk in the ways of the Lord. His choice of David as the successor to King Saul would bring Israel to her height of power and glory. His impact on the nation for God was significant even though his own sons did not follow in his ways.

What was the secret of Samuel's success as a prophet? Was it because he made wise decisions? His decision to make his sons judges led to many turning away from God. Was it because of his consistent walk with God? The fact that he fell into the same trap as Eli, shows that he failed in this regard as well.

This struggling father, however, impacted kings and nations. His counsel and advice changed the course of the nation of Israel. The success of Samuel's ministry was not found in him; it was found in the grace of God who chose to use him. Maybe he could have spent more time with his family instead of travelling all over Israel preaching the

Word of God. I am sure that he felt the pain of his sons' rejection of his message. I am sure he felt somewhat responsible for the nation of Israel turning from God as their king to seek a king like the nations around them. Despite his failures, however, his impact would be felt for years to come. He wasn't always wise. Perhaps his priorities were not always what they should have been, but his life was powerful because God, in his grace, chose to use him.

God's grace is poured out even on struggling fathers and mothers. The fact that God pours out His grace on us and gives us a fruitful and powerful ministry does not mean that we are doing everything right. God uses us despite our failures. Samuel's ministry is an example of grace being showered on a struggling parent despite his failures. We should not take from this that we can ignore our obligations, but be assured that despite our failures, God can still bless us.

For Consideration:

- God called Samuel even before he was born. Was the success of his ministry a result of himself and his qualities as a prophet or because of God's call?
- Samuel appears to be raised in the home of Eli the priest. What were Eli's sons like? What was Samuel's first recorded prophetic word?
- How did Samuel fall into the same trap as Eli? What were Samuel's sons like? Who gave them their position in ministry?

- Despite his sons' rejection of his message, how significant and successful was the ministry of Samuel?
- What is the connection between success in ministry and being right with God in all areas of our life? It is possible to be successful in ministry and fail in other areas?
- Do you think that Samuel could have spent more time with his family?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He uses you despite your imperfections and faults.
- Ask the Lord to give you a balance between family and church. Ask God to allow your life to impact your family. Take a moment to pray for your loved ones, asking that they would come to Christ as their Saviour.
- Ask the Lord to help you never to judge your spiritual condition based on the success or failure of your ministry.

Chapter 5

A Shepherd

Experiences

God's Grace

The first we hear about the young man David is in 1 Samuel 16. After God's rejection of Saul as king, He sent Samuel the prophet to anoint another man as king over His people. Samuel was sent to Bethlehem, the home of a man by the name of Jesse (1 Samuel 16:4). As Samuel offered a sacrifice to the Lord, he looked over the sons of Jesse gathered around him. The Lord revealed to him that none of these men were His choice to be king. Confused by this, Samuel asked if Jesse had any other sons. Jesse told him that he had one more—the youngest, who was tending sheep while his brothers attended the sacrifice. Young David was brought before Samuel, the Lord told him to anoint him as king (1 Samuel 16:12-13). This was just the beginning of David's experience of God's grace.

When Samuel anointed David, the Spirit of the Lord left King Saul and he was troubled with an evil spirit (see Judges 16:15). The only thing that seemed to calm him was music. Realizing this, King Saul sent his servants to search for a young musician who could be at his side so that when he was attacked, this young man could calm him

with music. One of the servants knew of David and his musical skills. He told Saul about him, and David was summoned. By the grace of God David was brought to the court of the king to play music.

The relationship between David and Saul grew and David found favour in Saul's sight (see Judges 14:21-22). In fact, Saul made David his armour bearer. In all this we see the blessing of God on David's life, preparing him for the task ahead.

The Philistines were a problem for the Israelites in those days. In fact, there was war between the two countries. Among the Philistines was a man by the name of Goliath—a giant. The Philistines proposed that the Israelites send a man to fight Goliath. If the man they chose to fight Goliath defeated him, then they would subject themselves to Israel. If, on the other hand, Goliath defeated the Israelite, then all of Israel would be subject to the Philistines. No one in Israel dared to take on this challenge. David, however, felt moved of God to stand for Israel.

This young shepherd was not skilled in the use of sword or spear. The tool of his trade was a simple sling shot. What was a sling shot against a giant in full armour? What was a shepherd against an experienced and mighty soldier?

Goliath mocked David when he saw him coming. Humanly speaking, David had no chance against this great soldier. David was aware of his disadvantage. He had no pretension of being able to overcome such a massive man in his own strength. Speaking to Goliath that day he said:

45 ... "You come to me with a sword and 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. 46 This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, 47 and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand."

David reminded those present that it was not spear and sword that would win this battle but the Lord — "for the battle is the Lord's." David took no credit for this battle. He knew his strength did not match that of Goliath. He knew that if it were up to him, he would not have a chance. It was the grace of God that would win the battle. Nothing but grace would give him victory that day. In the name of the Lord, David shot a single stone from his sling and struck the giant in the head, knocking him down.

In the grace of God this act of faith led to David's growing influence and authority in the nation. David served Saul well in his army. God gave David many victories. The victories of David exceeded the victories of Saul. In fact, a song was sung in those days with these words:

7 ... Saul has struck down his thousands,
and David his ten thousands. (1 Samuel 18)

Saul would become quite jealous of David. In fact, this jealousy was such that he often sought to kill him. David was forced to go into hiding to save his life. Imagine what it would have been like for David in those days of hiding from Saul. The great soldier and military commander is forced

to flee. Not only would this have been humbling, but it also would have reminded him that God could take away everything in an instant. David had to realise that were it not for the grace of God he would perish at the hands of his own king. Though he had defeated Goliath, God would not allow him to defeat Saul.

The grace of God in David's life is evident despite his failures and sins. As David and his men hid from Saul, they were forced to depend on others for food. On one occasion, David sent messengers to a rich man by the name of Nabal asking for provisions. Nabal refused to help him. This refusal insulted David. He immediately prepared his men to fight Nabal and take provisions by force. David's anger was so great that day that he declared:

22 God do so to the enemies of David and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him. (1 Samuel 25)

The intention of David is quite clear. He was going to kill every male he found on the property of Nabal for refusing to provide supplies for his men. This was not the purpose of God for David. Only after Nabal's wife met David and brought supplies to him did David understand the seriousness of his sin and the guilt that would have been on his hands had he carried out his plan (see 1 Samuel 25:32-34). David the gentle shepherd was also a man who could at times take matters into his hands and get himself in trouble.

After the death of Saul, David would become king of Israel and Judah. One of his great desires was to bring the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem where it would be near him. The priests transported the ark on a new ox cart. In doing so they broke the law of God that stated that the ark was

only to be carried by priests. As they travelled, the oxen stumbled and the ark risked falling off the cart. A man by the name of Uzzah, put out his hand to stabilise it so that it would not fall on the ground. The moment he touched the ark, however, the anger of the Lord was aroused and God struck him so that he died.

2 Samuel 6:9-10 tells us that David was so afraid of the Lord that he was unwilling to take the ark the rest of the way to Jerusalem. In fact, 2 Samuel 6:8 tells us that David was angry at the Lord for killing Uzzah:

8 And David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-Uzzah to this day. (2 Samuel 6)

Because of his anger, for three months David refused to take the ark to Jerusalem. When his anger subsided and David saw how the region where the ark rested was blessed, he decided to follow through with his plan to bring the ark into the city. As the ark arrived in the city, David danced before it with great joy.

David's wife Mical, the daughter of Saul, saw David dancing before the ark and despised him for it. When she brought this matter up to David, he responded in 2 Samuel 6:22:

22 I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in your eyes. But by the female servants of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor. (2 Samuel 6)

Commenting on this verse Adam Clarke says:

Then it is said, Michal had no child till the day of her death: probably David never more took her to his bed; or God, in his providence, might have subjected her to barrenness which in Palestine was considered both a misfortune and a reproach. (*“Commentary on the Bible by Adam Clarke” Marion, IA: Laridian, 2013 Electronic edition copyright © 2015 by Laridian, Inc., Marion, Iowa. All rights reserved.*)

Is it possible that because of this accusation of Michal that David no longer slept with his wife? Did this argument between them end this aspect of their marriage? If so, we can see again that David did struggle with anger and an unwillingness to forgive. This in any relationship is a serious matter.

Despite this issue with his wife, God continued to bless David. Again, we see that God used David despite his unfaithfulness in these areas of his life. David would go on to become very successful in battle, conquering many enemies of Israel. In fact, his success was so great that at times he didn't even feel the need to go into battle himself, he would simply send his military commanders. On one such occasion, while his men were fighting, David was home. Late in the afternoon David got up from his couch and was walking on his roof top when he saw a woman bathing below. He was attracted to this woman and inquired as to her identity. The result was that David invited her to his home and slept with her. She was the wife of one of David's soldiers who was fighting for him. Bathsheba became pregnant because of this encounter. When news of her pregnancy came to David he had his military commander put her husband in the front line where he would be killed in battle. He then took Bathsheba to be his own wife. In doing this, David was guilty not only of adultery but

also of murder. Perhaps, had his relationship with Michal been as it should have been, this incident may not have happened.

The gentle shepherd/musician not only could become very angry to the point of being ready to slaughter an entire family for refusing to give him food, but he could also murder a man to take his wife. David would pay the price for this sin. The child of this illegitimate union would die. David repented of this sin, however, and his relationship with God was restored as he received the wonderful forgiving grace of God. God did not give up on David, even after this sin. He would continue to use him to bring Israel to the height of its power and glory.

David also struggled in his family life. His son Amnon would rape his sister Tamar (see 2 Samuel 13). David's son Absalom would murder his brother Amnon because of what he did to Tamar (see 2 Samuel 13:23-29). Because of his crime against his brother, Absalom was forced to flee the city of Jerusalem. For three years, David did not see his son Absalom (2 Samuel 13:38-39). Only after these three years, through the pleading of Joab, did David allow Absalom to return to Jerusalem. When he returned to Jerusalem, however, David would not allow him to stay in the palace nor even to come into his presence.

23 So Joab arose and went to Geshur and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. 24 And the king said, "Let him dwell apart in his own house; he is not to come into my presence." So Absalom lived apart in his own house and did not come into the king's presence. (2 Samuel 14)

As a father, David refused to see his son or allow him even to come into his presence. Absalom would live in the same

city as David but he would never enjoy a relationship with him. He would never be able to sit down with him to talk. He would never share a meal with his father. In fact, his father refused to speak with him or even be in the same room as him. We can only imagine the pain this would have caused Absalom. As a father, David, struggled to forgive his son. He would not reach out to him in this time of need. For the rest of their lives, they would be separated. The bitterness of this separation would be hard on Absalom who would eventually come to hate his father for rejecting him.

Absalom's hatred of his father David was such that he began to compete with him for the hearts of the people in his kingdom. This would eventually lead to Absalom declaring himself to be king in opposition to his father. Rather than fight Absalom, David fled Jerusalem, taking his household with him. He left his concubines, at the palace to care for it in his absence. In an act of defiance, Absalom pitched a tent on the roof of the palace and there, in public view, he slept with his father's concubines. This was a tremendous act of disrespect for his father and showed the people how much Absalom hated his father. We are left to wonder if Absalom's hatred for David was a result of David's unwillingness to see him or be in his presence.

There was a price to pay for David's sins. The man who committed adultery saw his own daughter raped by his son. Another son publicly slept with his concubines. The one who killed a man for his wife, watched one of his sons kill the other. The child born through his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba died. The man who conquered the city of Jerusalem, fled from it when his own son threatened to take it from him. These were deep pains for David. The cost of his sin was a heavy one to bear.

David was not perfect. He would have outbursts of anger that threatened to destroy a whole family. He was guilty of sexual sins and murder. He was not the father he should have been and his son Absalom hated him for this. He was not the husband he should be –casting aside Michal when she disagreed with him. Sometimes he didn't seem to be able to forgive those who had offended him. Even a quick reading of the Psalms of David give us a sense that David sometimes struggled with the unfolding of God's purpose for his life. David had his share of problems. These sins alone would ban him from being a pastor in many of our modern churches.

But God did not forsake David. He would experience the grace of God in a wonderful way. The God whose grace gave him victory over Goliath would remain with him throughout his reign. Even when he fell, David knew the mercy of God. What was the secret of the success of David's reign? Was it his moral integrity? Was it in how he raised his family? Was it in the fact that he always followed God? We know for a fact that David failed in every one of these areas of his life. God, however, had a purpose for this man. The grace of God was on this shepherd/king with all his faults. God did not give up on him. I imagine, that as David looked over his life and reign, he was struck by two details. First, how often he had doubted God and failed him. Second, how God used him nonetheless.

For Consideration:

- Where was David when Samuel came to anoint a new king of Israel? What does the fact that he was not present at the sacrifices of Samuel tell us about how his family saw him?

- Does David take any credit for the slaying of Goliath? Why do we feel compelled to take credit for what God does in our lives? To what extent do we feel we deserve credit?
- What do we learn about David's anger? How did his anger nearly mean the destruction of an entire family?
- What do we learn about David's family life? Describe his relationship with his wife Michal and his son Absalom.
- How would you account for the success of David's reign? To what extent did this success depend on David? To what extent did it depend on God?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to see the potential for His grace to work in even the most unsuspecting of people.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be willing to give Him credit for the work He does in you. Thank Him that even when we do not deserve it, He still blesses us and our ministries.
- Ask the Lord to guide you in your family relationships. Ask God to help you to see the relationship with your wife or husband and children as an important priority.

Chapter 6 – The Power of God in the Weakness of the Prophets

Of all the religious leaders in Israel, the prophets were the most respected as well as the most hated. They were a vital part of God's plan, however, and communicated His heart and purpose to His people. I would like to examine briefly the lives of four men who were called by God to serve as prophets.

Amos

Scripture says very little about Amos. We know that he lived in the region of Tekoa, which was a town about 19 Kilometres (12 miles) from Bethlehem. The message God called him to preach was not well received, especially by the people of Israel. The priest at the time was a man by the name of Amaziah. He heard the message of Amos and rebuked him, banning him from ever speaking again in the town:

12 And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel

for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom. (Amos 7)

Notice how Amos describes himself to Amaziah in response to the priest's rebuke:

14 Than Amos answered and said to Amaziah, "I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. 15 But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7).

Amos was never trained as a prophet. He did not grow up in the home of a prophet. He did not have the human qualifications to be a spokesman for God, but he did have the call of God on his life. It was on this basis alone that he spoke.

What was the key to success of Amos, in his ministry? It was not his training or his experience; it was the call of God. Without this calling, Amos was merely a shepherd. Without the anointing of God on his life, Amos had no ministry. He owed everything to the grace of God, who had called him to this task.

Hosea

Hosea is another prophet we know little about. God asked him to marry a woman by the name of Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim. It appears that after their marriage, Gomer was unfaithful to him. We read in Hosea 3 how God called the prophet to bring his wife back and love her. To do this Hosea had to buy her back from another man.

In many circles this would have disqualified Hosea from ever preaching in the name of the Lord. In fact, the law of Moses stated that the priest was not to marry a prostitute or a woman who had been defiled.

7 They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to God. (Leviticus 21)

No doubt, the same laws would have applied to a prophet of God. God would use the marriage of Hosea and Gomer, however, to illustrate the relationship He had with His people. Just as Gomer had been unfaithful to her husband, God's people had been unfaithful to Him. God did not stop loving His people. In fact, He would make a way to buy back or redeem those who belonged to Him.

Why do I speak of Hosea in this context? I do so because it shows that he must have struggled deeply in his marriage. His wife was unfaithful and proved to be a bad example for the people among whom he ministered. You can almost hear the people speaking about Hosea and his wife Gomer. They would not have been blind to what was happening in their marriage. Hosea's ministry was a success not because his marriage was on track, but because of God's grace in his life. God chose to use his broken marriage to accomplish His purpose.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk is another relatively unknown prophet who was called by God into ministry. Here is a man cried out to God for help, but felt that God was not listening to him. Listen to the opening words of his prophecy:

2 O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? (Habakkuk 1)

He would go on to accuse God of doing nothing about evil in this world:

3 Why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong? (Amos 1)

The picture Habakkuk paints in these opening verses is of a God who does not listen to the cries of His people and who chooses to do nothing about injustice.

While these are questions we have all wondered about, somehow, we expect that those who have been called by God into a prophetic ministry would have a higher view of God than this. Throughout the book of Habakkuk, the Lord addresses these questions so that in the end the prophet comes to an understanding that the righteous person was to live by faith even when things were not going well and we don't understand God's ways (see Habakkuk 2:4; 3:17-18).

The book of Habakkuk is one that portrays the struggles of the prophet to understand the ways and purposes of God. Habakkuk does not have answers for those who questioned him about God's ways. All he can do is remind people to have faith in God even when they do not understand what is happening around them.

Why did God choose Habakkuk? It obviously was not because of his strong theological understanding. In fact, God used his weakness and lack of understanding to speak to the people of his day.

Jonah

Finally, I want to take a moment to consider one of the most famous of all the Old Testament prophets. Jonah was known as the prophet who did not want to speak the word of God. When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh to warn the people of that city about the judgment to come, Jonah defiantly refused. In fact, he boarded a ship heading in the opposite direction (see Jonah 1:1-3), seeking escape from God.

God would not let Jonah go. He continued to pursue him, sending a powerful wind that threatened to break up the ship. The sailors, afraid they were going to lose their lives, hurled their cargo overboard and cried out to their pagan gods to save them. Jonah, however, was sound asleep down in the hold of the ship.

To discover who was responsible for the storm, the sailors cast lots. The lot fell on Jonah. Forced to confess, what he had done, Jonah told them the truth. He also told them that for the storm to stop they would have to cast him into the sea. When Jonah was cast into the sea, the storm stopped, just as he had said. This had such an impact on these pagan sailors that right there on the ship they offered a sacrifice to the Lord God of Jonah (see Jonah 1:16). The eyes of these sailors were opened to the God of Israel through the disobedience of Jonah.

God rescued Jonah from the raging sea by means of a great fish who swallowed him and spit him up on the shore. Then God spoke again to Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh to bring His message to the people there. This time Jonah obeyed. It is important to understand, however, that while Jonah did obey the Lord, his heart toward the people

had not changed. Jonah went to Nineveh and told the people that the judgment of God was about to fall. They were so challenged by this message that they repented of their sin and cried out to God for forgiveness. God forgave them and the judgement of Nineveh was averted.

Notice the response of Jonah to this compassion of God:

1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 2 And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. 3 Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. (Jonah 4:1-3)

These words of Jonah reveal his attitude toward the people of Nineveh. He did not like these people. He wanted to see them perish. He refused to go to Nineveh when God first sent him because he believed that God would use his message to bring repentance and forgive the people. He did not want God to forgive them. He wanted God to condemn them. In fact, Jonah did not even want to live if God was going to forgive these people.

God used the ministry of Jonah in an incredible way. On the ship the sailors bowed down to worship the God of Israel. In Nineveh, the whole city was broken by his message and repented of their sin. The message of Jonah, came from a rebellious and disobedient heart. He preached to people he hated. He longed for the judgement of God to destroy these people. He was obedient in preaching, but his heart was still in rebellion. He was angry with God for forgiving the people of Nineveh.

What was it that made the ministry of Jonah so powerful? It wasn't because of his attitude and burden for the people of Nineveh or the sailors on the boat. It wasn't because he prayed for these people. It wasn't because of how he preached, because his word to the people of Nineveh were filled with hate and bitterness. The only explanation for the powerful success of Jonah's ministry is the grace of God. God used him despite his rebellion and bitterness. Jonah's success had nothing to do with him – it had everything to do with God and how He chose to work despite Jonah.

What are we to understand from these men of God? Amos had no training. Hosea was married to an adulterous wife. Habakkuk didn't have any answers. Jonah lived in rebellion and disobedience. All these men, however, were powerfully used of God to accomplish His purposes. The reason for their success was not found in them, but in the God who chose to use their weaknesses to bring glory to His name.

God is not restricted to using our strengths and talents. In fact, sometimes, it is our weaknesses He chooses to use.

27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. (1 Corinthians 1)

For Consideration:

- What qualified the prophet Amos to be a prophet?
- Describe the marriage of Hosea and his wife. How did God use their broken marriage to proclaim His message to the people of Israel?

- Of what did Habakkuk accuse God in the opening chapter of His book?
- What was Jonah's attitude toward those to whom God had called him?
- How did God use the weaknesses of these men for His glory?
- If God can use our weaknesses, what cause is there to boast in our strengths?

For Payer:

- Take a moment to recognize your own weaknesses. Commit them to the Lord and ask that He would either strengthen you or use these weaknesses for His glory.
- Ask the Lord to protect you in your weaknesses. Ask him to strengthen your marriage and family relations and to heal your improper attitudes.
- Ask God to forgive you for boasting or being proud in your strengths. Thank Him that He uses us even when we are weak.

Chapter 7 - Foreign Kings and the Purpose of God

We often feel that success in ministry is the result of our faithfulness to the Lord. We see people who have a successful ministry and think that they must be walking very close to the Lord. This, however, is not necessarily the case. In this chapter I would like to examine the lives of three foreign kings and how God used them to accomplish His purpose in Israel.

Pharaoh and the Revelation of God's Wonders

The first king I want to examine is the Pharaoh of Egypt at the time of Moses and the slavery of Israel. God's people had been living in Egypt since the time of Joseph. Their success, however, resulted in Pharaoh treating them with cruelty and reducing them to slavery to advance his cause.

As years of this slavery passed, the Israelites began to cry out to God for release. God chose Moses to deliver them from their bondage. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush, telling him that was to return to Egypt and tell his people that God had heard their prayers and would set them free. Notice, however, that God also told Moses that

He was going to use Pharaoh to reveal His wonders to Israel:

19 But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. 20 So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. (Exodus 3)

Consider this for a moment. God's people had been held in bondage for years. They were beaten and oppressed. God wanted to deliver them and give them their own land. Their relationship with God, however, was not where it needed to be. They were not spiritually ready to step out into the desert and make the trip to the land God had in chosen for them. There were enemies to conquer and great battles to be fought. If God's people were to be ready for this, they would need to know more about the power and authority of their God. They could not conquer the land of Canaan themselves. They needed the power of God working through them. God needed to show them His power. He chose to do this through Pharaoh, the most powerful king on the earth. Through a series of events, God would demonstrate to both His people and the Egyptians that He is the Almighty God.

Listen to the word of God in Exodus 7:3-5:

3 But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, 4 Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. 5 The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against

Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them. (Exodus 7)

Notice in verse 3 that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh. There was a purpose in this. As Pharaoh stubbornly resisted, the power of God would be revealed to Israel and to Egypt. Both nations would see that the God of Israel held them accountable. Israel would also see the wonderful compassion of God toward them.

It was the hard, sinful heart of Pharaoh that was used to demonstrate the wonders of God to Israel. As the people watched this conflict between God and Pharaoh, they saw their God bring the nation of Egypt to its knees. They saw the power of God destroying the land of Egypt. They watched as Pharaoh grew weaker and weaker under the almighty hand of God. When the day finally came for them to leave the land of their bondage, they knew that their God was the most powerful God. Through Pharaoh, God taught His people about His power and compassion. The Pharaoh of Egypt was the instrument to reveal the wonders of God to His people.

Who among us does not long to be an instrument through which God reveals His wonders? When God does use us, however, we must not think that He has chosen to work through us because of our goodness. The example of Pharaoh rebukes this idea. Here was a man who fought God from beginning to end. He resisted God and wanted nothing to do with Him but he was the instrument through which the mighty signs and wonders of God were revealed. Just because you have been used of God does not mean that you are close to God. He can even use those who resist Him to reveal His wonders.

Nebuchadnezzar and the Judgment of Israel

Nebuchadnezzar is another example of a pagan king who was used of God. As the people of Israel settled in the land of Canaan and became established as a nation, they soon forgot their God. The anger of God was stirred against them. He chose to use a pagan king to discipline His people. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would become God's chosen instrument for this purpose. Listen to the announcement of God in Jeremiah 25:

8 "Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, 9 behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. (Jeremiah 25)

Notice particularly in verse 9 Nebuchadnezzar is called the servant of God. He was chosen by God to discipline His people. Israel was not the only nation God was going to judge. In Jeremiah 27 the prophet is given a word for the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon. Listen to the words of God to these nations:

5 "It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. 6 Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. 7 All the nations shall serve him and his son and his

grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave. (Jeremiah 27)

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is again called the servant of God. As a chosen servant, God would use him to judge not only His own people but also the kings of the surrounding nations. These nations would serve Nebuchadnezzar for the rest of his life.

As Nebuchadnezzar and his army went to war, the Lord gave them victory over many nations. God's people were taken into exile in Babylon. Those who remained in Judah were fearful of Nebuchadnezzar and so under the leadership of Johanan they fled to Egypt for refuge (see Jeremiah 43:1-7). The Lord gave these refugees from Judah a word through his servant, Jeremiah. He told Jeremiah to set up some large stone at the entrance to the palace of Pharaoh in Tahpanhes, Egypt and to proclaim these words:

10 and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will send and take Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will set his throne above these stones that I have hidden, and he will spread his royal canopy over them. 11 He shall come and strike the land of Egypt, giving over to the pestilence those who are doomed to the pestilence, to captivity those who are doomed to captivity, and to the sword those who are doomed to the sword. 12 I shall kindle a fire in the temples of the gods of Egypt, and he shall burn them and carry them away captive. And he shall clean the land of Egypt as a shepherd cleans his cloak of vermin, and he shall go away from there in peace. 13 He shall break the obelisks of

Heliopolis, which is in the land of Egypt, and the temples of the gods of Egypt he shall burn with fire.” (Jeremiah 43)

Notice again that God would send “Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant,” to exercise His judgment on the nation of Egypt and His people who had put their trust in him and not in their true God.

God would reveal Himself in a powerful way to Nebuchadnezzar over the course of his life. At the height of his power he became very proud. In fact, he set up an image of himself and demanded that all his people bow down to in worship. When Daniel’s friends refused to bow down, they were thrown into a fiery furnace. In his anger, Nebuchadnezzar demanded that the furnace be heated seven times hotter than normal before casting Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into it. God protected them in that furnace and revealed his presence to them in a very special way. As Nebuchadnezzar looked into the furnace, he saw the presence of the angel of the Lord protecting Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. This had a powerful impact on Nebuchadnezzar’s life.

God would also reveal Himself to Nebuchadnezzar in a dream (see Daniel 4:19-27). In that dream, God told Him that he would be driven from among men, and would live with the animals for a period, until he was humbled and his pride driven out of him (see Daniel 4:31-32).

God used Nebuchadnezzar and called him His servant. God would even show His presence and power to Him in amazing ways. God spoke to Him in dreams and he saw the angel of the Lord. Here was a man who did not even belong to the nation of Israel, whom God used to discipline

His people so that they would become aware of the consequences of their sin.

Cyrus and the Restoration of Israel

God used Pharaoh to reveal His wonders to the people of Moses' day. He used Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to discipline His people in the days of Jeremiah. God also used the king of Persia in a special way.

After the days of Nebuchadnezzar, the nation of Persia would eventually conquer Babylon and inherit the Jewish exiles. King Cyrus was king of Persia. Isaiah the prophet spoke about Cyrus in Isaiah 45. Listen to what he had to say about this pagan king:

1 Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped,
to subdue nations before him
and to loose the belts of kings,
to open doors before him
that gates may not be closed:
2 "I will go before you
and level the exalted places,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
3 I will give you the treasures of darkness
and the hoards in secret places,
that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
4 For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I name you, though you do not know me.
5 I am the Lord, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;

I equip you, though you do not know me,
6 that people may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;
I am the Lord, and there is no other.

There are some powerful promises given to Cyrus, king of Persia in these verses. Notice in verse 1 that God calls him, His anointed. He had been chosen for a specific purpose. God held the right had of Cyrus (verse 1). This was an indication of God's favour and empowering on him. In verse 2 God promised to go before him. He called Cyrus by name and equipped him even though Cyrus did not know Him (verse 5). He empowered and equipped Cyrus so that, through him, people would know that He, the God of Israel was the Lord and that there was no other God but Him (verses 5-6). Of significance are the words of God through Isaiah in verse 5: "I equip you, though you do not know me."

Here was a pagan king who did not know the Lord God, but was chosen to reveal His name to the nations. God would empower this man and use him to accomplish His purpose on the earth and bring glory to His name.

It was in the very first year of the reign of Cyrus that the Lord stirred up his heart. Listen to the declaration he made in the first year:

23 Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up." (2 Chronicles 36)

The Lord put it on the heart of Cyrus to release the exiles of Israel and send them back to their homeland with the purpose of building a temple for the Lord their God. To accomplish this, Cyrus released all the treasures Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from them. These treasures were taken back to Israel and the work of rebuilding the temple began under the capable leadership of Ezra.

Cyrus was God's instrument to restore the people of Israel to their homeland. He encouraged the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. He was called of God for this purpose. He did not know the God of Israel personally, but he was God's instrument to restore His people.

How amazing it is that God would call Cyrus, who did not even know Him, and equip him to accomplish such an incredible restoration. After seventy years in exile, under the blessing of Cyrus, the people of God would be restored to their homeland. Why would God take a man who did not know Him by the right hand and stir up his heart in such a way? Why would he put such a burden on a pagan king's mind? It was an act of grace on God's part. He uses whomever He chooses.

These verses show us that God is not limited to using only those who love Him to accomplish his great purpose in this world. He used Pharaoh, whose heart was hardened against God and His purpose to reveal His power and compassion to Israel. He used Nebuchadnezzar to judge His people for their sin. He used Cyrus, who did not know Him, to restore His people to blessing. We need to be aware that God can speak to us or challenge us by any means. Would it surprise you that He would use even an unbeliever to bring you into a deeper revelation of His purpose and plan for your life? God is not limited to doing things in ways that we understand. Being used of God is

not necessarily an indication that that person is close to Him. In fact, God may choose to use people who do not know Him. Don't confuse being used of God with knowing and walking in fellowship with Him.

For Consideration:

- What was Pharaoh's relationship with the God of Israel? How did God use him to reveal His wonders to His people?
- Could Pharaoh boast about how he was used of God?
- Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were known as cruel warriors. How did God use them?
- God called Nebuchadnezzar His servant. Did this mean that Nebuchadnezzar was in a right relationship with the God of Israel?
- Can God still use us even if we are not in a right relationship with Him?
- How did God use Cyrus of Persia to restore His people to their blessings and homeland? Did Cyrus know God?
- Is God limited in the kind of person He can use for His purposes?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He can use anyone He chooses to accomplish His purpose on the earth.
- Thank the Lord for times when His blessings have come to you even through the hands of those who did not know Him.
- Thank the Lord that He is bigger than our failures and faults and that despite our weaknesses, His work will go on.
- Ask the Lord to give you wisdom and discernment that you will not be deceived by those who may be fruitful but not faithful.

Chapter 8 - The People Jesus Chose

To this point we have considered a variety of Old Testament characters God chose to use. In this chapter I would like to look at some of the people Jesus chose in His day.

Peter

Peter was a fisherman by trade (see Matthew 4:18). One day while Jesus was walking by the shore He saw Peter and his brother Andrew. He called them to follow Him and become His disciples. While we do not know much about Peter before he became a follower of the Lord Jesus, the gospels teach us some important details out this disciple.

Peter was a man who spoke his mind. On one occasion Jesus was telling His disciples that He needed to go to Jerusalem and that in that city He would suffer many things. Peter rebuked Jesus for this statement:

22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." (Matthew 16)

Jesus' response to Peter's rebuke contains one of the strongest statements spoken to an individual in Scripture:

23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. (Matthew 16)

We can imagine the impact of those words on Peter. Jesus was accusing him of being used by Satan to hinder the work of God.

Peter could also be very impulsive. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, and take Him to be tried, John 18:10 tells us that Peter took his sword and cut the ear off the High Priest's servant. Jesus had to rebuke Peter for this and tell him to put his sword away. Peter's natural response in this situation was very different from what God had in mind.

Peter was very confident in his faith. As Jesus spoke about his death, Peter's response was, "I am ready to die with you" (John 13:31). Matthew 26:69-75, however, describes the details of how, after the arrest of Jesus, Peter followed cautiously behind Him and was present in the courtyard during the trial of Jesus. Some of those present in that courtyard recognized Peter as one of Jesus' disciples. Peter denied this, not once but three times. Matthew's account of this third denial is of significance:

74 Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed.

Notice that Matthew tells us that when Peter denied the Lord the third time he invoked a curse on himself and

swore. What was Peter doing here? Peter is swearing an oath before all those present. He is doing so by calling a curse on himself if he was lying. He is saying something like this: "May I be cursed if what I am saying is a lie –I do not know this man Jesus." This is the strongest form of denial.

This was the man the Lord chose to be His disciple. As a follower of Jesus, he was outspoken and rash. He was confident in his faith but when challenged, he denied even knowing Jesus. God, however, was not finished with Peter. As rough as he was in word and deed, Peter was powerfully used by the Holy Spirit. He preached sermons that saw thousands come to Christ. He impacted churches for the glory of the Lord. His epistles continue to impact people around the world for the glory of the Lord.

The Samaritan Woman

One day during His ministry on this earth, the Lord Jesus was passing through the region of Samaria. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews because they were a mixed race whose faith had been watered down. As Jesus stopped to rest at a well, He met a woman who had come to draw water. Jesus' conversation with her revealed some things about her. She had had five husbands and the man she was living with at the time was not her husband. Here was a woman who would have been considered an immoral woman, shunned by society.

Despite her lifestyle, after speaking with Jesus that day, the woman was convinced that He was the Messiah He claimed to be. Leaving her water jar at the well, she ran off to speak with the townsfolk. Listen to what she told them:

29 Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.
Can this be the Christ? (John 4)

In response, the people of Samaria came out to see Jesus. The result of this encounter is described for us in John 4:39-42:

39 Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. 42 They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world."

The result of the woman speaking to the people of Samaria was that many came to believe in Jesus. In fact, the townspeople asked Jesus to stay with them. For two more days, Jesus preached in their midst. Before he left, the people approached the Samaritan woman and told her that they had seen for themselves that the man she had introduced to them was indeed the Saviour of the world.

A great move of God took place because of the testimony of this Samaritan woman. She was living an immoral lifestyle, but she was the instrument God used to bring revival in her community. Imagine being used of God to change a whole town as this woman? God, in His mercy and grace, chose to use her, despite her lifestyle, to accomplish His purpose among a hated people group.

Prophets and Miracle Workers

Listen to the shocking words of Jesus in Matthew 7:21-23:

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Matthew 7)

Let's consider what Jesus is saying here. He is telling us that in the last days there will be many standing before Him who have spent their lives prophesying, casting out demons and doing mighty works, seeing themselves as servants of Christ. These individuals will appear to be successful in their various ministries, prophesying, casting out demons and demonstrating the power of God.

What is surprising to note here is Jesus' statement of what His response will be: "I never knew you; depart from me you workers of lawlessness." In other words, though they served in the name of the Lord and saw success they would discover that they did not belong to the Lord. In fact, what appeared to be outward success was is described here as works of lawlessness.

There are many directions we could go with this passage but what is important for us to note in this context is that Jesus teaches that there are many who appear to be powerful in miracles and signs but they do not belong to Him. They may have been used by God to deliver people from the power of Satan though they themselves have never been set free by the Son of God. We must not be fooled by what appears to be successful. The Lord God may use those who do not know Him to accomplish His purpose.

Believers in their Weakness

Listen to what the apostle Paul said about the people through whom the gospel of Jesus was advancing in Philippians 1:

15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. (Philippians 1)

The apostle Paul realized that there were people taking advantage of the gospel. They were preaching out of envy and rivalry. They were trying to get more followers than their brother or sister. They were jealous if their brother was better received or had more converts. These motives were unworthy of the Lord and unacceptable in the heart of a true preacher. Notice, however, the response of Paul to this: "... in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice" (Philippians 1:18). You see, Paul understood that God did not depend on people having good motives in the preaching of the gospel. The message of the gospel was going out and impacting lives despite those who were preaching. These individuals would be held accountable to God for their motives, but the power of the message was not diminished by those who ministered for wrong reasons.

God's word goes out despite our weaknesses. Our inabilities or frailties do not impact the power of the Word.

Preaching Christ out of jealousy and rivalry will not diminish the power of the gospel to impact the lives of those who hear it. God's Word remains pure and strong despite the vessels who carry it.

The New Testament is filled with example of jars of clay carrying the powerful message of the gospel. These people often fell short of God's standard for their own lives, but they were instruments in the hands of God to proclaim the truth. Once proclaimed, that truth took root and accomplished its work. How thankful we need to be that God's kingdom will advance despite the feeble workers who carry it to the nations.

For Consideration:

- How did Peter demonstrate his weakness as a believer in Jesus? Did this stop the Lord from using him?
- What was the lifestyle of the Samaritan woman? How did God use her? Why do you suppose God used this woman instead of one of the disciples?
- Do all who serve the Lord truly belong to Him? Can we be used of God to perform mighty works and not belong to Him?
- Will the message of the gospel lose its power if it is not preached with the right motive?

For Prayer:

- Have you ever denied Jesus? Thank the Lord that He is willing to forgive and use you in His service?
- Thank the Lord that the message of the gospel and its power to change is not diminished by the weakness of the vessels who carry that message.
- Ask the Lord to use you despite your failures and shortcomings to have an impact on this world for God and the sake of His kingdom.

Chapter 9 - Worldly Success Versus Faithfulness

So far in this study we have examined a variety of people God chose to use for His glory. These individuals were far from perfect. Some of them did not even know the Lord; others rebelled against Him. We have seen God using the strengths of ordinary people, but we have also seen Him using their weakness and rebellion. What does this teach us about the kind of person God uses? What lessons can we learn from the lives of these individuals? In the remainder of this study I will attempt to summarise and apply what we have seen so far.

One of the most powerful lessons that seems to come out of the examples we have seen in this study is the distinction between fruitfulness and faithfulness. We have often confused these. Fruitfulness relates to God's use of an individual to bring glory to His name and advance His kingdom purposes. Faithfulness, on the other hand, refers to walking in obedience and fellowship with God.

We have often been told that God cannot use us if we are not faithful to Him. The examples we have seen in this study seem to contradict this. God uses whomever He wishes. He can use the unbeliever or the believer. He used

rebellious Jonah to bring glory to His name among the sailors on the sinking ship headed to Tarshish. He used those who preached Christ out of envy in Paul's day to advance the gospel. He used Peter who denied Jesus under oath, to bring about the salvation of thousands of souls.

You don't have to be faithful for God to use you. While this seems to be a radical statement, it appears to be what the Scripture show us. God is not limited by our unfaithfulness. The gospel is carried in jars of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7). Those jars are not perfect. Every person who carries the message of Christ is flawed. Not one of us is faultless, but we are the instruments of Christ in this world. The kingdom of God will advance despite our imperfections. This ought to give us great hope.

In our world, we see terrible confusion all around us. Nation wars against nation. Crime and violence surround us. The people of God are not always what they should be. Believers fall into sin and unfaithfulness. How easy it would be to lose hope if we believed that the kingdom of God was dependant on us and our faithfulness. God chose to use Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus, enemies of Israel, to advance His purpose. God is sovereign over nations. The very enemies we fear can be used by God for our good and His glory. How thankful we need to be that God is not limited to using only those who are walking perfectly in sync with Him to accomplish His purpose on this earth.

Fruitfulness needs to be distinguished from faithfulness. Just because you are fruitful in ministry does not mean that you are walking in faithfulness and fellowship with God. Fruitfulness, as we have said, refers to how God chooses to use us. Faithfulness, on the other hand refers to how we walk with God and remain true to Him.

This teaching brings up an important question. If God can use us even when we are not faithful to Him, why would we be concerned to live a life of faithfulness? This question was asked in Romans 6:

1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? (Romans 6)

The apostle Paul would answer this with a very definite, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6:2). There are several points I would like to make in in this regard.

Successful but Still Accountable to God

First, it is important to understand that we can be very successful in ministry but still be accountable to God for our sin. Jacob was a deceiver. He would have to answer God for that deception even though he became the father of the nation of Israel. David was a great king but was punished for his adultery and murder. He also suffered the consequences of ignoring his son Absalom. The New Testament prophets who performed wonders and cast out demons would be banished from Jesus forever.

It is possible to be used by God yet refused a place in heaven. Our salvation does not depend on our works. Nor does our fruitfulness in the cause of Christ remove our sins. I am afraid that there are many pastors and evangelists who will have much to answer to God for on the day of judgement. Though King Nebuchadnezzar was God's instrument to punish His people, he would still have to answer to God for how he treated them.

Our successful ministry does not excuse our sin. God will still hold us accountable. You may be very fruitful in ministry but stand before the Lord in utter shame because of the pride of your heart and the motivation behind your ministry. We will all give an accounting to God. Our success will never erase our guilt.

Rewards for Faithfulness Not Fruitfulness

The second point we need to make here is that God does not reward us so much for fruitfulness as He does for faithfulness. Listen to the words of Jesus through the apostle John:

10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2)

The reward promised here was for those who would be faithful even unto death.

Many missionaries have served the Lord faithfully without seeing fruit for their labours. Many believers have been converted to Christ and killed for that faith without ever being given the opportunity of living and serving their Saviour on this earth?

Some time ago I was working on a chapter in a book I was writing. I had spent a couple of hours on this chapter and was just coming to the end of what I was writing when my computer shut down. I frantically searched for the file I had just worked on to no avail. It was gone. My first response was, "Lord, why did you let this happen? I am going home now with nothing to show for this morning of work." As I sat

there confused, I felt that Lord speak to my heart, "Wayne, have you been faithful?" I thought about this for a moment and said, "Lord, you have asked me to write and open up your Word. That is what I did this morning, even though I have nothing to show for it." As I reflected on this for a moment, encouragement and joy began to flood into my heart. I had been faithful. I was doing what God had asked me to do. I returned home with nothing to show for a morning's work, but with joy in my heart because I knew I had been faithful to God.

What is the point I am trying to make? I am saying that you might not have anything to show God for your efforts on this earth, but God sees your faithfulness. I think of the prophet Jeremiah, who was rejected and mistreated all his life. He wrestled before God in a ministry that seemed to be so unfruitful. No one seemed to listen to him. They persecuted him and resisted him all his life. I think of the wonderful reward this man will receive for faithfulness in God's call, even when he had very little fruit to show for his efforts. Faithfulness is often difficult when we do not see fruit. Some will abandon their faithfulness in search of fruit. Sometimes God calls us to hold a position or to remain at a post where we see very little activity. Faithfulness may lead us into barren deserts where we see very little fruit for our labour. Those who constantly seek fruit are often blinded to their need of faithfulness. Don't let your sense of need to be fruitful keep you from being faithful.

As you stand before God on that final day, He will not be comparing your ministry to the ministry of your friends. He will not be counting how many souls you won. His concern will be about whether you were faithful and obedient to Him. Your reward will be related to for your faithfulness to Him, not how successful your service appeared to be in the eyes of the world.

Fruitful but No Fellowship with God

There is one final thing I want to touch on before concluding this chapter. Being fruitful is not a guarantee of intimacy with God. As we have seen, God used Pharaoh, who fought Him to reveal His wonders to Israel. The Christian life is not measured by how much we do for God or how successful our ministry is but by our walk and intimacy with Him.

The quality of a marriage is not judged by how many children that marriage produces but by the relationship between the couple. Yet how often in the Christian life do we focus on success and ministry to the exclusion of a relationship with Christ. A Christian life that moves its attention from the person of Christ and a personal relationship with Him is a life that has its priorities wrong.

The apostle Paul had a wonderfully successful ministry, but listen to what he told the Philippians about his priority in life:

7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3)

As the apostle examined what was important to him, he told the Philippians that he counted everything worthless compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus. This was the central priority of Paul's life. He wanted to know Christ. Everything else was secondary. So often we make the Christian life about ministry and fruit and not first and foremost about knowing Christ and being

in fellowship with Him. It is out of knowing Christ that all else flows –whether that be in fruitful service or in the barrenness of the desert.

Are you content just to be fruitful? Is that your goal in life? Will you be content with numbers and statistics? What happens when you are called to the desert, where you see very little fruit? Will your relationship with Christ hold when you are laid up in a bed of sickness, unable to produce any more fruit? Will Christ and your relationship with Him be sufficient when ministry is taken away?

Some will pass through fertile valleys. He will lead others through the desert. In the course of our lives, we will pass through both the fertile valley and the barren desert. Wherever we pass, however, the one constant is our relationship and fellowship with God. His love and devotion to us will remain. Our connection with Him is secure. In this we can rejoice.

We can be fruitful and not enjoy an intimate relationship with Christ. Surely, our fellowship with Christ needs to take priority. This fellowship with Christ is the basis for all our service. As we fellowship, He leads and empowers us in service. Service and the fruit of our service, however, should never take His place in our lives.

For Consideration:

- Can God use us if we are not faithful to Him? Give some examples.
- How does the fact that God is not limited by our unfaithfulness give us hope in this world? What

would happen if the purpose of God was dependant on those who were 100% faithful to God?

- Does success in ministry remove our guilt? Can we be successful and still need to answer to God for our sinful behaviour and motives?
- What is the difference between rewards for success and rewards for faithfulness? How does God reward us?
- Does being successful guarantee a close relationship with God?
- What was Paul's greatest priority in life?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He is greater than our failures and shortcomings and will advance His purpose despite us.
- Ask that Lord to search your heart to see if there are any sins you need to confess. Ask Him particularly to show you if success has become more important to you than faithfulness.
- Ask the Lord to help you to have the priorities of the apostle Paul –to know Christ. Ask God to forgive you for the times when ministry and ministry success have become gods.

Chapter 10 - Taking the Credit

As human beings, there is within us a natural need to take the credit for our success and fruitfulness. There may be several reasons for this, but they all seem to boil down to a heart filled with pride. I recognize that without God I could do nothing, but somehow I still have this need to feel that I have been good enough for God to use. I want to feel that I have been used because of something God has seen in me.

There is a feeling in each of us that the harder we try the more fruitful we will be; the more we discipline ourselves, the more useful we will be to God; the closer we are to God the more He will be able to use us. The problem with this is that it shifts the attention away from God as the source of fruitfulness. It says that the real reason God uses us is because of who we are and what we have done. We feel the need to take the credit for ourselves.

Admittedly, there is a connection between our walk with God and our fruitfulness. Listen to the words of God through the prophet Hosea:

1 Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel,
for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants
of the land.

There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land;
2 there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and
committing adultery;
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows
bloodshed.

3 Therefore the land mourns,
and all who dwell in it languish,
and also the beasts of the field
and the birds of the heavens,
and even the fish of the sea are taken away. (Hosea 4)

Notice in these verses the connection between the faithfulness of God's people and the fruitfulness of the land. Because there was no faithfulness or steadfast love, the land was not producing its crop, animals, birds and fish were disappearing. The unfaithfulness of God's people brought a curse on the land. God, however, is pleased to bless those who walk in obedience.

While it is true that God blesses those who walk in obedience, He is not obligated to do so. All blessing from God is an act of compassion and grace on His part. Not one of us can live completely as God requires. As much as I want to see my obedience and faithfulness as the reason for God's blessing, I must come to understand that as close as I am to God, I have still fallen short. I know what my sinful heart is capable of doing. I know the thoughts that lurk in the hidden recesses of my mind. I know the attitudes that still need to be corrected and brought in line with God's purpose. If it were not for the forgiveness of Jesus, I would not be able to stand before the Father without shame and guilt. Can I say that I deserve this blessing of fruitfulness in my life? Can I truly say that God owes me anything?

There was never a moment in the history of God's people when they could say that they truly deserved the blessings of God. They always fell short of His standard. This is the case for my life as well. For every attitude I correct, there is something else in my sinful nature that needs correction. In fact, the closer I get to God the more I recognise how far from Him I really am. Every blessing from God is an act of grace and compassion. All fruit that I bear is from Him. He deserves all the credit for every success in my ministry. I am an unworthy instrument; but He is the source of all blessings in ministry and life.

In John 15, Jesus tells the story of a vine and its branches. In this parable, Jesus compared Himself to the vine. We are the branches:

5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15)

Jesus tells us here that it is those who abide in Him that bear fruit. There is no fruit apart from Him. What happens when the branch is disconnected from the vine? It withers away and dies. It has no life of its own. All fruitfulness is in the vine. Can the branch boast in the fruit it bears when it knows its absolute dependence on the vine? It is merely an instrument. It is not the source of that fruit. It is true that not all branches produce the same amount of fruit. Some branches are more fruitful than others. Every branch, however, is dependent on the vine and without it there would be no fruit. The vine is the source of all blessing and fruitfulness.

Writing to His people in the days of Isaiah, the Lord God says:

10 Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;
I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

11 For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it,
for how should my name be profaned?

My glory I will not give to another. (Isaiah 48)

The words of God through Isaiah are quite clear. He will not give His glory to another. He alone deserves the glory and credit for all He does. Should I take the credit from Him for something I could never do on my own?

Acts 12 recounts the story of the death of Herod. Herod stood before the people of Tyre and Sidon and delivered a wonderful speech. In fact, the words of Herod were so powerful that the people who heard him cried out: "The voice of a god, and not of a man" (Acts 12:22). Herod loved those words and took them to heart. Acts 12:23 tells us what happened to him as a result of his basking in the glory of those words and refusing to recognize God:

23 Immediately, an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.
(Acts 12)

We read about the great King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. On one occasion walking on the roof of his palace in Babylon he considered the greatness of his kingdom. Overcome with the vastness of his blessings and the fruit of his efforts he said:

30 ... Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty? (Daniel 4)

The boastful words of Nebuchadnezzar reached the ears of God. The result was devastating:

31 While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, 32 and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." 33 Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws. (Daniel 4)

Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom was taken from him. He was driven from human beings and lived among the animals of the field as a wild man. This would be his punishment until he knew that "the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom He will" (verse 32). Nebuchadnezzar was punished for taking the credit from God and attributing it to Himself. It was God who gave him his kingdom. It is true that Nebuchadnezzar was the instrument, but all glory belonged to the Lord God. To take the glory due to God for himself was a serious matter.

Listen to the words of God to his people in Isaiah 10:

13 For he says:

"By the strength of my hand I have done it,
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
I remove the boundaries of peoples,
and plunder their treasures;
like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones.

14 My hand has found like a nest
the wealth of the peoples;
and as one gathers eggs that have been for-
saken,
so I have gathered all the earth;
and there was none that moved a wing
or opened the mouth or chirped.”
15 Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it,
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields
it?
As if a rod should wield him who lifts it,
or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!

As God speaks to His people in Isaiah 10, He reminds them that it was His hand that had given them victory. It was by His wisdom that they had become the people they were. Their victories in battle were a result of God's presence with them. No one could oppose Him. Israel's army was an instrument of God but had no cause to boast. Does the axe have anything to boast about when it has been used to chop down a big tree? An axe is useless without someone to swing it. All credit goes to the one who handles the axe.

It is a tremendous privilege to be an instrument in the hands of the Lord. While it is a privilege we cannot take the credit for ourselves. We would be useless without that hand of God. Apart from Him we could do nothing. He deserves the glory for all good things. Everything of any value that I have accomplished for His kingdom is due to His grace.

How important it is for us to recognize that our fruitfulness is the result of God's work in our lives. He deserves all the glory for what He has accomplished in and through us. We are far from perfect. At best, we are flawed instruments in

God's hands. It is only by His skill and wisdom that He can use us. Like Nebuchadnezzar we find ourselves saying: "Look at what I have done." How we need to repent of this attitude. God will not share His glory with another. We are the instruments but He is the One who controls that instrument. Like the branch separated from the vine, without Him we would shrivel up and die. To Him alone belongs all the glory and praise.

For Consideration:

- Why do we feel the need to take credit for our successes and fruitfulness? What is behind this need?
- Can we truly say we deserve the credit for the fruit our lives produce?
- How serious a matter is it to take the glory for what God has done in our lives?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to be able to give Him all the glory for the fruitfulness of your life and ministry.
- Thank the Lord that He can use us despite our flaws. Thank Him for the way He has personally used you as an instrument for His glory.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times when you have failed to give Him the credit and glory for the work He has done. Ask Him to remove any need you have to take credit for what He has done.

Chapter 11 - Worldly Success and Spiritual Priorities

The temptation for those who are involved in ministry is to make success (as the world defines it) the top priority. We like to have big churches. We like to have impressive growth and statistics to share. One of the things we need to understand, however, is that worldly success is not always God's priority in ministry.

We have examined the difference between fruitfulness and faithfulness. God is more concerned with how faithful we have been to His purpose than with how successful we appear to be in the eyes of the world. As believers, it is very important for us, therefore, to understand God's priorities for our lives.

During this study, we have seen how God used people of questionable character. They were fruitful for the Lord, but their priorities were not God's priorities. Let's take a moment to reconsider some of the examples we have studied.

Jacob

Jacob was a deceiver. He took advantage of his brother in a moment of weakness to obtain his birth right. Later in life

he stole his brothers blessing by disguising himself and lying to his father. He obtained his wealth in sheep by deceiving his father-in-law. Jacob became very rich because of these deceptions, but the question we need to ask ourselves is this: Did he have God's priorities in life?

Does honesty and integrity of character not take priority over worldly goods? Listen to what the Lord Jesus told his listeners in Mark 8:

38 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8)

Jesus would also in Mark 6:

24 No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Mark 6)

We all have a decision to make. What will be our priority in life? Will we like Jacob seek worldly blessing and riches at all costs? Will we allow ourselves to deceive and compromise our integrity to be successful in the eyes of the world?

Samson

From his birth, Samson was set aside for God and His purpose. This involved living a certain lifestyle as a Nazirite. He was not to drink wine or strong drink. He was not to touch a dead body. He was never to cut his hair. Samson seemed to mock these obligations throughout his life. He ignored his vow to God and seemed to do as he pleased.

Samson lived an immoral lifestyle. He is seen with prostitutes and living with foreign women. He was filled with vengeance and his desire was to get back at people who had offended him.

The apostle Paul shows us what God's desire for us is in Ephesians 4:

32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God is Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4)

The author of Hebrews reminds us:

30 For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." (Hebrews 10)

Until the very end of his life, Samson sought revenge. He was not able to forgive those who blinded him.

Samson, though used by God, did not have God's priorities in life. He lived as an angry vengeful man. He did not seem to demonstrate the character of the God he served.

Will we allow fleshly anger to be our motivation in ministry? Will we allow our wounded pride to drive us? Will we reject the fruit of the Spirit and be motivated instead by our sinful attitudes? Surely our God deserves better than this. Surely our priority should be to honour Him not just in our deeds but also in our hearts and minds.

Jonah

God was willing to forgive the people of Nineveh when they repented because of Jonah's preaching. Jonah hated the inhabitants of the city and resented the fact that God would pardon them. From the time he was called by God to go to Nineveh, until the end of the book of Jonah he is portrayed as a prophet who resisted God and His purpose. He was filled with pride and prejudice.

While Jonah saw wonderful fruit in his ministry, he did not share God's heart. Instead, he was filled with hatred toward the people of Nineveh. He longed for their judgement and destruction. Outwardly, Jonah's ministry was successful but his heart was not right with God. He could not surrender to God's way.

We can go for years in ministry fighting God and His purpose for our lives. We can minister with sinful attitudes that need to be surrendered to the Lord. You may be having an impact on your city for the cause of Christ but deep in your heart a battle is raging. There in your heart are attitudes and motivations, unworthy of His name. It is God's desire to break these attitudes. Will you surrender to God and His priority for your life? Will you allow Him to break what is not from Him?

David

There was no king as revered and respected as King David. His leadership moved the nation into wonderful prosperity. As powerful as he was, however, David did not always have God's priorities in life. There is no place where this is more evident than in his family life.

We see David pushing aside Mical his wife in 2 Samuel 6:22. In 2 Samuel 14:23-24 we watch him abandon his son Absalom. We see Him commit adultery. While David was a successful king, he did not always walk in God's ways. There was a great work of God yet to be done in the heart of this king. Surely these matters were of great importance to God as He sought to draw King David closer to Himself.

Philip the Evangelist

Philip the Evangelist ministered in Samaria. As he did, he saw a powerful work of God. Samaritans were coming to the Lord and the Lord was revealing Himself to them in powerful signs and wonders (see Acts 8). As he ministered among the Samaritans, however, God called him to go to the desert to speak to an Ethiopian man. Philip was obedient to God's call, leaving a revival to minister to a single individual in the desert.

I have often considered what my response to this call of God to go to the desert might have been. There in Samaria were new converts who needed to be discipled and taught the Word of God. Surely, this was important. God showed Philip that day, however, that He had another priority for his life. God's priorities are not always the same as ours.

As you serve the Lord you may be tempted to please people and gain their approval rather than walking in the priorities of God. You may be tempted to measure your spiritual life and ministry by numbers and statistics rather than by how it lines up with God's priorities. You will be tempted to ignore your walk with God and the cultivation of a holy heart and mind. It is possible to be successful but not be in tune with God and his priorities for our lives.

What is important for us to understand here is that God does want to use us to expand His kingdom. This, however, is not His only purpose for us. We are more than simple tools in God's hands. We are also called to a relationship with Him. This means that He wants to do a work in us as well. He wants to lead us and guide us into His purposes. His ways are often different from ours. He may move us out of a "successful" ministry to something very quiet. We may find ourselves in a bed of sickness, unable to serve as we would like. God does not abandon us in these times. It is often in these wilderness times that we are able to better discern His heart and priorities for our lives. Worldly success is not always God's priority for us. If we make worldly success our goal, we may very well miss God's heart for our lives.

For Consideration:

- Can we be fruitful and not be living in God's priorities for our lives?
- Do you have God's priorities for your life and ministry?
- Is it more important to be fruitful or to walk in God's priorities in ministry?
- What role does Scripture have in revealing the priorities of God for our life and ministry? Are you a student of God's Word?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to walk in His priorities for your life.
- Ask the Lord to give you time to study the Word of God and the grace to align your life in its teaching and priorities.
- Thank the Lord that even when we do not always have His priorities He is still able to use us for His glory.

Chapter 12 - Fruitfulness in Weakness

Over the course of this study we have seen that God is not limited to using our strengths to accomplish His purpose. He uses people with all their weaknesses and failures to advance His kingdom on this earth.

Not only can God use us despite our weaknesses and failures but He can actually use our weaknesses for His glory. Pharaoh's rebellion only demonstrated the wonderful power of God to deliver His people. David's sling shot was nothing in comparison to the sword and spear of the giant Goliath but it was that sling shot that brought victory over the entire Philistine nation. God waited until Moses was old before using him, so that the glory would not go to Moses but to God. Hosea's broken marriage would become a powerful illustration of the grace and patience of God with His people.

God does not need our strengths –He can use our weaknesses and failures just as well. Listen to what the apostle Paul told the Corinthians:

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not

many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1)

Do you see what the apostle is saying here? Paul reminds us that God chose to use the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. He used the weak to shame the strong. God does not need our great wisdom and experience to accomplish His purpose. Our only boast is in the Lord and what He is doing.

This idea that God uses our weaknesses was something the apostle Paul seemed to delight in. Writing again to the Corinthian church he would say:

6 though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more

gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

There are some very powerful insights in this passage. Paul said that he was given a thorn in the flesh. When he asked the Lord about this, God told him that he was to live with that thorn. The reason for this was because God's power was to be made perfect in Paul's weakness. Paul accepted this weakness caused by the thorn in the flesh and marvelled at the fact that God could use this weakness to accomplish His purpose. In fact, Paul would tell the Corinthians: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:6).

How humbling it is to know that God does not need our strengths. In fact, often, our strength and experience get in the way. They take our eyes off God and place them on ourselves. We begin to trust in our own abilities and not in the Lord and the work of His Spirit.

This is not to say that God cannot use our strengths. He gives us spiritual gifts that He expects us to use for the sake of His kingdom. He gives us experiences that shape and refine us to be more effective in His service. Don't be deceived into thinking, however, that God limits His work to our human strengths. During this study we have seen God use people who actively rebelled against Him. Others were used who did not know God. God used Paul's weakness as well as in his strengths.

How desperate we are to find something in ourselves to say, "this is why God uses me." We want to feel that God uses us because of our strengths, but we see Him using

Paul or Moses in their weakness. We want to believe that it is because we are so close to Him that He uses us but then read of how He used Jonah who was resisting God and running from Him or Cyrus who did not even know God. We want to believe that it is because we are available, but then we read about Pharaoh who wanted nothing to do with God but was used to reveal His wonders to both the nation of Israel and Egypt.

As we read the stories of men and women who were used of God, we sometimes see them at their worst. We see their rebellion, their weakness and their rejection of God's purpose. Even the best among them is far from perfect. God uses flawed men and women to accomplish His purposes on this earth. He uses the weaknesses of these men and women to advance His kingdom. He will even use the rebellion of people to bring praise to His name:

10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise you;
the remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt.
(Psalm 76)

Joseph was sold into slavery by his angry brothers, but God used their anger to accomplish the salvation of the nation of Israel. Through Joseph the entire nation of Israel would be delivered from a great famine that would have devastated them as a nation (see Genesis 37:26-28).

King Nebuchadnezzar became very angry when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down and worship his idol. In his anger, he threw them into a fiery furnace. There the angel of the Lord appeared to these three men and protected them. Seeing this, Nebuchadnezzar worshipped the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (see Daniel 3).

The crucifixion of Christ is another example of how the Lord God used the wrath of human beings to bring praise to His name. It was the jealous anger of the people of that day that put the Lord Jesus on the cross. God used His death to bring salvation to the ends of the earth and great praise to His name.

Can we boast of our strengths when we see God using even the wrath of human beings to advance His kingdom? Can I honestly believe that God will limit Himself to what He can do through my strengths and availability? Is He not much bigger than this? The destiny of this world is not in my hands. It will not be limited by what I can do. The work of God will not be hindered by the evil of humankind nor will it be defeated by Satan.

The great Creator God is working out His purposes. Those purposes are being worked out despite our failures and weaknesses. The wrath of humankind will not hinder His purposes. He is bigger than our greatest weakness. He will even use our weaknesses to accomplish His purposes for good. In this we can find great hope.

For Consideration:

- Give some examples of how God used the weaknesses of His servants to bring glory to Himself?
- How can our strengths become a hindrance to us in the service of the Lord?
- Why is it foolish for us to boast of our fruitfulness? To whom does all the glory belong?

- How does God use the wrath of men to bring praise to His name?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He can use even your weaknesses for His glory and the expansion of His kingdom.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times you have wanted to take the glory for what He has done in your life.
- Thank the Lord that He is bigger than even the wrath of sinful men and that He can use their wrath to bring praise to His holy name.

Chapter 13 -

Concluding Remarks

In this study, we have seen the kind of people God uses. We have also examined some truths that seem to come from these examples. In this final chapter I want to summarize some key principles and applications of the truth we have been examining.

Fruitfulness is not Primarily Dependant on my Strength or Availability but on the Grace of God

In the illustrations we have studied, we have seen how God used men and women who were weak or even rebellious for His cause. God may use my strength and experience but He may also use my weakness and failure, to teach me and advance His kingdom. He uses those who are available to Him as well as those who bitterly fight against Him to the end. God can use whomever He decides in whatever condition they find themselves. He is not limited to our strengths and availability. His purposes will advance with us or despite us

It is by God's grace that I can bear fruit. It is not primarily because I am good or strong but because God has chosen to use me. This removes any boasting. If I am to boast of anything, it would be in the grace of God. All fruit is the result of God's work in an imperfect human being. Without

Him I would not be able to bear any lasting fruit for the sake of His kingdom. I am dependant on Him not only in my weakness but also in my strength.

Fruitfulness is not a Measure of my Walk with God

The second point I need to make here is that my success in ministry is not a measure of my walk with God. It is important that we distinguish between fruitfulness and faithfulness. God may use me even if I am not walking with Him as I should. In fact, who among us is walking perfectly with God? How thankful we need to be that God is not limited to using only perfect people.

Don't be deceived by those whose ministry is successful in the world's eyes. There are preachers and evangelists whose successful ministries have deceived many into believing that they are walking close to God. An examination of their lives, however, may reveal something very different.

We dare not be deceived by what we call success. We must look beyond the exterior to the person behind that success. Are they walking faithfully with the Lord? Are they seeking to live their lives in accordance with the teaching of Scripture and the leading of God's Spirit?

Don't make "success" your first priority. Seek with all your heart to walk faithfully with the Lord God and His Word. Make knowing Christ and walking with Him your highest goal.

Focus on Faithfulness and Abiding in Christ

As believers, we need to learn to focus on being faithful to God and abiding in Him. I think of Jeremiah who preached for forty years seeing little fruit for his labour. In fact, God told Jeremiah that he was calling him to preach to a people who would refuse to listen:

27 So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. (Jeremiah 7)

From a human perspective, his ministry was a failure but in God's eyes, he was a faithful prophet. At the end of his ministry, Jeremiah had little to show for his years of preaching but he had been faithful and would certainly receive his reward.

Will you stand your ground even when you see little fruit? Will you continue to preach when you do not see the response you would like? Many have left the post they have been assigned by God for more fruitful ministries. Where are those who will be faithful to God in small churches? Where are those who will travel to remote places with the truth of God? Where are those who will persevere even when they see nothing for their faithful efforts? True success cannot be counted in numbers and statistics but in faithfulness and obedience.

One of the great problems in the church of our day is that once you get beyond the statistics you may find great weakness and spiritual immaturity. Yes, we have great numbers of people coming to church but what about the spiritual condition of those people? We may be fruitful, but are we faithful in the little things? Are we walking close to

God and experiencing Him? God sees beyond the numbers to the quality of the individual heart.

Be Obedient and Let God Use You as He Sees Fit

The challenge for each of us is to walk in obedience to God and His Word. Only as we abide in Him and are faithful to His Word can we become all that He intends us to be. I believe that God is more concerned about us than about what we do for Him. Having said that, however, be assured that God will use you as you walk faithfully with Him.

Jesus made this promise in John 15:

5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15)

In fact, Jesus would go on to say:

8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15)

God wants to use us to advance the cause of the kingdom. Notice, however, that He wants to do this as we abide in Him. What does it mean to abide? To abide is to remain in a place of fellowship and communion. It is to surrender to Him and His purpose for our lives. It is to allow Him the right to do as He pleases with us and through us. We are the instrument through which He flows. He who abides in Christ is one who refuses to allow his or her own plans to conflict with what God has in store. To abide is to be surrendered to God and His ways for our lives. It is to give

Him full control of all we do and say. To abide is to remain in a place of deep intimacy with God.

The branch on the vine is surrendered totally to the vine. The power of the vine flows through that branch and causes it to produce fruit. This is how it is in our Christian life. If we abide in the Christ and surrender to Him, the result is that His life flows through us. When the life of Christ flows through us, the natural result is the fruit of His Spirit being produced in us. We begin to take on the character of the vine. As we take on the character of the vine our light and example shines in that midst of the darkness of this world. People see that light and our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (see Matthew 5:16).

What we need to understand about these good works that God wants to produce in us is that they are the fruit of His Spirit working in our lives and not the fruit of human effort. The fruit that God wants to produce in us is a result of our abiding in Him. He is the source of this fruit.

As I grow in ministry one of the things the Lord seems to be showing me is that there is a difference between human fruit and the fruit that comes from God. There are many people doing things for God. What I am seeking, however, is for God to do things through me. I want more and more to be in a place where I am trusting the leading of the Lord more than my earthly wisdom and experience.

As I look at the ministry the Lord has given me in book writing and distribution, I have often been amazed at what God is doing. I often wonder where the resources have come from to continue this ministry – God has continually provided so that tens of thousands of books are available around the world. I receive emails and letters from people I do not know requesting books. I often wonder how these

people ever found my address – again this is the work of God. I receive letters telling me of how a book arrived at the right time to bless or to equip a pastor for a conference – God’s timing is perfect. These are not things I have planned. God has been directing this ministry, all I can do is follow and step out in obedience.

There have been times when I have wanted to advance in a certain direction. The temptation has been to make it happen in my human strength and wisdom. While I could have done this, I have found myself praying and waiting on God instead. God hears my request. If what I am asking is His purpose, He will make this clear. He will provide the right people and the resources when it is His time. I am not the director of this ministry. I am merely a servant who is seeking to be obedient to my Heavenly Director. This is how I want it to be. I want the fruit of this ministry and the provision for this ministry to be from God and not the result of human effort. I want it to be the fruit of an abiding life.

The Blessing of Fruitfulness

There is a fruitfulness that comes from abiding and surrender to the Lord. This fruit is the result of surrender to God and His ways. It is not the result of human efforts although it does require obedience. It is the natural result of being part of the vine. It is the product of a close relationship to Christ.

The blessing of this fruitfulness is in the fact that God is working in us. It is evidence of His life flowing through us. We could look over our kingdom like Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:30 saying:

30 ... Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence for the glory of my majesty? (Daniel 4)

We could do many things in human wisdom and strength. Many of the largest business and countries of the world have been built and run by human wisdom and strength. Imagine looking over your life and ministry and only being able to say: "look at what I have built by my mighty power for the glory of my majesty." How much more wonderful would it be to look back and say: "Look at what the Lord has done." As I look at what God has done, my heart is filled with praise and wonder. I see evidence of His presence and grace. I am overcome by the wonder that He would be pleased to use me as a vessel. I am overjoyed at that fact that He has chosen to reveal His strength and grace in me. All this humbles me and causes me to bow the knee before my Creator and Saviour.

The blessing of this kind of fruitfulness is in the presence of God and His glory, not in the fruit. All too often we worship the fruit or the human instrument who bore that fruit. The true glory belongs to the source of that fruit – the Lord God Himself. It is the greatest joy of the believer to see the Lord receive the glory. It is the great delight of the believer to know the presence of God and His power.

What a wonder it is to see the power of God flowing through us. We know it is not our power but His. We know that it is He who strengthens us and equips us. We know His presence and the very life of the vine flowing through us. We delight in this because this is why we were created.

For Consideration:

- How important is success to you? How does the world define success? Is this God's priority?
- What does it mean to abide in Christ?
- What is the difference between doing something for God and God doing something through us?
- Is it possible for us to take God's place as Director of our ministries and lives?
- What is the difference between: "Look at what I have done", and "look at what God has done"?
- What evidence is there of the work of God in your life and ministry?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to have His priorities for your life and ministry?
- Ask God to help you to surrender more fully to Him and His purpose.
- Thank the Lord that He delights to pour His strength and wisdom into us. Thank Him that He is willing to use us as instruments for His glory.
- Ask God to help you to see the difference between what He is doing through you and what you want to do for Him.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path Book Distribution (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely or at cost price to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

These books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into a number of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books? For more information about Light To My Path Book Distribution visit our website at <http://ltmp-homepage.blogspot.ca>