

Eyes of a Child

*Collection of 14 essays
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I dedicate this collection of essays to you, the reader. The Lord bless you, in Jesus' name.

'The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light.' (Matthew 6:22)

Contents:

Eyes of a Child
No More Gloom
Walls of Wind
Company
Arid Places
Face like Flint
God's War Strategy
The Insecurity Trap
Strongholds
It (Never) Ends Here
Be a Hater
Saul and David
Jonathan
Joab

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(Essay #1)

Eyes of a Child

'... their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.'

(Matthew 18:10)

Children just know. They see and know. They are not slaves to their own understanding and 'words' and rationale. They look, trust, see and know. They soar.

God tells us that mankind 'fell' into sin by wanting higher knowledge. Mankind 'fell' from paradise because we wanted to 'know' and be like God. (Genesis 3)

Have you ever felt like you don't know much? Maybe that you don't even know much about God or about his Scriptures? You're not educated and 'deep' like people who study theology or read lots of books about the Bible?

My friend, in many ways the less you know about God, the better you can know God.

'... the more knowledge, the more grief.'

(Ecclesiastes 1:18)

Jesus called people to look him in the eyes, believe he was one with Father God, and come to him. Jesus called people to see and believe. Jesus called people to act on this faith, i.e. to turn away from their sin each day.

Have you believed in Jesus Christ? Have you turned away from your sin?

This act of seeing and believing is everything to God. It is a childlike act of relationship. It is deep beyond 'words' and study.

Jesus said, ***'Unless you change and become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.'*** (Matthew 18:3)

There will be people who know more than you. People who have all the answers. People who teach and preach and advise. And yet they will be further from God than you.

Jesus said many will come on the day of judgment and remind God himself of all their religious greatness – ***'Did we not prophesy in your name, drive out demons and perform miracles?'*** – and Jesus will say to them, ***'Depart from me. I never knew you.'*** (Matthew 7:21-23)

It is not a coincidence that the great men and women of Scripture were unschooled people. They were humble. They had no degrees in theology. Jesus called these people to himself, and used them powerfully to follow him, to preach the gospel, to heal in faith. Jesus also put their names and stories down in Scripture as examples to the rest of humanity.¹

¹ Mark 14:1-9; Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus' own disciples were 'unschooled men', and yet they became the authors of the Gospels and the books of the Bible. (Acts 4:13) Their writing is simple, and that is why even you and I can understand it. But their writing is anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the one man who did hold degrees and all kinds of academic brilliance? Well, God broke him and humbled him. He began to show him things of truth that he would not be able to put into words², and here is what Paul said of all his own learning:

'I consider it all a loss, compared to knowing Christ... I consider it garbage.'
(Philippians 3:8)

Jesus told the religious leaders and academics of the day that the prostitutes and thugs were entering heaven ahead of them. Why? Because in their humility they heard the call to repent of their sin, believe in Jesus, and they did it. (Matthew 21:31-32) They didn't question Christ. They didn't submit his teaching to their own analysis and higher thinking. No. They looked, they saw, they trusted, they followed.

Jesus elevated the lowly who bowed down, over the learned who questioned. One day Jesus was invited to the house of a religious leader for dinner. While he was there a woman in that town 'who had lived a sinful life', came to the house and fell at Jesus' feet. She wept

² 2 Corinthians 12:1-4

with regret for her sin. She wet his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. She brought a sacrifice of perfume, and poured it on his feet. Jesus then turned and spoke boldly to the religious, learned man – the man with many answers, much understanding. He said that he did not treat Jesus in this way. He did not embrace him, anoint him with oil, honor him in this way. He then turned to the woman and said that her sins were forgiven, because she had come to Jesus with 'love'. (Luke 7)

You may not know much, but do you love Jesus? Have you walked past all the teachers, the leaders, the 'important' people who know so much, and reached out and touched Jesus? Have you come to him and regretted your sin, turned away from your sin, and taken hold of him?

You don't need to know anything except Jesus Christ as Lord of your life. If you know this, you know everything!

(Essay #2)

No More Gloom

‘There will be no more gloom for those who are in distress...’ (Isaiah 9:1)

Introduction

The story about Jesus is magical. It is in childlike language with childlike imagery. It is more like a fairytale than a ‘doctrine’; more like a song than a creed.

When telling of Christ’s coming – of ‘God’ coming – the prophet wrote:

‘The people walking in darkness have seen a great light! On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.’
(Isaiah 9:2)

Jesus is light cutting into darkness. (John 8:12)
Jesus is water to a thirsty soul. (John 7:37-38)
Jesus is true ‘bread’ from heaven, for those who hunger for more than earthly food. (John 6:35)
The picture of Christ comes in images of water, light, peace, joy.

In this brief essay I look at the impact of Jesus overcoming despair, and his power through you to overcome despair – in your life, and in the lives of others.

Gloom

'The kingdom of God is not a matter of mere words, but of power!'

(1 Corinthians 4:20)

Jesus 'defeated death'. We're told he took the 'sting' out of it. Because of Jesus, death is no longer a 'place', but rather a thin curtain we pass through, or a mist we step through. Jesus himself referred to it as 'sleep'.³

Death – corruption, decay, mortality – is in everyone and everything. Not even nature is pure. We're told that nature itself is in a 'bondage of decay', and subjected to 'frustration', because of our fallen, sinful state.⁴ Although this world is beautiful and speaks of God's glory⁵, this world – people, animals and nature – are marked by sin, destined to decay, impure in spirit.

Every day I'm mindful of the 'gloom' that pervades life. Are you? I try not to dwell on sorrow, but we cannot and should not deny its powerful presence. Jesus came to overcome, not to act like nothing is wrong. He did not come to be super-positive and disapproving of sadness or despair. He came as a 'dread warrior'⁶, to defeat despair, overcome death,

³ 2 Timothy 1:10; 1 Corinthians 15:55; John 11:11

⁴ Romans 8:20-21

⁵ Psalm 19:1-2

⁶ Jeremiah 20:11

break open healing and new paths of hope,
where hope had been lost.

‘Jesus said, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free...’ (Luke 4:18)

Power is not in positivity. (However, if you are a positive person, it is a gift, and we thank you!) No, power is in the Spirit of God. Power to forgive a sin that has haunted you. Power to heal a hurt that has cast your eyes down for years. Power to comfort the soul even in a dark, dark night. Power to whisper hope and zeal into your spirit, where people whisper accusations and fear. Not even ‘strength’ is the key. It is the Spirit of God that dispels darkness.

‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.’
(Zechariah 4:6)

And you can release this power over your life or situation, or over that of another. It is your faith in Jesus, and your asking, your prayer.

‘Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.’
(Hebrews 11:6)

Jesus called us to call on him:

‘Jesus said, ‘My Father will give you whatever you ask for in my name... Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.’ (John 16:23-24)

My friends, like a child, press in. Like a child, believe God and go to him. Other Christians may lack faith or distract you with many explanations and questions about unanswered prayer. Let them talk, but you walk away quietly to the closet in your room. Kneel, and ask the Lord. Believe the Lord. Wait on the Lord. Look at this incredible verse about what truly honors the Lord:

‘God’s pleasure is not in the strength of animals, nor in the strength of the warrior. The Lord delights in those who fear him, who trust in his unfailing love.’ (Psalm 147:10-11)

Hope

‘He will wipe away every tear from their eyes...’ (Revelation 21:4)

Jesus saved people, and then sent people to other people. He did this all the time! He sent his disciples in groups of two, from village to village to proclaim his message of truth, and also to touch and heal and encourage people. (Luke 10) He called on his disciples to actually

pray to God the Father for more workers, so they could help the 'harassed and helpless.'
(Matthew 9:36-38)

Jesus told parable after parable of pursuing and rescuing the lost person, the lost soul, the persecuted. (Luke 15) Jesus – God in the flesh⁷ – saved us and commissioned us to save others. He touched us with power, and gave us his power to touch others.

'Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you!'
(John 20:21)

Don't be afraid! Jesus is not sending you unequipped. He is not ushering people out into the cold to suffer a 'testimony' just in order to be good. No! Jesus is sending you out with the power of the Holy Spirit to do everything he did!

'Jesus said, 'If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.' (John 20:23)

'Jesus said, 'The Holy Spirit... will testify about me. And you also must testify about me, for you have been with me.' (John 15:26-27)

'Jesus said, 'Whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things...' (John 14:12)

⁷ John 1:1,14; Matthew 1:23

When you see despair, my friend, in your neighbors, in your communities, in your country... you have power in Jesus to pierce the darkness with light. You can speak a message of repentance and faith that sets people free, and is the source of God's power! (Romans 1:16)

You can tell the weary soul of a light of hope that penetrates darkness, turns a red stain white as snow. You can speak of a 'blood that speaks a better word than the blood of murder.' (Heb 12:24) You can pray with a bowed head, a humbled soul, to receive the love and forgiveness of Christ, and have and hold a 'new heart and a new spirit'. (Ezekiel 36:26) You can hold out to any man, woman or child, the promise of new and eternal life:

'Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!' (2 Corinthians 5:17)

And here and now you can speak the name of Jesus in faith over a situation, over a need, over a crime, over a tragedy, and usher power in from heaven to that very moment, and to those people with you.

'If my people would humble themselves and pray, and turn from their wickedness, I will hear their prayer from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land!' (2 Chronicles 7:14)

Jesus handed us keys to open and close blessing over people's lives. Here he says to Peter, based on his faith and proclamation that Jesus is the Savior of the world,

'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' (Matthew 16:19)

Remember, Jesus taught us to pray with a focus on bringing heaven to earth:

'Pray like this... Our Father in heaven... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...' (Matthew 6:9-13)

Conclusion

'God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, of love and of self-control.'
(2 Timothy 1:7)

My friends, we are equipped with power through the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we believe in Jesus as Lord of the earth, God of creation, we have his power to reach others. He called us to step towards people with his same power and zeal to actually change their lives.

We speak to people of how God stepped down to earth to touch us, forgive us, save us. His name is Jesus, and he died to pay for all the sin and despair in our lives, our souls, our history, our world. If we bend the knee in repentance of our sin – rejection of our sin – and put our hope and faith in Jesus, he pours his Holy Spirit into our lives.

‘When you believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit...’
(Ephesians 1:14)

When you see ‘gloom’ in your world, pray and listen. God may give you a lead to bring his light into that darkness, his comfort into that hopelessness. Listen. Believe. Wait.

When Jesus opens a door for you to speak about him, speak in faith. When he opens a door for you to pray with another, pray in faith. Be a ‘doorkeeper’ between heaven and earth, opening the skies to the Spirit of God over your land.

‘Jesus said, ‘See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut...’
(Revelation 3:8)

(Essay #3)

Walls of Wind

'The name of the Lord is a strong tower...'

(Proverbs 18:10)

Introduction

Inside the walls of the human heart is where God dwells. Not in 'temples made by man', not in any place of brick and mortar.

'The God who made the world and everything in it... does not live in temples made by human hands.' (Acts 17:24)

When God stepped down to earth, all physical walls – religious barriers – disappeared. God was now among mankind, as a man: Jesus Christ.

You, my friend, are now the temple of God. Jesus said,

'The kingdom of God is not something that can be seen with the eyes... because the kingdom of God is within you.' (Luke 17:21)

The 'structure', the 'spiritual house' of God's kingdom is not a local church building. God dwells in people, and we're told that believers, followers of Jesus, are the living stones of God's kingdom. People are the church. Jesus

is himself the 'cornerstone', the 'living stone', and we, too, are 'living stones'.⁸

The Lowly

When Jesus was born his name was Emanuel, which means, 'God with us.' (Matthew 1:23) God stepped out from the borders and boundaries of heaven⁹, out from behind the curtain and divide of the priesthood, and into the lives of you and me. Look at the astounding first 'reach' of God when he arrived to earth:

'There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby... An angel of the Lord appeared to them... and said, '... a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.' (Luke 2:11)

The shepherds were not called into the temple for a word from God. God himself stepped down from heaven, stepped 'over' the temple, and brought his word to where the shepherds were – out in the field. The message went forth. And it went to the lowest and most humble of humanity. It met them where they were.

Jesus described the nature of his 'invitation', his gospel reach, in this parable:

⁸ 1 Peter 2:4-5; Ephesians 2:19-22

⁹ Philippians 2:7

'Go out to the roads and the country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.' (Luke 14:23)

Where you find yourself today – hurting, lonely, lost? – Jesus comes to you. You need only be still, and heed his voice. He knocks on the door of your heart. He asks you to open the door of your heart to him – to Jesus Christ, and his Holy Spirit.

Will you allow him to come into your life here and now? Will you allow him to turn your life around, and away from sin?

'Jesus said, 'Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.' (Revelation 3:19-20)

Never Alone

The safest place to 'be' is in the presence of Jesus. And by faith, you are always in this space. The 'strong tower', is the 'name of the Lord'. It is not a community, nor a person. It is Christ himself.

'Christ himself is our peace...' (Ephesians 2:14)

'Christ is all, and is in all.' (Colossians 3:11)

It is important, my friend, to be still in the presence of the Lord - alone. It is important to drink from the fountain of the water of life.

‘Jesus said to her, ‘... whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’
(John 4:14)

Jesus came to connect with the individual. Jesus came to be with you, and in you. We often come together with others for an experience of spiritual connection with God. That is good. But the connection with God when in a group, in a crowd, is only ‘real’ if the individuals are each connected to God personally.

Jesus brought the discussion right down to the individual when speaking with Peter. First he asked Peter what others were saying about Christ. But then he said,

‘What about you? Who do you say that I am?’ (Matthew 16:15)

In fact, when there was a swell of support for Jesus in more of a crowd situation, Jesus evaded the attention (John 2:23-25), left the area (Mark 1:35-38) and even exposed their ‘following’ for what it was – greed. (John 6:25-66)

Jesus came – ‘God with us’ – and sought out each individual. He left the ninety-nine sheep in

pursuit of the one. (Luke 15:1-7) Even after his resurrection, the same day, he appeared and spent hours with just two people. He did not seek the crowds, the religious leaders, the politicians, the press... No. He rose from the dead, changing all history forevermore, and chose to appear to two lonely friends, walking a lonely road. We're told, **'Jesus himself came up and walked along with them.'** (Luke 24:13-35)

Jesus warned that a time would come when people would be pointed here and there in order to find him. People would be invited into this or that room, to see the Savior. It is a marked contrast in 'dynamic' and 'direction of flow', to what Jesus modeled. He left heaven, and he left the ninety-nine, and he left the villages, and he left the crowds, and he kept going 'outwards' to reach people, rather than beckoning them to come to this or that meeting. Nothing in itself wrong with the latter, but the spirit can be one of hiding rather than 'reaching', staying rather than going, an obstacle rather than a rope.

'Jesus said, 'Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people... So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it...'
(Matthew 24:10, 26)

Jesus warned about hypocrisy, speaking about the religious leaders of the day, and he said, **'Do not do what they do, for they do not**

practice what they preach. They put heavy loads on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for people to see... (Matthew 23:3-5)

Paul warned Timothy that a day would come when false teachers would abound, and be readily accessible:

'The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.' (2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Jesus turned everything upside down. Rather than the high and mighty religious leaders actually being high and mighty, Jesus said, ***'The greatest among you will be your servant.'*** (Matthew 23:11) And Jesus himself modeled this to the highest degree.

Rather than you or I having to go somewhere to find God, he came to us through Jesus and knocks on our door.

Rather than you or I having to be a member of this or that church denomination or conference or movement, Jesus modeled and warned against 'crowd' dynamic and flow. He left the ninety-nine to find you, to find me, and walk alongside us.

This truth, my friend, is everything God came for, Christ died for. Look what the Bible says:

‘The mystery of God is revealed in this: Christ in you...’ (Colossians 1:27)

Jesus said he would be present where ***‘two or three are gathered in his name.’*** (Matthew 12:20) Two or three are not needed, because he is with you and in you alone. But his point is that a gathering of just two people – not two thousand – will receive the very fullness of God’s attendance, his presence. Breathe this in. Don’t go anywhere right now. Let Jesus be fully in you, fully with you, fully around you. You are where he is.

Beauty

Bask in God’s beauty. Soak in his rays of light. It is important that the light and vision of Christ is real to your soul, to your hope. Because this world will distract and pull and promise. If your vision of Jesus is not higher, brighter, truer, you risk believing lies and wandering.

‘For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays...’ (Malachi 4:2)

When you believed in Jesus, he poured his Holy Spirit into you. (Ephesians 1:14) The ‘living water’ of Christ wells up from within you. (John 7:37-38) Your life – your true life – is even now ***‘hidden with Christ in God.’***

(Colossians 3:3) You are living life in the 'strong tower' that is the living name of God – Jesus Christ. You are hidden in the shadow of his wings. (Psalm 17:8) This is real, my friend. This space of Spirit is yours in Jesus. Every day you need to take time to gaze on this beauty, to soak in the Spirit and vision of the eternal.

'One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him...'
(Psalm 27:4)

'Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls. All your waves and breakers have swept over me.' (Psalm 42:7)

'Your love, O Lord, is better than life...'
(Psalm 63:3)

Walls of Wind

You are now the dwelling place of God. His Spirit is in you, and blows through and around you:

'Jesus said, 'To be born of the spirit is like the wind – you hear its sounds, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going.' (John 3:8)

Jesus himself is your strong tower, and always surrounds you. You could not be safer than

you are right now. You could not be more 'inside' the kingdom of God. Your King has come to you, and resides within you, and around you.

Your walls of safety, so to speak, are walls of wind, walls of the Spirit of God.

'Jesus said, 'God is Spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.' (John 4:24)

(Essay #4)

Company

'One plus one is... two thousand.'

(GK Chesterton)

I'm anxious sometimes. Particularly when I don't have a 'meaningful' project already filling my time, my mind, my heart.

So if a new day dawns, and there's nothing already driving me to and through activity, distraction, I can feel a little anxious, jittery.

This feeling, this 'truth', can raise many deep questions, even life-changing questions, about purpose, relationship, etc. But let me share just one...

Yesterday, mid-morning, I was in one of this 'states'. I had nothing pressing on me to do – a 'state' of being I work hard to attain – and yet still a sense of 'pressing'. That anxious feeling of wanting, needing something to do that was meaningful. At this moment my wife walked in to inform me that a group of family friends were going to be gathering together for a BBQ at someone's house, and we were invited to join them. Gathering would be kicking off soon, in fact, so let's go...

Company. Getting together is, in itself, one of life's most powerful experiences of meaning. Just being with someone intentionally, relationally, is to stand in the spirit of purpose.

Being. Company. Purpose. I'm not just talking about the moment in itself, but the actual sense of open doors, new possibilities, new perspectives, vantage points, feelings, insights, discoveries... Now, when people 'park' social activity as an end in itself, this can come to feel someone inane, like a cross-roads or an open field has been carved into a dead end. No, company in its purest sense is not defined as a goal in itself. Company must always have the door and windows open to God's Spirit, to blow to and through the 'eternity in the hearts of mankind'¹⁰, and allow it to be an oasis or a river or a waterfall or an ocean...

And this brings me to my point of this reflection: **To be alone with Jesus, by his Spirit, is to be in company.** To rest in the presence, the 'friendship', the 'whisper' of Christ in you, is to be present in the purest experience of 'company' – and purpose, and possibilities – that is available to you in this life.¹¹

Jesus – 'God with us'¹² – is with you through faith. You will never need to sit anxiously, wondering where to find an activity of purpose, or seek company with other people to 'feel alive', or discover possibilities. Your alone moments – now and forevermore – can be your most purposeful, most promising, most powerful.

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 3:11

¹¹ John 15:15, John 10:27; Colossians 1:27

¹² Matthew 1:23

'Be still and know that I am God.' (Psalm
46:10)

(Essay #5)

Arid Places

'Then the righteous will answer and say, 'When, Lord, did we see you hungry and feed you?' (Matthew 25:37)

Introduction

There will come a time when all is said and done. Jesus speaks of 'judgment day' in above parable, saying he will sit on his throne and judge all peoples of all nations.

In Christ the war is already won, though it is not over. You feel the crossfire of good against evil. You are in the midst of this battle. But in Jesus - as he cried out - ***'It is finished!'*** (John 19:30); and again, ***'The prince of this world stands defeated.'*** (John 16:11)

In this war-torn land that we call 'life', there are scars and ruins everywhere. There is despair in the shadows. But the light of Jesus dispels 'gloom'. (Isaiah 9:1) As followers of Jesus, we carry this light into the corners of the earth, to the weary souls of mankind. Here we see the arid place become an oasis. We see it in the soul of an individual, in the spirit of a family, in the very land of a community.

'... I will heal their land.' (2 Chronicles 7:14b)

The **'power of God'** for this salvation in the soul and across the land is the gospel of Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:16) In this brief essay I look at this 'power' of Christ in you and through you, to bring God's light into dark spaces, turn desert places into streams.

The Arid Place

Every other corner I turn I 'feel' the despair of this broken life. Can you relate? I mean, back alleys and side streets and lonely businesses and unlit homes and poverty and litter and decay... I'm not trying to be depressing here; I'm just allowing reality to actually touch me. Life is hard and people are weary. Life is an up-stream swim, an up-hill climb, a fight. And some people give up the fight.

My friend, it is against the backdrop of life's broken and arid reality, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is so powerful. Look at this prophecy about Jesus, 600 years before he was born:

'There will be no more gloom for those who are in distress... The people walking in darkness have seen a great light... every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, for to us a child is born... his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...'
(Isaiah 9:1-6)

Jesus – ‘God with us’¹³ – came in power. He did not come to give an ‘out’ from this life, but rather to bring heaven to earth. He even taught us to pray with this ‘transformation’ in mind: ‘... ***your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...***’ (Matthew 6:9-13)

Jesus came to pour peace into your heart, and from your heart to pour peace onto others, into situations, onto the land.

‘Jesus said, ‘Anyone who believes in me... streams of living water will flow from within them.’ (John 7:37-38)

Yes, there is a ‘rescue’ mission in Jesus, much like pulling someone out of a burning building. But the greater mission of Jesus, is not only rescuing us ‘from’ something or someone or somewhere, but his Holy Spirit (not you, necessarily) moving back into that space and conquering it, transforming it, redeeming it. You see, the whole world belongs to Jesus:

‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...’ (Matthew 28:18)

All people belong to Jesus:

‘All souls are mine!’ (Ezekiel 18:4)

Jesus will rescue the weak from the arrogant and from danger. But then Jesus will go back in and judge the arrogant and erase the

¹³ Matthew 1:23

danger. He will turn a life-threatening desert into a life-giving oasis, a place of fear into a haven of peace, a person of violence into stubble under the feet of those they wronged:

'You will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I act,' says the Lord Almighty.'

(Malachi 4:3)

'I will restore the land... and reassign its desolate inheritances... I will turn all my mountains into roads...' (Isaiah 49:8,11)

The Arid Soul

The most hopeless feeling in our souls comes from sin. Do you have some secret sin that makes every shred of hope fade? Like, you wake up in the morning and see life's opportunities ahead, but then you remember this sin in your life, and everything loses value, loses purpose?

There is hope in Jesus! My friend, only Jesus holds the 'keys to death and hell'. (Revelation 1:18) Only Jesus – 'God with us' – has paid for your sin with cruel crucifixion and a perfect life, so that you can be made new. God puts it this way:

'Come, let us reason together,' says the Lord. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, I will make them white as snow...' (Isaiah 1:18)

At this moment – right here, right now – you can be free. You can be clean. You can be a ‘new creation’. My friend, don’t worry at this moment about making amends. Don’t think about the possible paths of redemption, or justice or exposure. No. Right now just come to Jesus. Just turn your weary face, your arid soul, to Christ, and look at him. Listen to him.

‘Jesus said, ‘Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest.’ (Matthew 11:28)

About Jesus it is also promised, ***‘A bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out...’*** (Matthew 12:20)

At this moment you need to only reconcile with Christ. He will lead you thereafter. And he will be merciful, tender, true. You will have nothing to fear. But right now, my friend, pray this prayer:

Dear Jesus, I need you. My soul is weary, my spirit is thirsty. I feel like dying. I have no hope. Jesus, I need you.

Please, Lord, forgive me. Please forgive me of my sin. You see, and you know. I repent, Lord. I regret what I have done. I regret it from the bottom of my soul. Please forgive me. Cover my stains with your blood, and make me white as snow.

Now lead me, Lord. Lead me in a new life, a forgiven life. Give me a new heart and a

new spirit. Lead me in mercy. Hold me. Save me. Pour out new life on me. Thank you, Jesus. Amen and amen.

If you just prayed this prayer, and took this step of faith, everything has changed. Your dry and desert soul is now becoming an oasis. Water – living water – is beginning to flow into you. And actually, out of you. You have been saved, and will be used to save others. You have been refreshed, and will be used to refresh others. Celebrate your new life in Jesus!¹⁴

Conclusion

Jesus always starts with the individual. He rescues you, me, and then through us pours out on others around us...

He calls us to repent of our sin, and believe in him. This is to become a follower of Jesus, and to be 'marked' in him by his Holy Spirit. Then, as we share Jesus with people around us – sharing his life and message of repentance and faith – we are breaking his light into darkness. We are pouring his living water into desert places. We are bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth. We are advancing the kingdom of God.

¹⁴ To protect and grow your new faith in Jesus, please read 'FIRST STEPS', at www.1peter1three.weebly.com

So first we allow the living water of Jesus to pour into our souls, and then through us to pour into others and over the land. To us, and through us, Jesus changes arid places into oases.

‘Jesus said, ‘Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’ (John 4:14)

(Essay #6)

Face like Flint

'The word of God is sharper than a double-edged sword... dividing soul and spirit...'

(Hebrews 4:12)

God created the world, and people in the world. Everything was perfect and holy. God's presence was everywhere, like wind, like oxygen. No laws were needed, so no laws were spoken. No guidance was needed, so no guidelines were given. Truth was Spirit, and blew freely through all creation.

After mankind chose to rebel against God, to 'sin', everything changed. Death came on everything in spirit, and in timeline. The infinite became finite. People die. Goodness became polluted. Dishonesty and evil now rage from the inside out. Creation itself is 'subject to decay', not just people and their thoughts and tendencies.¹⁵

Now 'laws' were needed. Now guidelines were 'spoken'. God did this through particular people (prophets), at particular times. And these spokesmen of God wrote his words down, his histories, and were instructed to share these spoken truths with other people. And so the 'Word of God' was noted, and shared, and spread. This was God's way, when it came to God's spoken truth, his 'message', his Word.

¹⁵ Romans 8:20-21

Creation – all things physical, material, tangible - was in and under all mankind. It always is. But the word of God came through designated people at designated times. Chapter by chapter God's word was revealed to mankind - God's heart, God's thoughts, his plan, his priorities, his call. God speaks to man, and through man to all men. This is how God's spoken word came, and continues to 'go forth'.

'How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?... Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.' (Romans 10:14-15,17)

We see this dynamic of God spreading his spoken word to people and through people, from the beginning of the Scriptures to the end of them. One prophet told by God to go tell others; not all people communicated with directly by God. (Isaiah 6) One person given a dream to communicate to others; not all people given the same dream. (Acts 16) An angel telling one man to go tell another man something; not the angel himself carrying the message directly to the intended hearer. (Acts 10) Philip transported by God and instructed by God, to instruct the Ethiopian eunuch; not God himself speaking directly to the Ethiopian eunuch. (Acts 8) Jesus sending forth his Holy Spirit to communicate with the hearts and

minds of people; but Jesus telling us that we must also testify alongside this Holy Spirit to the ears of people. (John 15:26-27)

If an angel can instruct a man to speak to another man, cannot this angel simply cut out the middleman and go himself to the other one? But my friends, this is God's way. Because of our broken minds and hearts, riddled with 'false knowledge' and darkened understanding, we have questions about this 'way' of God.¹⁶ We question its efficiency, its necessity, its justice. Does God prefer these people to those, because his message has reached these and not those? We philosophize, and because we can't fit this system of communication and 'reach' into our own systems of understanding and justice, we don't believe, we don't receive, and we don't go forth.¹⁷

The parable of the 'wicked servant' speaks directly to this. We are told that three servants were given each a sum of money to invest and multiply. Two of the three did so, according to their means and abilities (which differed). The last servant, instead of believing and obeying the master, did nothing with the money, and then brought his brilliant reasoning to the master:

***'I knew that you were a hard man,
harvesting where you have not sown and***

¹⁶ 1 Timothy 6:20; Isaiah 55:8-9

¹⁷ Colossians 2:8

gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and hid your gold in the ground. Here is what belongs to you.'
(Matthew 25:24-25)

The master doesn't buy it. Doesn't deign to reason. He sees the core of the issue:

'You wicked, lazy servant!...' (vs.26)

God's way of truth, which is revelation to the heart and mind of those who seek God, comes to the individual, and moves out through the individual. (Acts 10:34-35) We even see this way of God, this connection with the individual, after Jesus rises from the dead. That same day he appears to only two lonely men on the road to Emmaus, and he walks, talks, explains, and dines with them. (Luke 24) He leaves the ninety-nine to find the one. (Luke 15)

God came to you – just you – in and through many moments and actions and words by many people, until you found yourself alone and whole in the arms of Jesus. He moves to and through the individual. This is his way. And we must walk alongside him to others, as his Spirit leads.

'Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like flint...' (Isaiah 50:7)

(Essay #7)

God's War Strategy

'Does he who made the ear not hear? Does he who formed the eye not see?'

(Psalm 94:9)

Introduction

At times God gives very specific instruction. He does this not to test our faith, but to love and direct us in a very real spiritual and earthly existence and battle. The test of faith is simply in believing and following, trusting and listening.

I want to reflect briefly on two examples of this.

War Strategy

When David was king over Israel, the Philistines - a powerful, violent neighboring nation - advanced against him to fight. Look at what David did when he received this news:

'David inquired of the Lord, 'Shall I go and attack...? Will you deliver them into my hands?' (2 Samuel 5:19)

This was David's pattern – to inquire of the Lord before he acted or reacted - and through 1 & 2 Samuel, we often see David do this.

Now read what God revealed to David, and commanded him to do:

‘Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the poplar trees.’ (vs. 23)

Now, interestingly, the Lord also tells David that he will send a sound of the Lord himself advancing against the Philistines (***‘the sound of marching in the tops of the poplar trees’*** vs.23), and at this moment David and his men were to advance, ***‘... because that will mean the Lord has gone out before you.’*** (vs. 24)

So I question: If God could move in Spirit and in power from the rear, why could he not just move in power and Spirit head on? Why the need to circle around the back and advance from the rear?

Was this just a test of David’s faith? Did God not need to go this route but just wanted to see if David would trust him, obey him, not question him - as I’m doing now, perhaps?

No. God does not test people’s faith just for the sake of testing faith. And God doesn’t circle round to the rear just for the sake of it. He is more meaningful, purposeful, than we are - not less. We don’t take the long way round just because... Neither does God.

There is a spiritual battle raging in the heavens. It’s real. Daniel called on God and God, true to his word, answered Daniel. But

the answer was delayed 21 days because the enemy, the devil, fought to block this answer coming to Daniel. It came. God is true and trustworthy. But the delay was only a test of faith insofar as Daniel trusted and waited for God in the battle; the delay was not a test of faith in itself. (Daniel chapter 10)

The real test of faith is walking with Jesus, and trusting him. That in itself is testing. It is counter-culture. It is faith in action. To put faith in action, is to test it.

Test of Faith

‘Abraham!... Do not do anything... Now I know you love me...’ (Genesis 22:12)

It would seem that God calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was essentially a test of faith. When Abraham lifted the knife, God intervened, and said, *‘Now I know you love me.’*

Paul wanted not only to know God’s victory, his *‘resurrection power’*, but also to ***‘fellowship with Christ in his suffering.’*** (Philippians 3:10) God did not test Abraham in order to know if his love for God was real. God knew Abraham’s love for God was real because Abraham walked with God deep into the foreshadow of God’s own suffering. Abraham fellowshiped with God in his suffering, as God played out the loss and cruel suffering of his own Son. And it was clear to God that

Abraham truly loved him, because Abraham stood with God in this lonely place.

When Jesus called on Peter and John to stay awake and pray only hours before his crucifixion, he was not doing this to test their faith. He was asking for support, for company, in a very real spiritual battle. The test of faith for them was whether they could muster up the strength and conviction to walk with Christ in this.¹⁸

God does not allow evil to touch our lives in order to test our faith. Never! God hates evil and does not use it or need it for his purposes.¹⁹ The test of faith when we encounter evil is to not doubt God, his love for us, his ability to defeat this evil and **'restore the years the locusts have eaten'** (Joel 2:25). The test of faith is to hold to Christ against this evil, believing he fights it, hates it, and will conquer and will redeem. (Rev 12:10-11; 21:5)

Conclusion:

God is not aimless. God is not puppeteering people, and directing them with whimsical strategy when just anything would do. God is serious about his creation, to the point of crucifixion. There is a spiritual battle, there is a victory, and there is purpose in Christ.

¹⁸ Matthew 26:36-43

¹⁹ Hebrews 1:9; Mark 3:22-30; James 1:13

Our hearts and minds have been corrupted with 'knowledge'. We ate of the tree of 'knowledge', and now we think we know. So we question and question and doubt and doubt... This questioning and doubting is what is broken, tainted, whimsical and inane. Not the ways of God:

'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' says the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.' (Isaiah 55:8-9)

If God leads you to the 'rear' and prompts you to move when you hear him in the top of the trees, the only test of faith is that you trust he has purpose in this, he has love, he has reasons, and you follow. The test is not in the strategy of God - he has deep reasons for what he does, and so deep and true is life in his hands that he was willing to suffer and die for it. The test of faith is simply in believing him and following. This is *always* the test of faith, just to walk with him and trust him.

'Jesus said, 'Blessed is the one who does not take offense on account of me.'
(Matthew 11:6)

(Essay #8)

The Insecurity Trap

‘Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you...’ (Hebrews 13:5)

Well, there are really 2 traps, like a front door and a back door.

If you are reading this, you don’t need ‘insecurity’ defined. You’re aware. Some area in your life that triggers fear or pride or envy or temptation.

When All is Said and Done

We’ll look at the ‘traps’ below, but first it is important to take a moment, settle the mind and heart, and ponder this truth:

God in heaven is your Father. He made you and loves you. He has no favorites. None! This is clear in the Bible, and stated explicitly.²⁰ Life is unfair, and people suffer and prosper in such disparate ways.

Jesus came to earth as ‘God with us.’²¹ He connected heaven to earth with himself as the ‘door’:

²⁰ 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; Matthew 18:14; Acts 10:34-35

²¹ Matthew 1:23

‘Jesus said, ‘I am the door, and anyone who enters through me will be saved...’

(John 10:9)

Jesus came to tell us the ‘end of the story’, so that we would have hope and inspiration to begin our journey with him here and now. He promised that if we lift our eyes and believe in him, and turn away from sin in our life, we will be forgiven of our sin, and given eternal life. We will be raised up after we die and live eternally in heaven! This is the end of the story – which you can ‘pocket’ now through faith and repentance.

In the meantime, here is what happens to us here on earth once we believe in Christ. He pours out his Holy Spirit into our lives – our bodies, our minds, our hearts, our soul. He begins to heal wounds, and ‘make all things new’. He begins to work out the justice and punishment on those who wronged you, and he works on your past, as well as your present and future. He ‘restores to you the years the locusts have eaten’, and he makes you a ‘new creation’.²²

So through Christ we have an eternal future in heaven, and we have ‘salvation’ and ‘sanctification’ here and now, like a river running through us...

²² Ephesians 1:14; Revelation 21:5; 2 Tim 4:1/Heb 9:27/Mt 18:6; Joel 2:25; 2 Cor 5:17

It is important as you deal with 'insecurity' to set your eyes on the Lord. The tendency is to fixate on ourselves – How can I be more positive? How can I feel better about myself? How can I be more confident? All eyes on me - not other peoples' eyes, ironically, but my own. I need to take my eyes off myself, and lift them to the Lord.

'...everyone who looks to Jesus and believes in him, has eternal life...' (John 6:40)

If gazing inward truly brought the power to deal with 'insecurity', you would not be reading this essay. You've done that. You still feel the 'unsafety' (i.e. insecurity), the brokenness, and with it a deep question over the purpose of healing. Once 'secure', then what?

Insecurity is not just about you. It is about you and God. It is about his report over your life, his path under your feet, and not what you feel you are worth, but what you are worth to him.

When you catch a glimpse of your worth to God, you will never hang your head in shame again. You will never allow mankind's values to shake your sense of self, your conviction of life's true purpose, your worth and your inheritance in Jesus.

After breaking down the following two 'traps' of insecurity, we'll conclude with how, through faith, we can access the power of God to break the chains of insecurity in our lives.

Insecurity – Front Door Trap

The front-door dynamic of insecurity is a 'drive'. In other words, our insecurity drives us to do something. The energy of our insecurity focuses us outward. We get up, get dressed, and head out the front door to tackle our insecurity...

For example, we may feel 'driven' to go buy that item, or join that society, or live in this neighborhood, or work in this sector, or eat... drink... wear... speak... act... attend... post... like... comment... agree... disagree... chasing, chasing...

These are 'actions'. This is energy in us that drives us to go 'do'.

The 'trap' here – while trying to fill that void, or shake the feeling of inadequacy – is up ahead. It's that mirage of an oasis up ahead, that you never reach. It's an illusion of an identity up ahead, if you only had this or that... The problem is, the list just keeps evolving. A new person enters the scene, and new insecurities rise up, and new challenges arise... chasing, chasing...

This trap is out the front door, you drive at it, but never reach it. You see it, chase it, but it's not real. And you run and run...

Insecurity – Back Door Trap

The back-door dynamic of insecurity is getting 'sucked into' something. It's not something that you drive at, but rather something – due to the vacuum in your soul - that pulls you off course. It's not so much a course you take intentionally, but something that takes you. But the vulnerability, the weakness that allowed for this diversion, is your insecurity.

When Jesus taught us to pray – the famous 'Lord's Prayer' (Matthew 6:9-13) – he said, '**... lead us not into temptation...**' (vs.13)

Temptation marks this 'trap'. An old friend (and older friend, no longer with us in this life), once shared his story with me. He told me that he had grown up poor. About 15 years into his marriage later on in life, 2 kids, he discovered that a very wealthy lady was attracted to him. He told me that having grown up poor and 'without', looked down on by the rich, when this promise of wealth and honor crossed his path later on in life – many years later – he was so vulnerable to the attentions of this woman, her wealth. She represented everything he did not have growing up, and had felt insecure about. He left his wife and kids for her. Left everything. Years later he truly repented, broke down before God. His first wife took him back, and they forged on together.

Insecurity can leave you open to lies, to flattery, to temptation. Others promise you attention, money, status, gratification, honor,

power... Things you might not have had, and felt insecure about, but now on offer. In exchange for your soul.

Conclusion:

You can sit in a book shop with coffee for years, and still not find answers. Well, truth is, you find answers (theories) but no power or authority. Some author will tell you to 'forgive yourself'. But what authority does this author have to tell someone they can forgive sins – their own, or another's? What authority, and what power to address the past and the soul?

No human in history can tell you that you can forgive yourself for what you did, any more than they can authorize you to 'forgive' what you're about to do. I think what authors are really trying to say, is that without forgiveness in the soul we have no real hope of peace in the soul. That they can say. But only Jesus can bring the power and the authority to fill the soul with healing:

'The kingdom of heaven is not one of mere words, but of power.'

(1 Corinthians 4:20)

When it comes to insecurity, and our vulnerability to fear, pride, envy and temptation, we must come to God. He speaks a 'report' over your life that takes away this brokenness in the soul.

Where you lacked love, he pours out love – in word, Spirit and deed. He lived, suffered and died for you.

‘I have carved your name on the palm of my hand.’ (Isaiah 49:16)

Where you lacked money and financial security, he calls you a Prince, a Princess, even now, and promises you an eternal inheritance and reward. Where you lacked honor, he esteems you. Where you lacked power and influence, he will hear and answer your prayers – you can save souls, change the land, influence history.

Jesus calls you. He came to find you, and to heal your soul, forgive sins, and walk with you. Jesus is the only one who has authority to do this, because he is God in the flesh.²³

‘Jesus said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...’
(Matthew 28:18)

‘When God is for us, who can be against us?’ (Romans 8:28)

With Christ in your soul, in your story, in your past, in your future, you are ‘new’.

‘Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come!’
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

²³ John 1:1,14

Stop chasing security. Be secure in Jesus.

'The name of the Lord [Jesus] is a strong tower. The righteous run into it, and they are safe.' (Proverbs 18:10)

For more information on knowing Jesus, and taking 'first steps' with him, please visit the 'First Steps' tab at:

www.1peter1three.weebly.com

(Essay #9)

Strongholds

‘The weapons we fight with... have divine power to demolish strongholds.’

(2 Corinthians 10:3-4)

Introduction:

A spiritual stronghold is something in the heart or mind that stands between you and God’s truth over your life. It blocks Christ’s freedom in your soul, his freedom through your life.

It might be fear. It might be insecurity. It might be a suffocating kind of regret.²⁴ It might be a control issue – being controlling or being controlled. It might be a grip of envy on your soul²⁵, or idolatry – i.e. love of money or honor or power...

‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.’

(Galatians 5:1)

In this brief essay I want to encourage you, equip you, to break the chains of strongholds in your life.

²⁴ 2 Corinthians 7:10

²⁵ Proverbs 27:4

Power

'The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power...' (2 Timothy 1:7)

In Jesus we can endure much. We can 'suffer' and wait - hoping, alive, strong. But in Jesus, my friend, we also have power, and can break chains. We can break the spiritual chains in others' lives, and we can break the spiritual chains in our own lives.

'We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.'
(2 Corinthians 10:5)

There is a call on our lives to advance against evil:

'Who will rise up for me against the wicked? Who will take a stand for me against evildoers?' (Psalm 94:16)

The momentum of Christ was from heaven to earth, and then from 'earth' to the corners of the earth, the shadows.²⁶ He advanced. He set his face towards the mission, and moved to claim, capture, take back, redeem.²⁷

'This is what the Lord says, 'Yes, captives will be taken from warriors, and plunder

²⁶ Philippians 2:7; Luke 14:23

²⁷ Luke 9:51; John 4:32,34; Joel 2:25

retrieved from the fierce; I will contend with those who contend with you, and your children I will save. (Isaiah 49:25)

In Jesus, the truth is every stronghold in our heart and mind can be broken, and will be broken. Actually – and hold on tight here, don't let this pass you by – every stronghold in you is already broken. Jesus said, ***'It is finished.'*** (John 19:30)

When we believe on Jesus Christ we are completely saved. But like a prisoner who has been set free – chains off, prison door open – there is a moment, sometimes longer than others, where the prisoner still looks imprisoned. He or she still stands within the cell, still clothed in prison clothes, still weary from the sentence. The door is open, the prisoner set free (completely), but the fullness of this freedom will be experienced step by step, day by day.

The parallel here with our spiritual lives, and walking free from captivity, is very tight. Often the 'freedom' we need from strongholds in our lives needs very little dramatic 'action', it just needs faith to walk. We need to believe the freedom is there, the chains are off, and we need to look and walk towards the light and the open door, and take our eyes off the chains. They have no power anymore. They don't bind us anymore. And we need to lift our eyes and walk.

'... let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run... fixing our eyes on Jesus...'

(Hebrews 12:1-2)

So a stronghold can be either a real 'hold' or grasp that something has on us (thoughts, fears, insecurities, pride, etc.), that in Jesus we are empowered to break, or it can be something that is already broken but still holds our gaze – like chains that have fallen off, but that we are fixated on and cannot walk away from. Either way, my friend, the power to be free from the chain or the broken chain, is ours in Christ Jesus. How?

Breaking Chains

Spiritual strongholds are about spirit. They can't be reasoned away. They are not about rationale, but about heart and spirit. Faith in Jesus – real faith, taken hold of and stepped on – is the only path to freedom.

'... the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony...'

(Revelation 12:10-11)

They – Christians - triumphed over the accuser (the devil), by the truth of the death of Jesus Christ, and by believing this – by testifying to the power, the Lordship of Jesus, and the

spiritual truth of his blood covering sin. Look at how spiritual all this is!

Faith in Christ – in who he is (God), and the power of his death and resurrection, the power of his blood – this overcomes the power of ‘accusation’ and the power of the devil, the great accuser of your soul. Faith in Jesus. Faith.

‘Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.’
(Hebrews 11:6)

We know what our strongholds are. We know they are not ‘truth’, but weights on our soul. That insecurity, that person who constantly defined us (‘accuser’), who put us down, who dismissed us. A fear of something that has no power (like death, because in Jesus it has ‘lost its sting’²⁸). Memories of abuse or past people who still have a hold on our ‘day’, our sense of wholeness. We know these things are dark and don’t have ‘truth’ in them, and yet they ‘hold’ us. We just can’t see a way around them. We can’t reason our way out of their hold. We can’t distract ourselves enough to forget.

My friends, the power of Christ is much more than what we can reason. It is much more than the hold of time and even history. The power of Jesus is a ***‘blood that speaks a better word***

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:55

than the blood of murder.' (Hebrews 12:24)
The power is 'out of this world'. It is Spirit power, and it has actual authority.

If we are going to truly break a stronghold, and **'make it obedient to Christ'**, it is going to be through faith. Through a declaration of his truth and authority over the stronghold – over the thought, over the fear, over the sin, over the abuse, over the 'report' of man. Like the Christians in Revelation 12, we are going to declare the **'blood of Jesus'** over the stronghold. We are going to stand in 'faith'.

Here is a prayer you can pray today. Here is a prayer I ask you to make your own. Consider writing this out – or printing it/cutting it out – and filling in the blank. The words that flow from your heart in faith – not on the paper – are what flow forth in power. When identifying the 'stronghold', you may just need to put the name of a person. Maybe it is time to simply hold that person up before the Lord, and in faith speak the blood of Jesus over him/her?

(prayer on following page)

Dear Jesus, please increase my faith even now. Please pour out a fresh measure of your Spirit on my heart so I can believe, and speak these words in faith. I pray right now, in your name, against this stronghold in my life. I pray against the grip that this has in my life:

(write your stronghold here)

I pray today, Jesus, that your blood and sacrifice pour over this stronghold and break its power. I pray that today this stronghold is subjected to Jesus Christ. I believe in you. I don't come against this anymore with my own thoughts or strengths. I come against this now in faith in you. I love you. I look to you. Fight for me. Free me. Thank you, Jesus. Amen and amen.

Pressing On

'Not that I have already arrived at my goal... but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me... One thing I do: forgetting what is behind, and straining for what is ahead, I press on toward the goal...' (Philippians 3:12-14)

Paul – who was the champion of breaking strongholds and protecting our spiritual freedom – here describes the 'journey'. We have power to break chains, we do. But life –

which is very short – is a journey of spiritual growth as we near heaven.

There may be strongholds in your life that truly are defeated in Jesus, but may need continued faith and prayer as you walk further and further from them. Keep walking! Keep pressing on!

It is a little like leaving a place. The farther you keep going, the smaller it gets in your sights. Till suddenly it is completely out of view, and one day it is completely out of your mind and your memory, and in Jesus, your history!

'I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten...' (Joel 2:25)

Jesus not only covers your past – what you've done, and what's been done to you – but he **'makes all things new.'** (Revelation 21:5)

He not only heals a broken heart, but gives you **'a new heart, and a new spirit.'** (Ezekiel 36:26)

Some chains break and fall off and that's that. Pray for that! But do not be disheartened if you feel some lingering 'residue', a path of victory you need to follow day by day. You are indeed free. The chain is snapped. Your salvation and inheritance is sure! Rise every morning and know that you are free! But in the same way we repeat truths, we sing anthems again and again to celebrate truth, you may need to **'press on'** and **'strive to take hold'** of this precious freedom you do have.

‘The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, ever-brighter till the full light of day.’ (Proverbs 4:18)

You are free. Walk in it. Press on!

Conclusion

My friend, we are in a battle. The fight is real. The scars are deep. The amazing power of Christ in you by his Spirit, changes everything. Healing flows to and through you. You are new, saved, forgiven. Some scars heal quicker than others, some memories fade faster, but everything in you – your heart and spirit – are being made new.

‘Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come!’
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

When you feel the weight of accusation and insecurity and fear, speak the blood of Jesus over it. Don’t fear it. You don’t have to see a way around it. Let God’s truth fall on it like rain.

‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.’
(Zechariah 4:6)

Let God’s Spirit come against the strongholds in your life.

I leave you with this powerful verse to also ponder, remembering that the systems of this world do not hold the answers to the pain of this world. So we soak in Christ. We gaze on his gospel and his story. We read his Word and whisper to his Spirit. His way, his Word, his blood and his Spirit liberates everything.

‘See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human traditions and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.’ (Colossians 2:8)

(Essay #10)

It (Never) Ends Here

'Mary sat at Jesus' feet, listening to him...'

(Luke 10:39)

Introduction

God meets with you alone. Personally. Privately. This is where he meets you for the first time. You have been made in God's image, he is your Father.²⁹ He comes to you in the person of Jesus Christ, to meet you, to know you, to save you. Have you had this personal encounter with Jesus?

After coming to know Jesus, we grow in him. He leads us. He speaks to us through the Scriptures, and by his Holy Spirit. We come to 'add to our love, knowledge...'³⁰ As time goes by, we see the world – and his world mission – more through his truth, his Spirit, his eyes.

One danger in growing up in our relationship with Jesus, is that we can grow apart from Jesus himself. Not by turning our back on him, or leaving the faith, but by becoming more concerned with serving him, than with being present with him.

²⁹ Genesis 1:27; Acts 17:25; John 1:3

³⁰ Philippians 1:9

Martha was very busy serving Jesus – literally preparing the home to serve Jesus food. Meanwhile, Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him, being close to him. Martha got frustrated at Mary's lack of service, her lack of activity, and here is what Jesus said to Martha:

'Martha, Martha... you are worried and upset about many things... Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.' (Luke 10:38-42)

In this brief essay I look at the nature of being with Jesus – both when we meet him, while we grow in him, and when all is said and done.

The Point

When Jesus paused and looked at the people, looked at you and me, here is what he felt:

'When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd...' (Matthew 9:36)

Jesus himself looked on us with pity. He saw us as weary. Do you feel weary?

Sometimes when I actually stop running and working and thinking and fixing and worrying, I realize I am weary. I am afraid. I'm tired. I'm stressed. I am to be pitied. I'm harassed and helpless, and don't really have a 'lead', a

shepherd. Jesus himself looked on me and saw this in me, he said it out loud.

It is here in this true place of our harassed life, that Jesus comes to the individual. When others are away, out, and you are alone in the quiet, here Jesus comes to you.

‘Mary stood outside the tomb crying... Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’ (John 20:11,16)

Have you met Jesus personally? In the quiet place, alone, privately? This is where it starts. This is why Jesus came and suffered. He came to find each one of us personally, privately, alone.

‘Jesus said, ‘The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes after the one, lost sheep until he finds it.’ (Luke 15:4)

This ‘starting point’ is the whole point. My friend, if you have never stopped and been still before the Lord, please do this now. Let the room grow quiet, let your heart and mind grow still. Close your eyes and let Jesus come to you. Read this verse, this Word of Christ, then put this essay down, close your eyes, and open the door:

‘Jesus said, ‘I stand at your door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and dine with you.’ (Revelation 3:20)

At the End of the Day

‘One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek, that I would dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.’ (Psalm 27:4)

King David wrote this Psalm – this prayer and song. He had caught a glimpse of the truth of God, the presence of God, and he wanted to ‘dwell’ in that place. He wanted to ‘gaze’ on the Lord, but also ‘seek’ the Lord. When we ‘see’ Jesus, when we know deep in our spirit that he is real, he is true, and he is God, we can ‘gaze’ on him, but we can also seek more of him. He is eternal, and his Spirit has no end.

David also wrote this powerful truth: ***‘Your love, O Lord, is better than life...’*** (Psalm 63:3)

David had found God – the very source of life. He had found the well-spring, the fount, the Creator. He had reached out and taken hold of that ***‘life that is truly life.’*** (1 Tim 6:19)

Have you allowed Jesus to go this deep into your soul? Have you allowed Jesus to become more to you than life itself? We don’t make this happen. We allow Jesus to do this. We sit still with him. We gaze on what we see. We seek silently, searchingly. We open the door of our hearts, and let him come in.

‘Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.’ (Matthew 13:44)

This intimacy with God is not about doing more; it’s about doing less. It’s about humility, and quietness.

‘... in quietness and trust is your strength.’ (Isaiah 30:15)

Jesus put aside his glory in heaven and ‘became nothing’, in order to reach us. His very name, Emanuel, means, ‘*God with us*’.³¹

The starting point – meeting Jesus – is the whole point, and the end point. We must grow in him, but never grow distant from him. Roots need to go down in Christ. We need to grow ‘in’ him.

Jesus spoke through his prophet and disciple, John, to a church in Ephesus. He told them that he noted their ‘hard work and perseverance’. Jesus saw and commended them for ‘enduring hardships’ and even testing and rejecting ‘false apostles’. But he then said this:

‘Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider

³¹ Philippians 2:7; Matthew 1:23

how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.'

(Revelation 2:1-5)

The *'things we did at first'* were childlike. We had no answers, only love. We had no reputation or status as Christians, just a new-found wonder at Jesus. We were keen to obey and learn and follow. We were humble.

Jesus calls us first to come and meet him, to know him. Then he calls us to stay with him forever. The starting point is the end point, and is the point! Jesus himself is our 'peace', and the 'door' to eternal life, and true living.³²

Conclusion

'Then Moses climbed mount Nebo... And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in Moab... to this day no one knows where his grave is.' (Deuteronomy 34:1-6)

The last days of Moses have always impacted me. We are told in Scripture that there was no prophet like him, ***'whom the Lord knew face to face'***. (vs.10) We're told he was the most humble man on the earth. (Numbers 12:3,7) He was a mighty leader and worker of God's miraculous signs. And yet, his last days were very much like the very first days of his conception – alone with God.

³² Ephesians 2:14-15; John 10:9

Moses, the mightiest of men, left the earth without a ceremony, a speech, a tomb. And this was intentional. And this speaks deeply to us about the nature of man's relationship with God. It is personal. It starts and grows and never ends - together.

Allow Jesus to meet you today. Allow him to come in. Sit with him. Close your eyes, and listen to his Spirit. Whisper to him what is on your heart. Turn to his Scriptures, and spend a few minutes reading. Mark where you left off, and pick it up again in your quiet time with the Lord tomorrow. Maybe start back up in a Gospel, like the Gospel of Mark or Luke, and then just keep going, one chapter a day... Be with him, now and forevermore.

(Essay #11)

Be a Hater!

'...put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve evil...' (Ezekiel 9:4)

I think back to when I was a kid. I would see situations that made me sad. I would find myself in situations that were lonely. Arid spaces. Impoverished places. I would feel a wind of despair, here or there, and I would turn my face away. That's all I could really do, turn away.

There is only one hope here. And before I speak to 'hating', we need to take hold of this hope. I despair less now, because Jesus is 'more' in my soul. Over the years I have allowed the promises, truths and Spirit of Jesus to be real in me, through me, and over history. This is why I can weather a little more of life's tragedy: Christ rescues, redeems, moves back through time, and 'makes all things new.' (Revelation 21:5) I have hope for justice, for vindication, and for the Lord to 'restore the years the locusts have eaten.' (Joel 2:25) So as Christ has become more, life's despair has become less.

So I can now 'face' the arid, the lonely, the impoverished – in measure, according to God's gentle unveiling to my soul. I can face it, because I can 'hate' it, and I can change it.

‘The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.’ (James 5:16)

As a believer in Jesus Christ, we don’t just have ‘shielding’ from despair, we have power to erode it, break it:

‘Our weapons... have power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.’
(2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

We often talk about what God has saved us from; but the more compelling truth is the power he has given us to save others. We are saved from evil, but we have power to destroy evil. We don’t just walk away. We run towards – as David did to Goliath – and we speak, in faith, the name and blood of Jesus against darkness.³³

Jesus moved towards the lost, even leaving those who were safe to venture into the unsafe place. (Luke 15:1-7) We can’t always get into the center of that place of evil, that arid space that disturbs us. But we can ‘hate’ the evil, look towards it, and pray that the Holy Spirit is released upon it in Jesus’ name:

‘What you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ (Matthew 16:19)

³³ 1 Samuel 17:48; Revelation 12:11

We're told of Jesus that he 'hated' wickedness:

'... about the Son he says, '... You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.' (Hebrews 1:9)

We're told of God's heart towards not only violence, but the violent:

'The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion.' (Psalm 11:5)

I am allowed to hate evil! I am allowed to grieve despair. But in Jesus Christ I don't have to be defeated by it. I can eye it with zeal, and in faith lift up the name of Jesus over what I see. I can speak the Holy Spirit over the spirit of despair. In Jesus name, I can,

'... bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.' (Isaiah 61:3)

I have power to 'believe' a change over what I see. I have a faith in Christ that can remove stains, that can ***'turn mountains into roads.'*** (Isaiah 1:18; 49:11)

'If you forgive anyone their sins, they will be forgiven.' (John 20:23a)

I have the power in Jesus to 'bind', to actually decree that this or that person, this or that

spirit, is held to account, brought into the courts of God:

'... if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.' (John 20:23b)

The gospel of Jesus Christ is about change. It is not about 'mere words'. (1 Corinthians 4:20) Jesus himself came to 'change' everything, to 'rescue' and to ***'destroy the devil's works.'*** (1 John 3:8) Jesus said:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...' (Luke 4:18)

I can 'hate' evil, and bind it in Jesus' name.

(Essay #12)

Saul and David – 10 Points

(1 Samuel)

If you are not familiar with the story of king Saul, his son, Jonathan, and David, read the book of '1 Samuel'. In this brief paper I do not summarize the story, but simply outline 10 points from this account that I find note-worthy.

1. **Wish granted by God, but not God's will**

The people of God asked for a king. They had been well taken-care of by the prophets that God had given them, but they wanted to be like the nations around them, and have a king. (8:20) Samuel told them that God would give them a king, but that God was not happy with this request. (12:17)

2. **Person prospered by God when out of favor with God**

The favor of God had already departed from king Saul, and yet God prospered him in battle. (13:13-14; 14:47-48)

3. **God regretted doing something that he did**

'The Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.'

(1 Samuel 15:35; cf Genesis 6:6)

4. Jonathan's zeal brought danger on all God's people

Jonathan attacked the Philistines when his people – the Israelites – were far out-numbered and out-armored. His zeal, it would seem, put the whole nation into danger - his father's kingdom and life, and all the people. (13:3-7)

5. Jonathan's zeal brought victory to all God's people

Jonathan's first act of valor – which would have looked like folly – put his whole nation in peril. But rather than scrambling, apologizing, back-tracking... Jonathan followed up with another, reckless attack. 'Reckless' in the eyes of the world, but zealous and honorable in the sight of God. God honored him, and through this second, follow-up act of faith and action, God gave the Israelites victory over their enemy. (14:1-23)

6. Saul was prepared to kill his son

Saul thought that God was not answering his prayer because someone (turning out to be his son, Jonathan) had broken Saul's command to fast that day. Saul then declared before his troops that Jonathan would die for this. (14:44) It was the troops that spoke up and said this should not happen, crediting their victory in battle that day to Jonathan. (14:45) So Jonathan's life was spared. But the heart of Saul was such that he was prepared to kill his own son, really

just to keep face, fulfill his threats, hold power. The truth is Saul never enquired as to why God was not answering his prayer. It would seem that God was silent because Saul broke God's command, not that anyone had broken Saul's command. (13:13)

7. **Saul gave a sincere oath, but changed his mind (19:6)**
8. **Saul prophesied by the Spirit of God, but then proceeded with his evil plan. (19:23-24)**
9. **David broke God's law, lied to the priest, then feigned insanity (21:1-13)**

There seems to be no rebuke in any of this, in the Scriptures. In fact, Jesus seems to vindicate David in his transgressing of the laws of the temple, and eating only what was lawful for the priests to eat. (Matthew 12:4) All my life I've heard these stories of David on the run, and it was 'adventurous', never condemned. And nor should it be. But it is note-worthy that God dropped David in such 'weakness', in his preparation journey to be king, that he had to stoop to the lowest of the low to survive – lie, cheat, steal... Why?

Well, I think because David needed to learn to 'be' someone with a 'true' heart, but in the circumstances of a cruel world. He needed to know the

difference. There are people who lie, cheat and steal who are good people, and indeed people of faith, but they are in hardship that we do not know, nor have to navigate.³⁴ There are others, of course, who lie, cheat and steal from a heart of darkness – not circumstances of darkness – and they are defying God, not navigating men. Often, interestingly, these more guilty parties are the rich, not the poor. (James 2:6) David had to make himself nothing, humble himself, and become like one of us – the same way Jesus did. (Philippians 2:6-8) He could then rule with a truly humble heart, not thinking he was something that others were not, nor that he would act differently from them. (2 Samuel 5:12)

10. Saul had given David's wife to another (25:44)

When Saul had run David out of his kingdom, he gave his wife, Michal, to another man. When David became king, Michal returned to David, but there was strife. She was embarrassed by his dancing before the Lord. (2 Samuel 6:20) I think in today's world we might consider Michal – who had loved David, and saved his life through word and action (1 Samuel 18:20; 19:11-17) – as having been through quite a lot at this point. She needed some tenderness,

³⁴ Joshua 2:4-7; James 2:25

some understanding. I don't think we'd rebuke her quite as harshly after she had been given to another man for a time, and then returned to her husband who now had at least 2 other wives, and was going to add to his wives the practice of having concubines.

(Essay #13)

Jonathan

(1 Samuel 13-14)

I've always thought primarily of Jonathan as a loyal friend to David. And he was. He recognized David as God's anointed to be king, instead of himself as the son of the king – king Saul. He stood in the gap between his father and David, saving David's life. He sacrificed himself in battle, died with his father, opening up the way completely for David to take the throne.

However, I've been even more impacted by another side of Jonathan, another part he played through faith and action, before even knowing David. We find this account in 2 chapters in 1 Samuel, chapters 13 and 14.

Saul became king at the age of 30. God allowed it, but was not happy that Israel had asked for a king. Even after God confirmed Saul as king with a mighty victory in battle (chapter 11), Samuel admonished the people and made clear that asking for a king was not pleasing to God. (Chapter 12) Here we see a sobering truth. God can allow something - and even bless it in a measure - that he has not been pleased about. We see this again, in that we are told that Saul, during his reign, 'delivered Israel from the hands of those who had plundered them' (1 Sam 14:48), but this was after Samuel had definitively told Saul that

because of his disobedience God had chosen another to replace him, and that his actions were 'foolish'. (1 Sam 13:13-14) This is why even when we see someone or something 'prospering' according to our values and judgments, this is not necessarily an indication of God's lasting favor on that same entity, or the direction God is moving. We need discernment. Listen to the Lord.

Jonathan was a man after God's own heart. If Saul had not turned his back on God, God would have established Jonathan as king:

'If you [Saul] had [kept the command of the Lord], God would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time.' (1 Sam 13:13)

Jonathan had the character traits of David – 'a man after God's own heart' (vs.14), but Saul's sin had cut off Jonathan from inheriting the crown. So another – like Jonathan – was sought by God.

Here in chapter 13 we see the heart of Jonathan. He was anointed in faith, in stark contrast to his father, Saul. We see this in 2 particular incidents.

First, Jonathan attacked the enemy's 'outpost' (seemingly unprovoked), causing the Philistines to come out to fight Israel with 'soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore.' (1 Sam 13:5) We know they had at least 6000 charioteers and 3000 chariots, and

then countless soldiers that were armed. Israel, on the other hand, brought to this crisis by Jonathan's attack on the Philistine's 'outpost at Geba', are left with 600 men and only 2 swords! (vs.22)

It would seem ('on paper') that Jonathan's attack on the outpost was careless, dangerous, and now was going to cost Israel as a nation brutal loss of life, plundering and pillaging.

As the troops are gathering, swelling, Israel's soldiers hiding in caves, pressure mounting... Saul waited for the priest, Samuel. He had been told to wait 7 days for Samuel. And he did. When Samuel did not come within that agreed time, Saul wanted God's favor, so he sacrificed a burnt offering. (vs.12) Again, 'on paper', this looks solid, strong, faith-filled in a terrifying moment. A grueling 'wait', and then an act of 'faith'. However, Samuel shows up late, and tells Saul that he has done a 'foolish' thing, disobeyed the Lord, and the kingdom would be removed now from his lineage. (vs.13)

So Jonathan wreaks havoc by arousing the wrath of a giant, meanwhile his father, Saul, is seeking God's favor to deal with this crisis caused by Jonathan. But Saul is in this moment rebuked by God and stripped of his inheritance, and we're yet to see how things play out for Jonathan...

So in this waiting moment where troops are amassing and war is impending, Jonathan

strikes again! Yes, he and his armor-bearer scale a hill and attack 20 Philistines. Jonathan kills them all. Now this is the tipping point. This is where everything comes to fruition. This second attack of Jonathan, which would seem to be the nail in the coffin and bring on certain death and doom by the Philistines, actually has the opposite effect. God breathed on it. He was with Jonathan – powerfully.

‘Then panic struck the whole army [of the Philistines]... It was a panic sent by God.’ (1 Sam 14:15)

The Israelites pursued the Philistines and defeated them. It is put like this:

‘So on that day, the Lord saved Israel.’ (1 Sam 14:23)

But the plot thickens at this point, because the battle ‘moved on...’ So the Israelites are pursuing and defeating the Philistines, but there’s a problem. It would seem that Saul made a hasty ‘decree’, gave an unwise order to his men. He decreed that none should eat until he ‘avenged himself’ on his enemies. (vs.24)

His men respected this ‘oath’, and we’re told that they were growing weak, faint throughout the day as a result of this. However, his son, Jonathan, had not heard of this decree, this order. So he comes on some wild honey, and the men look on as he dips his staff in and eats – and is strengthened. They tell him of his

father's order, and Jonathan speaks out that this was not a wise order on such a day of a battle. (vs. 29)

Later in the day it gets a bit messy, but let's recap on where we are at:

1. Jonathan attacked a large, looming 'enemy', which brought on the very real threat of war for the nation.
2. Saul entreated God, but was deemed disobedient in this action.
3. Jonathan again attacked the enemy while battle lines were drawn up, and the war had not yet started.
4. This second attack of Jonathan – killing 20 Philistine men – God honored by following up with 'panic' in the Philistine camp. This roused the courage of the Israelites and they routed the enemy – who outnumbered them outrageously.
5. During this victory run of Israel, king Saul decreed that no one should eat until he had his full revenge. His soldiers grew weak as a result of this. Jonathan, however, did not get the memo, and ate.

Ok, back in Israel's camp, at the end of the day of battle, men are eating and drinking... Saul was in victory mode, and he suggested that they continue their plundering that night in the Philistine camp. The priest suggested they inquire of the Lord. They inquire. But the Lord does not answer.

Saul believes someone among them has sinned, offended the Lord, and this is why God is not answering. He draws lots and it falls to Jonathan.

Jonathan fesses up that he ate honey. Saul orders that he must die. The men – the army of Israel – say this:

‘Should Jonathan die – he who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Never!’ (1 Sam 14:45)

Let’s sum up here and conclude. Jonathan was a man of deep faith. He rose up against the enemies of God’s people, when he was deeply out-numbered, and when his actions looked like they would put the whole nation in peril. He didn’t stop there. He attacked again. What looked like the ‘death knell’, adding insult to injury, had the exact opposite effect. This second wave of Jonathan’s zeal brought on God’s favor and action – he sent panic into the enemy camp and brought victory to Israel.

The king says, ‘Don’t eat!’ Jonathan eats. The king – Jonathan’s father – says he must die. The people say ‘no’, and state clearly on record that it was Jonathan who brought the deliverance to Israel.

Jonathan had a faith that stood alone – much like David in the fields attacking a bear, a lion, and worshipping God. Jonathan went up against a ‘giant’ and stood his ground, attacked twice, just like David had gone up against

Goliath. Jonathan did not look to the 'results' or the circumstances to determine if he was in the Spirit; he kept on with his mission, his focus, his attack, and God's favor fell. Jonathan defied the decree of the king and his father, but this was not seen as 'dishonoring' in the eyes of the Lord. When the 'sword' came down between Jonathan and his father, the people rose up and declared Jonathan the victor, God's anointed who brought the deliverance that day.

The Lord had not answered Saul when he inquired, not because of Jonathan's sin; the Lord had not answered Saul because it was Saul who was inquiring. God had already declared through Samuel that Saul was out of favor with God. (1 Sam 13:13)

Jonathan was a man after God's own heart. David, in fact, was a man, it would seem, very much after Jonathan's heart. Saul disqualified Jonathan to take the throne, and so God raised up another to take Jonathan's place. And what an incredible man of faith! Jonathan – fit to be a king, and in line to be that king – saw that God had shifted plan, and so he shifted with God. Because God's presence was Jonathan's true crown, his glory. His place of 'serving' David looks more like the 'Son of Man' than that of one being served. And Jonathan's act of self-sacrifice in battle, making way for David's path to the throne, looks much like the picture of the Savior and saved. (Matthew 20:28)

(Essay #14)

Joab

(1 & 2 Samuel)

Introduction

If you are not familiar with the story of king David, read the books of '1 & 2 Samuel'. In this brief paper I do not summarize the story, but simply share some thoughts about David's army commander, Joab.

David was very much a warrior, and before he was king he led his own band of men in battle for a number of years. We see this particularly between 1 Samuel 22 and 2 Samuel 2. So David was himself a leader in battle, a commander, a warrior. He led his men, but then when he became king he grew in strength and numbers and appointed others to command troops. David's main commander was Joab.³⁵

Joab was one of three sons of Zeruah. The other two were Abishai and Asahel.³⁶

Joab & Abner

We first see Joab as a commander of David's troops in 2 Samuel 2. Joab leads David's

³⁵ 2 Samuel 8:16

³⁶ 2 Samuel 2:18

troops out to battle. At this battle something significant happens. Joab wins the battle, losing 19 men, but killing 360 of the enemy's men. But this is not the 'significant' thing. At this battle the commander of the enemy army, Abner, kills Joab's brother, Asahel. Although Joab strikes an agreement with Abner to end the battle, and pull back. Joab did not forget Abner as an enemy to David as king, and as a personal enemy to himself and his family, having killed his brother.

The significance of this shows itself later. Abner, commander of the 'opposition', later is offended by his own king, and so changes sides. He literally goes over to David and meets with him, pledges his support to David. Interestingly David 'buys' it. He seems good to accept Abner's offer of support, even though it had the markings of very shaky commitment. If Abner got offended and switched loyalties, what might he do if and when David offends him? But David did not seem to question Abner's rationale.

Meanwhile, however, despite David's acceptance of Abner, and nothing in Scripture specifying that Abner was insincere in this changeover, Joab was having none of it! When Joab heard that Abner had come and gone – sent away by David 'in peace' – Joab was upset. He challenged David about his judgment of character regarding Abner. He referred to Abner as a 'deceiver'. But we are told that David had sent Abner away in peace. Joab

pursued Abner without David knowing, and killed him.³⁷

Now, interestingly, David quakes a little at this killing of Abner. It is as if he is scared of Abner's people, or of the politics of it, or the public perception. I'm not sure, it just seems like David is reactionary, over-the-top, out of character. David even curses Joab for what he has done, and refers to him as an 'evildoer'. David wept and fasted for Abner's death.

So much going on here, but note this: Joab, whose brother had been killed by Abner, does not seem to take offense at David's cursing and lack of sympathy for Joab. If something similar had happened to David – Abner having killed one of his brothers – David would probably have done the exact same thing as Joab. David avenged his people fiercely throughout his reign.

I wonder how Joab felt about all this. Joab, loyal in leading David's troops to defend David's kingship and kingdom, and then being cursed by David for defending and avenging his brother's life. Not only did David not avenge Joab's brother, but he cursed Joab for doing it. If anyone might be hurt, offended, and tempted to 'change sides', I think it would be Joab at this point. But no. He was steady to the very end of David's reign.

³⁷ This account of Joab and Abner is in 2 Samuel 3

And even more noteworthy: Despite the anointed king's cursing of Joab, God does not seem to have punished Joab, or to have been displeased with him. David had his rant and parade of sorrow for Abner, but look how God stood by Joab; look at what David says even in the midst of his anger at Joab:

'And today, though I am the anointed king, I am weak, and these sons of Zeruiah are too strong for me.' (2 Samuel 3:39)

David did not act against Joab, nor did he strip him of his role as commander of his troops. In fact, it would seem that David had a type of fear of Joab, a holy fear. He did not fear for his life – because everything in Joab was completely loyal to him – but he did seem to fear to oppose Joab. This is because Joab was a man of integrity, he was strong, and he was blessed by the Lord. David ranted at him – wrongly – and misjudged him. But he continued to rely on him. And he was right to do so...

Joab and the Ammonites

In 2 Samuel 10, we see the warrior nature and fierce loyalty of Joab to David. The Ammonites are the enemies in this account, and they had mustered all their own troops, and hired 33000 more troops from the Arameans and others. David sends Joab and the troops out against them. Joab appoints his brother, Abishai, as commander over half the army, so they could face those in front and behind. Now look at

what Joab says, both as a strategy and as declaration of courage. And bear in mind that every time Joab went to battle he was putting his own life on the line for David and the nation:

‘Joab said [to his brother, Abishai], ‘If the Arameans are too strong for me, then you are to come to my rescue; but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will come to rescue you. Be strong, and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. The Lord will do what is good in his sight.’ (2 Samuel 10:11-12)

Joab wins this battle. But what stands out most is his humility, loyalty and courage in facing the battle before he knew the outcome.

Unquestioning

When David had not only cheated on all his own wives and concubines (by having relations with a woman he had not covenanted with before God and man), but also stolen the wife of one his most loyal soldiers – Uriah³⁸ – he relied on Joab’s unquestioning loyalty to cover up his own sin. In this he took advantage of Joab’s integrity, because he knew Joab would not ask for a reason, just obey.

David sent a letter with Uriah – also trusting the integrity of this man he had just wronged so profoundly – commanding Joab upon receipt of

³⁸ 2 Samuel 23:8-39, note particularly vs.39

this letter to send Uriah to the front lines of the battle where the fighting was most fierce. David wanted Uriah killed, to cover up the fact that he had committed adultery with his wife, Bathsheeba. David put a letter in the hands of Uriah, commanding his own death. And Uriah delivered it.

Joab, not knowing what was behind David's decision and not questioning it, did as he was asked, and Uriah was killed in battle. The blood of Uriah was not on Joab's hands, it was on David's. And how God punished David for this! (Read 2 Samuel 11-12, 16:21-22)

Joab & Absalom

Absalom, one of David's sons, had been banished because he had killed another of David's sons, Amnon. Now, the reason he had killed this half-brother, Amnon, is because he had raped his sister – Amnon's own half-sister. The whole thing is deep and dark, but Absalom's killing of Amnon for this, seems just, even holy. But he was banished by king David to another city for this act of vengeance on his own half-brother.

But David loved Absalom and missed him. Joab knew this. And David's sorrow impacted, even saddened Joab. So Joab advocates for Absalom to come back. It is as if David needed to 'allow' Absalom to come back at the behest of another, so that it looked like he was being gracious to someone else in this, and not indulgent to himself. Joab perceived the

dynamics here, and stepped in the gap, took one for the team:

‘Joab son of Zeruiah knew that the king’s heart longed for Absalom. So Joab sent someone to Tekoa and had a wise woman brought from there...’ (2 Samuel 14:1-2)

Joab proceeds to equip and instruct this ‘wise woman’ to present a case to king David, and long story short, in doing so he gave the king grounds to ‘allow’ Absalom to come back to Jerusalem. Joab did this not for himself, but for king David.

Joab Kills Absalom

Now skip forward a few years... Absalom has risen up against his father, David, and has actually succeeded in overthrowing him. David has been run out of town, and Absalom has taken his kingdom, and as an act of power has set up a tent on the roof of the palace and slept with 10 of king David’s concubines. The evil over the city is almost tangible. It’s horrific. David’s son has done this. It is noteworthy, however, that this is a mirror image of the evil of David’s unfaithfulness with Bathsheeba. The prophet, Nathan, said this very thing would happen one day as a result of David’s sin. (2 Samuel 12:11; 16:21-22)

But here we are focusing on Joab. David’s heart is broken, and he does not even wish ill – or justice – on Absalom. When the deciding battle actually takes place, king David orders

the troops under Joab to not kill Absalom if they find him.

But Joab found Absalom, and despite David's order, he killed him. He knew exactly what David had ordered, but he defied it for all the right reasons. Absalom was an evil man, and Joab was a man of high integrity. He was not going to let Absalom live just because David was sentimental about him. And again, much like in the case of Abner, David wails and mourns. All his troops who had fought and won safety for him, came back to the city quietly, as if ashamed, because David was so upset at Absalom's death in this victory.

Look at how Joab fearlessly admonishes David:

'Today you have humiliated all your men, who have just saved your life and the lives of your sons and daughters and the lives of your wives and concubines. You love those who hate you and you hate those who love you. You have made it clear today that the commanders and their men mean nothing to you. I see that you would be pleased if Absalom were alive today and all us were dead. Now go out and encourage your men. I swear by the Lord that if you don't go out, not a man will be left with you by nightfall. This will be worse for you than all the calamities that have come on you from your youth till now.' (2 Samuel 19:5-7)

David does as Joab says, but seems to bear a grudge against Joab. Again, before the Lord, it is an ineffective 'grudge', and Joab takes care of business...

Joab & Amasa

David tries to appoint a new commander to the army. Well, actually David does appoint a new commander to his army, but it doesn't work out so well:

David says, ***'Say to Amasa, 'Are you not my own flesh and blood? May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you are not the commander of my army for life in place of Joab.'*** (2 Samuel 19:13)

But when David sent Amasa on a 3-day errand to muster troops to defend him against Sheba, Amasa does not return within the 3 days. He left David hanging, and very vulnerable. Joab goes on mission with his brother, Abishai. Not only do they go to battle Sheba, but Joab finds Amasa on the way and stabs and kills him. No questions asked. And Joab and the troops were also successful in defeating Sheba.

Joab & David

A very famous story is when David became prideful about his power, his army, and wanted to count the troops. Now, counting in itself is not a bad thing, or an unholy thing. We are told in Psalm 48 to look, admire and count the

towers in Jerusalem. (Psalm 48:12) It is all about the spirit.

But when David had the notion of counting his own troops, Joab felt something was off:

'But... why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?' (2 Samuel 24:3)

We're told the king 'overruled' Joab and sent forth to 'enroll the fighting men of Israel.' Nine months and twenty days later, Joab reported the number to the king, a total of 1,300,000 able-bodied soldiers, in both Judah and Israel. David was suddenly 'conscience-stricken' about all this, and indeed a prophet showed up and told David that God was going to punish him for this prideful assessment of 'his' power. Seventy thousand people died of a plague because of this act of pride of king David.

Joab had tried to warn him.

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