

AS SPARKS FLYING UPWARDS



*Studies in the lives of prominent Bible Characters, and
how they dealt with the troubles of life*

by

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As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 1

"The Agonies Of Abraham"

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Genesis 22

1. ***Sacrifice Your Isaac:***
Letting go of what you love (verse 2)
2. ***Get Up That Mountain:***
Obeying when you don't understand (verse 3)
3. ***Look For A Resurrection:***
Trusting the God of the impossible (verse 5)
4. ***Don't Listen To Those Voices:***
Believing in the midst of emotional turmoil (verse 7)
5. ***Wait For The Lamb's Intervention:***
Depending on the God of Provision (verses 8-14)

Now we're starting a new study this evening, a group of character studies that I have entitled "As Sparks Flying Upward". We're looking first of all this evening at 'The Agonies of Abraham'. In Job chapter 5 and verse 7 we read the words: 'Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward'. That philosophical conclusion of Eliphaz, one of Job's friends or Job's comforters, came out of his witnessing the fiery crucible of trial that Job went through. As he was a witness of Job's pain, Job's temptation, Job's suffering, he said: 'Man', in general, 'is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward'. In fact, Job himself later on in the book, in chapter 14 and verse 1, says: 'Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and those days are full of trouble'.

Now you remember, and we studied it recently with our brother Tom Hayes, that Job was a man who was full of prosperity and also full of piety - two things that don't normally come together in this world and age in which we live. He was a prosperous man, a wealthy man, but he was also wealthy towards God, he was a holy man. As we read through that book we find that God tried his faith, and God allowed Satan to come into his life and to unleash the plagues of torment against him. As we read through the book we find that Job lost everything. He lost his children, he lost his home, his business, his friend's loyalty, his wife's confidence, and then finally he lost his health. He came to the conclusion at the end of it all that he wished that he had never been born, he cursed the day that he had been born.

If anybody knew about trouble, Job knew about it. Yet he developed such a faith in his God through his trials, that he could say: 'Though He slay me, yet I will trust Him'. In the same book that we find this phrase: 'Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward', 'Man's days are few, but his days are full of trouble', he can come to the realisation of faith to say: 'Though God slays me, I'm going to trust Him'. We find that there's a turning point within the book of Job, and at the end - the last chapter - we read: 'The Lord turned the captivity of Job'. He was blessed again, he was given health, he was given his friends back, he was given a beautiful family and abundance of riches. He lived another 140 years, we read, and he died being full of days.

The question is: what makes a man like that tick? How can that change come about from a man who has gone through the crucible of pain? It's not only Job, it's Abraham, Joseph, Elijah, Hannah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Paul the Apostle, and we could go on and on and on, and all of them are as sparks flying upward with all the troubles and persecution and problems that they have had in their lives. All of them equally came

out of those troubles and problems better men and women because of them, but we need to ask the question tonight: why and how? We want to explore this phenomenon tonight, beginning with this man Abraham.

Let me give you a brief biography of this man's life. His life spans in record, from chapter 12 of the book of Genesis right through to chapter 24. In Acts chapter 7 and verse 2, when Stephen preaches one of the greatest sermons in the whole of the Bible, he alludes to the conversion of Abraham and he says these words: 'The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia'. If you like, that is the conversion of Abraham, his conversion. As you read his life story, we find out that he was born and raised in Ur, a city of the Chaldees. It was a seaport in Persia, the Persian Gulf, about 12 miles away from the traditional spot that scholars think the Garden of Eden was in. That city, the Ur of the Chaldees, the most conspicuous site and building within it was a large building that seemed to be modelled on the Tower of Babel. The city had two main temples, one was dedicated to the god Nannar the moon god, and the other to his wife Ningal. Abraham, as a young child, was brought up in that pagan atmosphere - and glory be to God, he was converted out of it, and he became eventually the father of faith.

His conversion, then as we go through Genesis we find his calling. After he was converted, and after God appeared to him in Ur of the Chaldees, God asked Abraham to leave Ur, to leave his father's house for a land that God would show him. Now I want you to see this: that when God called him to that promised land, God didn't tell him where to go or how to get there, He just told him to leave the Ur of the Chaldees and have faith and follow Him. Imagine going on a journey and not knowing where you're going!

His calling, then there is his commission that we find in Genesis chapter 12 and verses 2 and 3, and it's a sevenfold commission. God gave him some guarantees, He has converted him, He has called him, and now He's commissioning him. He says first: 'I will make of thee a great nation'; second, 'I will bless thee'; third, 'I will make thy name great'; fourth, 'Thou shalt be a blessing'; five, 'I will bless them that bless thee'; six, 'I will curse them that curse thee'; seven, 'In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed'. What a head start he had in life! God calling him! God wasn't calling anybody else at that time. Converted, commissioned with a sevenfold perfect promise, all the spiritual blessings that he had in God - but as you know and as I know, all the spiritual blessings in the world doesn't exempt or immune any of us from problems.

Because of that, as we read through his biography, we're enlightened not only to his conversion and his calling and his commission, but we then see his carnality. We find out that he lied about his wife Sarah to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh found her fanciable and he wanted to marry her - and all the plagues of God's judgement came upon Pharaoh and Egypt, and then he realised that this was not the sister of Abraham as Abraham had said, but his wife! That same sin, he followed it again in chapter 20 of Genesis. His carnality, and then later on we find his compromise, for God comes to him and promises him a son, that his children would be like the stars of the sky and like the sand of the seashore. God promised him, but he was getting old and then Sarah got past the age of childbearing, and he decided: 'I'm going to bring God's promise into fruition', and he listened to his wife's voice, he took Hagar, he slept with her, and he raised up a son by the flesh to his own name. Of course you know that was Ishmael, the turmoil of compromise caused by not waiting upon God's promise.

Eventually we find that in Abraham's wife, Isaac was born - a child of promise. Now this man had his fair share of agonies and we could spend all night looking at them, but I want to single out one in particular: the greatest agony of all. Not his conversion or his calling or his commission, not his carnality and not his compromise, but what I've called: 'His Calvary'. It's found in chapter 22, let's read it together: "And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt", or a better word would be 'test', "Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took

two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen".

We read in verse 1: 'And it came to pass after these things, that God tested Abraham'. Now please remember, hopefully you know some of the story of Abraham's life, but his whole life so far has been leading up to this challenge of faith, this supreme test, the greatest test of all. Many times in Abraham's life, as we see through his compromise and his carnality, his faith failed him. But the beautiful thing of it all that I want you to see tonight: although his faith failed him, God never ever failed him. God never discarded him because of the failure of his faith, but rather God if you like persevered with Abraham - and eventually we read in the New Testament that Abraham becomes the father of faith. My friend, there is more about Abraham, you know, in the Old Testament than there is about the origin of the universe. God tells us more about this man than He does about where we come from and how we got here. The reason being is there's something supreme that God wants us to learn, and I believe it is this: in this life of faith, in this pilgrimage of Christianity, God is testing you and testing me.

We see in verse 1 that God called Abraham, He said: 'Abraham!' - and there are times, I believe, in our lives when God calls our name, when God calls us to be tested. Perhaps you're here tonight and God has called your name recently, maybe He's going to call your name soon. I don't know anything about you but, my friend, perhaps just like in the book of Job when God said to Satan: 'Hast thou considered my servant Job?', God is now saying to the grandstand of heaven and of hell: 'Have you considered my servant...whatever your name is...?'. Maybe they are directed at this moment, in heaven and in hell, to be spectators of your life. If not now, I would urge you tonight and right throughout this series, to get prepared here and now to keep these truths and ponder them in your heart like Mary for a future day, because you can be sure that if God's not calling your name now, there's a day coming very soon or at some time in your life when God is going to call: 'Abraham!'.

Don't become complacent because you're not going through trial at the moment - why? Because 'whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons'. My friend, listen: if you belong to Christ, if you're a child of God, you need to get prepared - not paranoid - but prepared for trial, be prepared for your name being called. Don't get fearful, because if we believe God's word we believe that all things work together for the good of them that love God, to them that are the called according to His purpose. We believe that all that we receive from the hand of God is for our good! What Abraham was tested in was for his good. If I could illustrate it like this: a mother gives medicine to her child, and the bottle holds the medicine, but it's not the bottle that gives the child the medicine, it is the mother that gives it the medicine. The mother is

responsible, not the bottle - but no matter how full the bottle may be, no matter how full her cupboards may be of medicine, the mother will not allow the child to get one more drop of medicine unless she believes that it is good for the child. But see further the illustration: when she does believe it is good for her little darling, that very depth of her love will not only give the medicine, but will compel her to give it to the child for the child's own good - no matter how bitter that taste may be.

The problems around us are the bottle, but my friend it is your Father's hand that measures it out for you. It is your duty and my duty, as sons and daughters of God, when we hear the cry: 'Abraham!', to say: 'Here am I! I'm ready Lord! What have You got for me?'. I want us to learn tonight, I believe the Lord has given this message for us this evening, I want us to learn how Abraham coped in his agonies and how he came through them. The first thing that I believe we find is in verse 2 - sacrifice Isaac: 'Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of'. Sacrifice your Isaac, let go of the thing that you love.

Now I want you to picture the scene tonight, it's evening around the Oaks of Mamre, the hills are yellow, the sandy plains are a soft colour as the sun goes down and there's the cool breeze of the evening coming in. Abraham sits before his black tents and thinks and meditates and ponders about the goodness of God right throughout his life, from his conversion to his calling to his commission - even when he failed Him in his carnality and his compromise, how God's promise had stayed true. Can you see him looking to the heavens and trying to count the stars, and remembering that God's promise to him was that his lineage would be greater than the stars of heaven? Can you see him lifting up in his hands those grains, microscopic grains of sand, and watching them drift through his fingers and thinking: 'God is going to bring that promise to pass, and there will be a great nation that will bless all the world through my seed'?

Then out of the darkness and the twilight of the night there is a voice: 'Abraham, Abraham, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac. Take him to Mount Moriah; offer him there as a sacrifice unto me'. I imagine, friends, that for Abraham the stars fell out of heaven, the ground below him with the sand opened to swallow him - he couldn't believe that this, his son of promise, was to be taken away from him! We tend to think in our lives as Christians that we must sacrifice to God those things that are sinful, and that is correct - we've to lay aside every weight that doth so easily beset us. But what is confusing to Abraham here, and to us, is that God gave him Isaac, Isaac was from the hand of God in a miraculous way, to a barren womb. The turmoil in his mind and in his heart, the spiritual wrestling perhaps that he is going through, is to realise that God gave this son and now God wants to take him away again! Why?

Think about this for a moment: there is nothing more in the world that Abraham wanted than this son, Isaac. He was waiting day after day for the promise of God. They waited so long that Sarah laughed when she was told that she was going to have a son in her old age. But God continually, over and over again, gave them hope that it would happen. Can you see them? An old-aged couple, and all their energies and efforts were exhausted in this one glorious expectation that in their old age a miraculous child of promise would be born. Then the day came when she felt a kick in her womb, and the promise was given. God gave, but my friend can you imagine the shattering nature of this revelation to this man of God: why would God climb a mountain to give me, an old man of a hundred plus, a child and now He comes to take it away? Do you know why? I'll tell you why I believe why: God will be God, my friend, God had to be on the seat of Abraham's affections. Day after day he was looking after Isaac, waiting on the promise of Isaac, I can almost see him with worshipful eyes as he looks on that giant of a young man thinking of the promises of God, and thinking of the miracle of God in his life - but, my friend, God had to have that place! God must occupy the highest place in our hearts.

What am I saying? I'll tell you what I'm saying: there are good things in our lives, yes there are bad things that we need to get rid of - worries and things about our health that weigh us down when they don't even

happen, worries about our welfare, what we will wear, what we will eat, what we will drink - but, my friends, there are good things in our lives, even God-given things, even godly things in themselves, but all of them, every single one of them must be given over to God! Why? Because God must occupy the chief place in every one of our hearts. He must be the delight of our eyes, He must be what we worship and what we serve. We must give everything that we have over to God. My friend, what am I saying? I'm saying this personally to you: you have children that are wayward, you have children that are not saved, you have children that are backslidden, can I ask you please to give them over to God? The problems that you're having in work, the problems that you're having in the family, perhaps even in the marriage, give them over to God! There is a danger that when we focus on these things or on these people, legitimate desires that they may be, that they occupy our focus, they saturate all our energy - even worrying about your own spirituality, worrying about leading people to Christ, many good things can take up our gaze, can become our god!

So God leads us to the place where He asks us all to sacrifice our Isaac, to let go of the thing that we love. My friend, listen: God wants every child of His to get to the place where everything in their life is consecrated to Him, sacrificed to Him. You might think I'm reading too much into this chapter, well please look at verse 12, the angel spoke to him and the voice out of heaven said: 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me'. Do you see it? But the best thing of all, friends tonight, is that when you can learn to let go of the thing you love, the thing you're worrying about, the child that is breaking your heart, the problems that are in your life that you're wrecking your brains to try and solve, when you let go of them the miracle of God's grace is this: He gives you back something far greater!

It's hard to let go, but when Abraham let go he received Isaac back. He got Isaac back, but not only did he get Isaac he got something far greater, because he passed God's test of faith and he had a greater walk with God and a greater faith in God, and God gave him all the things he wanted and many things more. Now notice: he learnt his lesson, he didn't get through the trial worrying about it, he didn't get through it scheming like he did in the past and thinking how he could plan something up to get a son. He gave Isaac to God! He let go of Isaac and God gave Isaac back, and gave him his faith mended and all! Oh, it's wonderful. What do I mean? Well, I'll put it in New Testament words, in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all of these things shall be added unto you'. Friend listen: God is a jealous God, and the good things and the bad things - give them to Him, and He'll give you them all back in abundance! Give Him your Isaac.

The second thing that I've been learning is in verse 3, where God says to him to get up, take his son, sacrifice him, and in verse 3 it says: 'Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son'. Early in the morning! He didn't waste any time. I don't know whether he wrestled through the night with it, but I'll tell you this: he got up early in the morning, and he did everything that was needed, he prepared. Now if you've been in the Christian life any length you will know that it's hard sometimes to obey God, especially when things don't seem to be right, when things don't make sense - but God is saying to you and saying to me and saying to Abraham: 'Get up that mountain! Obey Me even when you don't understand, when things don't make sense'. After God called him to the test, early in the morning, no time wasted, no thinking about it, no questioning God's sovereignty. From verse 3 right through the whole chapter until he actually comes to the Mount, you find him doing absolutely everything in preparation for sacrificing his own child. Now listen: he knew what God wanted him to do, he didn't know why perhaps, he didn't know how it was going to be done, he didn't understand what was actually going to happen when he got to the top of Mount Moriah, but he obeyed God!

I'll tell you: it's hard to obey God when you don't know what's going to happen. It's hard to obey God when you don't know the consequences of your actions, but I'll tell you this: it's hard to obey God when you do know what's going to happen, and to a large extent Abraham knew that that knife was going to come down

into the heart of his son Isaac. God told him: 'Take your son, your only son, and go up and sacrifice him' - and yet Abraham, knowing and expecting that he was going to have to kill his son, went ahead and obeyed God! Here's the supreme point: he only thought he knew what was going to happen. He thought he knew what God was going to do, but he didn't - why? I'll tell you why, child suffering, going through pain, going through anxiety: God's thoughts are not your thoughts, His ways are not your ways:

'Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace.
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face'.

God told Abraham to do something, and then God didn't do the thing that He told him to do - He didn't let him! God told him to do one thing, yet God had something else planned and Abraham didn't know about it. Can you imagine if Abraham had sat up all night and waited to the next night to 12 o'clock till he obeyed God just to the very second, and reasoned about it and thought about it and discussed it with many people - it probably would have left him high and dry and he wouldn't have gone through with it. But what he chose to do was this: get up the mountain. My friend, get up the mountain whatever it is, and trust the Lord! Do God's will and let Him worry about the consequences! You see, when you let your Isaac go over to God it's His responsibility.

I often use this illustration to people privately. If you bought a car off me, and you were driving home in the car after exchanging money and there was a puncture, a blow out, the tyre just disappeared along the motorway. You came back to me the next day and you said: 'David, that car I bought from you, on the way home the tyre burst'. I would say: 'That's very nice, but you sort it out, that's your responsibility, it's now your car'. My friend, do you know this consecration doctrine that we believe as Christians: that when we give our lives over to God it's not for us to worry about. If I can say it reverently: 'Lord, it's Your responsibility, You sort it out!'. That's when you can obey God, even when you don't understand.

What mountain are you afraid to climb tonight? What hill is too high? I tell you, Jesus says: 'If you had but faith the size of a grain of mustard seed, that mountain wouldn't even need to be climbed, because it would be totally removed!' You could pray tonight like Joshua: 'Lord, give me this mountain', and God would reply to you, 'The mountain shall be thine'. Why do these mountains get in our way when we have a God who treads the mountains underfoot? Do you see it? Get up that mountain! Obey God even when you don't understand.

So Abraham took his son, he gave him over to God mentally and spiritually, and then he climbed the mountain. Verse 5 tells us something very precious: 'Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you'. Do you see that? 'I and the lad will go yonder, and we', literally in the Hebrew 'we', ' will come again unto you'. Abraham had faith to look for a resurrection, he was trusting the God of the impossible. Now if you don't know this already as a child of God, the Christian life is one of faith. So many times in the Bible we read these words: 'The just shall live by faith'. Can I say that this is not some obscure eccentric life that some itinerant evangelist, or some ancient missionary lives, or is exclusive to a man called George Mueller. This is the Christian life! It is for all men, for without faith it is impossible to please God.

What was the secret of Abraham's overcoming in this test? What was the secret of his sacrificing Isaac, and getting up that mountain, and looking for a miraculous resurrection, believing that both he and the lad - after the sacrifice - would come down again to the servants? Turn with me to Hebrews 11 verse 17, the great chapter of faith, and we read: 'By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son. Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be

called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure'. Do you see it? He went up the mountain believing that God could raise Isaac from the dead if he had to kill him. God could bring him back to life!

You say: 'Well, I believe God, but wait till I tell you something: I couldn't believe that! I couldn't go that far to believe something miraculous like that'. Can I ask you a question tonight: what did Abraham have that you don't? What did this great man of God have that you don't have? It says in Hebrews 11 verse 17 that he counted the promise of God worthy, he believed what God had said to him, that in his seed Isaac would all the nations be blessed - all that Abraham had was the word of the Living God! Let me tell you this: he didn't have any promises that Isaac would be resurrected, he didn't have one promise in that vein - but what he was told, that in Isaac his seed would be blessed, that's all he needed. He didn't know how God was going to do it, he didn't know even why God was going to do it, but he knew that he could stand upon God's word! Can I ask you, child tonight, what more do you need? What more do we need? Is God's word enough for us?

Wait till I tell you this: he didn't have the promises of the New Testament disciple of Jesus Christ to rest upon. He didn't have the promises that you have, he was given one promise and he held onto that promise right throughout into his old age. Now, as he's climbing a mountain as an old man, having to stop for his breaths, he realises that before that knife plunges - or even after it - God would be a God who would honour His promise. Yet God says to you: 'Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a new work in you will perform it unto the day of Jesus Christ'. God says to you: 'Nothing shall be able to separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus the Lord'. God says to you: 'Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?'. He says to you: 'Now unto him who is able to do exceeding abundantly more than you ask or think'. He says to you: 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'. What more do we need?

That should encourage you and me to look for a resurrection in our lives, should it not? To trust in the God of the impossible? Then fourthly in verse 7 we find that as he's mounting this great hill, Isaac speaks to him and says: 'My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?'. Now we've dealt with the voice of reason, we've dealt with how perhaps Abraham couldn't make sense and couldn't understand any of this. That's the voice of reason, but this here in verse 7 is the voice of emotion. Can you imagine? I'll tell you this, there's no greater enemy to the life of faith than the voice of emotion. Would the voice of his young son lifting up his head and crying to his father, questioning perhaps his father's apparent hostile actions, would that not be enough to make the old man of God turn on his heels and go down the mountain again?

The Lord says: 'If you being evil know how to give good gifts unto your children' - and Abraham was a righteous man, yet hearing this in his own ears he didn't turn back! He was a man of like passions like you and like me, do you not think that he wondered what his son would think - that his father was willing to go up that mountain and sacrifice him to God? Do not think it crossed his mind and heart: 'What would Sarah say if she knew, and what's she going to say when I get home?'. Do you not think the memories of the little lad years ago as a child flooded through his whole being, drowning his obedience and the voice of God? Do you not think he thought of the possible ability in the future that that young lad could have, the prospects and the promise? All those things were worthy to make him turn and renege on his faith. I'll tell you this: if the devil can use emotion in your life and mine to not believe God and to turn back, you better believe he'll do it. To rob the rest of the peace of God from us, he'll do it. Can I urge you tonight, whatever you're feeling, whatever's in your heart, believe God in the midst of emotion!

We live on facts, facts in the word of God, we put faith in those facts of the word of God, and then the feelings may or may not come. If they come that's tremendous, but we don't live by them. Whatever you are feeling, what is important in your Christian life is this: your will and willing to believe, willing to trust God,

willing to follow Him. Do you remember Daniel in the den of lions? Do you know what it says of him? 'Then the king commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him', why? 'Because he believed in God'. What emotions do you think would be going through your mind and heart in a den of lions? But he wasn't hurt because he believed in God.

Fifthly: wait for the lamb's intervention - depending on the God of providence. You know, it was only in the supreme test of Abraham's life that God revealed Himself to him as Jehovah-Jireh. It wasn't until his back was against the wall that God showed him that He was God My Provider - I prefer the translation: 'He will see to it', Jehovah-He Will See To It. Verse 7, he believed that God was able to provide a lamb, God would provide for Himself a lamb. In verse 13 he hears the bleating of that ram caught in a thicket by its horns, and he took the ram and he sacrificed it. Can I say this to you: God always intervenes in a life that is filled with faith. The Lamb always intervenes! He may not answer the way you think He will, or wish He would. I think Abraham - and I hope you agree with me - was expecting that he would have to kill the child, and then God would miraculously have to bring him back to life again. But you see Abraham's faith was not in the way that God would answer him, but in the fact that God would answer him. One way or another God's word would come true.

Do we depend on the provision of God? Oh, it's so hard isn't it? In an affluent society in which we live in today, where we think we have need of nothing, where many who have many things don't even recognise that they receive them from the Father of lights. Do we depend upon God? If you're poor tonight, bless the Lord that you're poor - there's a blessedness in poverty, because it's easier to recognise Jehovah-Jireh in your poverty than it is when you're a millionaire. My friend, what is it to have these promises? Come on: my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. There's so much I could say on this passage, but let me say this: it's important in all of our studies throughout these weeks to see not Abraham, not Job, not Joseph, not Hannah, not John the Baptist, not Paul the Apostle, but to see Jehovah-Jireh, and to see the Lord Jesus Christ, the Author and Finisher of our faith. What a blessing to know that as with Abraham and Israel, listen to this, in your afflictions He is afflicted; to know as they knew then, what we know now in the New Testament, that we have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, but was tested in all points like as we are, apart from sin.

Quickly, let me take you down each of these points. The first: sacrifice your Isaac, letting go of the one that you love. If you look at verse 4 of our chapter you see this: 'Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off'. My friend, I couldn't help thinking that the Father, before the foundation of the world, looked and saw the place called Calvary afar off! And even there He was willing to let go of the One that He loved, for God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, He spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all. Think of this: Abraham believed that the child would be given back to him, and for the joy that was set before Christ He endured the cross, despising the shame! Do you see it? Do you see the obedience in Gethsemane? Him, 'Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered'. Can you see Him there in Gethsemane? Do you see Him on dark Calvary? 'My God, my God, why? Why art Thou so far from helping me in the words of my roaring?'. He understood why, but it was the cry of a Son to a Father in emotion.

Do you see Him declared to be the Son of God in power in His resurrection? We know that if we have the fellowship with His sufferings, we will know the power of His resurrection. Do you see fifthly, that He is the Lamb who intervenes, the Lamb who is able, the Lamb who is the provider - 'For all', He says, 'that the Father giveth me, they will come to me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he

hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day'. Can you see the Baptist standing: 'Behold! The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world'?

I've been truly blessed, but I hope that you realise through our study tonight:

'If called, like Abraham's child, to climb
Some hill of sacrifice,
Some angel may be there in time,
And deliverance shall rise'.

God will provide a lamb.

Father, if we are honest with ourselves a great deal of the time we know nothing, but we know one thing: nothing shall separate us from love of God in Christ Jesus. Father, thrill us tonight with Thy provision, with Thy goodness, and with Thy grace which is to us-ward. Lord, let us be lost in the wonder of it all. Father, we pray - there are those in our gathering tonight, and they need a touch from Thee, they need lifted out of the emotional turmoil that they are falling into - we pray that we all may give to Thee our Isaac, that we may realise that if we give it to Thee we will be given back tenfold and more. Lord, that we may all know these wonderful words to be our portion: 'And it came to pass'. Jehovah-Jireh, we thank Thee, for Christ's sake. Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 2

"The Life Journey Of Jacob"

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Genesis 32-50

1. *A Twisted Youth (25:27-34; 27:6-29)*
2. *A Testing Marriage (29:1-30)*
3. *A Triumphant Wrestler (32:24-3)*
4. *A Troubled Parent (34; 35:22; 38)*
5. *A Tragic Mourner (35:16-20; 37:31-35)*

Now we're turning to the book of Genesis, Genesis chapter 32. Now the whole life story of Jacob really straddles over the majority of the book, at least half of the book of Genesis - from chapter 25 through to chapter 50. We haven't got time, and I don't think you have the energy, to sit and listen to all that tonight. Let me just say also: this is a series on 'Sparks Flying Upward', what we're doing is not specifically character studies of these Bible individuals, but we're wanting to home in specifically on the problems and the trials that these men and even women faced. So we're not doing a categorical biography of these people, but we're wanting to home in on specific events in their life that teach us how to survive ourselves, as the saints of God, as we go through trouble.

Last week we looked at Abraham, and we saw that the greatest test of all was in Genesis chapter 22, when he was asked by God to sacrifice his son, his one and only son, Isaac. If you like, this is the greatest test of all in Jacob's life, and we're homing in on that this evening in chapter 32 this time, and verse 25. We'll start at verse 24: "And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed. And Jacob asked him, and said, Tell me, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. And as he passed over Peniel the sun rose upon him, and he halted upon his thigh. Therefore the children of Israel eat not of the sinew which shrank, which is upon the hollow of the thigh, unto this day: because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh in the sinew that shrank".

As we go through this great book of beginnings, the book of Genesis, we find that Jacob became the father of the Jews, that great ethnic people, that great religious movement in our world even today that has never been quenched or destroyed, even by all the tyrants of the world trying and baying for their blood to wipe them out and exterminate them. Jacob is their father, the father of the Jews, but as we look at the Jews and we look at Jacob tonight we see that there are a great deal of parallels with the Jew and with their father Jacob. The extremes in the life of the Israelites that we find in the Old Testament Scriptures that startle us and offend us and make us balk at this people, can also be seen in life of their father Jacob. Yet to the other extreme, not only do we see the failure of the Jewish people in life of Jacob, but we also see their spirituality. We can see the richness in their faith, the deepness in their devotion toward God - both extremes in the Jewish people are mirrored in their father Jacob.

Like the Jew, Jacob spends a great deal of his life in exile, having no home, wandering around the desert. He experiences trying conditions; his life is full of toils, sorrows, tribulation and trial. But we also see in the Jew and in Jacob the discipline of God, how - although they are going through turmoil and trial, and sorrow and testing and tribulation - God's hand is behind it all. We have seen that very vividly in the studies of the book of Ezekiel recently, how - even though at times it seems that God has cast His ancient people, Israel, off - He has not, because He is bound in covenant with them. What He is doing is not seeking to destroy them, but disciplining His own people. God is bringing them through trial and tribulation for the sole purpose to purify them as a holy and sanctified and zealous people unto His own testimony and glory.

We can see all those things in the life of this father of the Jews, Jacob. But there are not just parallels with Jacob's physical ancestors, Jacob's physical offspring, but we can see also parallels in Jacob's spiritual offspring. What I'm talking about is the whole household of faith, those who believe in God today - if you like, the church of Jesus Christ - there are many parallels that we even can take out of Jacob's life and apply them to our own life tonight. We're looking at the life journey of Jacob, but we equally can be looking at our own life journey, for what Jacob faced every day of his life we, as the children of God today, also face. I think this cannot be put better than the words of F. B. Meyer, listen to what he says about the parallels between Jacob and ourselves as we begin this study tonight: 'Jacob's failings speak to us. He takes advantage of his brother when hard-pressed with hunger. He deceives his father. He meets Laban's guile with guile. He thinks to buy himself out of his troubles with Esau. He is mean, crafty and weak. At times we can apply all these terms to him, but who is there among us who does not feel the germs of this harvest to be within our own breast? Who of us cannot say, when we look at Jacob, there but for the grace of God go I?'. His failings, then there are his aspirations, they speak to us. F. B. Meyer says: 'We too have our angel-haunted dreams. We make our vows when we leave home. We too cling in a paradox to the yearning of departing angels, that they should come and stay with us and bless us before they go. We too get back to our own Bethels and bury our idols. We too confess ourselves pilgrims and strangers on the earth. We too recognise the shepherd care of Almighty God. We too wait for God's salvation'.

My friends, I hope we can see already that in many ways Jacob's life journey is not only the journey of the Jews, but it's the journey of every child of God and is our journey tonight. Let's look at it. The first thing that we see is a twisted youth. If you turn with me to chapter 25 of the book of Genesis, the first part of the twisted youth of Jacob is the devising brother that we find in chapter 25. From the birth of Jacob and Esau you could see this obvious rivalry among these two twin brothers. In fact, the very reason that Jacob is called Jacob - and Jacob simply means 'grabber' - is the fact that as these two boys were coming out of the womb, Jacob was born with his hand on Esau's heel, and so he was called 'Grabber'. Right from the very beginning these two children were fighting in their mother's womb, and as they're coming out of that womb, there is Jacob holding onto the heel of Esau. But we see this rivalry coming to fruition here in chapter 25 of Genesis, where we see Jacob as a devising brother.

You know the story I hope, we'll not take time to read it, about how Esau gives up his birthright for a pot of porridge, or a pot of stew, or lentil soup if you like. He gives up his birthright. Now don't misunderstand what this means, for Esau to give up his birthright. We think of this birthright in terms of earthly prosperity, worldly goods and wealth of his father - and to a large extent that's what it was, because the son who was blessed, and Esau was to be blessed, that son would be blessed with a double portion of his father's goods. But the inheritance and the birthright is much more than earthly possessions and worldly wealth, but it is spiritual prosperity. It was speaking of the spiritual blessing of being the next patriarch in line; the one who would be the head spiritually of the tribe, the family and the clan; the one who would be the priest and come before God for his family and for his tribe. Ultimately in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Genesis, to be the one who received the birthright and the spiritual blessing and inheritance, was to ultimately be a link in the chain that would bring Messiah! You see the importance of that, all the earthly and worldly wealth pales into insignificance.

Now if you can imagine this scene in chapter 25 for one moment. One day Jacob is standing over a cauldron of stew made with red lentils, that you can still get in Syria or Egypt today. There he is making this stew, and who should tumble into the tent but Esau from the fields after a hard day's work. He's faint and he's hungry, and he cries out in impatience and desperation: 'Give me some of that!'. Jacob, at that moment, realises his opportunity. He realises, 'This man really needs something to eat, but there's something that I really need, something that is not coming to me, something that I am not going to receive unless I do something about it'. So he decides to blackmail Esau to become the spiritual leader of his tribe, his family and his clan. Now obviously Jacob only did this because he knew it would work with Esau, he wouldn't have tried it if he thought he wouldn't get away with it, but obviously Jacob realised from growing up with this young man that Esau had no wealth and value and respect in his birthright. He couldn't have respected it enough to give it away for a mere bowl of lentil soup!

That begs the question to us tonight - and we must look into ourselves this evening before we condemn this man Esau - because there are spiritual privileges and honours and talents that we have as the children of God today, and some of us are willing to exchange them for a brief sensual experience that fills the animal appetite in our heart for just one moment. Is that not what the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter 12? 'Look diligently...lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright'. One thing that we learn from Esau is that he despised his birthright. So Jacob's desire, if you like, was a good desire, it was a right desire - but the point that you need to see in chapter 25 of Genesis is that, although Jacob's desire was right, the way he went about it was wrong. The means did not justify the end. Yes, Esau was not interested in a double portion of his father's estate; yes, Esau was not interested in the spiritual birthright, the spiritual heritage, being patriarch and priest before God; yes, he wasn't even interested in providing for his mother, which fell to the one whom the blessing of inheritance fell to. Perhaps it was because he could see through to the fact that Jacob was his mother's favourite, and he didn't honour his mother - but whatever it was, Esau despised his birthright, Jacob wanted the birthright, but you've got to see this tonight: Jacob went about a right thing a wrong way.

He had a twisted youth, and the first occasion is devising to take the birthright away from his brother. What Jacob was going to have to learn in the days that would lie ahead in his life was that there are no shortcuts to God's blessing. His twisted youth is marked as a devising brother, and the second thing is in chapter 27 if you turn over to it. This twisted youth can be seen as he forms into a deceitful son - chapter 27 and verses 6 through to 29. Now you know, and I know, that youth is a time of grave temptation. But the strange thing about Jacob's temptation in chapter 27 is that it comes from his mother. He was Mummy's favourite, and one day she overheard Isaac, the old man, the father of Jacob and Esau, planning to bestow his blessing, his spiritual inheritance, his double portion on Esau and not Jacob. Because Jacob was her favourite she plotted that she would make sure that Jacob would receive the blessing, and so she called to Jacob - now note in the passage, verse 13, she had to call twice. My friends, when you're in youth, there are times that temptation can come the first time, and then temptation can come the second time - you're maybe able to resist it the first time, but the second time the call comes you fall, and the amazing thing about this is: the call came from his own mother!

'Go out and fetch two kids, bring them in. We'll sacrifice them, we'll feed them to your father, and with the skins from the kids you can wear them and you can pretend that you're Esau'. Because Jacob had a weak and a twisted nature within himself he responded, and he dressed up himself as his own brother, and he even imitated Esau's smell of the fields. He went into his old father's tent, who was blind by now, and he said to Isaac: 'I am Esau thy firstborn', verse 32. The tragic thing about it all is this: he even used the name of the Lord in vain. Isaac didn't recognise his voice, he probably thought: 'That sounds more like Jacob than Esau'. He said to him: 'How is it that you found the venison, the food, so quickly?'. And here he takes the Lord's name in vain, he says: 'The Lord thy God brought it to me! Do you see how twisted he's getting? It was

getting dangerous, so Isaac had to feel him to see if he was hairy like Esau was, he had to smell him to see if he smelt of the fields like Esau did, and when he was content then Jacob got the blessing. He got what he wanted - OK, Esau didn't want it, Jacob wanted it, maybe Jacob was seeking after God, but he went about it the wrong way!

My friends, this has thrilled me today. This young man had a twisted youth, he was a devising brother, he was a deceitful son, and what a thrill for us tonight to look at this man's life and to think that it was this same young man that grew up to be what the Spirit of God calls 'A prince with God' and the father of the nation of Israel! It's hard to imagine when we read this about him in his early days. It's hard to understand how God could bless such jiggery-pokery in this young man's life. You might think to yourself: 'Well, if it was God's will that Jacob should have the blessing and not Esau, surely the only way that that could come about - if Isaac was going to give Esau the blessing - is that it would happen dishonestly, that it would happen the way it's written here?'. My friend, I can't explain it all, but what I can say is this: Jacob was to get the blessing in God's eyes, but Jacob didn't go about it the way that God would have wanted him to. But I'll tell you something that can categorise and summarise the whole thing: God, in His sovereignty and His almighty nature, can make even the wrath of man to praise Him. Isn't that wonderful? What Jacob meant for evil, God meant for good.

Further, what came to me today as I was studying this, and what a blessing it was to my own heart when I thought back to the sins of my own youth! You've got them, haven't you? The things that jump out of the cupboard of your mind, those skeletons, those ghosts that haunt you at times when you're not expecting it. You're having holy thoughts and holy exercises, and all of a sudden you're reminded about something that you did in your youth, when you were foolish, when you were twisting, when you were devising and deceitful. But what a thought tonight: old Job, he thought God was cursing him for the sins of his youth, did you know that? In chapter 13 of the book, verse 26, he says: 'God, thou writest bitter things against me, and makest me to possess the iniquities of my youth' - 'You're punishing me for what I've done in the past'. How refreshing it is, even though it's only Eliphaz that says it in chapter 33 of the book, to read these words of the man who repents of his sin: 'His flesh shall be fresher than a child's: he shall return to the days of his youth'. What hope there is in our God! No matter how twisted your youth was, deceitful and devising, what a joy to know that our God is the God who can restore not only the years that the locusts have eaten, but the youth that the locusts have eaten!

It's wonderful, I would encourage you tonight young people: don't squander your youth because you know that God can forgive you. Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Of course we shall not. Solomon says in his wise words in Ecclesiastes 12: 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth' - but what a joy if you're looking back tonight, and there's no hope because you've squandered your youth, you've messed it up in sin and temptation, you've drowned it in the iniquity of a twisted childhood, what a joy that you can say like the Psalmist in Psalm 25: 'Lord, remember not the sins of my youth' - and the answer comes back from the excellent glory: 'Thy sins and thy iniquities I will remember no more'. Don't let the devil drag them up to you ever again! They're under the blood, they're gone, they're finished, they're dead with Christ, buried with Christ, and your new life has risen with Christ! What a joy that is to all of us who did things in our youth that we wish we had never done.

You folk here tonight, and your children are breaking your hearts, your children are drowning themselves in the sin of their own twisted youth, can I encourage you tonight? Have faith in God, for some of the greatest giants of the Bible did exactly the same as your wee boy or your wee girl is doing tonight - and look where they are today! Some of them are in Hebrews 11 in the hall of faith, God's hall of fame. Have faith in God.

As you can imagine Esau didn't like this. Jacob had tricked him and done him out of his inheritance, and he vowed revenge - to kill his brother, to hunt him down like a dog. Rebecca, in her tent, overhears what Esau is

saying in revenge, and she fears for her only beloved son Jacob. So she tells Jacob: 'You're going to have to go to my brother Laban in Haran. Go away, pack your bags tonight and escape'. What was happening here was Jacob was beginning to enter into God's school of learning, Jacob was beginning to realise how you can't have blessing by being a twister, by being a grabber and a supplanter and a thief. You're going to have to learn it God's way if you're going to be truly blessed.

We find as we go through the life of this man that Jacob, if anybody in the Bible, Jacob learns through suffering. Can you see him packing his bags, kissing his mother goodbye? Can you see him scuttering into his father's tent to get his blessing and his goodbye? Can you see him going out in the night, going across the desert? I'm sure at first it was exciting for him, there was a buzz of adventure, it was the first time he had ever been away from home - but I'm also sure that as he went mile upon mile on his own, he started to get lonely, his time away from home wasn't as good as what he thought it would be. He began to feel melancholy and depression - now the dark clouds had drawn across his blue sky. He had got the blessing, but there he was in loneliness. He was running away in fear, perhaps all the thoughts were going through his mind: 'What has Esau thought up for me? Is he going to send the dogs out after me? Is he going to send an army of his workmen out to hunt me down?'. He had no roof over his head, he had no bed, he had no pillow. Tired and dejected he reaches Bethel, and he gets an old rock and puts his head upon it. He looks into the stars and he falls asleep, and I want you to see this tonight: the very place that Jacob was in, the place where God had led him, was the only place that God could bless him.

When he went unconscious to the world around him and to all of his troubles, God gave him a dream and God gave him a vision. He saw a ladder coming down from God from heaven, and the angels ascending and descending on it. Child of God, this was the only place that God could speak to Jacob. When God leads men and women He leads us to certain places that are not comfortable, that do not feel good, that even do not feel right, but there are times in our lives when that is the only place that God will speak and that is where God has chosen to speak. 'The Lord is my helper', that's what matters. Everyone was against him, his own family was against him and he was out as a stranger going to his kith and kin - Laban in Haran - but, my friend, I want you to see what God was showing this young man as he had his head upon the pillow: He was showing him that God was there, and that in his turmoil he had a link with God. It might have been a ladder that he couldn't climb, or he wasn't near even the top, but God was showing him: 'Look, I'm there, I'm there for you! In this wilderness of your experience, you are connected to Me by covenant and by grace'.

The word of God tells us that God's angels are ministering spirits, they carry out His will. We read in the book of Daniel that, as Daniel was praying for 21 days, it was the archangel Michael who was coming to answer Daniel's prayers. I firmly believe upon the authority of those Scriptures that sometimes angels carry out God's will in answer to our prayers. I believe what God was showing Jacob was this: 'If you'll let the prayers go up, I'll let the blessings come down!'. If that wasn't enough for him to hear, he heard God's word, he heard the voice of God say - and this is what God said to him in that dream: 'I will be with thee, I will keep thee, I will do that which I have spoken to thee of'. What a God of grace He is, eh! This old twister, bathing his youth in sin, devising against his brother, deceiving his own father, out in a wilderness of sin - yet the God of grace appears unto him! We've all had our Bethel, haven't we? Praise God, we've had our Bethel!

He eventually reaches a well, and he meets a girl he likes. He sees Rachel, they introduce one another, they find out that they're related, they're cousins - in fact this is the daughter of Laban who he's trying to get to and stay with. He falls in love with this girl Rachel, and as he reaches Laban's house Laban agrees that he'll give Rachel to Jacob after seven years working for him in his business. It's very interesting that what goes around comes around. That's not a Biblical quotation, but it's very true. Crafty old Laban deceived Jacob as he had been deceiving others all down the years. Just on the day of the marriage between Rachel and Jacob, Laban substitutes Rachel with Leah, and old twisted Jacob finds out after the marriage vows that he's married

the wrong girl! Now the deceiver is deceived! He's furious, he goes to Laban, Laban says: 'Well, if you work another seven years for me then I'll give you Rachel to marry'.

There are many lessons that we can learn from this. Young people, one of the lessons that we can learn is: when you're looking for a partner in life, a husband or a wife, it's got to be true love. I know there were some arranged marriages in the Bible, but the best ones that I can see were true love. The first thing that we read is that as Jacob was going out to Laban, leaving his father Isaac when he was blessing him in chapter 28 verse 1, he blessed him it says: 'And charged him, and said unto him, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan'. Now listen, young person, you're not to go to the world for a wife, you're not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. There you have it in black-and-white in the Old Testament, and you have it again in the New Testament, the best person to love is a child of God for they love Christ.

The second thing we learn is that it helps when both homes are happy with the partner that you choose. Now that doesn't always happen, but I can tell you this it was good in this instance. In verse 20 we find that Jacob served seven years for Rachel, chapter 29 I beg your pardon, chapter 29 and verse 20: 'Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her'. That's one of the most beautiful verses in the whole of the Bible, they seemed but a few days for the love that he had for her. One writer said: 'Love has the power of making a rough road easy and a long wait short'. Young people, you've got to love one another, and you've got to love the Lord to be married - but look at this: he worked seven years for Leah! He was deceived, and he worked as asked to work another seven years for Rachel - the point is this: he was willing to do it! You can fall in love and have the greatest romance, love at first sight if that even exists, you can have all that, you can have both families enjoying the partner that you have chosen, but whether you like it or not it's got to be worked at! It's got to be worked at. If you're not prepared to work at it, don't enter into it! If you truly love your partner you'll stick with them.

Now we know all too well, to our own detriment, that it doesn't always work out for some. It takes two to tango, it takes two to work at it, doesn't it? Maybe one partner doesn't want to work at it, and some people like Jacob have been gravely deceived, and if you can put it like this: the person that they thought they were marrying turned out to be different from the person they actually married! He thought he was marrying Rachel, it turned out to be Leah, and he was disappointed - there are so many people that are disappointed, so many people suffering, and what a test it is for a child of God to be married to a monster. Do you know something? No matter what end some marriages come to, I'm no judge and jury but I'll tell you this: for many a man or a woman, they are in God's school of suffering even in their marriage! Many a Christian quietly goes through a turbulent time in a testing marriage.

Then we move on and we find that God leads him through that hardship of working at love, and he comes thirdly again to chapter 32 that we read together at the beginning of our meeting. I think that this is the pinnacle of Jacob's life of faith, because he comes to the point where he becomes a triumphant wrestler. Up to now he had got most things in his life by stealing them or supplanting them, just as his name means. He has deceived people into taking their birthright, he has deceived people into taking inheritance, he has been clutching and supplanting and twisting to get the blessing of God, but God was going to tell him in chapter 32: 'It is impossible to get my true blessing by wriggling into it, it's not taken by guile but it's taken by grace'. Jacob becomes, in chapter 32, the man who God had to break in order to bless.

This is the turning point in his life, and I want you to see five things under this heading. First: his position in verse 24, his position. It says that Jacob was left alone. Now, my friends tonight, the way of blessing is often a hard road, it's often a lonely road. Great men of God and women of God have had to walk a lonely path of pain at times, lonely early in the morning in prayer, alone in their zeal when the children of God around them had no concern and only indifference, the lonely doctrinal stand for the truth. Whatever it may be, it might be a lonely suffering on your own with no-one to cry upon, but it is only those who God can seek to detach from

the world that are detached enough for them to lay hold upon God and for God to lay hold upon them. My friends tonight, I say to you if you're suffering: let us go therefore unto him who is without the camp, bearing his reproach. Let us follow John the Baptist, let us follow Elijah, let us follow our Lord Jesus Christ who suffered lonely there on lonely Golgotha's Hill, but He was there!

His position was alone. Secondly we see his prayer. There are three things about his prayer, first his posture in verse 24: he wrestled. The Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Strive to enter into the kingdom, strive to go through the narrow door'. We read of the Lord in Luke 22, being in agony in Gethsemane, He prayed in agony. Ephesians 6, Paul says: 'We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers'. Hebrews 5 talks about the Lord praying in Gethsemane: 'Who with prayers, with strong crying and tears, cried unto God who was able to save him from death'. I don't know what you're going through tonight, but if you're going through pain I'm sure there are times that you've cried unto God, you've wrestled in God's presence in prayer. But see how his prayer turned out in verse 25, it came to the breaking of the day, he wrestled all night, his prayer was prevailing. I want you to see tonight that in our wrestling with pain and trial and tribulation, God is putting us through these things so that He can see whether we are trusting Him, whether we are hoping in Him alone.

It's very interesting that we see in verse 25, I believe that this was Christophany, an appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ before He was manifest in flesh at Bethlehem, I believe it was Him who was wrestling with Jacob. As He was wrestling, it says in verse 25, when He saw that He prevailed not against him - now that doesn't mean that He couldn't beat him, but when He saw that Jacob was so intense and that he was determined to prevail with God as he wrestled Him, it was then that He touched his leg. Child of God going through pain tonight, listen: pain persevered will always bring forth blessing, always. You can see it in the natural realm, in childbirth and the travail of it, and then a beautiful baby is born. You can see it with the painstaking efforts of an artist, and the picture is painted. You can see it in the farmer toiling and sowing in the field week after week, month after month, but eventually there's a great harvest reaped. You can see it with the composer with all the little notes, and scrapes and thoughts that he has to conjure up, but at the end there's a great symphony of beautiful music that comes into fruition from his hard work. God says to you, child going through turmoil tonight, 'The Lord is good unto them that wait for Him, to the soul that seeketh Him. Let us not be weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not. Why art thou downcast, O my soul? Hope thou in God, for thou shalt yet praise Him'.

He was prevailing and he was persistent, for in verse 26 he said: 'I'm not going to let you go until you bless me'. Oh, there's so much negativism about in Christianity today! Can I encourage you: in your pain and in your trials, in your torment - be positive, hang in there! Have faith in God and be a prevailer and not a pessimist, and trust Him!

There was his position: alone; his prayer; and then there was his pain, for the Lord Jesus touched his thigh and it went out of joint. I believe that speaks to us of brokenness, I believe the Lord is saying: 'If I've got to bless you, Jacob, I've got to break you'. The path to blessing is brokenness, and how you get through your pain, and how you get through your trial and your sickness and your sorrow, is determined and depends upon how you look at it! That's the bottom line. If you say: 'My life's out of control, this shouldn't have happened to me. Why is God allowing this to happen? God mustn't love me at all if He's allowing this to come into my life!'. If you look at it like that, you'll never prevail and you'll never have blessings out of your sorrow, but if you look at the thing and say: 'This is the hand of God, I don't understand it but I know that God's hand has planned it and I will trust His hand! He's allowing this for my good, He will turn what seeks to harm me into my everlasting joy!'.

You know, the things that we often resist coming into our life - in fact, I would say everything that comes into our life - is allowed by God. It mightn't be God's hand doing it, it might be like Job, it's Satan but it is

allowed by the sovereign councils and will of God. My friend, look at it like that! Jacob was never the same again after he was broken, after he was touched and became out of joint. Look at verse 31, it says from that day on he halted upon his thigh, he had a limp and men could see that the self in Jacob had been broken and weakened. Others could see that he had a touch from God, and we read in the book of Hebrews that at the end of his days he was leaning upon his staff worshipping God - broken, but God broke him to bless him! God put His signature on him by breaking him. One writer says: 'The sinew of self must shrink'. I'm led to believe that two horses pulling together cannot pull a sinew apart, and sometimes there are things in our lives that cannot be broken by any other measure than by pain and suffering. Let me tell you that meeting with God on this level, like Jacob, it doesn't just affect your opinions and your doctrines, it changes who you are - and God said: 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel', and he was changed!

In verse 32 we see that the change not only affected him personally and his name, but it affected the whole nation, for from that day on until this book of Genesis was written they never ate of the sinew of an animal. It affected a whole generation for God, one man's brokenness and the testimony of God through it! I'll tell you this: old Jacob was sensitive to the touch of God every day after that day. Then there's his power in verse 28, God told him: 'You've power with God and with men'. He knew his God, he had got to know his God, like David who was a man after God's own heart, like Abraham last week who was called the friend of God, and listen tonight - you who are going through trial - they got to know their God in the crucible of pain! That is what Paul meant when he said: 'That I might know Him, and the power of His resurrection', don't stop there, 'and the fellowship of His sufferings' - and if you don't have the fellowship of suffering you'll not be made conformable to His image!

Then there was his prize: Peniel, in verse 29 - 'For I have seen God face to face'. Do you know what the plan of God is in your pain tonight? That you might see Him face-to-face! That you might be brought nearer! Oh, I've so much to say to you. You know, his troubles didn't stop there, if anything they maybe got greater because he became a troubled parent in chapter 34, 35 and 38. Dinah was defiled by Shechem, and you remember Levi and Simeon, Jacob's sons, went out and tricked him - they said: 'You can marry our daughters if you get circumcised', and the day after they got circumcised they knew they weren't capable fighting, so they all went together and murdered the whole lot of them! Two of his sons became murderers, Reuben committed an incestuous act of adultery with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine. Then we find Judah committed adultery with Tamar who was disguised as a prostitute - boy, his problems were only starting, the pain caused by his children. We find then that his loved ones began to die, he was a tragic mourner, he lost his wife Rachel, his beloved, in childbirth. He buries his father in chapter 37, Isaac. Later on we find that he's parted from his only beloved son, the one he loved the most, Joseph. He is told by the rest of the brothers that he was killed, and they bring his coat of many colours back covered in blood. Can you see the pain that this man went through in his life?

Give me a minute or two, please. This man, he knew no sun without rain, he knew no joy without sorrow, no peace without pain. Do you remember when Joseph was in Egypt, and he asked for Benjamin to come? Do you remember that? You remember Joseph was testing his brothers, and trying to bring them to a knowledge of what they had done to him. In Genesis 42 and verse 36 it says this: 'Jacob their father said unto them, Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me'. All these things are against me! Do you feel like that? I'll tell you this, he didn't know the end of the story! He didn't know that the one who was taking away his children was the one in Egypt who would feed his children in the famine, because it was his own son! He didn't know, but as far as he was concerned all these things were against him. My friend, he was judging these outward things but he didn't realise that God was for him, for He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob! And the miracle of it all is: He's our God tonight! The miracle is: He is for us! All things work together for good because He is for us!

Now come with me as we close, for in Genesis 49 - don't turn to it - I can see this old man's pale, ashen, wax face, I can see the furrows of worry on his brow from the life of pain and trial and turmoil and torment that he has been caused. It has been a rough road, it's been a road of failure, a road of sin. In Genesis 49 it says that he's about to take his last breath, and he plumps down on the bed, his head bangs against the headboard and he swings his feet into the bed, and he sighs for the last, and the word of God says this: 'When Jacob had made an end of commanding his sons, he gathered up his feet into the bed, and yielded up the ghost, and was gathered unto his people'. A life of pain, trial, turmoil, tragedy, but like Abraham he died in the faith. Hallelujah! Whatever you're going through, child tonight, you'll die in the faith! Oh, no wonder we can sing:

'Oh, that will be
Glory for me,
When by His grace
I shall look on His face'.

That will be glory for me. If you didn't believe in grace, I'll bet you believe in it now, eh? When you look at a man like Jacob, he sighs his last and he's absent from the body, present with the Lord.

Father, we can say with an old slave trader: 'Tis grace hath led me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home'. Father, we take great courage and strength from the fact that Thou art willing and able and glad to call Thyself the God of Jacob, and we thank Thee that Thou too are the God of our salvation. Father, we pray for those going through turmoil and trial, that they may see the hand of God in it all, and that they may allow God to bless them in it, and that they may see the face of Christ in it all - for one day we will see Him face-to-face, and oh that will be glory, be glory for me. Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 3

"The Jeopardy Of Joseph - Part 1"

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Genesis 37-45; 50

1. ***Alienation – Persecution – Desertion (chapter 37)***
2. ***Temptation (chapter 39)***
3. ***Incarceration (chapter 40)***
4. ***Recognition (chapter 41)***
5. ***Glorification (chapters 42-45)***

We've looked in the weeks that have gone by at 'The Agonies of Abraham', we've looked at 'The Life Journey of Jacob' last week, this week we seek to look at 'The Jeopardy of Joseph' - the danger that Joseph faced right throughout his whole life. We don't have one specific reading this evening because there's so much ground to cover right from chapter 37 to chapter 50 - his whole life story spans the great majority of the book of Genesis. So we'll be looking at little passages and little verses as we go through this great study this evening, so please do bear with me.

I know that this life story of Joseph is one that is very familiar to you all. We've heard it from the very earliest age, if we've been brought up in a Christian home and in a Christian environment. We've been to Sunday School perhaps, and the children's meeting, and we've heard the great wonderful stories of this man called Joseph, and all the trials and problems that he went through, and how God went through them with him. Often familiarity with these Bible stories or Sunday School tales can bring distance in our hearts that prevents us applying these spiritual truths to our lives. It's like the singing of hymns, we can learn them off by heart, so much so that the spiritual truths and depths of them don't really sink down deep into our soul. It's always a good thing to sing a hymn as if it's the first time we're singing it, looking at the words, and it's the same as we read through the Bible stories that God has given us.

There are so many things to teach us in the story and the life of Joseph tonight that I don't want us to miss any of them. I want the teaching and the principles and the precepts that God has laid down in this man's life to really come home to us, I want us to take them and to apply them individually to our lives and to the things that we face within them. But of course, these things are written for our learning, but as we go into the New Testament we realise that these things, on many occasions, in the Old Testament are typical teachings of our Lord Jesus. They're pictures, they're paintings if you like, that are pointing forward to the Lord Jesus Christ who would come one day and would be the ultimate man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. As we go through this I don't want you just to apply these truths to yourself, but I want you to see our lovely Lord Jesus, and to see the great implications in Joseph's life that point towards His life.

As we look at this chapter, chapter 37, it's springtime in the plain of Dothan. To the south of the plain of Dothan there are the mountains of Samaria, and to the north there are the mountains of Gilboa. Standing just in the middle, on one of those lower ranges of the bordering mountains, you can almost see from a height little black dots against the green grass of the plain. Those little black dots are the tents of Jacob, Jacob that great man of God that we were thinking of last week - the father of Israel, his name was changed, of course, to Israel, and his twelve sons became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. There those little tents are, Jacob and his wives and his sons, and they're feeding the flocks, they're tending the flocks on the plain of Dothan. All of a sudden, as you survey that great scene, like a rainbow darting out of the darkness on a cloudy day, this tall, dark, handsome young man in a multicoloured coat catches your eye. It is Joseph.

You will know from life's experience, and even from the reading of the word of God, that love sees afar off. Love sees afar off, you read the story of the Prodigal Son and you can see there that the father saw his son returning to him, it says, a great way off. The love that was in the father's heart for the prodigal son caused him, after seeing him afar off, to run after him, to put his arms round him and to kiss him on the neck. But you know, love is not the only thing that sees afar off, for in verse 19 of this chapter we find these words: 'And they said one to another, Behold, this dreamer cometh' - hate also sees afar off. Hate for one when you see him coming, and we see here in the brothers of Joseph, they see him coming: 'Behold, the dreamer comes' - they see him with the eye of envy, the eye of hate, and in their voice you can just hear that jealousy toward their chosen, blessed, beloved brother.

Everyone loves a dreamer, isn't that true? This world loves people with great imagination, you can see it in the whole Disney empire today, and the great movies that are being produced with computer graphics. Everybody loves a dreamer, but it's oh so different being a dreamer for God. Joseph was a dreamer for Jehovah. This is a wonderful story, and one of the reasons why it's so popular even in our secular world, and people make movies about it, is because it contains all of the elements of life - many things that you go through and I will go through within our life's experience. You have ambition of a striving young man; you've got great dreams, aspirations and hopes; you've got love; you've got sorrow, envy, hatred - temptation is at the centre of the plot. You've got lust, revenge, suffering, sin, and fighting. Great passions right throughout this story that we find right throughout our individual lives.

One thing it teaches us, friends tonight, is that this book before us may be thousands upon thousands of years old, but it never ever becomes irrelevant - and man, no matter what the church today says, or psychology today says, or anthropologists say, man never changes! From age to age he is the same, he has still the same joys, still the same sorrows and problems and obstacles - and what a joy it is for us this evening to take a man like Joseph, to look at his life story, to look at the jeopardy that is threaded right throughout it all, and to see within ourselves the same problems, the same trials, and - glory be to God - to see the same Lord who will bring us through them all. To know that what men, women, organisations, systems, may think toward us for evil, that God can mean it for good.

So the jeopardy in Joseph's life starts with your first point on your sheet: alienation, then persecution, and then desertion right throughout chapter 37. Joseph was a dreamer, and his dreams alienated him from his brethren - his brothers hated him for it. Now you remember, we don't have time to look at them in any detail, but you remember the extraordinary dreams that he had. One of his dreams was that the sheaves of his brothers that they had gathered in from the fields after cutting them down, that all those eleven sheaves bowed down to his one sheaf. In another dream he saw the sun and the moon and eleven stars all bowing down and bringing obeisance to Joseph. He was sharing, with great excitement, these dreams with his brothers - and they absolutely detested him! They resented it, that he should proudly come and dictate and declare how God in some way had chosen him above his brethren.

Jacob even rebuked his beloved son for doing it, but I believe, probably, deep down in his own heart he knew that this son was special, this son was chosen, this son was blessed from God, and that God was giving him these special dreams. You know, just before we go any further tonight, I want you to see that Joseph - even though perhaps he dealt with these dreams wrongly and he shared them with his brothers perhaps in an ostentatious, proud, puffed-up way - you've got to see tonight that right at the beginning of Joseph's walk he was a dreamer. Now, I don't mean an idle dreamer that sits in the classroom looking into space or looking out the window, I'm talking about a man who had a vision. This man's vision was from God, it was a prophetic vision, it was a vision for the glory of God in his life, and the testimony and the witness of God to shine throughout him.

Of course, you know, I hope you know, that the word of God teaches that without a vision the people perish. Without a vision the people perish, and that's not just talking about those who are not saved, it's talking about

everybody. If you don't have a vision in life, and to us in our spiritual life, you will perish, you will starve. Clarence McCartney, a great preacher on character studies, says this about Joseph the dreamer, listen to these words: 'Our dreams are the golden ladders by which we climb to heavenly places. They are the mountain peaks of vision, whence we see afar off the country toward which we travel. They are the lantern by whose light we pass safely through the dark valley. They are the inner flame that gives us strength and energy for the struggle. They are the two-edged sword by which we cleave the steaming head of the dragon of temptation and leave him dying at our feet'.

Now, what we're talking about tonight is not dreams from God that we have in the night as we have our head upon our pillow, but how we are applying it generally to ourselves, I would say, has to be the word of God. The word of God is our vision, the word of God is our dream, our hope, our aspiration. All the promises, the great and precious promises that tell us of a home in heaven, that tell us of the glory that is laid out before us in our heavenly promised land, all of that must be what we take from God to be our vision. But the irony of it all is this: just like in the life of Joseph, our vision, our dream, even the word of God can be the very thing that alienates us from our brethren. It can be the very thing that causes enmity in our families, among our friends, in the workplace, in even the community, and sometimes sadly in the church of Jesus Christ.

Now, let me say before I go on any further: if you're here tonight and you were brought up in a Christian home, praise God for it! Thank the Lord for it! Oh, when you're going through those teenage years, perhaps you sometimes curse it because you can't get away with the things that others get away with - but I hope you're old enough now, and mature enough to look back in faith and see that God's hand of blessing was there that you didn't have opposition in the home for your walk with Christ and your testimony and sharing the Gospel. They didn't look down on you for opening the Bible, or singing, or praying. The fact that you thank God for it, there's a whole lot of other people - probably more - and they don't know what that is, they've never known what that is. In fact, they know more the words of the Lord Jesus Christ when He said: 'I have not come into this world to bring peace, but to bring a sword, to bring war. I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes shall be they of his own household'. This is eternal truth, you can't dispensationalise this tonight, because what we see in the life of Joseph is exactly the same in hundreds of believer's lives - where they have enmity at home, they're alienated, they don't feel any longer part of their family because they've been converted.

It's easy for us who have been brought up in a Christian environment to forget about those people, to think that they don't even exist. That alienation that can come into a family or into a home or into a life, that alienation usually grows to become persecution. When these people that you've become alienated from begin to persecute you, that's what you find in this passage. They didn't just say: 'That boy's a weirdo, just ignore him. We'll get on with our stuff, and let him dream away', but it moved on to where they were grabbing him, they were taking him, and they were putting him down a pit - and if it wasn't for Reuben, they would have killed him!

Alienation leads to persecution, and then persecution leads to desertion for they went away and they didn't listen to his cries for help. They walked away, they went back to Jacob, they brought his lovely coloured coat, they covered it in animal's blood and they said: 'We think that a beast has got him, we think he's dead'. Some of you know what I'm talking about. You're the only one in the home, you're the only one in the marriage - your partner, your spouse is not converted. I don't what that's like, but I imagine it must be a great turmoil and a great burden. I'm not saying there's not love in the relationship, but the trial that that must be, the hardship, the turmoil. Maybe it's the work environment: you're the only Christian in the office, or the only Christian in the class at university or school. Maybe it's even in a church! You're a dreamer for God, but nobody else seems to be thinking the thoughts that you're thinking, everybody else is downcast, discouraged, but you're wanting them to go onwards and upward!

Men with a dream for God have always been persecuted, that's why the Lord warned His disciples that they would be. In this very land in which we live, and in Scotland and in England, and right across Europe, not many hundred years ago the Reformers were persecuted, they were beheaded, they were burned at the stake - why? Because they had a dream for God, they saw all of a sudden by faith under the Holy Spirit's influence that justification was by faith alone. They died for it. Look what happened to Joseph: they saw this dreamer coming afar off, they said: 'Come now', verse 20, 'therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams'. 'Wipe Martin Luther out, and we'll see what will become of his dreams! Wipe Zwingli out, wipe John Huss and John Wycliffe out! We will see what will happen to their dreams!'. My friend, listen, if you have a vision for God like Joseph you've got to be prepared to have men pull you down when you stand up with your vision. If you're not prepared to suffer for your vision you might as well forget about dreaming about anything.

That story of William Carey is most poignant, isn't it? A Baptist Church in England had got themselves into such a hyper-Calvinistic quagmire that they didn't even go out and preach the Gospel any more. All of a sudden this young cobbler had a heart for souls, to win them in India. He stands to his feet among a room of what he thinks are godly, old, mature men and he says: 'I want to go and tell these people in India that Jesus died for them and that they need to be converted by the grace of God'. And they said: 'Sit down, young man, if God will convert the heathen He will do it without your help!'. He had a vision, and he suffered for his vision, but he was the first man in the modern era to take the Gospel to India.

Joseph, we will see tonight, remained faithful to his dream. All the circumstances that came into his life, he didn't let them deter him from the dreams that he had in his youth. Maybe you're alienated tonight, maybe you're persecuted and maybe all your dream is is trying to follow this book is closely as you can in your life, in your home life, in your family, in your school, in the workplace. I know that there are many homes now in our modern era, even Christian homes, and they have been smitten by this plague of divorce and desertion. In this age you can get divorced and your spouse has no say in it whatsoever, it's just something comes through the post! Desertion: somebody gets up and leaves - a father, a mother, a husband, a wife - the children are left, and this phenomenon is here! Young men and young women left on their own. Many undergo persecution and desertion and alienation of every type, and my friend if you're going through that in any shape or form, can I tell you: you've got good company with Joseph, but praise God Almighty you've got better company in the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. I never grow tired of reading this verse that I'm going to bring to you tonight, I never grow tired of preaching upon it. Listen to this, soul in alienation, persecution and desertion: 'You have not got a high priest who cannot be touched with the feelings of your infirmities', why? 'Because he was in all points tested as you are, yet he remained sinless' - hallelujah! Praise God, we don't just have a Saviour that saves from sin, but we have a Saviour that knows what the sinner goes through. He wasn't subject to infirmities, but He made Himself a little lower than the angels that He might taste death for every man.

My friends tonight, this is who Isaiah called the Man of sorrows, do you know why He was the Man of sorrows? Because He was alienated, He was persecuted, and He was deserted! 'He is despised, rejected of men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. We' - the Jewish people - 'hid our face from Him'. 'He came unto His own', John said, 'and His own received Him not'. The Lord spoke of His own desertion and persecution in one of His parables: 'This is the heir, come let us kill him and the inheritance shall be ours'. Joseph's brothers said it, the Lord Jesus' brethren in Israel said it, and they caught Him and they cast Him out, and they slew Him, and they parted His raiment among them just like Joseph's brothers did. Joseph's brother sat and watched him in the pit, and sitting down there the Roman soldiers watched Him there.

Joseph's brothers sold him to the Gentiles, Judas sold our Lord Jesus for 30 measly pieces of silver to the Romans - the Gentiles. Joseph was innocent, but my friend the Lord Jesus Christ was separate from sin, undefiled - not just blameless, but spotless. The Lamb of God, the Son of God, the perfect Lord Jesus Christ

- what a suffering Saviour we have! Don't cringe at the sufferings of Joseph, look to your Lord Jesus and see that one righteous as He went under greater suffering. Know that in all your pangs that rend the heart, the loving Saviour has a part. Satan meant it for evil, you remember that we have titled this series 'As Sparks Flying Upward' from the book of Job, and you remember that Job didn't know what was going on in heaven. God said, jibing Satan, 'There's not a man like Job in all the earth. Look at him!'. He says: 'Ah, a lot of nonsense', he says, 'any man will follow You, God, if You bless him. Do You think that Job follows You for nothing? He's following You for what he gets out of You. You're blessing him in abundance, his family, his flock, his riches - but just You touch him, God, skin for skin. Then You'll see who's his God'.

'Touch him and his vision will disappear', that was Satan's philosophy. 'Touch him, make him suffer, and his dream for God, his vision after God, his seeking after God will go. The same thing happened in Joseph's life, and the same thing happened in our Lord Jesus' life. It was the kiss of a friend that betrayed Him, but hallelujah He still went on to Calvary for your and my redemption. He was betrayed in the house of His friends, but He set His face as a flint to go to Jerusalem for you - what a wonderful Saviour!

Alienation, persecution, desertion, and then we see that it moves on to temptation in chapter 39. After his brothers throw him into a pit they decide that they'll sell him to Midianite merchantmen. The Midianite merchantmen take poor young Joseph down to Egypt. There's a captain of the guard who's walking up and down the line of slaves in the market, and he likes the look of Joseph, and he puts his hand on him and he takes him home to the palace. Potiphar was his name, the captain of the guard, probably meaning the head chief bodyguard in the royal palace. He's a member of the proud aristocracy, he's a rich man, he probably lived in a magnificent home. I can just imagine that young slave boy walking down the great driveway, then the great corridors of the buildings of that great palace, palm trees lining the way, the great Sphinx around him of Egypt, giant walls decorated with hieroglyphics and beautiful colourful paintings. There he is in all that splendour and dignity, but he is a young man who's alone, a young man who has been deserted by his brothers, his friends. He's away from his father, and how lonely he must have felt in a land of a different people, with a different colour of skin, with a different tongue that he could not understand, and I'm sure for young Joseph it was an earth-shattering time - but do you know something? You see what he's gone through already, that would be enough for us all - I doubt that some of us would even have gone through that - but take great joy tonight in the second verse of chapter 39: 'The Lord was with Joseph'.

He was with him. He was with Joseph. Older versions of the Bible say this, and I'm not necessarily going along with it, but it's very interesting - you know, and I've told you before, that the definitions of words change year after year even now in our modern era - hundreds of years ago one of the translations of this verse was this: 'The Lord was with Joseph and he was a lucky fellow!' Do you like that one? 'He was a lucky fellow!' It doesn't mean luck in the sense that we mean it today, chance. It means that he had a Midas touch, everything he touched in the palace seemed to turn to gold, everything seemed to go for him, it seemed to go well. He had success, and it followed him like a shadow. He was promoted in that household, not from a slave, but he was moved up the ladder and he became in charge of the whole household. He was approached to untangle every knot, every mess that came along in the politics and the domestics of the home, he was asked to untie it. Why? Because the Lord was with Joseph.

Now how come all this happened? OK, the Lord was with him, but let me tell you two things why this happened. Not just because the Lord was with him, but the implications of what happened in his life because the Lord was with him. The first thing was this: he might have been stripped of his coat, he might have been alienated, persecuted and deserted, but the fact of the matter is he couldn't be stripped of his character. His coat was taken off him, but he still has his character. He's in the slave house, he's doing all the dirty work, but he's working because he's not working for Potiphar, he's not working because he's obliged to, he's working because that's where God led him, that's where God called him, and that's what he would do.

As he said to his brothers later in life, as he stood before them as a great Egyptian dignitary, and we'll get to it later, he said to them there in chapter 45 and verse 5: 'God did send me before you to preserve life'. Right throughout his life, from beginning to end, he had this ethos: 'God has sent me here'. When he was in Jacob's tents as a young boy doing all his chores around the house he lived unto God, when he was moved as a slave into Potiphar's house he still lived unto God. Oh, that brings home the words of the Psalmist: 'I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise will continually be in my mouth'. Do you remember David? Oh, his faithful mighty men and his armies, but there was one point in David's life when he became greatly distressed, why? Because the people spoke of stoning him. Their family had all be taken away from Ziklag, and it's alright when you have friends - but blood is thicker than water, and at that moment they were picking up the stones, perhaps even bending over, and David was distressed. The people were grieved at him, and every man for his sons, for his daughters, but listen: 'David encouraged himself in the Lord!' It doesn't say he wasn't distressed, but it says that when he became distressed he decided: 'I'll encourage myself in the Lord'.

How often do we let our circumstances dictate our disposition? How often, come on now, are we blown about by everything like chaff in the wind? When something comes into our life we let it move our feelings, our emotions, and therefore our spiritual state suffers, our faith waxes and wanes. When the sun shines we're rejoicing, but when the storm comes we despair. We say, like the disciples in the presence of the Lord Jesus Himself: 'Do You not care that we perish?'. I tell you, this is some commentary, isn't it, on the words of the apostle Paul? 'I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content'.

The second thing was, not just that he was stripped of his coat but they couldn't strip him of his character, but the Lord made all that he had to prosper. That's what it says in verse 5: 'Joseph found grace in his master's sight, and he served him: and he made him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand. And it came to pass from the time that he had made him overseer in his house, and over all that he had, that the LORD blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake'. He didn't just bless him, He blessed everybody round him! He becomes the steward of this house, verse 6: 'He left all that he had in Joseph's hand; and he knew not ought he had', he didn't even take care of it, he trusted him so much that he didn't even know what was going on, because this man was such a goodly person and well-favoured.

But there are great tests in every character's life that we have come across yet. The first great test was Abraham taking his son, his only son, Isaac up to Mount Moriah and going to sacrifice him. Last week Jacob was wrestling with that angel, that Christophany, the Lord Jesus Christ - it wasn't just an angel, it was the Lord Jesus manifest. Here we have Joseph's great test, Joseph's great turning point, the making or the breaking of this man of God. You find, I hope you're seeing it as you come through these studies, that times of great blessing are often times of great testing. Now please note, verse 11 says: 'It came to pass about this time, that Joseph went into the house to do his business; and there was none of the men of the house there within'. This was a golden opportunity to take this temptation, there was nobody around him, nobody can see him only the eye of God, and we're not conscious to that half the time - but as far as he was concerned there was nobody who knew what he was going to do, this was a well-timed temptation from the devil.

It was likely that she wouldn't declare her shame, she wasn't going to tell her husband that she was having an affair with this young man. She came, it's Potiphar's wife I'm sure you know, she came and the Bible says that she persisted day after day after day, saying: 'Come, lie with me, come, lie with me'. Jacob last week listened to his mother's temptation to dupe his father, Isaac, to take the blessing. You remember we heard that after the first command that she told him to go out and get a calf he didn't listen, but after the second voice of temptation he went. We're so like that. But for Joseph it was day after day after day after day, but yet Joseph stood firm! This is a great refreshment for me I can tell you, because in this world that we live in - and, young people, I have a great sympathy for you and what you're being bombarded with in your world through the media, through the internet, through magazines and newspapers and billboards - but we, as Christians who are saved by grace, just sinners, we can almost say that there are certain things in our life,

certain pet sins, and they're impossible to resist! We sort of get it into our head that our body can't cope with them, that we just have to give in to them, and we almost sympathise with people when they fall into sin. Now, of course, we are to put our arm around people and we are to mark that but for the grace of God we go, and we're to mark that we too can fall into the same condemnation. But as a child of God with the Holy Ghost of God in his breast, there is no excuse for sin!

We can learn from Joseph, I'll tell you, it's a great refreshment - why? Because we learn that he stood his ground and he said to this woman: 'There is none greater in this house than I', verse 9, 'neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee', he tries to reason with her, 'because thou art his wife' - 'I'm in charge of this place, your husband has been so good to me, and you're his wife'. But he says: 'The ultimate reason why I can't lie with you: how can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?'. You see, you can't reason with sin, all you can do is run away. Listen, young person, I don't know what you're going through tonight, but maybe the temptations today you feel are too strong, they're too hard, and you're too young to resist them. We seem to get ourselves into this mentality that certain sins are an unavoidable necessity, and even Christian teachers are telling that today and writing it in books, preaching it from the pulpit: 'There are just things that you have to put up with today in the life of the Christian' - listen to God's word! Listen: 'There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man'. You're nothing special! What you're going through all men have gone through, but God is faithful - God is a faithful God who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but He will with the temptation make a way of escape. What does it mean? He'll not make the temptation too heavy that you can't hold up underneath it. He'll give you a fire exit, that when your whole body, bosom and mind is on fire with temptation He'll make you able to bear it! Don't you listen to the lie of the devil, the lie of this world, that you have to give in. Here is a successful young man in a foreign land, nobody's near him that he knows, he's in a palace, he's in a secret place, this woman is offering it to him on a plate: but he resisted! I'm glad this story's in the Bible: he could resist it and he did resist it, he could overcome and he did overcome, he could be pure and he was pure and chaste before God and before men.

Now this doesn't mean you lead yourself into temptation and you stare the devil out to test how this really works, that doesn't mean that. The Lord teaches us to pray: 'Lead us not into temptation', and therefore we ought not to lead ourselves into temptation. How do we know it? In verse 12 it says he took to his heels and he fled. As F. B. Meyer says, 'It's better to lose your coat than to lose your conscience'. We are taught to run from sin, not stare it out - for if we stare it out, it will master us. We're told to run from it. The angel said to Lot and his wife as they were going out of Sodom, listen: 'Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed'. Don't look behind you! If you really know your own weakness as a sinner, when you're faced with temptation flee from all appearance of it!

I told you before of the tragic story of the evangelist who used to go down to a beach, I think it was in Miami in the United States, and speak to the prostitutes about Christ. He said this, terrible testimony: 'I went down to win them, and they won me'. We've all been at the place where we've stared temptation too long in the face and temptation has got the better of us. Can I say to you tonight - I'm not going to get through everything but let me get through this - a greater than Joseph is here. Christ, in Matthew chapter 4, was tempted like us - but listen, He was not tempted in the same way as us - why? I'll tell you why, James 1:14: 'Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed'. We're tempted, if I can say it's a bit like metal that's drawn to a magnet. If the metal is you, right? The magnet is the sin. Your natural make up, like the metal, is naturally attracted to the magnet - you're naturally drawn to it - but there was no sinful nature in our Lord Jesus Christ. Do you get it? He was tempted from without, we are tempted from without, but we have a compulsion from within that meets that temptation from without, and He didn't have it.

There are people who preach the word of God, there are people who write books in so-called evangelical Christianity, and I don't know how they do it or how they find it, but they believe that our Lord Jesus Christ

could have sinned! God forgive them! I think that is blasphemy. Let me show you how, and it should warm your heart tonight, how Joseph's temptation was different from your Lord's temptation. Joseph and you and me have to flee from it. When he tempts us, if we linger it gets the better of us, but in Matthew chapter 4 and verse 11 after the devil had come to the Lord Jesus, who was fasting 40 days and 40 nights, and offered Him bread: 'Man shall not live by bread alone'. Then he came to Him and told Him to cast Himself off the mountain and the angels would give charge over him, but the Lord's word says: 'give charge over him in God's ways', and He wouldn't have been in God's ways if He had done that. Then he took Him to a pinnacle on a high mountain and offered Him all the kingdoms of the world if He would just bow down and worship him, and He said: 'Thou shalt worship the Lord God and Him only shalt thou serve' - and the word of God testifies: then the devil leaveth him! Hallelujah! He did not need to run away from the devil, the devil ran away from Him!

Do you not see the difference? If you don't you're blind. Imagine, please, your Saviour, the only man ever in God's eye in humanity who had been born before God as God's Son, the only man ever that had lived a perfect life before God, the only man who had overcome the devil in the flesh, and all the works in His life, in His death, and in His glorious resurrection. He's the only man - let me tell you this: we major on the cross, and rightly so because Paul says we're to boast in nothing but the cross, but let me tell you this, the righteousness of Christ's life is of as much importance for your redemption and salvation as His death is. For if He had sinned once, and I'd say this: if He had one compulsion to sin, you're damned tonight! What a joy for God to look at the birth of this child, and to look at the death of it, to see His glorious resurrection, to see His ascension, to see Him coming through the gates of heaven with His own blood to sprinkle on the mercy seat and bring an entrance to you and to me. What a joy - I'll tell you this, this is the bit for us - what a joy that because of His victory, because He made the devil run, you have the power - whether you speak English, French, Dutch, German - to say this one word: 'No'! Is that not liberating? Because Jesus lived, because He died, and because He rose again, you can say: 'No'.

Do you want victory over temptation? Well, you need to pull that sword out of the sheath that Joseph pulled out. Do you know what's engraved on that sword? 'How can I do this great wickedness against the One who died for me?'. I couldn't find this hymn, I heard it on the radio today, but do you know what the chorus was? You can maybe refresh my memory: 'When Jesus comes the tempter's power is broken', isn't that wonderful? Next week we'll look at incarceration, as he goes to prison, recognition and glorification. Come back, and bring your study sheet - save us a bit of money and bring your sheet back with you next week!

Let's bow our heads, thank the Lord with me that no matter what befalls us in life we can say with Joseph: 'God is with me'. We thank the Lord that He has come in flesh to us, which He didn't to Joseph, and He's gone to Calvary for us, and He's risen again, and He's exalted in heaven waiting for us. He can't wait until we get there too. It's wonderful, isn't it? Let that soothe your heart tonight, whatever you're going through. They might mean it for evil, but God has your good at heart.

Father, we just want to thank You tonight, we want to say that we love You because You first loved us. You've chosen us in Christ, and justified us, and Lord You're going to one day glorify us - no matter what we're going through in this life, Father, help us to look to the end and to see that one day it'll be far, far better, for we will be with the Lord Jesus forever. Thank You for this tonight, we pray that we will take it with us and, Lord, that it'll help those that need helped, to the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 4

"The Jeopardy Of Joseph - Part 2"

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Genesis 37-45; 50

- 1. Alienation – Persecution – Desertion (chapter 37)**
- 2. Temptation (chapter 39)**
- 3. Incarceration (chapter 40)**
- 4. Recognition (chapter 41)**
- 5. Glorification (chapters 42-45)**

Now we're turning in our Bibles to Genesis chapter 40, and this is our fourth study in our series 'As Sparks Flying Upward' - as Job says: 'Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward'. We've looked at the agonies of Abraham, the life journey of Jacob, last week we took our first glimpse at the jeopardy of Joseph - and I hope that you've got your study sheet from last week because we're continuing at point three this evening, and God willing we'll be finishing it in our fourth study tonight.

Last week we travelled with Joseph, we began the journey of jeopardy with him in his father's dusty tents on the plain of Dothan. Then we moved on with Joseph to Potiphar's magnificent palace, and as we've travelled with this young man Joseph we've felt his betrayal as his brothers threw him down into the pit, we've felt his hurt as they sold him to Midianite merchantmen, we have shared his loneliness as he entered into a strange land, a foreigner with a foreign language, foreign culture and customs. A young country boy slave dazzled by the splendour of the royal bodyguard's mansion. Then, as he has been in that house and climbed up the status ladder of power, given charge over everything in Potiphar's house, we have felt the red blood of temptation pulsating through his conscience as Potiphar's wife propositions him and lays herself on the plate for him. Then, as we have seen the great stand that this young man takes, our spirits have rallied with approval and admiration as we hear Joseph's great words, Genesis 39 verse 9: 'How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?'. Out of the gloom of the darkness of temptation and sin, persecution, alienation and desertion, we have seen - just like his multicoloured coat - a rainbow of hope, to know that a man with God can resist temptation, a man with God on his side can stand firmly on the victory side - and that has given us hope.

We have journeyed with Joseph, I think we've journeyed with him so closely and intimately and emotionally simply because his journey is our journey too. But I hope also we have seen a greater than Joseph, I hope that we have seen and we will see tonight the Man of sorrows acquainted with grief. What a journey of jeopardy Joseph went through in his life, last week we looked at his alienation from his family and his brothers, his persecution from them, his desertion of them when he was thrown down into the pit and later sold to those Midianite merchantmen, and then his temptation in Potiphar's house.

Where we pick up this evening is where his temptation costs him, the consequences of resisting his temptation and standing up for God, and standing up against Potiphar's wife - that's where we find him this evening: incarcerated. He goes through this experience of imprisonment, incarceration, as we begin our study at chapter 40. Here we have the consequences of Joseph's faithfulness to God and indeed to his earthly master. When we realise the passions that must have been in this young man's body and mind as he is offered such a tempting proposition, we begin to realise the strength of character that was in this young man - but as we see the reaction of Potiphar's wife against Joseph we also realise what William Shakespeare meant when

he said: 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'. Because she didn't get her way, and get what she wanted - her gratification - you know the story and I'm not going to go through everything tonight like a Sunday School teacher, you know the story, most of you. But you know that Joseph was falsely accused by that woman of raping her, she was able to produce the coat that Joseph left in her hand when he fled from sin and left it behind him. Because of that he is thrown into prison.

Now the prisons in Joseph's day are not like the prisons today - they're like the Hilton hotel today - but Joseph's prison was different. In chapter 40, if you look at verses 14 and 15, you'll read these words: 'But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and show kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house: For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon'. Now literally in the Hebrew language what he calls this prison is 'a miserable hole', that's what it literally is in the Hebrew. 'I have been put into this miserable hole, and I don't deserve it'. I want you to imagine it tonight, what it must have been like, this large gloomy dungeon - no windows, paved with cobblestones, black with filth, no light getting in, no air or ventilation, no amenities to clean yourself, no separation from the other prisoners around you - and all the day long you simply drag yourself from one corner of the cell to the other because of the fetters that are round your feet and round your hands. This young man has cascaded down a rollercoaster emotionally, spiritually and physically, and he now finds himself in a miserable hole.

Many-a-time - I don't know about you - but as a Christian, when you take your stand, men disregard you because of the truth that you stand up for. Joseph took a stand and men ostracised him, men relegated him and put him into oblivion, but the teaching of this book and the teaching of Joseph's story is this: what does it matter? What does it matter if your brothers turn away from you? What does it matter if somebody else's wife turns on you? What does it matter if God is for you? This is the message that we've got to get into our minds and into our hearts in the lessons that Joseph brings to us in our modern day and age, it is this: no matter what happened Joseph, God was with Joseph! God was with Joseph in prison.

When we go into the New Testament we find that the apostle Paul, now think about this for a moment, this great apostle, this great man who gave birth to so many souls spiritually speaking, who founded so many churches and tended the churches, and poured his whole life out in care of the churches, he says on one occasion: 'All those in Asia have forsaken me'. Now quantify that in your mind for a moment, every single believer and church in Asia had turned their back on the apostle Paul! Imagine that! Yet Paul was able to say again: 'Notwithstanding, the Lord stood with me'. What does it matter if everyone turns their back on you? What does it matter? As Paul could reckon in the book of the Romans: 'If God is for us, who can stand against us?'.

Now there are many of us, especially as Christians, who are incarcerated by the opinions of others and by their estimation of you. I think this is so applicable, especially in evangelical circles and what is often called fundamentalist circles, where the grace that we have in our lives and the liberty wherewith we are to stand in that Christ has bought for us through His blood, we are robbed of it by the fact that we're looking over our shoulders because of what we think so-and-so will think of us - his estimation of us - and we're incarcerated by fear, and the fear of man bringeth a snare. We're not talking about biblical teaching, we ought to be afraid of breaking biblical principles and laws, we ought to walk that narrow road, but what I'm talking about is the tradition of the elders, what I'm talking about is the rules and regulations that men and women make up in their own minds and want to enforce on everybody else. What does it matter if you go down in men's estimation? What does it matter?

I'll tell you one thing: the man that forgets what other men think will break through with God, and break out for God. Let's focus our eyes for one moment on the Lord Jesus Christ, the Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief - we hid, as it were, our faces from Him. He came unto His own, and His own esteemed Him not.

In fact, do you know what they said about Him? 'He's a winebibber, He's a friend of publicans, He's a friend of sinners' - in Matthew chapter 12 they accuse Him of being possessed by the prince of the demons, Beelzebub, and then they say: 'You're a son of fornication, we are not of fornication' - the inference being: 'You are'. I wonder how quickly each of us would run to our defence to prove our own parentage, but the Bible says of Him: 'When He was reviled, He reviled not again'. Philippians says - oh, this is awesome! - it can only be said of the Christ: 'He made himself of no reputation'. He didn't care what they thought of Him! When they took Him and nailed Him to that bloody cross, He was heard to say: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

Now let's look back at Joseph for a moment. He interprets the butler's dream, and we're not going to go into all the intricacies of it, but as he's in prison he interprets the butler's dream and he pleads with him and asks him that he'll remember him when he goes out into the court of Pharaoh - and as soon as the cell door is closed behind the butler, the years go by and the chief butler forgot Joseph! Verse 23 of chapter 40: 'Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but he forgot him'. Now listen, child of God, tonight, I want you to mark this: you may be here this evening and you're forgotten by men, you're forgotten by kith and kin, maybe by the establishment of a movement or a church, you're in suffering, you're in loneliness - but take great comfort this evening in this: though the butler forgot Joseph, the Lord remembered him! I wonder, I just wonder, as Joseph was lying on the cold damp floor of that prison cell, was the tempter coming to him and whispering in his ear: 'Joseph, if you hadn't been as true to your old dreams of your youth and your God, you wouldn't be in this mess!'. I'm sure many-a-time the accuser came to him and said: 'If you had slept with that woman you could have been Prime Minister of Egypt now! You wouldn't be lying in this den and dungeon!'.

I want you to notice something this evening - it's very pertinent, because the devil often does tell the truth, did you know that? But he mixes truth with a little bit of error, and I think, you know, that Joseph probably could be Prime Minister of Egypt by sleeping with this woman, he could have got there that way for he could have blackmailed her. He could have got right to the top of his profession, and if he had wanted to he could have got his ends by the wrong means. But listen: if he had done that he wouldn't have been fit to be a vessel for God to use, he wouldn't have been a fit deliverer for God to raise up and to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. He would have taken the credit for all that God was doing for him, but yet in chapter 41 and verse 16 when he interprets Pharaoh's dream he says: 'It is not in me: God shall give Pharaoh an answer. I'm not the one who can interpret dreams, I'm only God's vessel' - but he couldn't have been God's vessel if he got to God's position the wrong way. He couldn't have been the deliverer that God needed to deliver Israel from famine - and here, look please, this is such an important lesson for us. Paul in his epistles speaks of us running a race, and so many times he uses a race and athletics as a metaphor to speak of the Christian race and the Christian life. Paul says within his epistles in 2 Timothy chapter 2 and verse 5, listen carefully: 'If a man also strive for masteries', if you like, 'If a man is an athlete, and running in a race, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully'.

Have you got it? It isn't the finishing of the race that is all-important, but Paul is saying - and Joseph is bearing out - that it is also the keeping of the rules along the race. It makes it more difficult, doesn't it? As we look at this character, Joseph, we see it; as we look at Paul we see it; but I want you tonight to look to the Author and the Finisher of our faith - the Lord Jesus Christ. We were in Matthew chapter 4 last week, and if we go back there we see that in one of the Lord's temptations from the devil the devil took Him to a high place and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and he said unto Him: 'All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me'. Now what did the Lord come into the world for? He had come into the world to save the kingdoms of the world, He had come into the world to save sinners - all nationalities, tribes, people, and tongues - He had come into the world to bring His kingdom to the world, and that's what He was there for. The devil came to Him and he offered Him a shortcut! But, my friends, it wouldn't do. He offered Him an easy way of getting those kingdoms, but if the Lord had taken it - and He couldn't have taken

it in all of His holiness and righteousness - but if He had taken it He wouldn't have been striving lawfully, and ultimately He would have lost absolutely everything - but, of course, that is impossible! Why? This is why: because He was holy, spotless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and as we saw last week there wasn't that old sin nature in His bosom that was drawn after these temptations. That's why we can read that not only did the Lord Jesus get the prize, but the Lord Jesus Christ strove and kept the rules lawfully. That's why the writer to the Hebrews says, listen to these words: 'Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and now is set down at the right hand of the throne of God on high'. Do you know what that tells me as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? Two things: one, there are no shortcuts in God's race; two, as the way of the cross was the way for Christ, the way of the cross leads home for us too.

It was painful, there were no quick-fixes for Joseph, for Paul, or for our Lord Jesus Christ. The word of God tells us that if we suffer with the Lord Jesus - if we suffer - we shall also reign with Him, but if we deny Him, He also will deny us. Now my friend tonight, what I'm wanting you to see this evening is: if you have started out in Christian life like Joseph, with all these dreams of what God is going to do in your life, praise the Lord for it - but perhaps, like Joseph, your dream has quickly turned into a dungeon! Can I encourage you to look at Joseph and see that his dreams were shattered, they became a dungeon, but all those shattered dreams were only a pathway to a diadem.

The defining verse in the whole Joseph's life can be found in chapter 50 of Genesis, if you will turn to it, and verse 20. Racing on to the end of the story - you remember Joseph's brothers come before him, they're looking for food in Egypt, and Joseph's brothers didn't recognise Joseph but Joseph recognised them. After a few games and playing around with them, after a while he reveals himself to them, and verse 20 he says to them: 'But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good'. Now if you get nothing out of the story and the life of Joseph, get this please! The prime example is Calvary, men meant it for evil, the Romans meant it for evil, the devils and the demons who came out of hell and no-one knows what they did to the Lord Jesus Christ there on the gallows - nobody knows, it's hidden from us - but God, hallelujah, meant it for good! They thought they were destroying the Christ, but God was bringing into being your salvation and mine - isn't that wonderful?

It's the same in all of the plan of God - child going through pain tonight, what I want you to see is that one of the keys of surviving pain and trouble in life is to accept all that comes your way as being from the hand of God, believing that it is for some purpose of good, that it just hasn't come in willy-nilly and circumstances or fortune or luck has brought this into your life, or bad luck, but believing that everything that has come on your plate has come from God. Now I'm not talking about anything satanic, I'm not talking about sin or evil influence in your life, that clearly could not be of God's permission and it can be prevented in your life - but what I'm talking about is things that come across your path that you cannot avoid. Things that have come out of nowhere and you've had no choice in them, if you accept that from the hand of God my friend, I'll tell you this: it'll be a lot easier to deal with them. If you see them as God's guests it'll be easier.

I read a poem recently by Martha Snell-Nicholson, and I want to share it with you, and please take it to your heart tonight. It's called 'Guests', listen:

'Pain knocked upon my door and said
That she had come to stay;
And though I would not welcome her
But bade her go away,
She entered in. Like my own shade
She followed after me,
And from her stabbing, stinging sword
No moment was I free.

And then one day another knocked
Most gently at my door.
I cried, "No, Pain is living here,
There is no room for more".
And then I heard His tender voice,
"'Tis I, be not afraid".
And from the day He entered in --
Oh, the difference it has made!

For though He did not bid her leave,
(My strange, unwelcome guest,)
He taught me how to live with her.
Oh, I had never guessed
That we could dwell so sweetly here,
My Lord and Pain and I,
Within this fragile house of clay
While years slip slowly by!"

Now listen, there's an awful lot of tosh that is talked about suffering and pain within Christendom today - that everybody ought to be healed, and everybody can be healed. I believe that God can and does heal, but it's not for everybody! I'll tell you why it's not: because if you take away pain, suffering, anguish, trouble, heartache, I'll tell you what you do - you take away the cross! Personally and individually in each Christian's life you take away blessing.

Let me show you, 2 Corinthians chapter 4, if you're going through trouble at this minute please take this to your heart - this is for you tonight. If you're not going through it, you're going to go through it, so take it anyway and keep it, hide it in your heart like Mary did. Second Corinthians 4 and verse 7, this is what God has revealed to us that we might understand His purpose in our pain - there is a purpose in our pain - verse 7, he's talking about the life of God in us: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels', clay pots if you like, that can break and that can crack and that can crumble, just like our old bodies, but God puts it in these vessels of clay 'that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us'. Right, if you're to be sustained through life, if you're to get through life, it's going to be only by the strength of God not the strength of your clay pot. 'We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed', now watch this, 'Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you'.

Do you see it? If you think of Gideon's pitchers filled with light, that's what being spoken of here, but covered with a bushel of a clay pot. But as we go through the years we get this knock, that bump, this turmoil, that journey that we don't like, and it starts to crack, it starts to get holes in it - but the more holes there are the more light gets out! Do you see the plan? Do you see it? This is from God, and it's so that the life of Christ can shine out of you and shine unto others, and bless others. If you and I could only see that, oh how we would see pain in a different light!

Incarceration was a blessing for Joseph, and it can be a blessing for you. Listen to those lines of the poem again:

'Oh, I had never guessed
That we could dwell so sweetly here,
My Lord and Pain and I,
Within this fragile house of clay
While years slip slowly by!'

It's wonderful, isn't it? Then we find that Joseph didn't live all the time in the prison, he got out of the prison. If you turn to chapter 41 we find his recognition, because for this man Joseph, his day came. You remember that Pharaoh couldn't interpret his own dream, he had this dream about the thin and the full ears of corn, the fat and the thin cattle - and the chief butler, when he couldn't interpret the dream and nobody around Pharaoh could interpret it, at that moment the chief butler remembered Joseph. Joseph was brought out of the prison into the palace, he interpreted the dream, he told Pharaoh that a famine was coming to Egypt and they were going to have to get hoards of grain put away for the future, and after that Joseph was swiftly promoted to the first place in the kingdom of Egypt beside Pharaoh.

Now imagine this, he's just come in a moment of a few months perhaps, he's come from the depths of a dungeon to the height and delight of the diadem of Egypt. He's wearing Pharaoh's ring on his finger, he's got Pharaoh's robe on his back, he's got Pharaoh's gold around his neck - what a lifestyle! Anything he would have wanted would have been given to him. His palaces, Joseph's palace's, would have consisted of numberless rooms, spacious courts and halls filled with palm trees, sycamores and acacia trees. Carved furniture out of every wood that you can imagine, adorned with ebony and gilded with gold. The scent of perfume wafting around the rooms, and flowers to be seen in every corner. Thick carpet for you to sink into of the finest wools and animal skins. Numberless servants, musicians and choristers filling the air with pleasure. This man Joseph, from the depths of hell to the heights - it's remarkable, isn't it?

What is more remarkable tonight, and this is what I want you to see, is: prosperity never changed Joseph! A full cup is hard to carry, and prosperity often makes men forget God, but not Joseph - why? I'll tell you why, the Psalmist tells us why - turn quickly to Psalm 105 and verse 18, speaking of Joseph in prison: 'Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron'. Now that literally could be translated like this: 'Iron entered into his soul', as he was in prison God strengthened this young man, and as he was in the palace he could look back and he could remember God in his sufferings and in his success as well. There's not many of us can do that. Oh yes, many a man cries out to God, I've heard them say it, they're lying on a sick bed really seriously ill and they say: 'David, if God would only raise me up again I would do anything and everything for God' - and God raises them up and they do nothing for God! It's hard to remember God in your sufferings and to remember Him in your success as well.

I think he was a little bit spoiled in his youth. His father loved him, he got special treatment. He was too proud, perhaps, of his multicoloured coat and of the great dreams that he was having, and about his brothers bowing down to him, but now he has gone through the school of suffering and now his hand is steady to hold the rod of rule. You see, suffering - this is what I want you to get - suffering not only let's the light shine out, but suffering does something else: negatively it purges the dirt and the sin and the dross out, and positively it brings into the life of the believer maturity and purity. It's not enough just for the light to come out, but God wants to take the sin out of us, God wants to purge away the dross and the dirt, He wants to make us grow up and mature in our faith and become more pure. Some of you men will know how metal is purified. If you don't know, it's simply heated so hot that the metal itself becomes white. Then, the hotter it gets across the top of the white hot liquid, there's like a skin or a surface, a portion of what is called slag or dross. That dross and slag needs to be wiped away by the worker, and he has to put on asbestos gloves to wipe it all away. But it is the removing of the slag that makes the metal pure, and it is the heat of our trials that brings to the surface our sin, the dross that binds us, and it is the nail-pierced hand of the Saviour that comes and wipes it all away.

I was doing a bit of research today and I found out that a bar of steel is worth about £3.50, an ordinary bar of steel. But when you make that steel into an ordinary pair of horseshoes it becomes worth £7.00. The blacksmith heats it and he hammers it, and it doubles in price from £3.50 to £7.00. That same bar that's worth £3.50, if it's manufactured into needles the value rises for the one bar to £250 - and yet if the same bar worth £3.50 is made into delicate springs for expensive watches, listen, it is worth £175,000! The same bar of steel is made more valuable by being cut down to its proper size, being passed through one blast furnace after another again and again, being hammered, manipulated, beaten and pounded, finished and polished, until it's ready for the work that it's intended for.

That is what Job meant when he said these words: 'He knoweth the way that I take, and when He hath tried me I shall come forth as gold'. Our Lord Jesus Christ, a greater than Joseph and a greater than all of us, as I have already said was perfect, separate from sinners, undefiled - but do you know what amazes me? It's an absolute mystery to me: He in His humanity still went through a process, He still went through a process. Hebrews 5 and verses 7 to 9, listen as I read it to you, speaking of the Lord Jesus in Gethsemane: 'Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him'. He became perfect! You say: 'I thought He was perfect?' - He is perfect, it's not talking about moral perfection. He couldn't get any more perfect morally, He is God incarnate, but what it is talking about in His humanity is the complete obedience of going to the cross. His life would not have been complete if He had not gone to the cross. Think of it, your Lord Jesus Christ had a process like that! It's wonderful.

Finally Joseph was recognised, and then we find in chapters 42 through to 45 that he's glorified. Glorification, for there was one day that the famine came to Egypt and it also came to the land of Israel - but the land of Israel had not prepared for it the way that Egypt had done. Joseph's brothers had come before him and appeared before him to buy some corn, and the years and the culture of Egypt had disfigured Joseph to them, he was disguised - but Joseph recognised them. We haven't got time to go into all the tests that he went through with his brothers, just to say that at length Joseph probed their consciences, aroused their fears and their guilt, and then eventually after all of it he disclosed himself to them and they wept together in repentance and in forgiveness.

Now what I want you to see tonight, without going into too much depth with the end part of the story, is simply this: all of Joseph's life was leading up to this one moment, everything was moving like great waves in his life's biography bringing him to that one point where he would feed the children of Israel with corn and the people of God would live on. Joseph had been born, he'd been given his dreams, he'd gone down into prison, he'd risen up into Potiphar's house, he was accused, tempted, put into prison and eventually into Pharaoh's house - all to get him to this moment in time, ultimately to make sure that Israel one day would give birth to it's Messiah.

Please see this tonight as you're going through troubles and trials in your life: if Joseph had not been sold into Egypt, if he had not resisted temptation, if he had not been cast into prison, if he had not been forgotten by the butler and everybody else, if he had not risen to Pharaoh's high ranks, you would not have your Saviour! Oh, we must learn above all things the providence of Almighty God in our lives - that everything that we go through day after day is related to the end of our lives. Boy, if we would number our days, number our days and realise that everything is toward the end - all of your life must be related to the end, and you can't judge what you're going through now because you don't know what it will be like at the end! That's why Peter said: 'Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth,

though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory' - when? - 'at the appearing of Jesus Christ'. Do you see it? It's all toward the end! Your Lord's life was related to the end, for He being found in fashion as a man, humbled Himself, became obedient unto death - why? Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, given Him a name which is above every name - why? That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Do you see that it's all related to the end? That's why we're told in Hebrews chapter 12: 'Look unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God'. Listen: 'For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds - child, don't faint! Don't give up! Consider Him!

He was an overcomer, Joseph was an overcomer, and you can be an overcomer tonight. When Joseph's two sons were laid before him he named one of them Manasseh and he named the other one Ephraim. He named one Manasseh because he said: 'God has made me to forget all my toil!' How could you forget about all that he went through? How did Joseph end his life? Well, like his father who lay on his deathbed and said: 'Bury me not in Egypt', Joseph in chapter 50, if you look at it, and in verse 25 he says: 'Ye shall carry up my bones from hence'. He's basically saying the same thing as his father: 'Don't bury me in Egypt. You're going to one day go into the promised land, and you're going to take my bones with you'. The amazing thing is that these are the only words that are repeated in the New Testament, the only words of Joseph. In Hebrews 11:22 where it says: 'By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones'. He didn't want them left in Egypt, and the children of Israel on to the promised land.

Now that is tremendous to me, I'll tell you why: because at the very beginning Joseph was a dreamer, and at the very end he's still a dreamer for God! He's looking prophetically in faith at a day when Israel will have their own land. One hundred and ten years, as he lies on his deathbed, have stolen away his youthful excitement, and pain has left an indelible mark on his features. It's 93 years since he was lifted from the pit of Potiphar's prison, it's 80 years since he went before Pharaoh in all of his glory as the Prime Minister of Egypt, yet still at the very end of all of this hazardous journey his eyes are firmly fixed upon God. Isn't it wonderful? When Israel, as we read in the Old Testament, returns out of the exodus from Egypt into Canaan, Joseph's dust is brought with them to the promised land.

Do you know how I conclude Joseph? Listen: he never ever forgot that he was born of God, he never forgot that he suffered for God, that he reigned in Egypt for God, and as he lies with death engulfing him he dies for God. Roman 8 as we close, let me read it to you as you have in your mind that he was born for God, and he suffered for God, and he reigned for God, and he died for God - you take this to yourself tonight suffering soul: 'And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose' - listen - 'For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called' - we are born of God! - 'and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who', or what, 'can stand against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?'

It's wonderful, isn't it? They might mean it for evil, but God has meant for your good.

Our Father, we pray that we will finish the race like Joseph finished it. Our Father, we pray that not only will we finish the course, but that we will have kept the faith, that we will have kept to the rules along the way, and, our Father, that we will be crowned with glory so that we will take that crown and cast it at the feet of

our Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, let us not be empty-handed, but our Father let us live and run and finish and suffer and die for the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 5

"The Maze Of Moses - Part 1"

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Exodus 2

1. *The Entrance (verses 1-9)*
2. *The Promising Start (verse 10)*
3. *The Dead-End (verses 11-25)*

It's good to welcome you all to our Bible Reading here in the Iron Hall this evening. Thank you for coming, and to all those who are visiting with us we especially give you a warm welcome, and trust that you will enjoy this next hour of fellowship and Bible study together with us. We're turning to the book of Exodus. We have been studying these studies: 'As Sparks Flying Upwards', and I don't want to labour you by explaining every week the reason for our title, but maybe it's your first night here and you don't understand why we've called it 'As Sparks Flying Upwards'. There's a little in verse in the book of Job which says that man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward, and we have been looking at men in the Bible who were born unto trouble. Every man is born unto trouble, but the Holy Spirit through His word has given us individual characters who many of us know of from our Sunday School days, but we have sought in these recent weeks to look into their lives in a little detail - not just to do a character study of every aspect of their life, but specifically to home in on the problems and the trials that they have gone through in their life, and identify them with what we go through in our life and try to derive from these studies strength for ourselves as we go through the turmoil of life.

We've looked at 'The Agonies of Abraham', 'The Life Journey of Jacob', we looked at Joseph and his life story in two studies, and tonight we're in our fifth study and it's probably going to take two parts at least, and we're looking at 'The Maze of Moses'. The Maze of Moses, and our reading is Exodus chapter 2. Moses himself, we believe, writes: "And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi. And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink. And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him. And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it. And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children. Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the woman took the child, and nursed it. And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water. And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. And when he went out the second day, behold, two men of the Hebrews strove together: and he said to him that did the wrong, Wherefore smitest thou thy fellow? And he said, Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? Intendest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian? And Moses feared, and said, Surely this thing is known. Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the

face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian: and he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters: and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away: but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock. And when they came to Reuel their father, he said, How is it that ye are come so soon to day? And they said, An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and also drew water enough for us, and watered the flock. And he said unto his daughters, And where is he? Why is it that ye have left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread. And Moses was content to dwell with the man: and he gave Moses Zipporah his daughter. And she bare him a son, and he called his name Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land. And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them".

In recent weeks we have been studying in a little detail the life of Joseph. In chapter 1 of Exodus and verse 8 we read these words: "Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph". You remember that Joseph had risen to very high status in the land of Egypt, but there came a time and an age and a generation when a new king, a new Pharaoh, arose in Egypt who had forgotten and did not know Joseph. We read in the book of Exodus that this king cruelly persecuted Israel, he enslaved them, he ordered many of them to death, and especially those Hebrew children as we find in verse 10 of chapter 1 if you look at it, he said: "Come on, let us deal wisely with them; lest these Hebrews multiply, and it come to pass, that, when there falleth out any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land. Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they were grieved because of the children of Israel. And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour: And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field: all their service, wherein they made them serve, was with rigour. And the king of Egypt spake to the Hebrew midwives, of which the name of the one was Shiphrah, and the name of the other Puah: And he said, When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the stools for delivering the children; if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter, then she shall live".

This Pharaoh who had forgotten Joseph, who had forgotten the Hebrews, was concerned that as the Hebrews multiplied even under bondage that one day they would join with Egypt's enemies and Egypt would be overrun by the Hebrews. He instructed the midwives to take the children that were males who were born and to slay them. But as you read on in this story and look at verse 17 of chapter 1, it says: 'the midwives feared God'. What a wonderful statement: 'the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive'. In verse 20 we read: 'Therefore God dealt with the midwives gracefully' - He dealt well with them. Isn't it wonderful to know, right at the outset of our story, that God, when He sees obedience in one of His children, deals well with us. But you know, God's grace is right throughout the whole of the book of Exodus. Indeed the name 'Exodus' means 'deliverance', deliverance out of bondage, deliverance unto salvation as God's people. We see God's grace in chapter 2, if you look at it, and verses 24 and 25: 'God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them'. God had grace toward His people.

If you are familiar with the Scriptures, Old Testament and New, you will know that God's grace usually takes the form of a man. God usually personifies His grace in the person of a deliverer, a patriarch, a judge, a prophet, a priest or a king - and then finally in none other than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. It has always been that way right from the very beginning in Genesis chapter 3 and verse 15, after Adam and Eve fell in the Garden of Eden you remember the promise that God gave them in all of their depravity and shame, He

said: 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel'. Immediately Abel was born, didn't Eve look toward her son as a deliverer? When Abel was slain then she looked towards Seth, and ever since that day every man-child that was born to the people of God, every mother in Israel saw that child as the possible deliverer, as the possible messiah - and of course it was all pointing toward the Messiah, the One whom we read of in the New Testament. Galatians 4 verse 4: 'But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law'.

Does it not make your heart rejoice this evening that we do not have a God who is a distant God? We do not have a God who is divorced from our life's experience, divorced from the pit of sin that we find ourselves continually falling into, we do not have a God who is disinterested in us, but we have a God who is an interposing Saviour! We have a God who is known in history to intervene in the affairs of men, and to be a saving God - a God who we can say is the God of our salvation!

God's man in this particular epoch was Moses. We read in this chapter that Moses was born of godly parents, and then Moses was hidden for three months in the bulrushes in a little ark. He was set afloat in a basket down the river Nile, you read in verse 3. But isn't it a wonderful spiritual principle that we've been finding out in these weeks in our studies, and I want to recap a little bit again - I want you to realise why we are entering into these character studies, and it is simply this: the whole of biblical revelation and truth testifies to us, as the children of God in our epoch, in our generation and dispensation, that out of the worst, the most tragic, terrible circumstances of life, the Almighty God of heaven can bring immeasurable blessing. That's what you've got to see! Don't be burdened, and bogged down, and drowning underneath all the facts and figures and character relations that we'll give to you every week - but if you see this you will see the message that is upon my heart, and is right throughout the whole of Scripture, that out of the greatest tragedies in all of humanity God, our God, can bring blessing!

Out of the agonies of Abraham, out of the life journey of Jacob, out of the jeopardy of Joseph and his great journey from extreme depression, extreme helplessness, right through prison and slavery, false accusation, incarceration, desertion and everything that we looked at: God, who is God and who is our God, can work all things together for good to them that love Him, to them who are the called according to His purpose. Now grasp that tonight, before we look any further at Moses or any more characters, would you grasp that this evening: our God can bring triumph out of the deepest ashes!

Notice something else, and this is terribly important as we look at the character of Moses. Not only can God bring great blessing out of great cursing, but these men that we've been studying - and especially Moses tonight - would not have become the great men of God, and the great deliverers that they were, if it was not for their trials! If God had not led them down these difficult roads they would never have been the great Abraham, the father of faith; Jacob would never have become Israel and been the father of the nation; Joseph would never have arisen to the throne of Pharaoh and been able to administer all of the relief in famine, not only to Egypt but to Israel - and we would not have our Messiah today! You've got to realise this: the trials, and the problems, and the trouble that they all faced made them who they became.

Now, if you go little bit further and ask me: 'Why is that?', that's when I'm stuck! I don't know the intricacies of why it has to be this way, but that's the way it is. Perhaps we have a little bit of an answer. Harold Kushner, I don't know whether you remember this book or have ever heard of it, but he wrote a book entitled: 'When Bad Things Happen to Good People' - when bad things happen to good people, and this is the mystery of suffering and pain. Why is it that the righteous seem to suffer, and the wicked and the ungodly seem to flourish? That was a great theme within the Psalms of David at times. R.C. Sproul, the theologian and Bible teacher, was once asked: 'Why do bad things happen to good people?'. Listen to his answer, because I think it's excellent, he said: 'I haven't met any good people yet, so I don't know'. 'I haven't met any

good people yet, so I don't know' - of course, his definition of 'good' is 'perfection' I think. We're not talking about people who are moral and kind and neighbourly, but what he is saying in a theological sense is: 'There is none good but God, there is none perfect, there is none that seeketh after God, but every human being born into the human race is conceived in their mother's womb in sin, born in sin, shapen in iniquity - depraved in every area of life, maybe not as far as they could be, but they are warped in everything'.

So, bad things don't happen to good people, bad things essentially happen to sinners - and as we look at it we see, therefore, a little bit clearer the paradox that there is in pain, that God lets pain into believer's lives, into righteous people's lives who are saved by the grace of God, for the purpose of making bad people better people! Do we not see that at the very end of Joseph's life? In Genesis 50 and verse 20 he said to his brothers who had sold him into slavery and put him down in the pit and caused him to suffer everything that he went through in his lifetime: 'But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive'. 'You meant it for evil, but God wanted me here for His own purpose, for His own reason, and that reason was blessing'.

In the ways of God, which you know too well - I hope - are not our ways, and in the thoughts of God which are not your thoughts, these trials are necessary for are good. Don't you be standing up like a spoilt child and saying: 'I don't deserve this'. Don't be saying: 'Why is God putting me through this? How have I earned this?', because these trials - if we believe God, and if we are believers we must believe His word - they are purging influences upon our life, they make men and women of God out of us, they mature us, they bring us through the fiery furnace, and like Job who has given us the whole title of this series - he could say: 'God in heaven knoweth the way that I take, and when I am tried He shall bring me forth as gold'. You've got to see this through these studies, please don't miss it - and as we look at Moses this evening, God can bring blessing out of the greatest tragedies, but more than that: God brings maturity and God brings purity. That means that there is a divine purpose in your pain. You may see through a glass darkly as you're sitting in your problems and trials tonight, and you may ask why - but praise God, I don't know why, you may not know why, but there is One in heaven who knows why!

Often in personal conversation with people that are going through problems I liken our walk through trial and trouble to a maze. I've likened Moses' life to that this evening in our study. If you've ever gone through a maze you'll know how confusing it is - you don't know where to turn, right or left, or go back where you came from, or go forward, you have fear that you're going to get even more lost. It's awful until you eventually get out, if you ever get out. But one way of getting through a maze successfully is if you have a friend standing on a hill, and that friend can see down from the heavens, down on your maze - they can see where you're coming from, they can see where you need to go - and if you listen to their directions you will get through and out the other end of the maze successfully. Is that not the way our lives are? We hit brick walls now and then, but there is One above who can see the reason for it all. He can see how He's going to bring us through it.

That's what Moses' life was like. Moses' life, as we read it, is a story of deliverance. God took him through a maze. You might say: 'Why did God take him through a maze? Why didn't God take him through an exit, an emergency tunnel straightaway and get all the people out, and get it over with? Why does God take you through a maze? Would an escape, a fire exit not be better?'. Well, you see Exodus is not just the story of the deliverance of a people, but the book of Exodus is a story of the development of a person. Quick fixes, easy solutions, easy spiritual results do not make developed, mature people - for Moses that took a maze, and for us I think it takes a maze as well. I think we can identify with Moses' maze this evening.

The first thing I want you to note is his entrance into this maze of this tremendous life that he had. We've read it in verses 1 to 4 or so in chapter 2, and it strikes me every time I look at a patriarch or a character in the Old Testament how many of these men of God were chosen from birth. You remember Jeremiah, we

have a little bit of a peek into the womb of his mother, and God says: 'Before I formed thee in the belly, I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nation'. The whole of the word of God is filled with miraculous births - you have Isaac, Jacob, Samuel, Samson; in the New Testament, John the Baptist, and then you have the wonderful birth of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself in the virgin conception. In one sense Moses' birth was no different, for his entrance into the world was certainly extraordinary - it was supernatural. Not his conception and his physical birth, but what we read around the events of his birth.

I believe that this woman, Moses' mother, was a godly woman. I'll give you three reasons why I believe she was a godly woman. The first is this: she chose God's will over her natural emotions - she chose God's will over her natural emotions. Imagine you putting your little baby boy into a little ark of bulrushes and pushing him down the river Nile - imagine that! But she knew it was God's will, and there are times in our lives as mothers, as fathers, even regarding ourselves and our own problems, when we have to let God's will conquer over our emotions - the things that we feel we should be doing, rather than what we know we should be doing. The second reason I believe she was a godly mother is that she trusted in God's sovereign and supernatural protection. Do you think that she would have pushed that child down the Nile if she didn't have faith in God to believe that the sovereign supernatural God had providence to protect her child? Of course she did, it was by faith that she pushed him down the river! Thirdly, and probably most of all the reason I think she was a very godly mother is that she was deciding for heaven and not for earth. Do you see that? She was deciding for heaven and not for earth. I've told you before that the desire of all Hebrew women was to give birth to messiah, to be the mother of a great deliverer - even since Eve, as we've already said, since Genesis 3:15 every Hebrew Jewish woman wanted to be the one who would bring Messiah into the world. In a sense all of these deliverers in the Old Testament were messiahs - messiahs with a small 'm' - pointing toward the Messiah, the Messiah, the Deliverer of God.

I believe that this mother of Moses was no different than any other Hebrew woman. It was in her heart, she wanted to be the one to bring forth the deliverer. It was the same as Hannah, remember Hannah? At the end of the books of Joshua and Judges we find that there was no king in Israel, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes - do you think that Hannah was ignorant of that? Of course she wasn't! A godly woman and her husband, and there she was praying to God - was she just wanting to fill her barren womb? Of course she wasn't, she wanted a son, a child who would come and glorify God, and be a deliverer for the people who had no deliverer. So Moses' mother was the same. Hannah trusted her son Samuel up to Eli, to the service of the temple, for that's why he was born. She trusted him into the home of debauchery, where Eli's sons were in such abomination and pagan idolatry - but she trusted in His providence, in His supernatural protection and care.

Let me say to us all this evening, that more than ever in the generation in which we live God needs women, God needs men, God needs parents and Christians who will point young people and children in the direction of godliness. The question that I feel needs to be asked, and must be asked is: what is more important to us tonight? Parent, what is more important to you: that your child passes the 11-plus, that they go to university, or that they go to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for them? What is more important? We have a society and an education system and a status ladder that says you're worthless if you don't know something, if you don't have qualifications, if you don't have a skill. It is only right that we push our children in that direction, and I'm not decrying education and all of these things, but the question is this this evening that we all must face: what is most important?

There are hard choices that young people have to make, and parents have to make, but there is no greater choice than this: that the infinitely more important thing is that we point our children to Christ, that we push them toward the things of God, and that we give our children to God! Don't make the mistake, as many Christians in a modernistic age are doing, of putting all their energies into their sons and daughters and

encouraging their children to do well in everything but the things of God. Then when they become career people, and all they're interested in is a big car and a flashy house, they're standing asking themselves: 'Why has my son and daughter no interest in the things of God?'. Let us give our children to God - even then they have to make their own choice, but let's do what we can for them.

But another spiritual principle here that warms my heart and is such a blessing to me, and we've seen it already in our studies - when you give something to God, God always gives you back in abundance. Do you believe that? The Lord Jesus said it in Luke chapter 6:38: 'Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again'. Can you see that mother pushing that child down the Nile, giving up that little boy to God? Look at chapter 2 with me for a moment, verse 7. Pharaoh's daughter comes down to bathe in the river Nile, and one of her servants spots this little package in the water. 'When she had opened it', verse 6, 'she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept'. She recognised, from its complexion probably, that it was one of the Hebrew children. Then in verse 7 his sister, Miriam, who had followed the little boat all the way down the Nile, she said to Pharaoh's daughter: 'Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages'!

Now watch this: she gave her child to God, and how painful that must have been, but God gave her child back and He paid her wages to look after it! What about that! Don't be afraid of giving things to God. Remember Abraham gave up Isaac, he was ready to plunge the dagger into his young son's breast, and what did God do? He stopped him - and because he was willing to give Isaac, God gave Isaac back - and God gave Abraham all the promises that his seed would be like the sand of the sea shore, and the stars of the sky, and He gave him an A+ in the test of faith! God is no man's debtor, and still today them that honour God, He says: 'I will honour'. Believe me, if you give everything to God you'll not lose out. I think, and I know I labour on this always, but I think that after salvation there is no more important truth - I think that this is the summary of all practical spiritual things, it is the secret of the spiritual life if there is any secret, and it's an open secret: child of God, give everything to God! That's it! You can talk about second blessings, you can talk about everything under the sun, but my friend give everything to God - that is the secret if there is any secret, it is this:

'All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give.
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.

I surrender all,
All to Thee my blessed Saviour,
I surrender all!

If you do it you'll not lose out. Well, that was his entrance into life. We don't read too much really about his life, but we find that at least this happened: after Pharaoh's daughter took the little babe he had a promising start in life. Your second point: he had a princely, promising start in life. Now I'm sure that this, as we read it here, would not have been the road that Moses' mother would have chosen - for him to go into the royal palace of the godlessness of Egypt, in fact the oppressor of his own slave parents, the enemy of the Hebrews. Yet, as I've told you recently on our Sunday mornings, Augustine had to go to pagan Italy to be converted even against the prayers of his own mother! God does not always answer our prayers in the way that we look for them to be answered, but He always gives us good things.

So, Moses' ascendancy to Egypt's royal family, we must believe, was all of God. Do you believe that? We know little about the first 40 years of his life in the palace, but we know this much: Moses was no mean man. As soon as he came into that home as a little babe in the bulrushes he became, as it were, the grandson of Pharaoh. When he was old enough we believe he was probably sent and educated in college in Egypt, a college or university which had grown, scholars tell us, around the Temple of the Sun - it has been called the Oxford University of Egypt. Turn with me to Acts chapter 7 for a moment, Acts chapter 7, and in Stephen's great sermon before he was martyred for the Lord he says, going through Jewish history and how God had led His people, in verse 22 speaking of Moses: 'Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians'. And you see even here in Egypt God was fitting Moses for the days that would lie ahead, God was training him to be a ruler - not a ruler in Egypt, but a ruler in the new state and nation of Israel. But look at Acts chapter 7 for a moment, because we see that Moses was more than a royal student. Stephen tells us that he was a statesman and he was a soldier, it says that he 'was mighty in words and in deeds' - the words are his statesmanship, and the deeds are his prowess as a soldier.

So here is a scholar, here is a prince, here is an eloquent statesman, here is a courageous valiant soldier. Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that while Moses was still in his early manhood the Ethiopians invaded Egypt. The routed army of the Egyptians had been threatened and destroyed, and the Ethiopians were going to destroy the city, the Egyptian city of Memphis, and in a panic all the Egyptian leaders consulted the oracles of Egypt. On the recommendation, we are told, of the oracles, Moses was entrusted with the command of the royal troops. He immediately took the field, surprised and defeated the enemy, captured their cities and returned to Egypt laden with the spoils of victory. That's what history tells us! This was a great young scholar, a royal prince, a noble statesman, and a valiant victorious soldier. You would be forgiven for thinking that things in many ways couldn't have got any better for Moses. For the first 40 years of his life he lived a royal life with the foremost positions of Egyptian state open to him. You would think surely it would be onward and upward for this young man - but we read that it was not the case! It was not to be, because buried deep in the soul and in the heart of the young man Moses was his identity.

This is wonderful, look at Acts 7 and verse 23, it says that 'it came into Moses' heart to visit his brethren'. The flame of his identity, who he really was in the eyes of his Hebrew brethren and in the eyes of Almighty God, was beginning to be kindled as an unquenchable fire as he daily heard the cry of the slaves groaning in the brickfields under the lash of the whip. He heard it, and it had an echo - deep called unto deep in his breast, and I'm sure that there was a period where he went through a wrestling between his royal statehood and who he really was deep down in his heart. You know the story. Can you imagine the courage that it would have taken for this man, and what it would cost him to go to his adopted mother, Pharaoh's daughter his benefactress, and break the news to her that all he had been raised for, all he had been groomed for was not his destiny after all, but he would rather choose the citizenship of a slave nation!

Josephus tells us that this Pharaoh had no children apart from this daughter. He tells us that his daughter had no children apart from the adopted Moses, and the likelihood is that Moses would have succeeded the throne of Egypt. But he came into that throne room and talked to his adopted mother, and he denied it all! F.B. Meyer, the great Bible scholar, says: 'The noble ingredients of Moses' resolve was threefold' - I want you to listen to this, how he came to this decision, and how he plucked up the courage to go through with it. First of all this decision was made in the full maturity of his powers. Moses had nothing to gain through this decision, he had everything in Egypt, but he was descending from the steps of the loftiest throne in the world - the number one superpower - and he was letting it all go. Secondly, it was made when the fortunes of the children of Israel were at its lowest ebb. He was going from the highest heights and riches of splendour to the lowest depravity of humanity. Imagine it: he was giving up a palace for a mud hut, he was giving up the finest food for the coarsest bread, he was travelling from respect and honour to hatred and contempt, from treasures to poverty and hardship. Yet he bowed his head beneath the yoke, though it was rough, though it was heavy, he bowed his head beneath it because it was God's will and it was his calling! Thirdly, this was a

decision made when the pleasures of sin seemed the most fascinating. There was nothing that Moses could not lay his hand upon and sin with, but he denied it. Fourthly, and perhaps most of all, it was made decisively. He was not double-minded in his decision. If it was you or if it was me, we would probably use our influence as Pharaoh or a prince in the palace to help our blood relatives, the Hebrews, in slavery - but not him! He made a clean cut, he cut himself off completely.

You might say: 'Oh, I wish I could be like the man Moses', do you? I do! How could he do it? Let me show you how he could do it, turn with me to Hebrews 11, Hebrews 11. Something tells me we're not going to get through this first study tonight - but let's take our time over this because this is very important. Hebrews 11 and verse 24: 'By faith Moses, when he was come to years', 40 years of age, 'refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible'. How did he do it? How did he make this decision in the full maturity of all his powers, in the fortunes of the children of Israel that were at a low ebb? How did he do it when all the pleasures of sin were open to him? How was he so decisive in cutting himself off? I'll tell you: by faith! Don't miss that!

To define it for you plainly and simply: he believed God. He believed God's promise to his fathers, he believed God's promise to Abraham that after 400 years of bondage in Egypt that his people would be delivered. He believed - he must have known by the dates on the calendar - that the period was nearly expired. He had faith because of God's word! You know that, and I know it, in the light of the New Testament, that faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God. He had heard the word of God in his heart, he had heard the word of God from the prophets, and he believed that God had something more dazzling for the child of faith than the royal palace of Egypt had for the child of Pharaoh. Faith! Hebrews 11 verse 1: 'the evidence of things not seen'. Abraham was told to go out from his home and to walk into the nothingness of unknowing, and he walked in faith not knowing where he was going. Joseph went in faith, Jacob went in faith, these were all men and women of faith - and here we have Moses not knowing what he was going to perhaps, but knowing certainly what he was leaving, but he chose to believe God.

Isn't that wonderful? When you see by faith what the eye cannot see - the evidence of things not seen? What the ear cannot hear, what cannot be conceived by the heart of any man, and you cheerfully take the path of affliction to receive what you cannot see, what you cannot prove - but the only proof and the only evidence you have of it is faith! Oh, if we could be like Moses and we could deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow Christ, as Moses did. Note that now, I'm not confusing dispensations here - it says that he followed Christ! It was the reproach of Christ that he counted greater riches than the treasures of Egypt. He counted the Judgement Seat of Christ a better reward than all he could get on the throne of Pharaoh, and by faith he forsook Egypt and he endured, seeing Him who is invisible.

That's the kind of faith that great men and women of God have had. To put it bluntly: they see what most other people can't see, and that's faith. Moses came to a dead end, and we haven't time to look at it tonight - but isn't it wonderful, and isn't it strange, that in the maze of God, after his entrance into it, after he was started promisingly, he was doing well, everything seemed to be looking up for Moses, isn't it strange that God took him out of all those riches? God took him away from the palaces, God stripped him of it all, and it was a voluntary surrender for him in many ways, but it was according to the sovereign will and way of God - and that happens to you and me, doesn't it? There are choices that you and I have to make at times, and they cost us. There are times that we don't even make the choices, but the disciplining hand of God, a loving Father, comes into our life and He takes away some of the crutches that we have been using, some of the things that we have a love affair with and are on the mean altar of our hearts.

Why does He do it? He does it because it's better - do you believe that? That's what Moses believed: it was better to forsake Egypt and to suffer as a slave. Let me read you a poem by Martha Snell-Nicholson, I read one recently to you, it's from a book called 'Ivory Palaces' and the poem is called 'Treasures'. It sums up everything that Moses has experienced in his life hitherto, and what some of you are experiencing even tonight. Listen, 'Treasures':

'One by one God took them from me,
All the things I valued most,
Until I was empty-handed;
Every glittering toy was lost.

And I walked earth's highways, grieving.
In my rags and poverty.
Till I heard His voice inviting,
"Lift those empty hands to Me!"

And I turned my hands toward heaven,
And He filled them with a store
Of His own transcendent riches,
Till they could contain no more.

And at last I comprehended
With my stupid mind and dull,
That God could not pour His riches
Into hands already full!"

Have you realised that? That God cannot pour His riches into hands already full? It's the same today as it ever has been, that whoever will save his life for his own sake, saith the Saviour, will lose it; and whoever loses life for My sake will save it. Moses was a man who could sing these words:

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold
I'd rather be His than have riches untold.
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands,
I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hands

I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause,
I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause.
I'd rather have Jesus than worldwide fame,
I'd rather be true to His holy name.

Than to be the King of a vast domain,
And be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today'.

Our Father, we know that what we're talking about this evening is the road that the Master trod. It is that road of humiliation, where He who was rich for our sakes became poor, who stepped from that heavenly throne out of the ivory palaces into a world of woe. We thank Thee for that love that is typified in Moses, but perfected in our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that we will learn to take up our cross, denying ourselves, and following Him. In His lovely name we pray, Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 6

"The Maze Of Moses - Part 2"

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The book of Exodus, and if you turn to chapter 2, we're not going to have an initial reading at the beginning of our meeting but we will be delving into a few Scriptures here and there within the Bible - in the New Testament and in the Old. We'll be particularly concentrating on chapters 2, 3 and 4 of the book of Exodus. Our study - apologies this evening for the lack of study sheets, if you haven't got one, I think you haven't got one. I forgot it was St Patrick's Day today and all the offices are off, so apologies for that - but if you get a piece of paper it will do the job as well, and I'll outline all the points to you this evening.

Last week we began our study 'The Maze of Moses', and if you like we looked at the early years in Moses' life, the first 40 years of his biographical history. Of course, you know that the first 40 years of his life were lived in Egypt. As a little baby he was floated up the Nile, and he was found in those bulrushes by the daughter of Pharaoh. We looked at his upbringing for the first 40 years of his life in the royal palaces of Egypt, and we saw how remarkable the early life, those early years of this great patriarch Moses were. If there is any theme - there are many themes that we could take out of the life of Moses, and I want to say that at the outset this evening: I'm not going to analyse and go into every spiritual detail and lesson out of the life of Moses, that would take a longer series than two weeks - maybe more than 20 weeks. But if there is one overarching theme in the whole of the life of Moses, and I think we could say this in every character study that we have been looking at so far in this series, it is the theme of providence - the providence of Almighty God: how our God is a sovereign God. He is a ruling God. We have looked week after week at how our God is the God who can bring all things together for good to them that love Him, to those who are the called according to His purpose. How people may mean things for bad, but God can even work bad things, that men mean for bad, through for our good.

Of course we see this very obviously in the life of Moses. We saw it last week: his mother surrendered that little child, floated him up the river, yet his mother got that little child back with wages to look after the child, to be a nanny for the child! How God worked all that together for good! The reason why she floated the little boy up the river was because the Pharaoh wanted to exterminate all the little Jewish Hebrew baby boys. The slaves were getting greater in their number, and no matter how much they put the knuckle down upon them, tightened the screws, they seemed to just multiply more and more and more - and he was fearful that one day an enemy would come into Egypt, and the Hebrews would join them, and that they would throw the yoke of bondage off from them, and that they would fight with the enemies against Egypt.

Someone remarked to me even last Monday night: isn't it remarkable that this child Moses, who would be the future deliverer of the Hebrew children, of the people of God, Israel, that very child that the Pharaoh was trying to exterminate was brought up under Pharaoh's royal protection, under his nose! Isn't it wonderful? The providence of Almighty God. I'm sure that his mother, as she looked after him day after day, would have whispered in his ear and told him the old Bible stories about Abraham, about the suffering of the Hebrew people, about who he was and what his identity was. We see that through his mother's influence, probably, God was moulding his heart, God was moulding his spirit. She was a godly woman, we saw last week - but not only was his spirit and his heart being moulded, but we see that his mind and his body and his personality was being moulded. He went through the Oxford University, if you like, of Egypt. The New Testament tells us, Stephen in his sermon says that he became mighty in word and in deed. He became a statesman, he

became a great soldier. Here is a young man, and God is moulding his heart and his spirit; Egypt is moulding his body, his intellect and his abilities - and God is bringing all these things together, that which is spiritual and good, and that which is perhaps worldly and carnal, He is bringing it all together for His one future purpose.

Wasn't it wonderful to study him and to look at all the opportunities that this young man Moses had, of status and of pleasure that he could enjoy. What a blessing it was for us to see in Acts chapter 7 that one day it says that it came into Moses' heart to visit his brethren. That must be an encouragement to any parents here this evening, especially parents who have not believing children, that there was a day when it came into Moses' heart to visit his brethren. Can you hold on to that? All you have whispered into your child's ear, all that you have brought to them over the years - it is not in vain, it cannot be in vain, and if you trust God and keep praying for them and trust God's providence in their life, these things will come to their remembrance!

What a joy it was for us to see in Hebrews chapter 11, that great chapter, that 'By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible'. What a triumphant note! You would be forgiven for standing back at that great epitaph of faith of this man and saying: 'What a man Moses was'. What a man he was, he was probably the greatest, indisputably, the greatest man in the whole of the Old Testament. Yet God's providence in Moses' life was not without its problems. You will find that in life, and as you embark upon the life of faith in Christ, you will find that God's providence does not mean a bed of roses and an easy ride, but God's providences often have those clouds that break in blessing upon our heads - but they are clouds! Providence has its problems. The maze of life that we are in - you remember we likened the Christian life to a maze at times, you don't know where you're going, you're walking in faith. Of course you know the final destiny, and you've all the promises of God - but sometimes you hit dead ends, you don't know whether to turn right or left, or go forward or back, you don't know where to go, and you just need someone standing on a hill instructing you as they look down on the maze, where to go and how to travel.

Even after major spiritual conquests there can be major spiritual crises. In Hebrews 11 we see that by faith Moses came to his mother, his adopted mother, in Egypt and he renounced and reneged upon all of the blessings and all of the heritage that he would have in Egypt - he probably would have went to the throne, yet he turned his back on it all and he did that by faith. But right after he does that we see that that spiritual mountaintop went into a spiritual valley - why? I can't give you an accurate answer why, but I can sum it up in the title of our series: man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upwards.

Your first point is this: that Moses met a dead end. In this maze of life - you remember we looked last week at how he had an entrance into this maze, and how he had a promising start as he went on his way - but now we find that Moses meets a dead end. I don't know about you, but as I read through biblical biographies there's one thing I love about it - and I read quite a bit, and I like reading Christian biographies, and I hope that you do too and you'll learn a great deal from them. But Christian biographies tend to put a good light on every man that they write about, but the biographies that we find within the Scriptures have these men, warts and all. Their spiritual mountaintop experiences, their great ability and prowess as men of God, but they also show them as realistic sinners, as men of like passions as we are. That encourages me and it ought to encourage you.

Like Abraham that we studied recently, like Abraham before him and many after him, Moses made one mistake in the life of faith that is a critical mistake - and it would be crucial for you tonight to understand what that mistake is, and for you to avoid it within your spiritual life. It is this: Moses renounced Egypt,

Moses did not fear Pharaoh, he renounced the pleasures of the world and he followed God by faith, but what he had begun in faith he tried to accomplish in the flesh. What he began by faith he tried to accomplish in the flesh. He tried to do in the flesh what God had only promised in the Spirit. When he stepped down from the road to the throne as he did, it wasn't long before his Hebrew blood began to boil. Turn with me to Acts chapter 7, this is a tremendous sermon of Stephen's, and here we read an account of this, how Moses met his dead end, Acts 7 and verse 24. In verse 23 we read that it was put into his heart after 40 years to 'visit his brethren the children of Israel. And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian: For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not'. It was in his heart, and it was put in his heart by God through his mother's influence and through the influence of the Spirit of God I believe. What was put in his heart through the promises of God and the word of God, Moses tried to accomplish through the flesh, and it didn't work!

Now keep your finger there and turn with me to Galatians chapter 3 for a moment. Galatians chapter 3 is a parallel of the flesh and spirit - it is many things, but one thing it is is a parallel between the flesh and the spirit. There were Judaisers came to the church at Galatia and said: 'Yes, Christ has died and faith in Christ's cross is essential, but there is more to it than that. You've got to keep the law, you've got to be circumcised, you've got to adhere to the food laws and so on. It's got to be faith and a little bit of religion mixed into it' - faith and the flesh if you like. Now here's what Paul says, and this is a tremendous commentary on this incident in Moses' life, Galatians 3 verse 3: 'Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?'. We have been saved by the Spirit, Romans 8 tells us that; we have been made free from the law of sin and death, and incidentally that is the law of God that only brought death to us because we couldn't keep it. We've been made free from the law of sin and death, and we have been given a new message which is the law of the Spirit and life in Christ Jesus which has set us free.

Now here's the thing where many of us fall down: we start in the Spirit and we carry on in the flesh. Paul says, and Moses' life testifies, don't be so foolish! Having begun in the Spirit, you'll not be made perfect by the flesh. Now remember, let's go back to Moses' father here, Abraham way in the past. Remember his incident with Hagar? What was it? A promise that was given in the Spirit that he tried to accomplish in the flesh. He took Hagar, he slept with her, he brought up Ishmael to his name - it was a son, but it was not the promised son of faith, it was a son of the flesh. You can see how today, even in our news bulletins, how Abraham is still suffering today because of what was carried on in the flesh and not in the Spirit. We must do God's will in God's way. It's not just about knowing His will, it's not even about doing His will - it's more than that: it's doing God's will in God's way.

You've seen already in these character studies that as we run the race of faith we are to strive to master and to be experts in excellence in our life of faith; but we will not be crowned, Paul says, except we strive lawfully. We are to run the race, but as we run the race we are to keep the rules. Now that should really make us analyse our lives, our thoughts, the work that we do for the Lord, simply because it is possible to do right things in wrong ways, to do the will of God in a wrong way. But what is so blessed to us and should really thrill us this evening and make us praise God, is to see that Moses moved from this point in his life - there was hope for Moses - and later one day God would lead His own people out of Egypt through the same hand of Moses that smote the Egyptian and buried him under the sand. One day 'Moses the murderer' would be called 'Moses the meekest of all men' - yet we must learn this lesson tonight, let's not scour over Moses, let's not see him with a halo and forget where he came from to be what we know him to be.

How and why did he meet the dead end? Well first of all he let his passion take over. There's no doubt about it, we need believers with a bit of feeling and a bit of fire in these days, but we cannot let our passion take over. There are times when our heart ought not to rule our heads. The second thing he did was he acted prematurely. It was not God's time. He thought he was doing God's will, he thought he was delivering one of

his people, but it was not God's time to do what he did. He had more to learn, God had to bring him through 40 years of the school of the Midian wilderness as a shepherd. He wasn't going to do this until he was 80, but 40 years premature he moved too quickly.

I don't know whether you feel that this applies to your life, but I feel it must - it certainly applies to mine. At times we get into difficulties, we don't know what to do, and we are waiting on God but we can't wait long enough for God, and we devise our own way out of the situation rather than wait any longer for God. Remember the story of King Saul in his backsliding and spiritual decline? He was facing the Philistine invasion and he was forced, he felt, to make for himself an offering and a sacrifice to God before they went into battle. Just as he made that sacrifice, and he wasn't legalised to make the sacrifice, it wasn't for him to do it was for Samuel, but just after he felt forced into doing it he lifted his head and he saw Samuel coming across the mountain. He had acted prematurely, he hadn't waited on God's time.

When you're doing God's will first make sure you're passion doesn't overrule your mind. Secondly, make sure that you don't act prematurely doing God's will. Wait on the Lord - how many times do we read that in the word of God? But is there a harder thing to do in the life of faith than to wait on God in the instant society where we can get everything at the push of a button - to wait on God? One whom we cannot see, we cannot hear, we cannot know, touch, feel or sense - to wait on Him? That's why the Psalmist exhorts us so often: 'Wait on the Lord. Be of good courage and He shall strengthen thine heart. Wait, I say, on the Lord'. Proverbs 20: 'Say not thou, I will recompense evil; but wait on the LORD', don't take the law into your own hands, 'and he shall save thee'.

Now turn with me to Hebrews chapter 10 again. There's one theme right throughout the whole book of Hebrews that is noteworthy, and that is the theme of reward, you find it right throughout the whole book of Hebrews: reward. You remember in Hebrews 11, if you look at it just briefly, you'll see that Moses 'esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward'. He saw the reward by faith, not the reward of the gold of Egypt and the wine, and all of the luscious food, and the leek and the garlic, but he saw something that was invisible - he saw God, he saw a reward that was by promise and by faith. Now here is what Hebrews 10 says on the same theme, verses 35 and 36: 'Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward' - there is that statement again - 'For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise'. There it is.

Now I know that one thing I have need of in my life with regards to this walk of faith is patience. Don't we all need it? We act too quickly, we react to situations rather than waiting on God, and waiting nearly until - I describe it like this - until God almost pushes us into the situation, until we are 110%, if we can ever be, sure that that is where God wants us to be. F.B. Meyer says: 'One blow struck when the time is fulfilled is worth a thousand struck in premature eagerness'. He struck the blow against the Egyptian, and it was worth nothing, it was a sin against God, it was done in passion, it was done prematurely. If he had struck the blow in God's time, it would have been worth a thousand more premature strikes.

Passion, prematurity, and thirdly there was his pride. I think that this was maybe the hardest lesson for Moses to learn, and I know personally it's the hardest lesson for me to learn in my life - pride. Hannah prayed the prayer - and remember we saw last week she was looking for a deliverer too - and she testified in her song of praise when God gave her Samuel: 'For by strength shall no man prevail'. Here you have this opposite antithesis of the Spirit and the flesh, and Hannah had to learn in her life of faith that by the flesh, by the strength of man, shall no-one prevail. It is not by might, but by my Spirit saith the Lord.

You remember he slew the Egyptian, and what does it say he did? It says: 'He looked this way and he looked that way', to see if anyone saw what he had done. Then he buried the body in the sand. He was looking to see

who was there, if anyone saw him. Perhaps he was looking to see what men thought, maybe he was looking for the praise of his own Hebrew brothers - 'Oh, you're a great deliverer Moses! You come and lead us and bring us out of Egypt'. Let me say this: if Moses knew that he was doing the will of God in the way of God, if he was sure that he was in God's plan and sovereign purpose, he wouldn't have cared who saw him, he wouldn't have cared what men thought - for it was God's plan. He looked this way and he looked that way, and you know what that means: he was walking by sight and not by faith! Do you see it? Here was his dead end! What had been germinating in this young man of God's heart by the Spirit and by the promises of God was beginning to be mutated into something that was above and beyond anything that God stamps His divine seal of approval on, it was becoming the flesh.

That is why the Saviour called us in the Sermon on the Mount to be single-eyed, single-eyed. Was not He Himself single-eyed when He said: 'I do always the things that please Him'. This life that we have entered is a life of faith, you must grasp that. It is a life that is walked in the Spirit, and navigated not by what we see and what our intellect and our wisdom and our common sense tell us, but it is to be navigated and guided by faith in God. You know the story better than I do, that when it reached the ears of Pharaoh what Moses had done, Pharaoh sought to slay him. It says that Moses feared, and he got up and he fled into the desert - he ran away! Now look again with me at Hebrews 11, because here is a supposed contradiction you would nearly think. Verse 27 of Hebrews 11, it says that: 'By faith Moses forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king'. Yet it says in Exodus, chapter 3 I think it is, that Moses fled fearing Pharaoh.

Is that a contradiction? Of course it's not a contradiction, there are no contradictions in the infallible word of God. But it says here in Hebrews 11 that he didn't fear the King, it says in Exodus that he did fear the King, so how do we work it out? Well let me give you this idea - it's my own, and I don't know whether you'll agree with it or not, but I think in the context of everything that we have been considering this evening already this is the only answer. Could it be that the fearlessness of a pure vision given by God that was not executed by God's will in God's way was mutated into a godless fear? Do you see it? Something that was put in Moses' heart by the very Spirit of God, and that was pure, and that was according to the sovereign will and providence and purposes of God, because he didn't execute that by faith it turned into fear.

You know, an aspiration in any of our hearts that is born in the Spirit can be executed in the flesh, isn't that right? It was by faith that he forsook Egypt, it was by faith that he went into his adopted mother and renounced everything, it was by faith that within his heart there welled up this passion and fire to denounce Egypt, and to go and help his brethren - but he executed it in the flesh. It was not by faith, like Hebrews 11 says, he buried the body and he ran. We read in Exodus that the reaction of the men around him, when he saw two Hebrews fighting together, they said: 'Are you going to slay us like you slew the Egyptian?'. Everything around this was not testifying the will of God, he was looking to the eyes of men rather than to the eyes of God - and we read that the fear of man bringeth a snare.

He reaches a dead end in his life, it's a desert dead end, but here we're brought back very gradually to this overarching theme again - what is it? The providence of God. Don't ask me to work this out, there's a number of things that I cannot work out. You might think you can work them out, but you can't. You can't work them out. I'll tell you one of them: the triune God, three in one - can you work that out? You can't work it out, don't try and work it out, you can't work it out - just believe it, that's what faith is! The evidence of things not seen, or not understood. I'll tell you another thing you can't work out: the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. You're responsible for your own soul, deciding for Christ, but God is working in you. God's Spirit is actually saving you and bringing light into your heart - I can't reconcile those two things, but I believe those two things. There are many other things within the word of God, and here is another thing that is very hard to understand in the whole providential working of God. What is it? God in His providential sovereignty can even work our failures into His sovereign plan. He can work failures together for our good. If you like, He can draw a straight line with a crooked stick. He can do His will through us, and in the life of

Moses - although it was not the sovereign choice, if you like, of God to make Moses sin and not have faith, that's not what we're talking about - but what was in His plan was that it was necessary for Moses to go through this school, it was necessary for him to reach a dead end in his life, it was necessary for him to go out and run into the desert and spend 40 years as a shepherd in the wilderness in obscurity - it was necessary.

He would become a shepherd in the open spaces of Midian. If you're familiar with the word of God you'll see what a great school the desert and the wilderness often is to men and to women of God. You remember Paul for three years went into the wilderness, to the desert of Arabia, and God revealed many of the mysteries that we have in the epistles to him. John the Baptist was a voice crying in the wilderness, and here you have Moses and he's in Midian. I'm sure that all of what he went through, all of what his mother whispered in his ear as a child, all of the passion and the spiritual exercise in his heart to be a deliverer for the people of Israel would have seemed absolutely pointless and futile, and his life would have felt a failure. But listen tonight! It was in that desert of failure that Moses met God. Isn't that wonderful? He revealed Himself to him in chapters 3 and 4 as the great 'I AM'. He never revealed Himself in that way before to any man, but He revealed Himself to an old failure of 80 years of age in the desert as 'I AM'. It's wonderful that God can make even our failures work together for our good. Friend tonight, never forget, please don't ever forget that Moses met God in the desert as a shepherd, and not in the palace as a prince.

What a maze Moses' life is turning out to be, isn't it? It seemed from his entrance that he had a promising start, but as with all of God's children it is only through the crucible of pain and problems and trials that the gold of godliness can be formed, and we can be broken and moulded into the image that God would have us in. It is the way of the cross, isn't it? The way of the New Testament, the blood-stained pages that we read that our Saviour trod to purchase our redemption and our salvation - we are asked to trod that way. We are to go along the same road, whether it is the crucifixion of our fleshly lusts that war against the soul, whether it is simply the denial of our sinful self or even our good self - do you know that there is a good self that is of the flesh? That you can do good things not in God's way that are in the flesh? You can pray in the flesh, you can do charity in the flesh, you can fast in the flesh, and all of that which is not of the Spirit we are to crucify.

It is amazing, and I believe this with all my heart - you can argue with me if you like, you wouldn't be the first - I believe that God in His mysterious sovereignty allows us to hit brick walls in our life. Do you know why? Because God, perhaps above anything else, wants us to come to an end of ourselves, and He wants us to find everything in Him. Now, sometimes there's no other way of doing that than to let us crash. As it happened in Moses' life, it happens in many a life, that men have to be broken down before God can break in. Isn't it interesting that the mighty Moses had come to an end of himself, and as we see him in the next chapter that we're going to look at, chapter 3, he comes to an end of himself and he loses confidence in himself. That's why God brings us to an end of ourselves, to lose confidence in ourselves. A man who was learned in all the wisdom of Egypt, a man who was mighty in word and in deed, he's reduced to a trembling child in the presence of Almighty God.

Now let's look at it, Exodus 3. If you can imagine in your mind's eye a normal sunny morning in the plains of Midian, and there are sheep lying all across the desert - lazy, lying and sleeping in the morning sun. The scene has just been like that - think of it, it hasn't changed for the man Moses for 40 years as he's been a shepherd in that desert. He knows every nook and cranny of that wilderness. If it was you or I looking at him in his eightieth year, and looking at the promises that God had given him, and the upbringing that his mother and father had given him, and the great learning that God had given him in Egypt, we would assign him to absolute extinction - wouldn't we? We would relegate him as hopeless! What can God do with an old done man like that? It's too late! His day's gone! We would sing to him, 'Moses, sit down there a moment: Wasted years, wasted years, Oh how foolish'. But what an encouragement tonight that God met a failure of an old rickety man, and made him the mightiest man in the Old Testament!

Here you have it, from a burning bush God broke the divine silence in Moses' life for 40 years. Look at verse 4, Moses is out in the desert, he sees a burning bush. He says, verse 3: 'I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt' - it's burning but it is not consumed. Verse 4: 'And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I'. 'Moses, Moses', twice. Now could it be tonight, listen, I know that we - and I say this kindly - we may have an elderly congregation in the Iron Hall, but could it be that God is calling not just to the young but to those in senior years, late in life, and it may be like Moses He has to knock twice - He had to say it twice: 'Moses, Moses'. Maybe He's knocking on your door, wanting you to serve Him, and the question tonight is this: are you responding, 'Here am I'?

He reveals Himself out of that burning bush. He says: 'I AM', in verse 14: 'I AM THAT I AM'. I don't want to dazzle you - I can't dazzle you anyway! - but I don't want to confuse you any more than I'm already trying not to do, but that statement 'I AM' is a Hebrew verb. The Lord is literally taking the Hebrew verb 'to be' as His name. It's symbolising 'I AM - I am! I was, I will be, but I am! I am the real, living, existent God, and I am in the here and now' - have you got it? 'I'm the real, living God'. He speaks of the past, the present, and the future all rolled into one - and you'll see it, look at verse 6, He speaks of the past to Moses. He said: 'I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham' - that's the past. If you look at verse 7, the present: 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them' - the present. Then the future, He says in verse 10: 'Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh'. 'I heard My people cry', verse 10, 'and I am sending you'.

What a meeting! I'll tell you, I'm not the most patient Christian, I want to have all of God and I want to have all of Him now - I'm not always prepared to pay the price, as most of us aren't. I just want everything now, quick fix, everything now! But I think, perhaps, I would be willing to wait - I hope He doesn't keep me to this - but 80 years to have an encounter with God that this man had. Wasn't it wonderful? The eternal God revealing Himself for the first time ever as this name, this great name. It is amazing. Here's the proof, if you want any proof that Moses came to the end of himself, here's the proof: the excuses start coming.

Now this is a man that was chomping at the bit to be God's deliverer, so much so that he committed murder to do it - and now when God's time comes, in God's will and in God's way, the excuses come rolling out. It's interesting, isn't it, that one who in youth couldn't wait on God's time, tried it in the flesh in his youth, and when the time is right to free the people of God he is now reneging upon God's call. F. B. Meyer says: 'He who had once run before God in feverish impatience, he now lags faint-hearted behind Him'. Now, if you will suffer a word of exhortation from one so green behind the ears, some of you can remember a day when you were on fire for God. You can remember a day when it rose in your heart to visit your brethren. You can remember a day when God's passions burned in your heart but, for all sorts of reasons that I don't know and perhaps you're not sure of, those embers have died and the gold has grown dim. You, like Moses, have lost your vigour that you had in youth. But could it be - and here's the big question for many of us - could it be that that youthful energy was nothing only youthful energy? When the going got tough, because it was in the flesh, it's gone - could it be?

What's the answer? Well, I don't know the ABC of it, but I'll tell you this much: you need a fresh encounter with God. Isn't that what did the trick for Moses? Meeting God again! It was because of this encounter, right at the dead end of his maze of a life, right there because of this later on as he's receiving the law on Mount Sinai - and we haven't got time to go into the greatness of the mountains of Moses' life, and the great ecstasy of service for God that he went into after his 80th year - but it wasn't until after this point at old age that he became a man who was following hard after God, and who could say: 'Lord, show me Thy glory!'.

But yet there were excuses on his lips. Verse 11, the first excuse, chapter 3 verse 11: 'Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?'. What did the Lord say? He said: 'I will be with you'. 'Who am I?' - it doesn't matter who you are, 'I will be with you. I am the One who was and ever shall be, I am the One who never changes'. As one writer said, He was communicating to Moses: 'There's not an hour that you will be without My companionship. There's not a difficulty that will be without My cooperation. There is not the Red Sea that will be without My right arm. There is not a mile of a wilderness journeying without the angel of My presence'. Forget about who you are! 'I AM'.

Excuse number two in verse 13: 'Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? What shall I say unto them?'. The answer: 'I AM WHO I AM!' You'd almost be forgiven for thinking that was the same answer - maybe it is. 'I AM' - I am the answer - 'I AM WHO I AM'. The point He was making was: 'I am exclusively God'. Moses was coming from the point: 'They've so many gods here in Egypt, and when I come to them and say God says let them go - they're going to say 'What's his name?'. He's saying: 'This is My name: I AM GOD, and there is none other - and whatever you need, Moses, I'll meet that need'.

His third excuse is in chapter 4 and verse 1: 'He answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, they'll not listen to my voice: for they will say, The LORD hasn't appeared to you'. We haven't got time to go into all this, but the Lord gave him three signs. He said: 'What's that in your hand?', and he had a rod, probably a shepherd's crook in his hand, and he threw it to the ground and it turned into a serpent. The serpent was an image of Egyptian worship, it was really picturing the Egyptian nation - and it says that Moses ran from the serpent, just as he had run from Egypt! But God told him to pick up the serpent, don't be afraid, and when he picked it up it turned into the rod or staff again. God is saying: 'I have power over Egypt, and I have power not only over nature, but over all that you're going to be facing'.

What a future that rod would have! Can you cast your mind forward a little bit and see how that same rod would be stretched over the Red Sea, and the waters would part and the people would be exited out into the promised land? Do you see the rod smiting the rock and the waters miraculously coming from it? Do you see the rod causing the victory over the Amalekites in battle? What it is saying is this: a rod with God behind it is mightier than the vastest army, the vastest superpower of the world. Just an old rod, but a rod with God.

The second sign is that He told him in verse 6 to thrust his hand into his bosom, and he took it out and it was leprous. Then God told him to put it back in again and it was healed. God was telling him: 'I have power over life and death, don't be afraid of your life - I have power, and I have not only power over life and death but power to cleanse'. The third sign was that He told him to pour out waters from the Nile, and that they would turn to blood - verse 9. You know that the Egyptians worshipped the Nile, it was their life source, they lived around it - but they treated the Nile as a god. And God was declaring judgement upon all their false gods - why? Because 'I AM WHO I AM'!

The fourth excuse in verse 10 of chapter 4, this is the laughable one: 'I can't speak. I'm not eloquent. I don't know what to say'. This is the same man who Stephen says was mighty in word and in deed, who was learned in all the wisdom of Egypt, and I can't believe that he couldn't speak! I just believe that he was filled with fear and he had lockjaw! He couldn't speak, why? Because he could not believe God, and even when God told him 'I AM WHO I AM', God had to send Aaron with him - and that, I believe, was the flesh too because Aaron was a thorn in his flesh from that day since.

What excuses: 'I have no ability, I have no message, I have no authority, I have no eloquence' - and perhaps the most astounding in verse 13, he says this, look at verse 13 and we're nearly finished: 'O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt' - I have no inclination. Do you know what he's saying? 'I don't care who You send, but don't send me, I'm not going'. Now listen, friend tonight, if you don't take anything

out of what I say this evening take this: God can take an old failure like that and turn him into one of the mightiest men in the Bible.

Sometimes we do everything to avoid the will of God, but eventually Moses submitted to that higher authority on the hill that was guiding him through the maze of his life. You know the plagues that came, but he listened to the voice of God shouting from the hill, and eventually what happened? The exit came in the maze of his life - exodus, the people were delivered! The moment for which he was born, bringing them into the promised land, but he could only get there by faith, seeing Him who is invisible!

Now I'm finished with one thought, please one moment. Second Timothy 2 verse 12, we read: 'If we suffer with him, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us'. It says in Hebrews 11 of Moses: 'Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward'. Now turn with me to Matthew 16, and with this I do finish, Matthew 16 and verse 25. You have the scene being set for the transfiguration of our Lord, and it says before He goes up the mountain He's teaching His disciples, verse 25: 'Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward' - mark that - 'he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom'. And we know that the next chapter is the Son of man, a forerunner of the Son of man coming in His kingdom, let's read it: 'After six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses'!

What is this a forerunner of again? What is it? The kingdom, the Son of man coming in His kingdom, and the Lord will reward works of men and women, works of faith, in the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ when He comes again. And because Moses denied himself, he is on the Mount of Transfiguration! What a reward!

'As a soldier who shrinks from the danger,
The joy of the soldier must lose.
So the crown of the Lord is withholden,
If the cross upon earth we refuse'.

Let's bow our heads, and as we do that in the quietness perhaps you're here - and I don't know how long you're on the road - but maybe the fire has gone out, and the gold has grown dim. Will you take heart tonight? God can take an old man like Moses and make him a mighty man of God. You're still here for a reason you know, you might be in retirement but God hasn't set you out to graze yet. There's plenty for you to do in God's work, but you must say: 'Here am I'.

Father, we thank Thee for Moses, but more we thank Thee for the Lord Jesus Christ. Moses was a man of like passions as we are, but Christ was tested as we are yet without sin. He went to Calvary and bore our sin, and we thank Thee for the life of faith that we live in and through the Spirit of God. We pray that we will not begin in the Spirit and carry on in the flesh, but that we will walk in the Spirit that we may not fulfil the lusts of the flesh - whether they be good or bad. Teach us Lord how to react when we come to these dead ends, and Lord teach us to look up and submit to the divine instructions, and then we may break down but we will break out for God. Lord we need grace and we need help, and we pray that we will be the Christians that You want us to be. Thank You for the promise 'I AM WHO I AM', Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 7

"The Exhaustion Of Elijah"

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I Kings 19:1-18

1. ***His External Problems***
 - a) **Circumstances**
 - b) **Personalities**
2. ***His Internal Problems***
 - a) **His convictions**
 - b) **His fears and emotions**
 - c) **His physical and mental condition**
3. ***His Solutions***
 - a) **Get a good rest**
 - b) **Get a grip of yourself**
 - c) **Get a fresh glimpse of God**

Our reading this evening is taken from the first book of Kings and chapter 19, 1 Kings chapter 19, and we are beginning to read at verse 1 to 18. Now let me just say that we're speaking on the subject this evening 'The Exhaustion of Elijah', and some of the young people gathered out this evening will have been at the Young Life meeting recently where I dealt with the character of Elijah. The outline that you have before you may be rather similar, but I assure you that the contents in between the outline is dramatically changed. So don't be thinking you going to get an action replay this evening - although the points are quite similar I hope and trust that there are some new thoughts for you here this evening.

Beginning at verse 1: "And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets", of Baal that is, "with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers. And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only,

am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. And the LORD said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him".

If you're familiar with chapters 18 and 19 of 1 Kings you will know that in chapter 18 verses 1 through to 40 you have Elijah's challenge to the priests and prophets of Baal. You will know that there was a revival of Baal worship in Canaan and among the people of God. In other words, they were following false gods, they were exercising false rituals, giving false sacrifices, and they were worshipping this false god Baal. Of course, King Ahab and Jezebel were encouraging this Baal worship. But it all came to a climax, or a showdown if you like, on Mount Carmel where Elijah, the prophet of God, is faced with many of the prophets of Baal and Elijah throws down the gauntlet and challenges them: who is the real God of heaven who answers by fire? Does Baal answer by fire? In other words, is Baal the real and the living and the true god, or is Jehovah God? Is Jehovah the God who will answer by fire?

Of course you know the story, that the prophets of Baal set up a sacrifice, and they called upon their god, Baal. They cut themselves, they rent their garments, they squealed and they yelled like mad men and women, and they cried for their god - but there was no answer. As you read down chapter 18 you find that Elijah taunts them. He asks them: 'Where has your god gone? Has he gone on a journey? Is your god asleep?' - and in sarcasm he pokes fun at the fact that their god is not a real and a living god, their god does not exist. Then after that great showdown Elijah comes, he digs a trench around the sacrifice, he pours water in the trench, three times he pours water over the sacrifice - if I could say it, it doesn't make sense but this is the way I think of it, it was as if he was making it hard for God to do what seemed impossible in the eyes of the prophets of Baal. He prayed and cried unto his God, and the God that answereth by fire answered by fire, and consumed the whole sacrifice. Elijah restored the altar of the Lord, the God of heaven answered by fire, and the people of Israel were heard to cry on Mount Carmel: 'The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God! Jehovah, He is God!'. What a triumph!

If that was not enough we move on from the challenge to the priests of Baal, and we find in verses 41 to 45 that he takes Ahab, he tells Ahab to go and have a meal because God is going to come and answer prayer and bring great rain - the famine will be broken, the famine that was across the land because of their idolatry and their Baal worship would finish. So Ahab goes off to an inn somewhere and he eats and he drinks, and Elijah goes and he prays and puts his head between his knees and cries unto God seven times for the rain to come, and the seventh time his servant sees a little cloud in the sky about the size and like the shape of a man's hand. And Elijah said: 'There is the sound of abundance of rain'. The heavens opened and the rains fell, and the blessing comes to the land again. That is why in the book of James we read that Elijah was just like us - but he prayed for rain and God answered him, and the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

What a great man Elijah was, and in chapter 18 alone we see the triumph of Elijah the man of power, Elijah the man of prayer. We see him walking back from this great victory with his servant as the rain comes drenching down, as the winds of the storm are blowing in his face, and Elijah goes back to his humble home, and Ahab goes up to the great palace. All the day long, I imagine in my mind's eye, Jezebel to be looking out of the window of the palace wondering how the great showdown was going on, how the great battle of divine powers was taking place. I wonder as she saw the dark storm clouds hovering over the land, she probably thought that Baal and her prophets had won the day. You can imagine Ahab coming into the palace after the great battle, you can imagine Jezebel asking him how the day had gone. F. B. Meyer, in his book of character studies, does exactly that and this is the way it goes: "She says to Ahab: 'How have things gone today? No

doubt well, the rain has anticipated your favourable reply'. Ahab says: 'I have nothing to tell you that will give you pleasure'. 'Why?', she says. 'The worst has happened'. 'What do you mean the worst has happened? Where are my priests?'. Ahab says: 'You will never see them again, they are all dead! By this time their bodies are floating out to sea'. 'Who has dared do this thing?', she says, 'Did they not defend themselves? Did you not raise your hand for them? How did they die?'. And then Ahab would tell her: 'The God, Jehovah, answered by fire'".

We're reminded of the words of Shakespeare when we see her response: 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'. Ahab was a sensual man, we must remember that, the Scriptures teach us that he was extremely materialistic and all he cared about was eating and drinking, his horses and his mules, looking after his riches, and really deep down he didn't really care who was the nation's god - which deity they followed. It didn't matter to him whether it was Baal, or whether it was Jehovah - it was just who filled his pockets with the most, sensually and materialistically. But Jezebel was a different character altogether, Jezebel was a passionate disciple of the god Baal. As soon as she heard this news that all of the prophets of Baal were slain by the hand of Elijah, I believe that deep down in her heart she feared that there would be a great reformation, a great revival, a great turning again to Jehovah in the land. Like Queen Mary fearing the prayers of John Knox more than the Spanish Armada, Queen Jezebel feared the prayers and the preaching of Elijah more than any nation upon the face of God's earth. That is why in verse 2 of chapter 19 it says that she sent a messenger unto him, and said to Elijah: 'Let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time'. 'May the gods of heaven do to me what you did to my prophets, if I don't do to you what you did to them by this time tomorrow'.

I'm not sure that she really wanted his blood, but one thing I'm sure of is: she wanted him out of the land. She wanted his holy influence out of the nation so that this great turning of the tide back to God would be stopped. I imagine that this perhaps was the destiny, if you like in the words of the book of Esther, Elijah had come to the kingdom for such a time as this. If there was any time in Elijah's life when he was needed in the land, he was needed now. The tide was changing from Baal to Jehovah. From what we know of Elijah and all his great triumphs of faith, his great triumphs of prayer, his great triumphs of power - you read these verses and you're waiting with bated breath for another great supernatural exploit of spiritual heroism, but we're deflated! We're horrified! We're disappointed and let down as we see what happens. For when this message comes from Jezebel we find in verse 3 that when Elijah saw this, 'he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there'. He fled the kingdom of Israel and went down to Judah.

Can you see that gaunt figure that once was a great man, under the cover of the night sky, the cover of the clouds beating down the rain of blessing from God, can you see him scurrying through the driving rain like an animal pursued by its predator across the hills of Samaria? He reaches Beersheba, he leaves his servant there; he still doesn't feel safe enough and so he runs into the wild desert waste stretches southward of Mount Sinai. He wants to get as far away from this wicked Queen as possible. Can you see him as the sun rises in the morning and he walks over the scorching sands? He's dehydrated, he's weary, he's tired - until he gets to the end of himself and he falls beneath the shade of a juniper tree, and cries out in despair: 'I've had enough! Lord, take my life!'.

What a different character he seems to be now to us, doesn't he? This is truly the exhaustion of Elijah. Some scholars believe, I don't know what to believe, but some of them believe that if this great man had not caved in at this point a great revival and a great reformation would have come to the land, and there would not have been a dispersion - it would have been prevented. But isn't it interesting, as we've been going through this study 'As Sparks Flying Upwards' looking at great men like Abraham, and like Jacob and Joseph and Moses, and now this great prophet Elijah - how these great characters of the Bible often fall down where we most would have expected them to stand strong! You remember Abraham, and we have seen that he is known as

the father of faith, yet we see him going down to Egypt and lying to Pharaoh. He didn't have faith enough in God to believe that Pharaoh wouldn't touch his wife, so he says that she's his sister.

Do you remember Moses? We were finishing him off last week in our studies, and we saw how he became the meekest of all men that walked upon the face of earth - yet, as we read in the end of the Pentateuch, he missed the Promised Land because he spoke unadvisedly with his lips. His strength was his weakness, and in the very point that we would have thought him to have succeeded was the point at which he fell. We have them warts and all, don't we? Incidentally one man has said, and says rightly, this is one very subtle proof that the Bible which we hold in our hands is truly the word of God. There is no embellishment of the saints of God within the Scriptures - it gives their dark side and their light side. It paints the picture of their biographies as God, the holy, holy, holy God of heaven, sees them - everything is there for us!

I don't know about you, but it's a tremendous blessing and encouragement to me to realise that men like Elijah, Abraham, Moses, Isaac and Jacob were real flesh and blood sinners just like you and me. They were not stained-glass saints! What a solace for us, that specifically this man Elijah is described as a man of like passions as we are. If you're familiar with Christian history and biography you will know that some of the greatest men and women of God and saints of history have suffered in exactly the same way as the prophet Elijah has. I'm talking about depression, I'm talking about despondency and despair - it's almost a dirty word in Christian circles. People say Christians should never be depressed, never be despondent - and that is true, an ideal Christian ought never to be, but none of us are ideal Christians, we're all sinners saved by grace.

Even the greatest of us have fallen into the depths of the valleys of depression like Elijah. Listen to Spurgeon, in his book 'Lectures to My Students', a book that he writes for young men who are going into the ministry, under the chapter entitled 'Minister's Fainting Fits' he admits himself that he had great depressions in his own life - he had great 'fainting fits' personally. He cites them to be often before great successes, and even after great successes - and if you look at the life of Elijah, that's exactly what happens to him. After the great triumph of Carmel he's down in the valley after the mountain, and we find that after - in chapter 20 - he's back up on the mountaintop again. Before a success, after a success, it doesn't matter - we can all be prone to these depressions. He said that he often could not explain them, but listen to what he does say - I quote: 'Fits of depression come over most of us. Usually, cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise are not always ready, the brave are not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy. There may be, here and there, men of iron - but surely the rust frets even these. Surely the rust erodes even the most iron of men'.

Even great Christian leaders of state have been prone to it - none other than perhaps the greatest president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, who was a child of God. Listen to what he said: 'I am now the most miserable man living. If what I feel were equally distributed to the whole human family, there would not be one cheerful soul on earth! To remain as I am is impossible, I must die to be better!' Have you ever felt like that? Maybe you have felt that you are one of the most iron of men, but where you are at present tonight the rust is eroding your character and even your spiritual prestige. Perhaps you feel like Abraham Lincoln, that you can't get out of your problem, and you must die for things to get better. Now let me say this: take great heart tonight, for Elijah was a man of like passions as you!

Now if we're to see how Elijah got out of his exhaustion, we are to do two things: we are to pinpoint his problems, and we need to look at the God-given solutions to his problems. I want us to look first of all at the external problems that Elijah faced - there are external and there are internal problems, but let's look first at the external ones. The first is the circumstances that Elijah faced. If you remember, there was a famine in the land. The famine was there because of the people of Israel's disobedience and idolatry, but right at the top echelons of society there was political and religious compromise, there was apostasy among the people of God. There is here, facing Elijah, God's prophet, if you like God's representative upon the earth at this

particular time, a combination of adverse circumstances that was starting to affect this iron man of God. The rain was literally coming down, but as far as he was concerned it was raining and it was pouring - and you've experienced that, when it doesn't just rain but it pours. You say to yourself: 'I could deal with perhaps one of these problems, but why do all of them have to come on top of me as a dozen?'. Everything seems to, at a certain time in your life, break in and you just can't cope and you break down under it.

Let me just say in passing: that is why it is so important that, when the going is good, that you keep short accounts with God, and you have a regular ministry of worship and communion before the Lord - so that when the hard times come in, and perhaps even that communion is momentarily cut off by necessity, you have a spiritual reservoir in the past that you have carved into your life whereby you can draw out of it. One thing I want you to note is something that we have already learned in the life of Moses - remember we saw that Moses, the book of Hebrews tells us, endured as seeing Him who was invisible? He turned down the riches and the splendour and the status of Egypt by faith, the book of Hebrews says, yet we read in Exodus that by fear he ran away from Pharaoh - we looked at that apparent contradiction last week. We saw how there came a point in Moses' life where what began in faith, he tried to carry on in the flesh. He began to walk by sight and not by faith, he was looking at what people thought of him when he used his right hand in slaying the Egyptian. When Pharaoh heard what Moses had done in slaying that Egyptian, he sought to slay Moses but Moses fled in fear - and you have exactly the same here in verse 3.

Look at the verse, when Elijah saw what the messenger of Jezebel was saying - when he saw, not when he heard, when he saw - he fled! What was he doing? The great man of faith began to walk by sight and not by faith. Circumstances came in and faith went out. The second external problem he faced were personalities. Sometimes we can theorise and theologise these biblical stories so much that we forget that they are real red flesh and blood people in everyday experience in life. These two people that Elijah is fleeing from were just that - two people, they are personalities: Jezebel and Ahab. A great many of the problems that we face in life are usually problem people - problems that come to us through people. It might be unconverted family members; it might be friends in our life - whether our neighbours or work colleagues - it might be people at school who are unkind and bullying us; it might be people in the church, and problems in the church, and politics in the church. It can be so many things, it may even be Christians that we're disillusioned with. We see them living and doing and saying things that they ought not to do as a Christian, and we become despondent, we become depressed and dejected. Even some of the closest to us can make us despair.

Turn with me for a moment, because I want to illustrate this with a biblical story, to Exodus chapter 4. This is another scene, a little cameo from the life of Moses that we didn't have time to deal with - I wanted to deal with it, but we didn't have time to deal with it so I'm pushing it in here tonight, but it actually fits in quite well with what we're looking at. Verse 24 of chapter 4 of Exodus, Moses has been called, Moses is now on his way to Egypt to deliver the people from Egypt into the promised land, verse 24 says: 'It came to pass by the way', on the road, 'in the inn, that the LORD met Moses, and sought to kill him'. Now just wipe your eyes, because you're reading it right: the Lord sought to kill Moses. This is the same Moses that He protected from Pharaoh, that He floated up the river, that He made grow up 40 years in Egypt, gave him all the learning of Egypt in the wisdom - he was a statesman and a soldier. It's the same Moses that went into the Midianite desert and served there another 40 years to the age of 80, it's the same Moses that He appeared to through a burning bush and commissioned. It's the same Moses whom He put up with all the excuses that we heard about last week, that you and I wouldn't put up with. Yet here, after all of this, He's seeking to kill this man Moses!

Verse 25: 'Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son', Gershom, 'and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go', God let Moses go, 'then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision'. The only plain and simple reasonable explanation of this particular aspect of Moses' life is simply this: Zipporah, Moses' wife, who was not of the nation of the

Israelites, objected to the circumcision of her son Gershom - and as they are on their way to Egypt to deliver the people of God, and as Moses one day soon would receive the law of God from Mount Sinai, and as he would instruct the people of God to circumcise their own children as Abraham had been taught in the covenant - he would go, yet his own son was not circumcised probably because of the influence of Zipporah. How do I know that? Well, I don't know it for definite, but everything seems to point to that - because she saves Moses' life by taking a stone, circumcising the child, throwing the foreskin at Moses' feet, and saying to Moses: 'A bloody husband thou art to me, the bloody husband!'. Do you see it?

That's not what I want you to see, what I want you to see is this: how even the nearest and the dearest to us can cause grave problems to us. I believe that it was probably at this point that Moses sent Zipporah and Gershom and his whole family back to Jethro his father-in-law - why? Because they were a hindrance to him, they were a weight upon him in God's race, a sin that easily beset him. How could he teach the Israelites to circumcise their children if he wasn't doing it himself? Like Paul said, he said himself: 'I keep my body under subjection; lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I should become a castaway'.

There's a fascinating story in the life of John Wesley. It's about his wife - you may not have known that John Wesley was married, the founder of Methodism. But listen to this, J.C. Ryle says in his book 'Christian Leaders of the 18th-century' - he deals with people like Whitefield and Wesley, and various other great men of God - he says of Wesley's wife: 'Wesley was once married at the age of 48. He married a widow lady of the name of Vazeille, of a suitable age and of some independent property which she took care to have settled upon herself. The union was a most unhappy one. Whatever good qualities Mrs Wesley may have had, they were buried and swallowed up in the fiercest and most absurd passion of jealousy. One of his biographers remarks: 'Had he searched the whole kingdom he could hardly have found a woman more unsuitable to him in all important respects'. After making her husband as uncomfortable as possible for 20 years by opening his letters, putting his papers in the hands of his enemies in the vain hope of blasting his character, and even sometimes laying violent hands on him, Mrs Wesley at length left her home, leaving word that she never intended to return'. Now this is powerful, listen to this: 'Wesley simply states the fact in his journal saying that he knew not the cause, and briefly adding: 'I did not forsake her, I did not dismiss her, and I will not recall her". John Wesley, the great revivalist - yet the nearest and the dearest to him was a personality problem.

Circumstances, personalities - and then there are his internal problems. Let's look at them very quickly in the time that we have left. His internal problems - the first is his convictions. He's in the mess that he's in because he has followed God. In 1 Kings 18:17 and 18 Ahab calls him the 'troubler of Israel', when Ahab himself - as Elijah says - is the troubler of Israel. It's because of his idolatry and sin that the famine had come, yet Elijah is labelled as the troublemaker - as we Christians are today. In verses 10 and 14 of chapter 19 Elijah protests: 'I alone am left' - 'I alone am left!' - 'I have done zealously for the Lord Jehovah, and look at what I'm getting for what I'm doing'. But Elijah was right, do you know that? Because of standing up for his principles, he was suffering because of his beliefs, and that is hard to suffer for your beliefs and for your convictions - but if you've got any convictions worth having they will be worth suffering for, and you will be called to suffer for them.

The path to godly greatness is often a lonely path, and it causes many to draw back, and it almost caused Elijah to draw back in this particular instance. Convictions, and then secondly fears and emotions. It is rightly said that the best of men are only men at best. In verse 4 what does he do? He falls under the juniper tree, he says: 'It's enough, I have had enough, I can't go on! Lord, just take my life!'. Have you ever said that? It's human, you know, to say that - 'I can't go on!'. Do you remember Jonah? It's almost humorous when you see Jonah sitting down under the gourd, and just looking and waiting to see if God's going to just fry this whole people, the Ninevites, and boy do they deserve it! He's sitting there, I can imagine, with a packed lunch of popcorn, waiting - just loving it! Wanting to see them all being judged for their sin, but his ways

were not God's ways! As he sits there, you remember what happened, God causes the gourd to be eaten up by a worm, and then the sun comes and beats down on him - and he cries out to God in despair because he's not getting his way, and he says: 'It is better for me to die than to live!'.

You remember John the Baptist, the greatest prophet ever born of woman? He sends his disciples to the Lord as he's in prison, and he says: 'Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?'. Now I know there are people believe that the great Baptist would never have doubted, but I remind you please that his type in the Old Testament was whom? Elijah! And where is Elijah now? John the Baptist was only a man like any of them, subject to like passions, subject to fears and emotions - and can I encourage you please, if you do anything with fears and emotions, don't listen to them! Emotions are meant to be controlled by us, they are not meant to control us. If we are not careful our emotions will be controlled and exploited and used by the forces of evil and the devil himself. You control your emotions, like the Psalmist when he says: 'Why art thou downcast, O my soul?' - who's he talking to? He's talking to himself. Why? He's asking a question of himself: 'Why are you depressed? Why are you downcast? Hope thou in God'. That is controlling your emotions, not letting your emotions control you.

Thirdly, his physical and mental condition were one and many of his internal problems. I want you to imagine this please, his physical strength and his nervous energy is completely overtaxed. Remember what he has come through: the great high of a spiritual power clash on Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal - remember it was his own hand, he slew all those prophets! He killed them all in battle! Then he goes and he agonises in prayer for rain, and then he walks 18 miles - in fact he doesn't walk it, he sprints 18 miles in front of Ahab's chariot. Then, when he hears the news of what Jezebel's going to do to him, he runs away from her without rest, until he finally collapses in a desperate depressed heap, in sheer exhaustion and desperation, and cries out: 'I've had enough!'.

I hope you know, we haven't got time to go into it tonight, but I hope you know that your body, your soul, and your spirit are what you are made up of. You are a tripartite being, your body is sense-conscious - you touch the world, you sense things with your body. Your soul is self-conscious, your personality, your soul is your intellect, your will and your emotions. Your spirit is God-conscious, what you communicate with God with. Although they have separate functions in a sense, a lot of them overlap and they are related to one another. What I mean by that is this: if you are tired and weak physically it can have an effect upon your spiritual life, and you must remember that! If you're ill don't get guilty because you can't kneel down and pray because your knees are wrecked! You know what I'm talking about - what else am I talking about? I'm talking about going about the Master's business every night of the week, so much so that you're exhausted when it comes to a spiritual challenge.

Let's look quickly, as we close, at his solutions. Three things, it's a kind of spiritual check up. The first thing is this: get a good rest. Is that too carnal? Get a good rest? Well, that is exactly the first thing that God did with Elijah. We read in verses 5 to 9 that He fed him, and He gave him a drink, and He touched him and Elijah slept. Sometimes that is what we need, and that is what the Lord instructed His disciples to do: 'Come ye apart and rest a while'. We ought not to feel guilty about it - I'm not talking about laziness now, I'm talking about the Sabbath principle. Not the Sabbath day, but the Sabbath principle right throughout the Scriptures which is a principle of rest - a rest that is needed. You need a rest if you're going to do God's work and do it well! Richard Baxter, the puritan, said to his ministers, that he was training: 'Recreation to a minister must be like whetting', an old word for sharpening, 'to a lawnmower'. In other words, it is to be used only so far as is necessary for its work. You sharpen your lawnmower so that it will cut well, and you rest well so that you can work well for the Lord - and it is time to rest if you find yourself in this slough of despond!

Two, get a grip of yourself. Is that harsh? Well, God said to Elijah in verse 18: 'I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him'. Do you know what He was really saying to him? It's this: 'You're not the only one in this position - get a grip of yourself Elijah!'. You know, to hear some people talking about the experiences they have gone through - and I don't try to belittle them - but you'd think they were the only ones that ever went through it. Get a rest, get a grip of yourself, you're not the first who has gone through it and you will not be the last.

Thirdly, and most importantly, get a fresh glimpse of God. In verse 11 we read that God said: 'Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by'. Elijah goes to Mount Horeb, and incidentally I don't think he was led there in the sense that somebody said - an angel with a big signpost: 'Now it's time for Mount Horeb'. Do you know why he went to Mount Horeb? Mount Horeb is Mount Sinai, it's the same mountain - and historically Elijah knew, I believe, that that was the place upon earth where God's manifested presence was. Moses had seen the burning bush, Moses had been given the law there, Moses spent 40 days and nights with God there, and Elijah knew that that was the place where he should go. As the old black Negro spiritual says: 'Where could I go, where could I go, seeking a refuge for my soul?' - and he went to the cave, and he didn't have long to wait. Verse 9 says: 'Behold, the word of the Lord came to him'.

Listen to what F. B. Meyer says: 'There is no spot on earth so lonely, no cave so deep and dark, that the word of the Lord cannot discover us and cannot come to us'. God's voice was not in the earthquake that rent the rocks and the chasms, it was not in the wind that blew the great boulders across that mountain, it was not in the fire that took away all the heather and all the grass on the mountain - the Lord was not in them. You see, I believe Elijah was expecting God to answer as He always did: in a great cataclysmic supernatural way - and that's the way we look for God to answer and to intervene in our lives, but no! God's voice was in a still small voice. Do you know what He was saying to Elijah? 'I'm working a work in your day, Elijah, and you don't even know it. If you knew it you wouldn't believe it. Those 7,000 prophets who have not yet bowed the knee to Baal, I did that through the still small voice and you didn't even know about it'.

As I close tonight, do you know what that reminded me of? I'll tell you: 30 years in a little town of Nazareth, the Son of the Living God was growing up and not a soul knew about it. A still small voice, and even when He came to His ministry, what does it say of Him? He did not strive, nor cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the streets; but he came as the showers upon the mown grass, he came as a lamb, the Lamb of God - and His Spirit descended as a dove. What's the big thing we ought to do in our exhaustions? It is this: go to the mouth of the cave, wrap your face in the mantle, and listen as the heavens open and God says: 'Behold, my beloved Son, hear ye him'.

Father, we thank Thee this evening for a wonderful Saviour. A bruised reed shall He not break, nor a smoking flax quench. We thank Thee that He came as a servant, and He humbled Himself, and He could even say: 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'. Father, we thank Thee that there was not a stern rebuke for Elijah, but there was a still small voice - and for those who are exhausted in their despair tonight, we thank Thee that there is not a stern voice, but a loving Saviour who is there to sympathise, to succour, and who is touched to the very depths of His holy divine humanity with our infirmities. We praise Thee for Him, and we pray that we will find everything that we need in Him, in whose name we pray, Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 8

"Jeremiah The Dejected"

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Jeremiah 20

1. *He Felt Unequipped For His Calling*
2. *He Bore Many Burdens*
3. *He Saw How God Works In Brokenness*
4. *He Witnessed Unprecedented Destruction*
5. *He Became Christ-Like In His Sufferings*

I want you to turn with me to Jeremiah chapter 20, Jeremiah chapter 20, and we will be flicking through this great prophet and his prophecy this evening - because we couldn't hope to cover all that is held within this great book, that is 50 odd chapters long. The title for our series, as it has been going week after week and we're in our eighth study this evening, is 'As Sparks Flying Upward'. I've told you week after week, and I don't want to labour it but it is very relevant this evening, that the verse that has given us the title for this series has been plucked out of the book of Job. If you're familiar with the book of Job you will know the awful deep sufferings that this man of God went through in his lifetime. During all the reminiscences of Job and his friends, there is this little text that flies out at us, and really touches us in the depths of our human experience. It simply says that man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward. That verse, and indeed the title for our series, implies the real unpredictability of life and indeed the problems that enter into our lives from day to day, and even right throughout our whole experience. We find that the one who gives us the title for our series was extremely dejected. In Job chapter 3 especially we find Job down in the dumps to such an extent that he is almost suicidal in the expressions that he makes. He curses the day that he was ever born, he wishes that he'd died at birth, he wishes that he could die now - and perhaps it was into that sentiment that his own wife said: 'Curse God and die', get it all over with, just curse Him!

It's very interesting that the character that we're looking at this evening, Jeremiah, expresses some of those same suicidal sentiments. If you look at chapter 20 of Jeremiah and verse 14, we read some remarkable words from the prophet of God, he says: "Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying, A man child is born unto thee; making him very glad. And let that man be as the cities which the LORD overthrew, and repented not: and let him hear the cry in the morning, and the shouting at noontide; Because he slew me not from the womb; or that my mother might have been my grave, and her womb to be always great with me. Wherefore came I forth out of the womb to see labour and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame?"

As we read these words, I don't know about you but I'm caused to ask the question: 'What can make such a man of God, and indeed the prophet of God, God's man for this particular time, come out with such devastating and dejected, depressing words?'. What can bring a man of God to such despair? What sparks of affliction have flown into this man's life and blown all his hopes away, that he could possibly utter such words as these? Can you imagine what it would be like if I, as the preacher this evening, were expressing these same sentiments? You would pull me down and set me down and say: 'You can't say those things!'. What could make a prophet of God feel like this?

Well, we have to give you a bit of the history of the book of Jeremiah, and indeed the character Jeremiah, for us to understand where the prophet is coming from when he expresses these emotions. If the days of David and Solomon could be compared to spring and summertime in the history of the kingdom of Israel, it was

late autumn when Jeremiah came on the scene. When Jeremiah's life opens it's nearly the wintertime in the history of Israel's relationship with God, and there is decline in the nation, there is political and religious apostasy. Now we know from the historical records that there had been a spiritual revival under King Hezekiah and under the prophet Isaiah. For a brief moment that revival had a real influence and effect, but it's influence had started to decline and had long since passed as we reach Jeremiah in this passage that we have read this evening. Even in the lifetime of Jeremiah not even the reforms of the good King Josiah could really make any impact upon the people, they were purely cosmetic, on the surface - but the reforms, and some say the reformation rather than the revival of King Josiah, only went skin deep, it didn't really penetrate into the hearts and into the characteristics of the men and the women of the nation. It didn't change their lives, it only changed their habits.

One author has put it like this: 'At this particular time King and court, Princes and people, prophets and priests, were infected with abominable vices'. Now imagine this, this is God's chosen people, this is God's chosen land, yet the countryside of Israel is dotted with temples to the gods of Baal and Asherah. There are pornographic idols littering these temples and these worship centres. On every high hill a circle and clump of trees hides an open secret of illicit sexual worship of pagan fertility gods. But it was in Jerusalem that there was the great climax of apostasy, the real decline and backsliding of God's people, where you can see the mothers sending their children out to the woods to bring forth wood to make fires, to bake cakes. You can see the women kneading the dough, putting them on the pan, baking cakes to offer - Jeremiah says - to the queen of heaven.

Now historically when things get as bad as this among God's people and God's nation, God has to intervene. God is forced, if I can say that, to do something, to interject. His righteousness requires judgement for sin, justice and righteous equity. Yet on one side there we have God's holiness, God's righteousness, God's government, where He must make His precepts, His word, and His will known - yet on the other side of the coin we have a God who is merciful, a God who is loving, a God who is compassionate, and a God of grace who seeks to warn the people to flee from the wrath to come. He wants to give people the opportunity to repent, even before He has to do what He must do in judgement.

So to warn men, as He has needed right throughout the whole of biblical history, God needed a voice. It was not God's normal dealing to open the clouds as He did when He spoke of our Lord: 'This is My beloved Son' - that was not His normal dealing, to speak out of the clouds - but He used these strange, even eccentric, men called the prophets to speak the word of God, to be the voice of God. He needed a holy man - and you remember, as we looked at the prophet Ezekiel, that God scoured the whole of the earth, and when He told Ezekiel to keep quiet and he wasn't allowed to prophesy any more, He said that over the whole earth He couldn't find one man to stand in the gap - He couldn't find a man to be His prophet, and to be His representative.

Prophets are very interesting, they have to be holy men, it has to be the voice of a holy man that represents the word of God. He has to have a heart after God, he has to feel the way God feels, he has to have the burden that God has, he has to express and know the anger that God expresses over sin and unrighteousness, and he has to be touched with the pain and the feelings that God is touched with at the disobedience of His creatures and His covenant people. That is the one side of the prophet, but the great dichotomy and irony of the prophet is that the other side of his character is a bit like the other side of God. Not only has he to be a holy man, a righteous man, an angry man, a fearless man, but he has to be a man of love, a man of compassion, a man of mercy, a man of loving-kindness that is willing to come and to plead with those people who God is angry with, to plead with the people who God's judgement is going to fall upon, to ask them to repent and to plead with God Himself in intercession for the people - that God will show mercy and love toward them.

Jeremiah was that man. As one author has said, Jeremiah was the prophet of Judah's midnight hour. He was a man of sympathy with a message of severity. Jeremiah was God's chosen man, and I want us to look this evening at how he was chosen, and indeed why God chose him over anyone else. It seems strange when we enter into chapter 1 of Jeremiah, if you wish to turn to it this evening, why God should choose this man. Not only because of the lack of qualifications that he had, but by the very fact that he felt the lack of qualifications he had very keenly. That gives us our first point this evening: he felt unequipped for his calling. Now, what were the reasons for this? Well, you could go on and we could really spend all night on chapter 1 of Jeremiah, but I want to split it into two ways that he felt disqualified for following God and doing God's will.

The first we find in the passage is this: he felt that he was too young. Now we don't know how old Jeremiah was at this point in his career, but we know that he was young enough to use his youth as an excuse for not serving God. In verse 6 of the passage you read that when God called him and asked him to go and serve Him, he said: 'Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child, I am but a youth'. I want us to pause for a moment this evening, because as we've been looking through the characters in the Bible - and so far only in the Old Testament - we have found that throughout the history of the Scriptures God has a reputation of choosing men and women who are young to serve Him. Often it's because, and definitely in this case, it is because the older men in the nation were too steeped in their selves, and steeped in their sin, for God to speak to them. You remember that God had to speak to young Samuel. Eli did not hear His voice, but Samuel heard His voice in the night - and I believe Eli didn't hear His voice because Eli couldn't hear His voice! You can look at Samuel; you can go into the New Testament and look at Timothy; go into the Old Testament again and you find Joseph, a young man that God raised up; you find David out looking after the sheep - and it wasn't the oldest, it wasn't the best looking, it wasn't the tallest, it wasn't the most valiant, but it was David who was God's choice. John the Baptist, filled with the Holy Ghost in his mother's womb - and we could go on and on and on, and right through the whole Scriptures, and see how God creates this precedent for Himself, and He creates a reputation where He is known as the God who chooses young people.

Now, that's tremendously encouraging for any young people in the building here tonight - and I only wish that we had more young people here in the building this evening. To know that God has a special place in His heart for young people - of course He has for children: 'Suffer the little children to come unto me' - but there is a special ability in a young person to be moulded by God before the hardships of life enter in, where they can make their priorities known, and they can etch out a plan, they can choose who they will serve in their lifetime. Not only does the history of the word of God tell us that, but church history, Christian church history that we know of, tells us that God has the same trend today and in the past. It's very interesting for me to note today that John Calvin, the great reformer, wrote his 'Institutes of the Christian Church' before he was 24 years of age. John Wesley was only 25 when he inaugurated the once great system of the Methodist Church - 25 years of age! David Brainerd, the great missionary, was in his twenties when he saw a revival among the Indians, and he died in his late twenties leaving a legacy to God and to the missionary world. Robert Murray M'Cheyne was in his twenties when he saw Scotland ablaze for Christ, and he still sets many a heart ablaze today because of his service for God - yet at the end of his twenties he burned out for God, and he died to the glory of God. And what can we say of a man called Jim Elliot? In his twenties he left a wife and a child to be with Christ as a martyr, because his young life was built upon this motto: 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. If Jesus Christ be God, and died for me, what sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him'. And isn't it ironic that when we look at all the men and women in scripture who were young people when God chose them, and right throughout church history, isn't it ironic that the ones who perhaps we in our wisdom would not choose are the very ones that God chooses first?

He chooses mere boys like Jeremiah, and He chooses old done men like Moses. Why does He do that? Do you ever ask these questions about God? His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts, but you're allowed to stand back at times with your mouth agape, and say: 'Why does God do these things?'. Let me try, through the Scriptures, to explain it to you. If you turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 for a moment, 1 Corinthians and chapter 1 - and you remember that the foolishness of the cross, or that's not quite accurate, the foolishness of the preaching of the cross in the sense that the thing preached - the cross itself is the foolishness spoken of in chapter 1, not preaching, but the idea that Messiah could come and die on a cross and rise again, that was absolute foolishness to the Greeks and stumbling block to the Jews. So we enter into the middle of this discourse where Paul is explaining why the Gospel is foolishness to the Greek and is a stumbling block to the Jew, verse 25, the reason being: 'Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men'. Why does God choose people who you and I would not choose, and He chooses them first? Because His foolishness is wiser than your wisdom, that's why. 'And the weakness of God is stronger than men', here it is, 'For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence'.

Why does God do it? That's the reason why: that no flesh should glory in His presence, so He can make a fool of the epitome of all that this world stands for by using foolish things like you and me to confound the mighty strongholds and principalities and powers, philosophies and systems and kingdoms of this world. It's wonderful, isn't it? It's wonderful that what matters, no matter what age you are, no matter what you can and cannot do, all that matters is that God has called you. All that matters is that He has saved you, He has chosen you - and our passage is saying that whoever He chooses, He also equips them. The old puritan was right - and oh, that this would sink into everyone's heart this evening - when he said: 'God does not choose you because you are equipped, but He equips you because you are chosen'. God didn't look down one day and say: 'Oh, there's a great fellow, he can speak well', or, 'he's got a great mind', or, 'he's got lots of money', or, 'he's got many talents', or, 'listen to the sound of his singing voice', but God chooses the weakest, the basest, the ugliest things of the world. Paul said the off-scouring of all things, if I could translate it like this, or paraphrase it: the scum of the earth! He chooses us and He makes things that were nothing into something, that nobody should glory in His sight and all the glory should be brought to God.

Is that not what He said to Israel in Deuteronomy chapter 7? 'The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your father, Abraham'. That's why, because He chose you, because He loved you. Now, young people tonight, what I want to say to you is this: don't let any system, whether it's the world system or a system within the church, or don't let anybody whether your family or your friends, put you into a box of irrelevancy because you're young, because you're weak. Certainly in these days young people need to respect their elders, and learn to respect them and learn from them, but can I encourage you young people tonight in the light of what we see in the book of Jeremiah: set ablaze a trail for God in this day, and don't let anybody set you off that trail, don't let anybody hinder you or put your light out!

I tend to agree with Leonard Ravenhill when he says: 'I would rather calm down a fanatic than try to resuscitate a corpse'. Isn't that right? But equally older people here tonight, don't let the energies of the young people make you feel redundant, or make you feel retired from God's work - because your wisdom, your experience is greatly needed in the church of God. Isn't it wonderful in the light of the studies that we have done already, if Moses was sent to Pharaoh at the age of 80 years, I'm sure that God has still something for you to do! Don't you think?

He said he was too young, but the second way he felt he was unqualified for this calling was he said: 'I cannot speak' - I can't speak. Now he used the reason for not being able to speak because he was too young, he didn't feel gifted in this way because of his age. You'll remember that this was one of the excuses that Moses made, even though he was schooled in all the wisdom and learning of Egypt and he was a great man in stature and in speech. He said: 'I can't do anything for God', if you like, 'I am not a preacher'. How many Christians say that today? 'I haven't got a gift to preach, I find it hard enough getting up and standing and praying audibly. I'm not a musician, I find it very difficult to witness - I couldn't go round the doors and knock on them and ask people about their salvation'. Let me just say in passing, if you don't have the gift of speaking, or if you don't have the gift of singing, would you please spare us all and don't preach and don't sing!

The fact of the matter is that the word of God this evening tells us that there are a great deal of objections that we use for not serving God, for not speaking for God, for not being involved in God's work, which are only excuses. 'I can't speak', Jeremiah said, 'I'm too young', but look at what God says to him in chapter 1 and verse 5 - back to Jeremiah chapter 1 and verse 5: '[Jeremiah] before I formed you in the belly I knew you; and before you came forth out of your mother's womb I sanctified you, and I ordained', or I chose, 'you a prophet unto the nations'. What does he say first of all? 'God, I can't speak' - 'Listen, Jeremiah, I made you. Those lips that you say can't speak, I made those lips Jeremiah! I consecrated you, I've set you apart for my use, I have appointed you and ordained you a prophet to the nations'. 'But Lord, I don't know what to say' - verse 7: 'Whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak' - 'I will tell you, Jeremiah, what to say'.

He could say, like Moses: 'But who will I say has sent me, and what if they say who is the name of your God?'. In verse 8 He says: 'Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the LORD'. 'I have made you, I have consecrated you, I've appointed you, I will tell you what to say, and I will be with you'. 'Lord, how do I know, how do I know You'll be with me? How do I know You'll tell me what to say?'. In verse 9, this is a remarkable verse for me: 'Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth'. He touched him and He put His words in his mouth! He endued him with power from on-high, a bit like what the disciples were endued with on the Day of Pentecost, to speak and to utter words of God in the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit.

Don't be discouraged at seeming disqualifications that you see in your life for what God has called you to. Don't be discouraged, don't let them drag you down and stop you serving God - listen this evening: God has saved you, He has chosen you out of the teeming herds of humanity that are going down to perdition, and He has bought you with the precious blood of the Lamb of God at Calvary, He has set you apart and sanctified you, He has made you acceptable in the Beloved, He has chosen you in Christ before the very foundation of the world to serve Him and to do great exploits for Him, He has sent the third Person of the Trinity into this realm so that you might be empowered to go and do the work of God, and He has given you His word what to say. Don't be discouraged, He has commanded you to go and gossip the Gospel. It doesn't matter if you can't stand up here like this and preach, because what the Lord said before He left His disciples was simply this: 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you', and listen, what He said to Jeremiah He says to all of us, 'and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age. Amen'.

He was in many senses an unnatural choice, but aren't we? It is amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. We must move on: he felt unequipped for his calling, but when he got into the job we see that he bore many heavy burdens, and that is the reason why Jeremiah is known by the title: 'The Weeping Prophet'. He is called in places 'the prophet of the broken heart, the prophet of the bleeding heart and the iron will'. All you need to do to know about this is to go to the next book in the Bible from Jeremiah, which is the book of Lamentations, which really is a book of wailing and cries over the destruction of the

holy city of Jerusalem. That is why he is known as the weeping prophet. We are caused to ask the question this evening: what was it that caused his brokenness? What were the many heavy burdens that this man of God had to bear? Of course, we would have to say that it was the sin all around him, the idolatry and degradation politically and religiously of the state. Then of course politically there was the proposed alliance with the Egyptian nation to fight off the Babylonians, and that was not of God. Those two things alone would be an awful burden for a holy man, and again we see the divine dilemma of the prophet - a heart after God, a heart after the righteousness of God, and also on the other hand a heart after the people of God, a love and compassion for them.

But Jeremiah's burdens were not just vocational, but the one thing that strikes us very forcibly in the life of Jeremiah is that his burdens and his sufferings were very personal. If you look closely at this book you will find that although Jeremiah was standing up for God and standing up for country, the people of the nation, the political and religious establishment, stamped him and named him as a traitor. Cast your mind back for a moment to the book of Ezekiel, and I hope if you don't remember anything about Ezekiel that you remember this: there was a threat from the North, the Babylonians were coming to the North, and both Ezekiel and the prophet Jeremiah told the people of Israel: 'Don't fight against Babylon, because Babylon are My instrument of chastening you and bringing you back from idolatry to Myself. Don't fight against them, go into captivity', remember he said: 'Build your houses, furnish your homes, because you're staying here - don't fight what I am doing in My sovereign will'. Now you can imagine when Jeremiah was coming out with the like of this, and he was preaching it in Jerusalem, they branded him politically and religiously as a traitor.

His cry was not: 'No surrender', it was 'All surrender'. He was discovering, the more he preached and talked, that the enemies of a preacher are not always the people that he's seemingly preaching against in the state. If you look with me at this book, if you turn first of all to chapter 11 of Jeremiah, you will find that some of the enemies were from his own hometown. Verse 19 of chapter 11: 'But I was like a lamb or an ox that is brought to the slaughter; and I knew not that they had devised devices against me, saying, Let us destroy the tree with the fruit thereof, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name may be no more remembered. But, O LORD of hosts, that judgest righteously, that triest the reins and the heart, let me see thy vengeance on them: for unto thee have I revealed my cause. Therefore thus saith the LORD of the men of Anathoth', the place where Jeremiah was from, his own hometown, 'that seek thy life, saying, Prophesy not in the name of the LORD, that thou die not by our hand'. The people of his own town were against him.

Turn to chapter 12 and verse 6, perhaps more hurting for Jeremiah, the fact that those of his own home were against him: 'For even thy brethren, and the house of thy father, even they have dealt treacherously with thee; yea, they have called a multitude after thee: believe them not, though they speak fair words unto thee'. Chapter 15, we'll not take time to read it, but verses 15 to 17 tell us that the congregation, the actual people of God, the religious establishment, turned against him for his preaching. If you look at verse 20 of chapter 15, and the public in general, just everybody and anybody, everybody was against Jeremiah - like Athanasius, he was against the world and the world was against Athanasius. Does it not remind you of the words of our Lord Jesus when He said: 'A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country and in his own house, and a man's foes shall be they of his own household'?

What is this telling us? I'll tell you what it tells us: if you are wanting to be a man or a woman of God, whether you're young or old, mature or immature, there's one thing that you've got to realise: to be a man after God's own heart, and to be a man or woman whose heart is broken for the people, you will be a lonely man or woman! You will not be everybody's best friend. I think John Henry Jowett, that great preacher, put it well when he said: 'It is possible to escape a multitude of trouble by living an insignificant life'. Do you want to get out of trouble? Don't do anything! Be insignificant! And certainly I would say to you, only most of you are converted here this evening already, if you want to get out of any trouble or problems: don't follow Christ!

Jeremiah suffered for his message. If you look at chapter 20 verse 2 quickly, you'll see that he was put in stocks outside the city of Jerusalem. They probably threw fruit at him, maybe even stones at him and dear knows what else. In chapter 38 and verse 6 he was thrown into a pit, into a cistern. In chapter 40 and verse 1 he was put into chains. In chapter 16 and verse 2 God forbade him to be married - he wasn't allowed to marry anybody, he had to somehow reflect the anguish that God had. Perhaps I look into it and I read into it, just like Ezekiel's wife was taken from him to symbolise the marriage being dissolved, if you like, between Jehovah and the covenant people, Jeremiah wasn't even allowed a wife! I wonder was that the reason why? He wasn't allowed children, and all of these sorrows and all of these burdens could be the reason why he is called the weeping prophet, and the reason why many a scholar calls him the Job amongst the prophets.

In his ministry he had to face the false prophets, pastors and priests. During his ministry the word of God that he preached was banned and burnt and belittled - and is it any wonder that a man of like passions such as we are, and remember he was only a man, should become Jeremiah the dejected. Neither is it a coincidence that in his lifetime, more than any prophet, he saw how God works in brokenness - that's your third point. For one day, led by the Holy Spirit of God, Jeremiah goes just beyond the city of Jerusalem to the Valley of Hinnom. There in the Valley of Hinnom he finds a little potter's house, and he walks in and sees the potter sitting at the wheel. He's battering that clay and trying to get all the air bubbles out of it, just ready to be moulded. He puts it onto the disc, and he moves his foot and pushes and pumps, and then he puts his hands all around it. With his finger, like an artist and a musician, he brings from that clay what he wants to see inwardly and outwardly. He moulds it after his way. Then all of a sudden there's a little accident, and something falls off, something breaks, or it doesn't turn out the way he wanted to be - and I can almost see Jeremiah thinking: 'What's he going to do? Is he going to bend down and take another piece of clay?'. But he doesn't do that, he takes the bit that is broken, the bit that is not moulded right, and he breaks it! He pushes it, squeezes it, wrings it, and he remoulds it!

Look at chapter 18 for a moment, verse 3: 'I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel'. What a lesson it was for the people of God in Jeremiah's day to realise that no matter what comes into your life, even if it is the nation of Babylon that is going to sack, rape and pillage your nation and your hometown Jerusalem, if it is from My hand it is for your good!

The problem of evil, the problem of suffering and pain is one of the greatest questions that every Christian has to face. It cannot be explained, but the only thing that can in any way explain it is the evidence of things not seen, which we are told is faith. It is what Job found when he said: 'He knoweth the way that I take, and when He has tried me I shall come forth as gold'. The nation would have to be broken, the nation would have to be moulded again and remade, and the question that we need to ask personally in our own lives is this: do we trust God the Potter? Do we trust ourselves to the Potter's skill and the Potter's hand? The One who has the idea, the One who is the architect behind our lives, the One who has the skilful touch and has the power and the ability to change us - do we trust Him? Because I'll tell you tonight: if you trust Him you will find this is your experience, verse 4: 'He made it again'!

I would say again to you, if you don't want to be changed and you're a Christian, you're in the wrong life! You're in the wrong life. But if you want to be made again, and allow the trials that come into your life and the troubles and problems to do what God intends them to do, God will make you into a new vessel. Think of Jacob, the twister, the supplanter, the thief and the liar, and God makes him one night, through wrestling, through brokenness, through the Potter's hand, into a prince with God and with Israel! Think of Simon, cursing with oaths the name of Christ, denying Him thrice, going into the dark night weeping bitterly after

seeing the very face of His Saviour - and what happens to that man? From the resurrection morn that denier and that traitor is made into Peter: 'Thou art Peter', petros, a stone - a man of weakness made into a man of rock!

Can I ask you tonight: have you lost sight, in your fear and in your trouble, that God is still working on you? There's a wee children's chorus and I love it, it's very profound theologically - you mightn't think so, and I don't know whether the children grasp it or not, but it goes like this:

'He's still working on me
To make me what I ought to be.
It took Him just a week to make the moon and the stars,
The sun and the earth, and Jupiter and Mars.
How loving and faithful He must be,
Because He's still working on me!'

I know He's a lot of work still to do with me, but do we trust ourselves to the Potter's hand? We may not understand His plan, we may not understand what He's doing, but do we trust the hand? It's hard to trust Him when you witness unprecedented destruction, as Jeremiah did - your fourth point. Jeremiah constantly urged the backsliding people of Judah to return to Jehovah or bear the consequences, to flee from the wrath to come, but if they did not flee from the wrath to come they would incur the judgemental wrath of God - and they would go through it even though God loved them and God was not willing that any should perish. As you know the awful story of Jeremiah, that call of warning fell on deaf ears, and that's why Jeremiah changes from being a prophet of warning to a prophet of weeping. The wrath of God fell on the people's heads because Jeremiah's voice fell on deaf ears. The devastation was vast, Jerusalem was surrounded by the forces of Babylon. Her own trees, the word of God says, were used against her. The temple was destroyed, the corpses of the Jewish people were fed to the wild animals. Those people that lived entered into captivity for 70 years in Babylon, and they sat down and hung their harps, and they wept as they remembered Zion. Terrible, isn't it?

The amazing thing out of it all is this, and this is the point on which I want to finish: even in this dispensation, and even in this epoch of the Old Testament which is pre-Christ, Jeremiah became Christ-like through his sufferings. Now remember that this is a prophet who had a lot to commend him. As you read this book you find that he ministered under seven rulers: King Josiah, King Jehoiachim, King Jehoiachin, King Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Gedaliah of Babylon, Johanan. We find that he prophesied against nine nations: Egypt in chapter 46, Philistia in chapter 47, Moab in chapter 48, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar, Hazor and Elam in 49, and Babylon in 50 and 51. What a mighty prophet this was! But of all the attributes and all the characteristic achievements of this man of God, there is none greater than the one that you will find in Matthew chapter 16, turn with me. Matthew 16 and verse 13: 'When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God'.

They said: 'You're either Elijah, John the Baptist back from the dead, or Jeremiah!' Why Jeremiah? The weeping prophet? This weak prophet, it seemed, whose heart was broken - why Jeremiah? Because Jeremiah was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, the people hid their face from him, he was despised and rejected of men. And you can see our Lord Jesus Christ standing over Jerusalem crying: 'Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thee together as a hen gathereth her chickens, but ye would not'. Why was Jeremiah like Christ? Because of his sufferings! As Paul said: 'That I might know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the

fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death'. Why was Jeremiah like Christ? Let me read to you 2 Corinthians 4 verses 7 to 10: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body'.

Why did they mistake Christ for Jeremiah? Let me sum it all up with this story as we close. Margaret Sangster-Phippin was the daughter of the late great preacher W. E. Sangster of Methodism. She wrote that in the mid-1950s of her father's life he began to notice some uneasiness in his throat and a dragging in his leg. When he went to the doctor he found that he had an incurable disease that caused progressive muscular atrophy in his body. It was debilitating, and his muscles, he was told by the doctor, would gradually waste away. His voice would fail, his throat would soon become unable to swallow. From that day Sangster threw himself into the work of God in the British Home Mission, thinking that he could write and he could use up the time that he was no longer able to preach and go about doing meetings with prayer and with other things that he had wanted to do all of his life. He said this to the Lord: 'Lord, let me stay in the struggle. I don't mind if I can no longer be a General, but give me just a Regiment to lead'. And he did it, he wrote articles and he wrote books, and he helped organise prayer cells throughout England. He said to people whenever they commented upon his suffering: 'I'm only in the kindergarten of suffering'. Gradually Sangster's legs became useless, his voice went completely, but he could still hold a pen shakily. On Easter morning just a few weeks before he died he wrote a letter to his daughter, and in it he said these words, listen carefully: 'It's terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice with which to shout 'He is risen!', but it would still be more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout it'. Did you get that? It is terrible to a wake up Easter morning and have no voice with which to shout 'He is risen!', but it would still be more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout it. Can we say:

'Have Thine own way Lord, have Thine own way.
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.
Mould me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have Thine own way Lord, have Thine own way.
Hold o'er my being absolute sway.
Fill with Thy Spirit, till all shall see
Christ, only always, living in me'.

Father, we thank You that a greater than Jeremiah has come to us. We thank You that He trod the path of humanity that we trod, He is tested in all points as we are, apart from sin. We thank You that at this very moment He can see into our hearts, into the very depths of our being, and He is touched as our great Prophet with the feelings of our infirmities. What can we say, our Father, but we thank You for Jesus the Author and Finisher of our faith. We just pray that each gathered here tonight may know His succour and His sympathy as they go. Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 9

"The Dilemma Of Jonah"

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Jonah 1-4

1. ***A Confusing Commission (1:1-2)***
2. ***A Cry From The Deep (2:1-10)***
3. ***An Unexpected Outcome (3:5-10)***
4. ***Another Painful Lesson (4:4-11)***

We're turning to the book of Jonah, as you can see from your study sheet, we're embarking upon our ninth study tonight in our series 'As Sparks Flying Upwards' - looking at these biblical characters that can be marked for many characteristics and personality traits, but the one which we are homing in on in these recent weeks is the fact that these men and women, some of whom we haven't reached yet, went through very difficult times in their lives. We're analysing how they came through those difficulties, and how indeed God brought them through. We're looking tonight at a very unique character that many of you are very familiar with since you were a child - you've learnt the holy scriptures, or been to Sunday School, and you know the story of Jonah and (as it's commonly called) 'the whale'.

We're going to come in at the very end of this story, at the very back of the book, and we'll be looking at a lot of this narrative tonight but we want to look at the very climax of this book - the part that the author is leading up to, and the conclusion of where he wants us to get. It's very easy to get sidetracked with 'the whale', or the great fish, in the story of Jonah. It's even very easy to get distracted with Jonah himself, but that is not the whole point of this book. The whole point of the book of Jonah, as with all the books in the Bible, is God and the centrality of the divinity of the Almighty.

Let's look at verse 4 of chapter 4: "Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry? So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city. And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"

In Job chapter 3 and verse 11 we looked in recent weeks at this expression of a wish - a death wish, if you like - of the great prophet and man of God. He says this: 'Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?'. We find that when we moved from Job, we moved to study the character of Jeremiah in our last study, and we find also there in chapter 20 verses 14 and 15, he said: 'Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day wherein my mother bare me be blessed. Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying, A man child is born unto thee; making him very glad'. Job curses the day that he was born; Jeremiah, we find, curses the day that he was born. We then looked at the

great prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 19 verse 4, and he says, we read in the narrative that: 'He himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers'.

Job, Jeremiah, Elijah, all wishing that they would die. Now we come to Jonah and we find that he is no different, for in verse 8 of chapter 4 that we've read together tonight he says: 'It is better for me to die than to live'. We've been looking, over these few weeks, at how these great men of God can be moved to such an extreme, such a point of emotional and spiritual desperation, that they can feel within the very depths of their soul - even though they are zealous after God and His righteous cause, and preaching His word - they feel at the end of their tether; they feel that they want to die; they feel that there's no longer any purpose in their life, in their existence; they feel that the ministry which they have been called to is now pointless, and they just wish that God would take them off the face of the earth, that God would take their breath from their bodies.

Now the reason why I'm starting, tonight, at the end of this little book is because I want us to be caused to ask the question tonight: how do these great men of God get to this extreme? How do they get to rock bottom like this? Surely if they are men of God, surely if they are spiritual, surely if they are following the word of God and all of its teachings, its precepts and its righteousness, they should never get depressed? They should never become dejected and discouraged and downhearted! The reason why I start at the end is simply to prove to you that they do. In fact, it is characteristic of most men and women of God - if I can use this phrase - most men and women who go through with God, and follow hard after God, and seek God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their might, that there comes a time in their lonely experience when they leave others behind that they feel dejected, downhearted, and even near to death.

You've heard the expression: 'Many roads lead to the cross', it simply means that there's only one gospel, there is only one way to be saved - by grace are ye saved through faith - and it is through Calvary's cross work, the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we come to faith. But many of us have different stories about how we came to Calvary, and of course the same can be said to be true of trouble. There are many different kinds of road that bring us to trouble, there are many and varied reasons why we can go through trouble. Job that we've looked at: he suffered affliction and disease, heartache, bereavement. Jeremiah that we've looked at: he was downhearted, and in fact he wrote the whole book of Lamentations because of the state of the city of Jerusalem and the whole nation - God's nation, Israel. He was heartbroken over the people, he felt the heartbreaking nature of God's emotion and compassion for His own people. We saw in recent weeks how Elijah feared for his own life, and he ran away from Jezebel. His trouble was caused through fear of man.

We can all experience trouble, and it can be different types of trouble and different causes of that trouble - but as you look at the character of Jonah tonight, you might say: 'Aha! Well, I know his trouble, I know the reason for Jonah's trouble: he ran away! Jonah was disobedient; Jonah was rebellious; Jonah was a runaway, a prodigal prophet, God's fugitive - and he suffered. The reason why he was swallowed by this great fish, the reason why he went through all the heartache and problems, the reason why we find him in chapter 4 under the gourd, and the gourd being rotted away and the sun beating down on him, and him saying 'I wish I would die', is because he sinned against God!'. Well, that may well be true, but I would urge you all tonight - especially those who are believers - as the Lord Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount warns us not to judge one another harshly, I think we ought to extend that teaching to biblical characters. We have to be wise in our critique and our analysing of men of God within the word of God and I believe it is too - far too - simplistic for us to say tonight that Jonah just simply ran away from God, that Jonah was simply disobedient. He was like a little boy whose Mummy told him to wash the dishes, and he just said 'No!', and he went up to his room and he didn't want to do it.

What you have to remember is what, I hope, you remember from our studies in Jeremiah - and that is the nature and the characteristic of a prophet of God. A prophet of God is to have a heart after God's own heart, a zeal and a righteous thirst after God's law and God's teaching and precepts, just like God. He's to be jealous for the Lord God of Hosts, but he's also - on the other side of the coin - to have a characteristic after the people, a love and a compassion for God's own nation, Israel. He's to be a mighty man. He can't be a man of double standards, he can't be a weak man, he can't be a backslider like Balaam was - for God would have to deal with a man or a woman like that who was standing up for His name. I believe tonight, with all my heart, that Jonah was a holy man; I believe that Jonah was a righteous man, and Jonah would have had to have the qualifications that God lacked and needed in every single prophet whom He chose. His real problem, I believe, was not per se simple rebellion, but if I could put it like this: he had a doctrinal dilemma. His pathway to despair started not just with simple sin, but with a theological problem.

I think we'll see tonight how this is a prime example of how what we believe affects the way we behave, and also how doctrinal extremes in our lives and in our minds can restrict our ability to move as God would wish us to move, and what is God's will for our lives. Let me tease this out for you, because this is so important in our understanding of this book, and indeed the suffering of Jonah. This whole perplexity starts with a confusing commission, which is your first point on your sheet tonight. The big question that we have to look at is this: why did Jonah flee from God? Why did Jonah run away from God's call? Now the common answer that's given to that question is: 'Well, he was a petty minded bigot. He didn't like the Assyrians, the Ninevites, he wanted them all to die, he wanted them all to be wiped out - he just didn't like them'. Some say he was a racist; some say, although he was a prophet of God, he was a hateful, warped and twisted old begrudger - he was an unworthy man to be a prophet, an unlovable man. The more you read some commentaries and some books, that's the impression that you get, and listening to some preachers you'd think that it's very hard to love this prophet, Jonah.

Listen to what some have said about him: 'His national prejudice construed God's election of Israel as a rejection of all others. His religious intolerance was mixed with no mercy for the heathen. His legal spirit inclined more to vengeance than to grace. His disloyal temper made him wilful and wayward'. That author - who you would be surprised to hear who he is - says that Jonah was possessive of a disloyal temper which made him wilful and wayward! Another famous scholar says this: 'One cannot love this Jonah, or think well of him. We seem unable to recognise in him those signs of grace which we expect to see adorning the commissioned servants of God'. Now I want to say to you tonight that I believe that Jonah - along with many men and women of the Bible, but above perhaps all of them - is one of the most misunderstood characters in the whole of the word of God. Surely a man of the description of these scholars would be unfit for the prophetic office, let alone the spiritual leadership? I know, and you know, that God can use any vessel that He chooses to use - but surely God would never sustain a man or woman like this right throughout their whole prophetic career, and continue to inspire His word through them if he was not a worthy vessel and was disobedient, and was wayward and wilful? I think it's a bit hard to believe.

Nevertheless, the common reasons for that belief are simply these: in chapter 1, if you look at chapter 1, men and women say that Jonah was a coward, he was cowardly, he feared going to Nineveh - he ran away. That's why he ran away, he didn't want to go to these barbarous people. Then the second reason that people give is that he had bigoted prejudices against these Gentiles, because they were non-Jews he didn't want to go and preach to them, he didn't want them converted. Then thirdly some say: 'Well, it was a selfish motive, selfish jealousy he had' - he didn't want to go and tell the people that judgement was coming, and then God didn't send the judgement, and then the egg would be on his face! He would be embarrassed! Now, my friends, let's analyse this tonight: if you look at chapter 1, the one thing that you will not find in it is Jonah being afraid. He might be running away, but you will find him asleep at the bottom of a boat in the midst of a storm in the ocean. That is not a characteristic of a man who is afraid. It is not a characteristic of a man who is afraid, to be willing to jump overboard to save those who are onboard - the crew. Jonah was not a fearful man, he was not a timid man, but he was a rugged, rough prophet of God.

Well, was he anti-Gentile? I grant you he, I'm sure, was a Jewish nationalist. He may have been zealous and patriotic, but you see immediately when the whole ship is ready to sink, and those pagan idolaters - idol worshippers - on the boat are going to lose their lives, you can see immediately that Jonah has compassion upon them, and he is willing to cast himself off the side to save their lives. Is that anti-Gentile? I think not. Was he proud? Was he worried about egg on his face, if what he said and what he prophesied against the city of Nineveh didn't come true? Is that what it was: his reputation? Well, I would say to you that if Jonah wasn't concerned to sacrifice his life for these pagan sailors, do you think he would worry about sacrificing his reputation?

So, why did Jonah flee? Have you ever really wondered? Perhaps you've thought what I would say are these wrong answers to be the answer? Well, the reason I believe is in chapter 4 and verse 2, if you look at it. After Jonah sees the people of Nineveh repenting, it says in verse 2: 'And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country?' - isn't this what I said would happen? - 'Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil'. There's the answer: Jonah didn't go to preach to these Ninevites, not because he was afraid, not because he was anti-Gentile, not because he was proud, but he knew in the back of his mind that if there was any chance at all that these sinners could repent and did repent, God would forgive them and God would save them!

But what is added to that is other information that we have within the word of God, other information that we know Jonah possessed about Assyria, about the city of Nineveh which was the capital of Assyria. There were two factors in particular concerning Assyria that would have made Jonah run away from the commission of God, and run away from any possibility of thinking that these Ninevites should be saved. Here's the first: Assyria was the rising world power that was destined and prophesied by God's prophets of old to conquer the nation of Israel and to destroy them. These were God's chosen people to discipline and to chasten His own people - a bit like Babylon that we were thinking of in the book of Ezekiel. Jonah knew that, and Jonah was being asked to go and preach repentance to them. The second thing was, the second factor that was in Jonah's mind was that these people were so brutal, they were barbarous and notoriously so. Archaeological caves still today are littered and graffitied with the awful barbarous acts that these Assyrian people got up to when they sacked cities, and they went through them and wrecked them - all sorts of barbarous butcherism that they committed on men, women and children - they were like the Nazis of that present day!

So think of those two things, keep them in your mind: first, Jonah knew that it was prophesied that these people one day would come and invade Israel and take it over; secondly, he knew the type of people they were - wicked people, they were evil people, if you like they were people who did not deserve the grace of God! Let me say that it wasn't just Jonah knew these things, but every man in Israel knew them also. Jonah definitely knew them, because he came - as we learn from scripture - from one of the border towns of Israel, and he probably witnessed the savagery that the Assyrians wrought on his own home town and his own people. If you were to go tonight to the book of Nahum, you would find many instances - look at it, two books after Jonah. Jonah, then Micah, and then Nahum - chapter 2 and verse 12, and you can see what this prophet says of the Assyrians, chapter 2 verse 12: 'The lion did tear in pieces enough for his whelps', speaking of the Assyrians, 'and strangled for his lionesses, and filled his holes with prey, and his dens with ravin'. Chapter 3 and verses 1 to 4: 'Woe to the bloody city!', the city of Nineveh, 'It is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not; The noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels, and of the prancing horses, and of the jumping chariots. The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear: and there is a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcases; and there is none end of their corpses; they stumble upon their corpses: Because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the wellfavoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts. Behold', God says, 'I am against thee'.

You can see what a city the city of Nineveh is, and in verse 19 he tops it all: 'There is no healing of thy bruise', you're beyond reproach, 'thy wound is grievous: all that hear the bruit of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?'. Those that hear about your fall will rejoice because you're a wicked, wicked people! Now keep this in mind for a moment, come with me: Jonah knew - one, God had prophesied that the Assyrians one day would come and destroy the nation of Israel as judgement. Hosea said it, Nahum said it, Amos has said it, and Jonah knows it - and as Amos said before him: 'The Lord God will do nothing but that he revealeth his secret unto his servants, the prophets'. I believe that Jonah knew right well that these Assyrians one day would come and be used of God's sovereignty to destroy His own people. Jonah knew what God had intended for Assyria.

Now, put yourself in Jonah's shoes: God comes to him one day in the cool of the day, and He announces: 'I'm going to judge Assyria'. You must imagine that Jonah is overjoyed, he's beside himself: 'That's great, maybe this will divert the judgement and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem'. What a great patriot he is, a nationalist, he's fighting and loving his people! What a joyous message that would be! At last Nineveh would be destroyed and Israel would be saved, but there was one thing that Jonah feared - there was one thing at the back of his mind: he knew that Jehovah was a merciful God, and even if these people cried at the eleventh hour, God would have mercy upon them! Now, how would you like to have the choice that Jonah had? It's alright throwing mud at him when you're reading your Bible in your quiet time, five minutes before you go to sleep - but imagine standing there before God, and having this great choice: the dilemma of Jonah. The choice of whether not to go, not to go and tell the Ninevites, not to go on God's commission with God's message and let them get what they deserve and save the nation of Israel; choosing between divine vengeance upon himself for being disobedient and saving his nation Israel, or else going to Nineveh, preaching to them, and the possibility that they get saved and salvation is brought to them - and Israel is destroyed because the Assyrians live on, and they live on to destroy the nation of Israel!

Can you imagine the mental agony that the prophet of God, Jonah, went through? Do you think that he dealt with this thing lightly? In his mind, where we find him in this book, he thinks that the only way to resolve this problem, this Catch-22, is to flee the command of God - rather than to risk the people repenting, rather than to risk the fact that there should be a revival, that they should be saved and one day they should all grow up and their children should live to come and destroy the nation of Israel. Jonah's decision was to sacrifice himself to save his country. For Jonah that, as far as he was concerned, was his only choice - which should he save: should he save Israel or should he save Nineveh? He chose Israel.

Now let me cast your mind back to what Moses said on one occasion, he looked to God concerning the sins of his own people and he said: 'Lord, if You won't forgive them, if You won't blot out their sin, blot my name out of Your book'. In Romans chapter 9 Paul says, concerning his kinsmen according to the flesh, the Israelites who were not yet converted: 'I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren according to the flesh - I could almost wish that I would go under the judgemental wrath of God for them, so that they can be saved, rather than they all go to hell'. Now I don't think that's what Jonah was doing, or what Jonah was saying, but I'll tell you this: his sentiment was very commendable. Even in his disobedience, in the dilemma of Jonah, he felt that he was choosing the nation of God over a wicked Nazi race! He was feeling that he was continuing the heritage of God's covenant, Jehovah's covenant, and everything that was given in the Torah, he felt that he was doing this I believe - and he had an absolute dilemma that he couldn't iron out!

Was he right? Of course he wasn't right. He wasn't right because he chose the land of God over the God of the land. He wasn't right because in the balance that a prophet is meant to have between a love for God and a love for the land he got an imbalance, there was a lack of balance. He loved the land too much, and he didn't obey God enough. But I couldn't help thinking, and I really do believe that this is the correct interpretation of

this book, but I couldn't help thinking looking at this that our problem is often the same problem that Jonah had. Do you not feel that at times: that we need to understand what God is doing before we believe in God doing the best for us? We want to understand it all, we want to really reason it before we're willing to obey what God has told to do. We want to reason His commands, and often, like Jonah, our false reasoning of what God is telling us to do drives us from God and from His will! Have you been there? You feel like Jonah feels, you're in his situation: you're condemned if you do, and you're condemned if you don't; you're confused. You know that God wants you to do a certain thing, but it just doesn't seem right to you, you just feel that it possibly couldn't go well if you took that decision - it just wouldn't have the turnout that you wanted, and the end result. So you choose to go the wrong way, against God's will, because you have reasoned that that can be the best and the only way, that can be the only good outcome!

We make God's will so simple, don't we? But it's not simple, it's not black and white, it's not as easy as we all think - and, my friend, I want you to put yourself in the shoes of Jonah tonight and see that there are times that we can make choices for what we feel is best, and we know it's out of God's will but we still can't see past our own futile reasoning that 'This must be for the best, surely this can be the only way, it's the only way I can see it working out!' But we find that when we do not accept God's will, things inevitably get worse. Although Jonah's sentiment and his motivation might have been extremely commendable, it was wrong - and we find that his disobedience moves from a confusing commission to a cry from the deep. In chapter 2 we find that Jonah is cast over the side by these pagan mariners, and he's in the depths of the sea and he prays to God - and a great whale, or a great fish, comes and swallows him up. Now I don't know whether you're here tonight, but I feel that many people can find themselves in a similar position because of a decision of the will that they made maybe years and years and years ago. They made a decision that they thought was right, out of the will of God, and they find themselves, here and now in this present-day, gone out of the presence of God.

In chapter 1 and verse 3 that's what it says, that when Jonah ran away from God it says he went out of the presence of God. Now people think that that means he wasn't in God's presence - do you not think that Jonah knew the fact of the omnipresence of God? Psalm 139, that you cannot escape God - if you go into the heights of heaven or the depths of hell, if you take the wings of the morning, dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, God's hand will still be there. Even in hell, God is there, His omnipresence is there - Jonah knew that he couldn't escape God, but that expression is a Hebraism meaning that he was actually deactivating his capacity as a prophet. He was going out of the presence of God, he was demobilising himself - demobbing as a prophet. How many in their past have renunciated their faith, or renunciated a principle of their faith? It might be a backslider, or a stagnant Christian, or a bitter heart, or a twisted personality - it might even be a broken soul who's been harmed and been through horrific experiences in their life - but above all else they find themselves, tonight maybe even in this place, in a similar situation as Jonah: an absolute ocean of hopelessness!

Is that you? Being in a cul-de-sac with no way out? As far as you're concerned you've spoiled your chance, you've blotted your page in your copybook, and you've been shackled by that choice that you made in your past - and as far as you're concerned you will be shackled with it, and the chain of that decision has gone right into this very day with you. You feel burdened down with it, and you feel that you can never be free from it. Can I say to you tonight: take heart from Jonah! Look at Jonah, the cry that he gives from the deep, because essentially his cry is a 'Tae Deim' (sp?) - if you like, it's a praising of God, a doxology of praise. Look at chapter 2 verse 1: 'Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, he cried by reason of his affliction'. Verse 3: 'God has cast me into the deep, into the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me: I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again unto thy holy temple'. In the midst of the ocean he's thinking of the golden temple of Jerusalem back home; and when he went to the bottoms of the mountains and the depths of the oceans of the earth, there in the very depths: 'O LORD my God. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came

in unto thee, into thine holy temple'. 'You heard me, Lord! Even in those devilish depths You heard me', and even in the belly of a whale Jonah could praise God!

You know the story all too well, there was a deliverance from the depths of that belly of a whale. But you and I both know that that was not a pleasant deliverance, was it? It was very unpleasant, in fact Jonah was probably scarred for life badly with the gastric juices of acid right all over his body that he experienced in the stomach of this big fish. He was scarred for life, but the point is this: no matter how far away Jonah got from the sovereign will of God, even if he had to be dragged through the hedge backwards - if I can say it - he was given another chance! The God who would be merciful to the Ninevites was willing to be a God of mercy towards His prophet.

What we've got to learn from this character, Jonah, tonight is that the longer we resist God the harder our deliverance will be. The longer we plug our ears to His voice, the longer we ignore His calling and His wooing, the harder our deliverance will be! The poet V. Raymond Edmond (sp?) said:

'With thoughtlessness and impatient hands
We tangle up the plans the Lord has wrought.
And when we cry in pain He saith:
Be quiet dear, while I untie the knot'.

It's hard at times to get deliverance, it's hard to experience salvation, but what we know from God's word tonight is that in the very depths of hell Jonah could cry when nobody else heard him but God: 'Salvation is of the Lord!'. Does that not give you hope tonight?

A cry from the deep, and then we find an unexpected outcome - because it's very interesting to me that as Jonah is vomited onto the land that he goes and does the job that he ought to have done in the beginning: he goes and tells the Ninevites and he preaches to them. But it's very interesting to me that despite all the Jonah went through, despite all that God showed him - God showing that 'You can't predict Me Jonah, you can't tell Me what to do, you can't push Me into a box, you can't run away from Me, you can't escape My presence even in the depths of the sea; I can get you there' - even with all of this experience behind him he still didn't get the point! I want you to see this tonight: he was still hoping deep down that God would judge the Ninevites, that God would wipe them out.

You know, I find that as I was studying this, it comes to my heart and mind that there are many people going through troubles in this world at this present time, even perhaps - it could be possible - in this building tonight: you're going through heartache and trial, and problems and illness and disease, and all sorts of anguish - but you've never learnt from what you've gone through! Isn't that a tragedy of humanity? To think of a man or a woman who has gone through so much in life, but they never learn? They go through terrible times, but their character is never changed for the good even in the slightest. The reason for all that can be: our problem is Jonah's problem, and that is our attitude toward God and to His will. It is simply this: do we resist the will of God, even though we don't understand it, or do we submit to the will of God? How do you see the circumstances that come into your life? Do you see them as intrusions? Do you see them as enemies or do you see them as the hand of God?

You should read through this book in your own leisure time, and look at the many times it mentions what God does. God sent the storm into the ocean; it was God that determined the lot of the dice as the sailors threw it; God's hand is right throughout this whole book. God is in control simply because in Jonah, God was working in him both to will and to do of His good pleasure. Now can I leave this with you tonight, and if you forget anything or everything that I've said please don't forget this: if you and I are to survive the Christian life, there is one mystery that we are going to have to resign ourselves to believing, and that is the mystery of

providence of Almighty God. Have you got that? Don't go through your Christian life wrestling with it, but go through it believing in it and using it as a rock and a foundation! Your thoughts are not God's thoughts, your ways are not God's ways - for as higher are the heavens above the earth, so are His ways higher than your ways, and His thoughts higher than your thoughts.

A man was questioning God's arrangement of the universe on one occasion, and he said: 'Why does God make a big tree with small nuts, and a small plant with large watermelons? It doesn't seem to make sense, does it?'. Just then a nut fell out of the sky and hit him on the head, and he said: 'Thank God that wasn't a watermelon!'. We question God, don't we? But we don't know the whole picture, and I think one of the best definitions of providence is given by Paul Harvey, and it is this: 'Providence is God acting anonymously' - moving in your life. Look at the anonymous actions of God in this book: the storm, Jonah didn't know it was from God; the dice, Jonah didn't know it was from God; the gourd, Jonah didn't know it was from God - but God's hand was throughout it all! You can see it in Esther, God's name isn't even mentioned, but God's sovereign providence and moving is right throughout the whole book - His fingerprint is firmly on it.

At 32 years of age William Cowper passed through a great crisis in his life. He tried to end his life by taking poison, and when that failed he hired a horsedrawn cab to take him to the River Thames - he asked to be left beside a certain bridge to jump off, but it was one of the foggiest nights in the city of London, and the cab went round in circles and circles until he got so frustrated that he got off and decided: 'I'll walk there myself'. The more he walked, eventually he hit a door and he found it was his own back door! God had led him right to the very place that he'd begun. He went into the house and he tried to fall upon a knife blade, and it broke in his hands. He tried hanging himself and he was lifted down, delirious, exhausted, but still alive. One day, feeling a little bit better, he lifted up the epistle to the Romans and he received through the word of God such a boost of faith and strength to believe that God had forgiven him, that God had cleansed him, and that God was for him. He summed it all up in a hymn, and I want you to turn to this hymn now for I want you to read every word of it tonight - 102 in the Golden Bells hymn book. Look at these words, and please tonight let them sink into your heart and into your mind, this man could write:

'God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures us His bright designs
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense.
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own Interpreter,
And He will make it plain'.

Friend tonight, when you face unanswerable questions, difficult dilemmas, life changing decisions: trust the God of the unknown! The final thought I want to leave you with, fourthly, is that Jonah had to go through another painful lesson. What I want you to note in the story of the gourd that we read right at the beginning of our meeting, chapter 4, is that right up to chapter 4 Jonah has been the central figure. Until these closing verses the prominence has been Jonah, but now the prominence changes to the Lord Himself and the supreme message of the book is declared - and I think it's like an illustration of our own life's experience and our own suffering: how our experiences, our trials and our tribulations, ought to bring us on a journey from our self-centredness to seeing God and God alone. In chapter 1 he's fleeing from God; in chapter 2 he's praying to God; in chapter 3 he's speaking for God; and in chapter 4 he's learning of God - and we find in verses 1 to 3 that he is displeased, he is angry, he's dismayed for the Assyrians have repented! They have turned to God: what's it going to mean for Israel? It's only a dark future, they'll all be destroyed and the prophecies will all come true!

In verse 5 God says to him, and in verse 8: 'Are you displeased? Have you a reason to be displeased, Jonah?'. In verse 9 he says: 'I have every reason to be displeased', and perhaps you're here tonight going through what you've gone through, the problems and trials, and you say: 'I've got every reason to be the way I am tonight. You haven't mentioned my problem, you haven't mentioned by affliction, I've got a good reason!'. The purpose, I believe, of Jonah finishing the book where he does is for us to get our eyes off our problems, to get our eyes off our confusions and our dilemmas, and to get our eyes onto Almighty God. Is that not what we need? We find that indeed, what Jonah is doing without even realising through the Spirit of the Living God, is taking our eyes to Calvary to the very Son of God, and we can hear His voice saying that as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so the Son of Man shall be in the belly of the earth. We see him coming out of the whale, and we hear the voice of the Holy Spirit saying: 'Neither wilt thou let thine Holy One to see corruption in Sheol'. We see that our eyes are being brought to Calvary, to the One who bore the waves and the billows and the wrath of God, the One who sunk into a place where there was no standing, the One who could say: 'I am cut off'. God is bringing us, tonight, to the great subject of His love - that's where He wanted Jonah to get: 'I love these people, a people that don't even know their right hand from their left hand, and I love them!'.

He wanted them to learn that there is a wideness in God's mercy, for the love of God is broader than the measures of man's mind; and His heart, the heart of the Eternal, is most wonderfully kind. The message of Jonah is ultimately fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, but the message of Christ is ultimately fulfilled in our suffering: 'Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body'. What was once a dilemma for Jonah is now the privilege of the child of God.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 10

"Job's Enigma"

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Job 1-42

- 1. His Crucible Of Fire (Chapters 1-3)**
 - a) He had it all (1:15)
 - b) He lost it all (1:6-3:25)
- 2. His Comforting Friends (Chapters 4-37)**
 - a) **First Session (Chapters 4-14)**
 - i. Eliphaz (Chapters 4-5) – Job's Reply (Chapters 6-7)
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 - i. Eliphaz (Chapter 15) – Job's Reply (Chapters 16-17)
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 - iii. Zophar (Chapter 20) – Job's Reply (Chapter 21)
 - c) **Third Session (Chapters 22-37)**
 - i. Eliphaz (Chapter 22) – Job's Reply (Chapters 23-24)
 - ii. Bildad (Chapter 25) – Job's Reply (Chapters 26-31)
 - iii. Elihu (Chapters 32-37)
- 3. His Crisis Of Faith (Chapters 38-42)**
 - a) Humiliation (38:1-42:6)
 - b) Vindication (42:7-10)
 - c) Restoration (42:11-17)

Job is just before the book of Psalms, so if you can find that great multitudes of Psalms somewhere in the middle of your Bible you'll be able to find the book of Job. We'll take time to read the first couple of verses, but I will be filtering through the book to a large extent this evening. We'll be doing an overview of the whole book to try and get the nature of the character of this man Job. Let's read the first couple of verses to really get the introduction to this great biblical drama.

Chapter 1 and verse 1: "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. And there were born unto him seven sons and three daughters. His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east. And his sons went and feasted in their houses, every one his day; and sent and called for their three sisters to eat and to drink with them. And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually. Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them. And the LORD said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon

himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD. And there was a day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly".

You will know, if you're familiar with the book of Job, that suffering is at the heart of this man's life story. Since all men and women in the earth know the experience of suffering at one time or another in their lifetime, this character of Job has a universal appeal - his experience cuts right across time and culture. We all feel an empathy and an identification with this man Job. I've entitled the message tonight 'Job's Enigma', and an enigma is simply something that is puzzling, or a riddle, or a paradox. The paradox and enigma and puzzle for Job is the fact that this righteous man apparently suffers for something that he has not done. It's not as if he's sinned in his life, it's not as if he's caused this suffering to come upon himself, and he's simply suffering - as we go through the book we find that he has physical ailments, but perhaps his greatest suffering of all is how his physical ailments are compounded by a mental anguish. The perplexing question that many human beings are asking in our world tonight, and maybe even you are asking in your own life's experience: 'Why me? Why is it happening to me? What have I done to deserve this fate? What have I done to bring this upon myself?'

The character of Job, perhaps more than any other within the scripture, or any other within literary history, is one of these most perplexing people, with the most perplexing questions that face men and women in our world today. One of the greatest questions of them all is this, right throughout the whole book is this theme: are the ways of God just? Is what God does in our world just? Theologians have put a name on this, it's called 'theodicy'. If you look up the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of the theological word 'theodicy' is this: a vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil - a vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil. In other words, theologians and individuals, whether they realise it or not, the 5'8" walking down the street today, the average Christian, wrestles with the question: why is there the presence of evil in my life and in the world if God rules the world? If God is provident, if God is sovereign, if God is really in control, why is this happening to me? Why is there suffering? Why does God allow it to happen? Why doesn't God step in and stop it?

No later than last week I heard a broadcaster on Radio Ulster asking a minister very pointedly these deep questions: why doesn't God destroy the devil? Why doesn't God stop evil? Why doesn't He take away pain? If He's all-sovereign why does He let illnesses, diseases, problems, trials, and all kinds of abuses continue? Why doesn't He do something about it if He can? Let me say right at the outset of our study tonight, and indeed right throughout all of our studies as we look at this problem of theodicy and suffering: the Bible does not dodge the issue! Now it's very important for you to note tonight that the Bible doesn't ignore the fact that one of the greatest questions facing mankind today, and even in Job's day, is the fact that God is sovereign yet evil exists. We know that it doesn't dodge the question by the very fact that the book of Job raises the question. It is God who takes the initiative, and openly and up-front He writes a book that tells us about this

fact of how we can know that - although God is real - there is still suffering in the world, and how we can try and understand the enigma of Job.

Of further interest to you ought to be the fact that not only is it God that raises the question first, but Job is probably the first book that was ever written in the Bible - even before the book of Genesis. So not only does God raise the problem of evil and the existence of God right away, but the very first book that God inspires in the Old Testament is taken up with this very theme. Incidentally, I think that we can draw from that the conclusion that, in a sceptical world in which we live that asks so many questions today, where our children and our young people are schooled and increasingly being taught to question absolutely everything - whether they be fundamental beliefs that were once believed in society, or absolute principles that were held by society in general or even the religious establishment - we need to realise that the Bible does not dodge these issues. As Peter tells us, we ought to be ready always to give an answer to everyone that asketh you a reason of the hope that is within you, with meekness and fear.

Although there is no doubt that the book of Job, and the Bible in general, deals and raises these deep theological questions about suffering; if we were to ask of the book of Job tonight: 'Does it answer the question? Are God's ways just? Why does God allow suffering if He is in control?', we would have to say that it answers the question, but simply in an affirmative: 'Yes'. Are God's ways just? All that the book of Job tells us is: 'Yes. God's ways are just' - but there's a full-stop after the affirmative yes. The book of Job doesn't go on to seek to explain God's ways, why God does things; it doesn't begin to justify God's reasoning in the eyes of mortal men. In the sceptical world in which we live, a world of relativism, a world where absolutes are absolutely extinct, we as Christians often feel bombarded with all the questions that we face day by day, with all the things that we're asked that we feel we cannot answer, and we don't know the reasons for the suffering that goes on in our world. We ought not to feel that way! In the light of the book of Job we need to realise that God doesn't give us all the answers! God doesn't even give Job the answers in this book - and, unless you've got a better source of answers than God, you're not going to find out the answers either!

We live in a generation where the mysteries of life are no longer tolerated, they have to be explained. We Christians can fall into the same trap and forget that there is much about God, in fact most things about God and His ways, that are still and always shall be a divine mystery. Even all the aeons of eternity in our perfection and in our divine glorification, our understanding will never grasp some of these deep, divine truths. As Moses said at the very beginning in Deuteronomy 29 verse 29: 'The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law'. God has revealed certain things to us, but the majority of His counsels, I believe; the majority of who He is, and what He is like, and why He does things have been held from us - and they have been held for a good reason! The book of Job may not answer the question why we suffer, but one thing it does do is it teaches us how we ought to suffer, and how we ought to suffer knowing that there is a God in heaven who only has our good in His mind.

It was in Job's crucible of fire that his enigma was formed. You know, if you've done chemistry, that a crucible is a little melting pot for metals - and you remember that Job in chapter 23 and verse 10 said: 'God knows the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold'. There in the melting pot, in the crucible, of Job's pain he goes through a severe test and a trial - and it is out of that that his great paradox and problem and enigma comes. In chapters 1 to 3, you're familiar with it, we've read the first chapter tonight, Job's crucible of fire is outlined for us. It's important to say tonight that Job is not a fictional character that's just thought up for dramatic effect in this poem, for in Ezekiel 14 Ezekiel names Job as an actual person; in James chapter 5 the apostle does the same. In chapter 1 and verse 1 it says that Job lives in the land of Uz - now that's the land of Uz, not the land of Oz! That may add to the little tale that this is a fairytale, if you pronounce it the land of 'Oz', but it's the land of Uz. We think today that it's probably an area in Northern Arabia - and in Northern Arabia, as we know it today, there lived a man who was, the Bible says, the greatest man in all the east, the richest man, the greatest man of status.

He had it all according to chapter 1 verses 1 to 5. He was rich in every way, and as we read down chapter 1 especially we find that he was rich in character. God says that he was a man who was perfect and upright, a blameless man, a man who tried to live according to God's ways. It doesn't mean that he was sinless, but it means that he was sincere and he was obedient as far as he had it in his power. He feared God and he feared sin. We find that he was rich also in his family, we read that he had seven sons and three daughters - and a large family in those days was seen to be prestigious, and especially if you have a majority of sons, it was esteemed in the east. He was also rich spiritual, in chapter 1 verse 5 we read that he had such a concern for his family that he prayed at the altar for them, he offered up sacrifices just in case they were unconsciously sinning against God, in case they hadn't the spiritual enlightenment and desire that their father did. He was a godly father. He was rich in character, family, spirituality and also materially - for we read that he had a great household, his livestock numbered thousands upon thousands.

Now right at the outset we need to see tonight that this was a man who was rich in character, rich with his family, rich spiritually, rich materialistically - yet he is unique even in our society today, even in Christian establishments we see that people tend to worship God, to praise God, and follow God when things are going wrong, when there's trouble in their life, when they get their back against a wall, when they're in the straits of fear and the storms of life come in - then they call out to God, even the damndest sinner in the world, when he's on his back and suffering from disease, can be heard to pray out to God for help. But here is a man who was the most successful man on the globe as we know, yet he is worshipping God in his prosperity and his riches!

Right away we see that this man had it all, but of course I don't need to familiarise you, I'm sure you know the story of Job - that this same man that had it all, lost it all. We hadn't time to read it all tonight, but from verse 6 of chapter 1 right through to the end of chapter 3 we hear the awful turmoil and trial that this godly man goes under. Of course it was unknown to Job that the sons of God came before the Almighty, before His throne up in heaven. All this drama before the throne of God between God and Satan is unknown to this man Job. Little did he know that God and Satan were discussing his case, God was pointing out to Satan Job's uprightness, his holiness, how he was a perfect man that feared God and eschewed evil - and then he doesn't hear Satan when Satan says: 'Do you think that Job serves You for nothing, God? God, if You just took away all of his riches, all of his wealth and his possessions, all of the things that he has that he prizes, he'll curse You to Your face!'

Of course, you know the story, that Satan gets divine permission - and, incidentally, Satan needs divine permission to touch the child of God - and he's given it, and he goes and attacks all of Job's possessions in chapter 1. Before long, at the end of the chapter, we find that Job has nothing and he's lying in sackcloth and ashes, ripping his clothes and realising that he's destroyed. Satan insinuates: 'Do you think that you serve God for nothing? God, do You think that he's before You as Your servant, upright, for nothing?'. Yet at the end of chapter 1 we find that Job falls upon his face, and he prays and mourns for the dead, and he worships God, and he says these immortal unbelievable words: 'The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD'.

Now, you would have expected Satan's mouth to have dropped, and for that to have been the end of the throwing down of the gauntlet in the battle. You would have thought that he would have been convinced that Job did not follow God just for nothing, but that wasn't enough - such integrity only challenged Satan even more. He said further to God in chapter 2: 'Let me touch his body. I've touched his possessions, but let me go a little bit further and touch his body, his health. Let me give him some pain, and then You'll see how faithful he really is!'. So God permitted Satan to touch Job - and, incidentally, God can permit Satan to touch men and women - but He told him: 'You ought not to take his life away from. You can touch him, you can give him whatever you like, but you're not permitted to take away his life'. Incidentally, that insinuates that Satan at times can be permitted of God to take people's lives.

The Bible says that he was covered from head to toe in sore boils, possibly a form of leprosy or elephantiasis, but whatever it was he was full of pains all over his body. He became disgusting to his friends and to his relatives, and even to his wife - so much so that it comes to the point in their marital relationship where his wife tells him: 'Look, just get it over with! Curse God, and die, and have it finished with!'. This is a remarkable man, for in chapter 2 and verse 10 he replies to his wife in these words: 'Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips'. People often use this verse to try and prove that God is the Creator of evil, because Job says: 'Shall we accept good and not evil from God?'. The word 'evil' there would be better translated 'adversity' - it's not the evil of sin, but it's the evil of difficulties, the Bible says that God is not the author of evil or the author of sin. But again we see here: one, God can permit Satan to enter into the life of a believer to test them. He can allow Satan to touch their possessions, to touch their family, He can even allow him to come in and touch their very body - and Job insinuates here again in chapter 2 and verse 10 that God allows adversity into the life of the believer.

It is at this point in the drama that Job's three friends enter onto the scene. We're going to skip over a lot of ground, but just to say that they make an appointment to come and to comfort and to help Job. We read that they sat with Job - they didn't even say a word for one whole week - and they just wept with him, and they joined in all of his acts of humiliation: sackcloth and ashes, and so on. Incidentally, you may have found that most Christians only read the first two chapters and the last couple of chapters of the book of Job, and whenever it's preached on you find that the preacher usually labours on the chapters I've already been speaking about and then skips and does a great jump to the very end, to where Job is getting better again and God's giving him prosperity. The reason being that all the middle chapters are Hebrew poetry, they're very difficult to understand, very difficult to translate into English, and difficult to interpret for that reason. People feel that generally it doesn't add to our understanding of the book, you don't really need to know all that's in the middle - but what is in the middle of this book, and I want to concentrate specifically on this tonight, is the real crux of our understanding what this book is about. I believe that the full orb of the message of Job is enhanced, and completely understood, only when you grasp how Job is comforted by his friends. You don't understand how Job gets from chapters 1 and 2 in his prosperity and his trial, to chapter 42 into his new prosperity, until you know where he came from and how he got there.

More than that, and more applicable to you and I tonight, we also find that these chapters in between are extremely contemporary for us today - the church and each believer in the 21st century. So let's look at it tonight, his comforting friends - chapters 4 to 37. If you look at chapter 16 first of all, you see in verse 2 that Job calls these friends - or what's commonly called 'Job comforters' - 'miserable comforters'. They're a contradiction in terms. In fact, we can truly say that when they start to open their mouths they become miserable comforters, and if they had sat like they did at the beginning for a whole week and just sympathised with him and said nothing, they would have done a lot better. As one man said it is better to sympathise than to sermonise. That is exactly what Job's comforters do - they fail to sympathise with Job, and they sermonise and pontificate to him.

Let's look at them in a little bit of detail tonight. The first comforter you may be familiar with, and all the details are down on your sheet under your second point, all of the drama that has gone before us. We're not going to look through it, you can do that in your own private study, but the first person that we meet with in this drama is the man called Eliphaz - Eliphaz from Teman. He's the first speaker, and it seems that as you read all of his speeches right throughout the book of Job that this man, Eliphaz, bases all of his ideas on spiritual experience - his own personal spiritual experience. If you turn to chapter 4 you can see that, chapter 4 and verse 12. One night this man Eliphaz had a charismatic, if you like, spiritual experience. He says: 'Now a thing was secretly brought to me, and mine ear received a little thereof. In thoughts from the visions of the night', he had a dream, 'when deep sleep falleth on men, Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all

my bones to shake. Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up: It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image was before mine eyes, there was silence, and I heard a voice, saying...', and so on and so on. He begins to teach Job, arguing from his personal experience, that God is a just God and that God will only make a man or a woman suffer if there is sin in their life. But what I want you to note is that Eliphaz argues from his own personal experience.

Have you ever had people coming to you and saying: 'Well look, when I was in your situation, I did this. I did this, and I coped with the problem, and I got through by doing this - and if you do this, you'll get through, and if you can't cope by doing this there's something drastically wrong with you. In fact, there must be something in your life that's wrong'. Have people ever said to you, and I think we're all guilty of it: 'Well, from my experience, you need this'. Others say: 'You need this experience. You need this to happen in your life'. Other say: 'Well, if I were you, I would do this'. Now, here's the immortal lesson of suffering that we get from this man Eliphaz, who based all of his counsel and comfort on his own spiritual experience - listen: everybody's experience is different! Have you got that? If I learnt anything through theological or college education it was this: in a counselling scenario, never say to anybody, 'I know what you're going through'. Do you know why? Because you don't! You may have gone through cancer, but you mightn't have reacted the way this person has, you mightn't have gone through it the way this person has; you might have gone through a bereavement, or in fact any trouble - 'as the sparks fly upward' we know that we're all born trouble - but everybody's different, and not everybody's experience is the same. This is where Eliphaz fell down.

The second comforter on your sheet is a man called Bildad. If Eliphaz was a man who based his counsel on spiritual experience, Bildad was a traditionalist. He was a man who looked to the past, a man who based his counsels on wise sayings of history. We read in chapter 8, if you look at it quickly, you will see that he built all of his counselling comforting case to Job upon the wise sayings of the ancient fathers from years ago. Chapter 8 and verse 8: 'For inquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of their fathers: (For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow:) Shall not they teach thee, and tell thee, and utter words out of their heart? Can the rush grow...', and so on. He begins to recite all of these old proverbs and wise sayings that are from years ago. So Bildad, he comes and counsels Job not from revelation; in other words God has not given Bildad a message and a vision from Himself, but Bildad is advising Job by what the fathers, the ancient wise philosophers, if you like, believed.

He recites all these proverbs to lay down this fundamental principle that all of Job's comforters are bringing to him: 'God never judges unjustly. If you're suffering Job, you are suffering because of your sin, you're suffering because there's something wrong in your life. There's no smoke without fire!'. I don't know who Bildad reminds you of, but I know who he reminds me of: those Christians, mostly, who have all the answers off pat. They have an answer for everything, every problem in the book, every doctrinal heresy, they've got the answer right away. I think, when I think of Bildad, of the evangelical clichés, little sayings that can just drop of your lips like an effulgence of absolute verbal diarrhoea that we think is going to salve the problems and the trials of men and women who are going through hell on earth. It makes me think of people who have not thought through, or lived through many of the things that they teach to others.

So you have Eliphaz who counsels from his spiritual experience, you have Bildad who is a traditionalist and appeals to all these wise sayings and little quips; and then you have, thirdly, Zophar. When we look at Zophar - you see all the references there, we'll not have time to look at them - but we find that this man, above the rest, was extremely dogmatic in his teaching and in his advice that he brings to Job. He's portraying himself as a man who knows more about God than anybody else. He has arrived! He's got the special wisdom! He's had a special experience! It reminds me of those in our lifetime who tell us their wisdom, and tell us why we are suffering. They can be the legalist, the dogmatist, and they say: 'Now, this is the reason why this has happened to you, and it's nothing else - and don't try and tell me that it's anything else, I'll just not have it!'. And when you protest, and when you argue with a person like that, they take it as

all the more evidence that they're right and that you're wrong. We find that that is exactly what Zophar does. When Job stands up for his own cause, and tells how he hasn't sinned, tells how he is trying to be a righteous man, tells him that if he could find God he would come before Him and argue his case, tells him that he ought not to suffer - we find that Zophar is only backed more into his rut of dogmatism and legalism, and he believes all the more that he's right. He is a know-it-all! Do you know any of them? A know-it-all - but the fact is that he doesn't know it all. If anything the fact the book of Job teaches us, is that nobody - Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar - none of them can know it all.

All of these three comforters, we find, make the same mistakes. The first mistake they make is that they fail to enter into Job's sorrows, they fail to sympathise and empathise with him. We find that at one stage Job longs for somebody to represent him, for somebody who is touched by the feelings of his infirmities, that will not just tell him what's right and what he ought to do, but someone who will enter into his own sorrows. Don't you feel like that when you're suffering? You want someone to sit where you sit and shed a tear with you, and not tell you what's right and what's wrong and what you've got to do.

The second mistake they made was that they had a rigid concept of God and how God's works happen. They had a rigid conceptualisation of God that was not balanced. God, in their eyes, was top heavy; God was either a real holy God and had no love in Him; or like some people today, God has all love in Him but He is not a holy God. Because they believed a wrong thing about God, they behaved in a wrong way for God.

Thirdly, they were too dogmatic, they were too proud; and their pride and their dogmatism meant that they didn't really listen to Job. You know, one of the best things to do in a counselling situation - and I don't claim to be the expert, but I know this much: some people talk too much and don't listen enough. As the man said, that's why we've two ears and one mouth - because we're to listen more than we are to speak. They didn't really examine their own beliefs, and they just rode roughshod over all of Job's feelings and all of his pains and all of his problems. Do you know what the greatest problem of all of them was? They tried to answer the question that God never answers Himself. They tried to answer why Job was suffering, but God never ever answered it - in fact, no-one knew the reasons why, nobody in the whole book knows chapters 1 and 2. We're given the benefit, with hindsight, God's Holy Spirit tells us of the divine drama that's going on in heaven, but nobody else knew about this. Yet they called Job a hypocrite, yet God called Job an upright and a holy, godly man. In chapter 2 and verse 3 God makes it clear that He had no cause or reason for afflicting Job, that Job was not a hypocrite, that Job was not a sinner. These are the reasons why God rejected Elihu's speech and all the other three men, we see it in chapter 38 and chapter 42 - God just rejects all of their reasoning, because there wasn't a specific reason that you could pinpoint whether it was sin or justice why God judged Job.

Now what I say at the end of all that, in contemplation of these men's counsel is: what a tragedy it would be if, in our counsel and in our wisdom that we expressed to others, that we are found to be in ignorance to what God really says, what God really thinks. Imagine, if we are advising other people and counselling other people, like these three, yet we are saying the opposite to God! Wouldn't that be awful? At the end of chapter 32 to 37 a new voice is heard, Elihu. He waits until the other three speak, and then he speaks and he advances his views. He has different ideas to the other three, and in chapter 32 through to 37 if you read them at home, you find that he says this: 'God sends suffering to chasten His own children, not to punish them but just to chasten them in His own righteous, sovereign will. He does it for their own good'. It's almost reminiscent of the epistle to the Hebrews, how 'whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son that He receiveth'. Elihu, out of all of the four of them, is the greatest in his conception of God - he has a high view of God, and all of his speeches if you read them have beautiful points about the power and the wisdom of God. Go home and read specifically chapter 37, especially, in its beauty and depiction of the ways and the word of God.

Do you know what is the most terrifying, fearful thing about this man Elihu? Everything he said was absolutely right! But God rebuked him. God says to him in chapter 38 verses 1 and 2 that he gives dark counsel. He asks Job, rightly, to submit to God and to trust in God - but what did he do wrong? He had all the right doctrine, he had all the right advice, he gave all the right absolute principles, but at the end of the day he talked and counselled to Job critically and judicially - and when God appeared before him, do you know what God said? 'You should have just helped him!'. If there's any message to the comforters in the book of Job, that is the message of God: 'You should have comforted him!'. Imagine if everything you believe, everything you say is right - all that you know about God - and there's none of us like that, yet because you don't help a person you fail.

Of course, we know, as you see on your sheet, that Job argued back with these men and we haven't got time to go into it all - but imagine, they came to comfort him, but they ended up criticising him. Really each of them had the same argument in different ways. They were saying: 'Well, God blesses you if you do good, and God curses you if you do bad. God has afflicted Job, and if God has afflicted Job that must mean that Job is wicked. Job, you would only be suffering if you'd done something wrong'. I hope you can see, tonight, the danger of mere mortal men trying to explain the ways of God. I hope you can see the danger of trying to put God into a theological box, because the Holy One of Israel does not like, and does not want to be limited! You might say: 'Well, I've read this book of Job, I've read about Elihu and Bildad, and Zophar and Eliphaz, and you know sometimes I read the things that they say and they're right'. Well, we said that already, but you think: 'No, but they're right in what they say. You do suffer when you sin, I mean is that not true that there are consequences for your sin?'. Of course it's true, we have to admit according to the word of God tonight that sin brings misery - the way of the transgressor is hard, and righteousness brings blessing. The word of God testifies to that, in Deuteronomy 28 when the law was given to Israel, they were told that if they obeyed it they would incur blessings, but if they disobeyed it they would be given cursings. The whole historical books in the Old Testament tell us of every king, one king after another, that were sent into exile with the people because they disobeyed God's law. They were cursed, they were brought misery because of their sin. Proverbs tells us that the way of wisdom is blessing, but the way of the foolish is cursing.

It's true that sin brings forth misery and thorns and thistles and trial - but you've got to see the difference about what these three men were saying. They went beyond that, they went to a point from that presupposition that sin leads to suffering, and they began to say the opposite: if you suffer it is because of sin - do you see the difference? [They said] that suffering is the sign of sin, that if you're suffering it's because you've sinned - and Job is suffering, so that must mean that Job has sinned. If the book of Job does anything for us tonight, it corrects any false idea and faulty reasoning that the reason why people are suffering as Christians is because they are sinning, and if they were righteous and holy they wouldn't be suffering. Job, above anything else as a character in the word of God, shows us a man who is suffering, and he is not suffering for anything that he has done.

Turn with me for a moment, very quickly, to John chapter 9 because I want to finish this study tonight. John chapter 9, for here we have an identical incident and illustration of how a man can suffer for nothing to do with himself - a bit like Job. Of course you know that in John chapter 9 you have the account of the man who was born blind, and the disciples of the Lord Jesus come to him and ask the question - behind it is the same idea as Job's three friends - and he says, look at it: 'Rabbi, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered', in verse 3, 'Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him'. Now listen, my friend, if you want to know the crux and the thematic message of the book of Job it is none other than this: Job suffered for no specific reason that we're given in the word of God, but the chief, supreme, all-transcendent reason that we are given is that the works of God should be made manifest in him, and that glory should be brought to God. 'Satan, have you seen anybody like My servant Job?'.

The truth of Job, and John 9 and John 10, is that God is glorified through the sufferings of His faithful children. This book doesn't, in one instance, give an answer to the specific reason - because there's no reason other than God's glory! What does it make you feel tonight, as you sit and you don't realise why you're going through what you're going through; why this has happened to you; why it's turned out this particular way; why your marriage has broken up; why your children have gone astray, why they're not converted; why your job has fallen apart; why you're left on the shelf and you feel that you're going to be single all your life; why you've failed in all your exams and everything that you've tried to do in your career; why you've lost that loved one, that husband, that wife, that child? At the end of the book of Job, if you're looking for an answer to all of those things specifically, you're not going to get one because Job doesn't even get one! But what happens to Job is: he loses his question 'Why?' in the glorious providence and sovereignty of God.

But what transpires out of the unanswered question 'Why is there suffering in Job's life?', is a greater question, and it's the greatest question in the whole of the book of Job - and it's not 'Why is there suffering?', but the greatest question is this: who is wise? That's the greatest question. While virtually all the characters in the book of Job claim wisdom and try to give their wisdom, it's only really at the end of the book that we find out what real wisdom is - because God comes to Job, and God speaks out of the whirlwind to settle the issue once for all about who has the wisest counsel. When He speaks there is no contest, no human has a legitimate claim on the kind of wisdom that our God has. What the book of Job is teaching you and I is that in the midst of our suffering, our pain and our turmoil and trial, God alone is the source of wisdom, and He distributes His wisdom and His works and His sovereignty as He sees fit.

That is Job's crisis of faith, that's where he finds himself in chapters 38 to 42, your third point. If you look at chapter 38, you will find how he comes to that point. Verse 3, God says to him: 'Gird up now thy loins like a man', stand up, 'for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? Or who laid the corner stone thereof; When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?' - where were you!? Verse 12: 'Did you command the morning from the early dawn? Did you cause the dayspring to know its place?'. The proper human response to all of Job's questions, and all of his counsellors' and comforters' advice and wisdom, was that when God came to him and revealed Himself, he fell at God's feet. He didn't get the answers, but the answer to his problem was not getting the answers - the answer was falling at the feet of God, and repenting and submitting to God.

That's why in chapter 42, if you turn to it, Job realises this. Job says: 'Who is he that hideth counsel without knowledge?', God is doing things and He's not explaining himself, 'therefore have I uttered that I understood not', I didn't understand, '[these things were] too wonderful for me, which I knew not. Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me. I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes'. He came to the point, when God revealed His own sovereign wisdom to him, that he realised that he knew God only when he realised he didn't know God! He realised that he could see God only when he realised he couldn't see God, that God is the immortal, the invisible, the only wise, the One whose ways we cannot trace, whose hand we cannot understand or see. Job comes to this heartfelt repentance of his own impatience toward God, his own misunderstanding. He's humiliated, and then he's vindicated to be seen to be the righteous one. Then, in chapter 42, you know he's restored.

Now listen, as we close tonight, let me just labour on a couple of points for a moment because you know that the story and the relationship between God and suffering does not end with the book of Job. When we go into the New Testament Scriptures we get a better understanding of God's dealings and sufferings. Job could be said to be the man of sorrows of the Old Testament, but when we go into the New Testament we meet the Man of Sorrows. We see how God's love is shed abroad through His Son towards sinful creatures, by

sending Him to die on the cross, and we find that Jesus Christ is the true innocent suffer. He is the only one who is completely without sin, He is the only one who voluntarily suffered - Job didn't voluntarily suffer, he had to go through it. But Christ submits Himself to suffering for the benefit of sinful men and women - and, as the scholar Anderson says, the Lord Himself has embraced and absorbed the undeserved consequence of evil - it's the final answer to the book of Job and all of Job's humanity! Christ has come in the flesh to suffer, and if the answer to Job can be found anywhere in scripture, it is in the New Testament in the fact that Jesus - in the person Jesus, God enters into the world of human suffering at the cross, and He does it without complaining!

It's very interesting to note that the early Christian community saw the connection between the book of Job and the Lord Jesus, so much so that it was their common practice to read aloud the book of Job during the Passion Week. Do you see the reflection of the Man of Sorrows in Job? The Man of Sorrows who was acquainted with grief? That Man of Sorrows upon whom came sorrow and suffering from all sources at once, from the wicked who hated and rejected and killed Him; sorrows from beneath, from hell, as it assailed Him with all its strength and all its wickedness; sorrows from above, as Isaiah 53 tells us - that the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all! Job was acquainted with awful suffering that we will never know, but this Man's visage was marred more than that of any man, more than the sons of men. Not once did He use any of His divine attributes to quench that suffering, to prevent the full tide of His anguish flowing over His soul. Do you see Him in the garden of Gethsemane? Go there with me for just one moment tonight, and see Him there on His knees outside the city wall in Jerusalem, in agony - and the trees that are still there tonight can testify to the great drops of blood that fell in that garden, but more than that: they tell us that when the Man of Sorrows sought the comfort and the prayers of His three friends, He didn't get them! But there was none to help Him, none even offered to help Him, but He trod the winepress alone. He looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but He found none.

Surely He is the answer to the book of Job? Surely that is what Job's friends missed? My friend, you may have no answer to your suffering this evening, for all the pain and all that you have gone through - but here is the answer, here's the answer! Job's answer was 'trust and hope'. One: 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him'. Hope: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' - that was his hope! That was his only answer! What a joy to know that Job's Daysman has become our High Priest who is touched with the feelings of our infirmities, for He was tested in all points like as we are, apart from sin!

Father, we thank Thee, as we often sing here in the Hall, that Christ is the answer to our every need. Although Job was ignorant to the divine counsels between God and Satan in heaven, although he didn't know that, all his problems were answered when he said: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth'. Father, we thank Thee for the blessed hope that we have of the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Thee that we know, no matter what our problems are tonight that are unanswerable, that one day all our hopes and aspirations will be answered in Him. And when we see Him, we'll not say: 'Lord, now why did that happen?', but we'll fall like Job, and we'll worship at His feet. In His lovely name we anticipate that day, Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 11

"John The Baptist's Suffering Service"

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Matthew 11

- 1. He Had Divine Appointment In His Ministry**
- 2. He Underwent Intense Preparation For His Ministry**
- 3. He Faced Ultimate Rejection Of His Ministry**
- 4. He Eclipsed Himself From His Ministry**
- 5. He Experienced Doubts In His Ministry**
- 6. He Paid The Highest Price For His Ministry**
- 7. He Received Divine Commendation For His Ministry**

I want you to turn with me to Matthew's gospel chapter 11. We're embarking upon our eleventh study tonight in the series 'As Sparks Flying Upward' - looking at characters in the Old Testament and indeed in the New (and we're entering into the New Testament for the first time tonight), characters who are recorded for us in biblical biography as going through very difficult times in their life's experience, and also how God brought them through. Those whom we've looked at so far, we've seen that it wasn't an easy road, and their life was certainly not a bed of roses, even though they were servants of God. God led them in His sovereign purposes through difficult times, and we've seen and travelled with many of them - and we're looking at John the Baptist, specifically 'John the Baptist's Suffering Service'.

Now there are many texts throughout the gospel narratives that we could look at tonight, and we indeed will be flicking through most of them this evening - but we'll take as our main reading Matthew's gospel chapter 11, beginning to read at verse 1. "And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding his twelve disciples, he departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities. Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elijah, which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear".

I don't know whether you've ever heard the story about the fellow who, on a Sunday morning, couldn't get out of bed. His mother tried to get him out of bed, but of little avail. She shouted up the stairs: 'Get up!', and he shouted down the stairs: 'No!'. She shouted up the stairs again: 'Get up!', and he shouted down again: 'No!'. Then she shouted again: 'Get up!', and he shouted down: 'Why should I?'. She said: 'Well, first of all your breakfast is ready, secondly you've got to get out to church, and thirdly you're the Pastor!'. Often Christian service and Christian ministry can be as daunting as that, believe it or not. Anyone who is involved

in Christian service, not just full-time ministry if you like to call it that, find it difficult at times serving the Lord, and indeed serving God's people. One thing that has been characteristic of all the character studies that we have done so far - Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Job and so on - is that they went through trials, yes, but they went through trials specifically as the servants of Jehovah. It wasn't just ordinary illness that they went through, it wasn't just sickness or bereavement or trial, but specifically - yes, those things were involved - but they were tried and tested as God's servants. It was primarily due to their faithfulness to God, their obedience to the call of God, and the ministry and service that they were in for God, that they suffered the way they did.

I hope up until now you've seen this pattern right throughout our studies - that we could say tonight, especially looking at the sufferings of John the Baptist, that service for God often brings suffering. Service brings suffering. A quick survey of the characters that we have studied already, and the books that they are found in, will testify to that right away. Job 19:22 says, Job is turning to his accusers that we studied last week, and says: 'Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh?'. In Psalm 119:84, David who we haven't studied in these studies but we could easily do - and the only problem would be picking out one individual Psalm that we could use, because so many of the Psalms are talking about his persecution and his suffering at the hand of his enemies. But taking one, Psalm 119 verse 84: 'How many are the days of thy servant? When wilt thou execute judgment on them that persecute me?'. 'I'm your servant Lord, and when are You going to deal with these people that are causing me so much trial and tribulation?'.

We looked at 'Jeremiah the Dejected', and in chapter 17 of his great book and prophecy, verses 16 to 18, he says: 'As for me, I have not hastened from being a pastor', or a shepherd, 'to follow thee'. 'Lord, I haven't shunned Your call, I've been obedient to be a Pastor and a shepherd of the children of Israel'. He goes on: 'Let them be confounded that persecute me, but let not me be confounded: let them be dismayed, but let not me be dismayed: bring upon them the day of evil, and destroy them with double destruction'. Of course we know, as we have studied the Sermon on the Mount, all too well on these Sunday mornings, that the Lord has told us: 'In the world, ye shall have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world - but don't forget, in the world ye shall have tribulation'. He goes on: 'The servant is not greater than his Lord; and if they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you'. The great Beatitude that we all know and experience, I hope, is: 'Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake' - He's saying, 'Happy, satisfied, contented and blessed is the man that serves Me, and in serving Me finds persecution and trial'.

So in our studies so far, and even in these few texts that we have quoted from these studies of characters, I hope that you see very clearly that we're finding a principle here. Perhaps the principle could be stated more than simply that when you serve God you will suffer, but I think as we look at John the Baptist tonight we will find that the greater the service, the greater the ministry, the greater the suffering and the greater the trial will be'. Of course, the Suffering Servant that we find specifically in the book of Isaiah is the Servant of Jehovah. The most famous texts are Isaiah 52 and Isaiah 53, where we read of the Lord Jesus Christ prophesied of coming as God's Messiah, as God's Anointed One and Chosen One. He is the categoric, primary, pre-eminent Servant of Jehovah - but what is He called in Isaiah 53? 'A man of sorrows and antiquated with grief'.

Here in the character of John the Baptist we find another man of sorrows, but we can't just go past our Lord too soon because I want you to see that here in our Lord Jesus Christ is this principle: the greater the ministry, the greater the suffering. You have in our Saviour the greatest suffering of all, and can we not say tonight categorically that He as the greatest sufferer of all is the Servant that accomplished the greatest ministry of all? The salvation of His believing blood-bought people. We read exemplified all through the writing to the Hebrews in our New Testament the great ministry of our Saviour, but also mirrored in

Hebrews is the great suffering of our Saviour: 'For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings'.

Therefore it is no mean thing that the greatest sufferer of all, the Lord Jesus Christ, said of John the Baptist in Matthew 11 verse 11, and also in Luke 7:28: 'Among those who are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist'. So we should not be surprised that in the fact that he is the greatest prophet, we find also in him the character of a great sufferer for God - because he had a great ministry, a great service, a great prophet-hood, he suffered greatly. We shall see above all things, perhaps tonight, that what characterises John the Baptist's ministry is his suffering service. If I can apply it right away at the very beginning of our study tonight, what this really is saying to us, the whole of our message tonight is this: if you as a child of God today in this age want to serve God effectively, want to see results for the glory of God, want to have a significant ministry for God and His testimony - like all the great characters we've studied, and like John the Baptist - you have to be prepared to suffer.

Let's look and learn from the sufferings of this great man tonight. The first thing we see is that a man who suffers for God will need to be sure that he is called of God, for only those who are called of God will sustain the suffering that they undergo in service for God. We find very early in John the Baptist's biography that he had a divine appointment in his ministry. In fact, before he's even born we find that divine appointment in Isaiah chapter 40 verses 3 to 5. If you care to look at it, you don't have to turn to it, I'll read it to you if you wish - Isaiah prophesies: 'The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it'. Malachi, in chapter 3 of his prophecy and verse 1, talks prophetically about John the Baptist as being 'His messenger, preparing the way of the Lord', for the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

As we go through the early life of John the Baptist we find some remarkable things about him. We find that the gospel biography of Luke tells us that he was filled with the Holy Ghost from his mother's womb. Before he was even born he had that in-filling, that endowment of power from on high in his mother's womb. We find also that his mother subsequently was filled with the Holy Spirit, we find his father was also filled with the Holy Spirit, and in fact was given a gift of the Holy Spirit when he prophesied. We see that John the Baptist had a unique, a tremendous start in life - imagine having that kind of a start! You're filled with the Holy Spirit from your mother's womb, your father and your mother are filled, and your father prophesies at the event of your birth. The fact is, as we begin our study tonight, and we look specifically at the suffering of this servant John the Baptist, we've got to recognise that in many senses John the Baptist is no different to you and to me. Of course he's unique, there's no prophecies about us specifically in the Old Testament, and we are not the forerunner of Messiah; but there's one thing that we can claim tonight, each as a child of God, if we're saved by the grace of God, and that is that all of us have a divine appointment for service. All of us have the call of God.

I know that there are different calls of God, and I don't have time to look into them all tonight. But in this sense of divine appointment upon our lives, we don't need to sit around with an open Bible praying and waiting for God's call, waiting for a strike of lightning from heaven, until we go out - for the Lord Jesus gave us all the great commission: 'Go ye unto all the world and preach the gospel to every creature; baptising in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit'. That is given to us all, that is His divine appointment to all of us.

If you turn to Ephesians 2 and verse 10, we find that Paul says of all of us who believe in Christ: 'We are all his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should

walk in them'. Now grasp what this means tonight, Paul is saying that before the foundation of the world - we know all about predestination and the foreknowledge of God; that in some mysterious sense God knew, and indeed God ordained that we should at this moment be serving Christ, in Christ, covered in the righteousness of Christ and with the power of Christ - but even way back then, before the foundation of the world, God ordained the specific works that we ought to do for Him. Isn't that marvellous? He has actually ordained and chosen and planned the things that we should do, that we should walk in them. He has prepared our good works for us before the foundation of the world. It's not just a matter of willy-nilly going into the harvest field and doing what we like, and doing what pleases us - but God has a plan for us. What a thought! To think that up in heaven at this very moment the great possibility is that there's a pile of undone works with our name on it, that we have not accomplished because we haven't realised that God has a divine appointment for each of us.

The call of God is not the pastorate, the call of God is not an evangelistic call to go and take missions, or to go onto the mission field as a missionary - it is none of these things in one sense, because all of us have been commissioned to go with the gospel. What a tragedy that heaven has prepared for us many works that we have never executed. The question that I ask right at the outset of our meeting tonight is: are you in the plan? Are you in God's plan for you? Do you recognise God's divine appointment on your life? And what are you doing in that plan? What are you engaged in? How are you executing those works that have been prepared for you before the world began? I happen to believe that on the Judgement Day, when we stand before our Lord Jesus Christ, that we will be judged according to whether we have fulfilled those works.

As we look on further we find that his ordination divinely, and his appointment of God, was not enough just to take on this ministry. If you turn to Luke's gospel chapter 1 for a moment you will see this - it would do you well to read through Luke's gospel chapter 1 to get a more detailed biography of John the Baptist - but we find at the end of all this writing, in verse 80, it says of John that: 'The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel'. So not only had he a divine appointment in his ministry, but we find secondly that he underwent intense preparation for his ministry. You've got to remember that biblically speaking 30 years has passed from his miraculous birth to the barren womb of Elizabeth. Thirty years have gone by and, if you like, if I can use my sanctified - I hope - imagination, the excitement of all of his birth must have passed, and I'm sure people in the Jewish community had maybe forgotten all about the excitement of this great birth of this prophet. John himself, as an individual, may well have been forgotten - because probably, some scholars believe, from the age of 12 John was in the desert, in the wilderness, living in the caves and the indents of the limestone rocks of the desolate wilderness that geography tells us extends from Mount Hebron to the western shores of the Dead Sea.

There in the wilderness God was preparing His man, and there are you can see his solitary figure - a man who's alone in the desert, wearing strange basic clothing, wearing a leather girdle and camel hair, eating very strange odd food, locusts and wild honey the Bible tells us. In this environment, with strange clothing and with strange food, with strange habits, God is honing and working and moulding His man - God is teaching this young man to bring his whole body, soul, and spirit into complete obedience and lordship to God. Do you see it? It wasn't enough for this young man to be called of God, this young man had to undergo intense preparation for his ministry for God. F.B. Meyer puts it well when he says of this great preparation: 'By use of the scantiest fare and the roughest garb he had brought his body under complete mastery. From nature, from the inspired page, and from the direct fellowship with God he had received revelations that are bestowed on only those who can stand the strain of discipline in the school of solitude and privation'. He was in the school of God.

Paul testifies of that school, of course he went through it himself, but he tells us that every child of God that is truly following Christ will go through that school also - and that it is an essential for the servant of God. First Corinthians 9 verse 27, and I prefer the New American Standard Bible translation of it is this: 'But I

buffet, or bruise my body', Paul says, 'to make it my slave, to bring it into discipline; lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified'. It's not just a matter of being called of God, it's a matter of entering wilfully - wilfully by the guidance of God's Holy Spirit - but definitely, and every day of your life, into God's school of solitude and discipline, buffeting your body, beating it into subjection, making it a slave, disciplining it - lest, when you stand to others and tell them what to do, you will become disqualified because you're not doing it yourself.

So we see two things here in the preparation of this young man. Now mark these two things: one, solitude; two, discipline. Solitude and discipline were necessary in the preparation of the greatest prophet that ever lived. Do you know what that simply means in everyman terms? Listen now: you have to get alone with God if you're going to serve God; and not only do you have to get alone with God to serve God, but you need to get your body under the control of God too! Solitude and discipline. Now, needless to say if you've been on the road with God for any length of time, or even have just started, you will know that that is not an easy road. Being alone with God is not easy, and disciplining your body is not easy - the reason being, and I do not tire of saying it in an age of easy-believism, that the Christian road and the Christian life is not easy! And if we make it easy there is something wrong with our gospel! Yes, He said that His yoke was easy and His burden was light, He does say that His commands are not grievous or burdensome - and of course, in comparison with the hardships of the transgressor whose way is hard, this is an easy yoke. In comparison with legalism, the law where men are trying to live holiness and spirituality in the flesh, His yoke is easy and His burden is light, and His commands are not grievous.

We have been given the power of the Holy Spirit, and you and I both know that we couldn't do anything without His power - but still we've got to remember that we have entered, in fact the literal Greek is that we have 'squeezed through the narrow gate, and we are squeezing through the constricted way' - and it's not easy. God takes men into the University of His discipline and His silence. We studied Moses, and you remember Moses was there 40 years, learning in all the wisdom and skill of Egypt. He was a cultured young man, and by forty years of age he had used all the intellectual powers that God had given him and learned as much as he could. He was a great statesman and a great soldier, and he was as fully accomplished as you could expect a young man to be at the age of 40 years of age - but he still had not yet entered into God's school of solitude. For the next 40 years he went through the Midianite desert, and he was there being stripped - not learning, but unlearning; not realising how great he was, but humbling himself before God; not training self, but starving self! When God's work was done, God's man was ready.

Can I ask you tonight: do you want to accomplish something for God? Well, the other question that inevitably will answer that is: how is your time alone with God? How do you spend, or do you spend at all, any time with God? That is what your service, your witness, your ministry, your life will fall on. Imagine if the situation - and it could well come - in Ulster was that we would be sent to prison for our faith. Could we stick it? Could you stick it - just yourself and God as company? Being in a prison cell - just you and God alone? What if God called you to the back of beyond as a missionary, and you're there the long nights of the summer and the winter, in the cold and in the heat, with no family, with no friends - and you're just sitting there, you and God, could you stick it? Just yourself and God as company? Listen, don't think I'm advocating some kind of asceticism tonight, that we all go into monasteries and become monks and just pray all day - that's not what I'm talking about. But listen, friends tonight, if you want to do anything for God, you've got to learn to become a man or a woman of prayer - and that can only happen, not at the prayer meeting, but getting alone with God! Do we indulge our bodies so much in luxury and comfort and affluence, that if we were asked to sacrifice something for Christ, or forced to sacrifice something for Christ, would our metabolic system go into absolute chaos and recoil at the thought of losing something we're so used to, and would we break down under it? I put to you that John the Baptist was trained for his later stay in prison in the wilderness, where he ate locusts and wild honey, where he spent time alone with God - he was being prepared for what God has ahead of him, and he didn't pamper himself even though he could. What we learn

from John the Baptist is that the training of our body, the training of our soul, and the training of our spirit for service is hard - but it is necessary.

When he had learned these wilderness disciplines, we read in Luke chapter 3 - turn to it - and verses 1 and 2, these words: 'Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness'. Now there's so much in verses 1 and 2 that you probably don't understand, and you don't know why it all has to be down there. Well, of course the word of God is also an historical record, but you will notice in verse 2 that there are two high priests, and it was against the law of God for there ever to be two high priests. That shows us the state of the nation, religiously and politically, at that time. It shows us that there was a need for a deliverer, and here comes a man, John the Baptist, and he spends 20-odd years in the wilderness. There he is, and he comes forth and God gives him a message - that's what it was all about. That discipline, that intense preparation, that solitude was just for God to give him something to say to a people that were barren and lost - and what do you think it took all that time for God to tell him? One word: 'Repent'.

Remember now that there have been 400 years of darkness between the book of Malachi and the book of Matthew - that inter-testamental period where God never spoke by vision or by a prophet or by a man of God. It was a darkness without a ray of prophetic light. Gallons upon gallons of animal blood had been sacrificed and shed, hundreds of priests had administered their duty, and the nation was lost in ceremony, sacrifice and circumcision. But what an army of priests couldn't do in 400 years, one man sent of God did in six months! Why? Because he was God-fashioned, God-filled, and God-fired! His ministry started with a blaze of popularity and glory, to the people it was reminiscent of the good old days, the great days of the prophets like Elijah and Ezekiel. The jungle drums went around the cities and the towns, and spread the tidings of a new great prophet and preacher that was in the land.

Our first glimpse that we're given of his ministry is John the Baptist standing on the banks of Jordan, and men of every tribe and class and profession gather unto him there, and he preaches to them: 'Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand'. He attracts people like fire attracts moths. I hope you know that you never have to advertise a fire. Old John Wesley said: 'If you're on fire in the pulpit, people will come to watch you burn'. They did exactly that with not only John Wesley, but John the Baptist. We find, if you look at Luke chapter 3 and verse 9, that as he preached this message, a message of judgement, a message of repentance that the axe is laid at the root of the trees. In verse 10 the people asked him, the ordinary people said: 'What'll we do?'. If you go to verse 12 you find that there were tax collectors also, the publicans came to be baptised, and they said after his preaching: 'What'll we do?'. You find in verse 14 that paganistic, polytheistic men that worshipped many gods - Roman gods - the Roman soldiers who had nothing to do with the Jews came down to the Jordan. They must have heard that there was a man on fire for God at the Jordan River, and they came down and they even listened - godless pagans - to this message of God, and they said: 'What'll we do?'. There's the mark of a Spirit-anointed man, for he preaches repentance, and the people repent!

At first people could see that this man was a prophet, for at the time the prophetic office had been obsolete - and he was a real man in the midst of a hypocritical religious society, hypocrisy was the religious norm. But above all this the one thing that commended him to people was the fact that he faced the sin question in his preaching, he didn't dance around sin, but he nailed it! He faced it in Herod, his adultery, his incest, his fornication. He faced the hypocrisy in the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and individually to each society and class he preached the one message: 'Repent! Repent! Repent!'. He had the truth of God, and he simply brought the truth of God to the people and brought them to the knowledge of their need.

He was a man baptised with fire and the Holy Ghost, and he preached that the coming of the kingdom of heaven is at hand - the theocracy promised in the Old Testament. But if you don't accept the kingdom of heaven that is at hand, you must flee from the wrath to come. This was God's message, this was God's man, and they came to him one day and said: 'Who are you? We recognise that there's something special about you, are you Elijah?'. 'No, I'm not Elijah'. 'Are you that prophet?'. 'No, I'm not that prophet, but I am a voice crying in the wilderness'. He was a voice because he was only a voice preaching the word of God, he was not an echo of another man's message from God, he was not a puppet whose strings were being pulled by a denomination or a religious organisation - but he preached the word of God, and he had no fear in him. He preached against the ritualists and the legalists of the Pharisees who followed all of their 600-plus rules added to Genesis to Deuteronomy. He preached against the materialists and the liberalists and the sceptics of the Sadducees, who didn't believe in the supernatural, who didn't believe in eternity, heaven, hell, or the resurrection. He preached to them all no matter who they were! He didn't negotiate with them, he didn't sit down and reason with them! He looked them eye to eye and said: 'O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'. What a man!

This was a man who had the spiritual discernment to perceive that things were bad, and that things needed to be changed - and there was hope in him. I believe that there in that wilderness, all those years as God was preparing him and honing him, the prayer of Isaiah was burning in his heart: 'Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence'. Sure his very dress spoke of the barrenness of the people of Israel and the judgement of God upon them, and God taught him all these things in the wilderness. He came, the Bible says, not as that light, he came as a shining lamp, he came as a witness to that light. John 1 verses 6 to 18 tell us that, but the main point that is given there is that, as he comes with the message of 'Repent', the message of conviction of sin, the message of judgement to come, that he faced ultimate rejection of that ministry.

At first everyone was titillated and tantalised by the new prophet, they'd never seen one for 400 years - but as soon as he pinpointed their sin, told of the judgement of God, and told them to repent, he was rejected. In fact, John 1 tells us that the very crux and central character of his message, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, when He came to the Lord's people who He'd created Himself, He came unto a world that He had created and they rejected Him. When He came to the nation who He had called out of the whole world to be a people, and a shining light, unto the whole world - it says that He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. Ultimately every single point of John the Baptist's message was rejected by these people. I say to you tonight that any man whose simple sermon is one word: 'Repent', will be rejected today - and I tell you also that anybody who dares to preach repentance to the children of God will be rejected twofold.

If you think we live in a day of small things, where sinners will not heed the word 'repent' and change their ways, listen my friend, the reason for that is because God's people won't hear the word 'repent' and change their ways. We live in a day when repentance is unheard of, we live in a day where few people are being converted - and as Paris Reidhead said to Leonard Ravenhill on one occasion: "Evangelists say today, 'Come here and say a prayer like this: 'God be merciful to me, a sinner', and this is what you'll get: eternal life, a mansion on the main street of heaven, a free ticket to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, rule over five cities and immunity from judgement - you couldn't get much more for five minutes at an altar, except it's all rubbish - it's not true!'. Repentance is still a fundamental of the Gospel, people still need to feel the exceeding sinfulness of sin. Charles Finney, who was used in a great revival in the United States, he would preach 28 nights and never make an altar call, but just preach the law of God and the wrath of God, because people needed to feel their sin! Because if you don't feel your sin, you'll never repent of your sin!

That's why John preached it, before the Light of the world came he had to preach sin and judgement. But a greater tip on preaching from John is not only that, but he eclipsed himself from his ministry. I'm sure that as we look at this man John, we're all saying: 'Well, I would love to be like him. I would love to have a ministry

like him' - we all desire an effective ministry just like John's. But I feel that one of the greatest attributes about this man is that he was willing to let one of the most successful things in his life - in fact the most successful ministry, perhaps, of all time - to be taken over by the Lord. That strikes me as absolutely astounding, that he allowed his ministry that was blossoming an absolute fire across Palestine at that moment, he allowed it to dwindle, and he allowed himself to be eclipsed from his own ministry. That might seem a silly question for me to ask tonight, that a Christian minister or preacher or pastor would not let his service be taken over by the Lord - but believe you me, take it from the horse's mouth, it's a hard thing to let anybody eclipse your ministry. Sometimes us men can't even let the Lord do it.

He is the greatest prophet, and what is he doing? He's pointing to Christ, and I'll tell you: that's why he's the greatest prophet, he's pointing to Him, and he was allowing Christ to eclipse himself. In John chapter 1 and verse 29 we hear that wonderful cry: 'I must decrease, but He must increase!'. Some of the Jews came to him, and said: 'You know, your crowd's dwindling, and this other Man is taking away your disciples. They're all following Him!'. Basically John's answer was: 'That's my message! That's the whole point of why I'm preaching: to eclipse myself, and to reveal Christ'. Imagine being called and being equipped, and knowing that your ministry would last only six months, and you would go from converting multitudes to absolutely no-one - and you would end up in exile, and eventually in prison. One of the hardest things for preachers and Christians today is to get out of the way, and let the Light of the world shine forth and be seen alone.

Yet, although he was the greatest servant ever perhaps, although he was a great preacher, and although he allowed himself to be eclipsed by the Son of God, he was not exempt from doubts and problems in his ministry - even about the central character of his ministry, the Lord Jesus Christ. We see that he experienced doubts in his ministry. Now remember this, this is a man who saw the Holy Spirit as a dove descend from heaven, he saw the heavens cleft and God's own voice speak: 'This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'. Yet from prison, in our reading tonight from Matthew chapter 11, we read that he sends his own disciples to the Lord Jesus and asks Him the question: 'Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?'. Now listen, I believe this was a genuine doubt of John Baptist, and I analysed this when we looked at Elijah. Elijah was his forefather, and John the Baptist comes as the anti-type, if you like, of Elijah - and you know that there Elijah sat underneath a juniper tree, despondent and depressed, and I think that that's why we find John the Baptist doing the same thing. A genuine doubt - he may have been the greatest of men, but he was a man at best we need to remember, a man of like passions such as we are.

There in the prison of his depression, in his disappointment; all his human expectations, perhaps, that Christ would come and bring the kingdom and avenge the nation there and then in physical form - he doubts Christ! The Lord's reply to him, if you look at chapter 11 of Matthew and verses 4 to 6 is: 'Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see'. And they departed, and the Lord said in verse 11 - notice that He said after the disciples of John departed - He let His heart outpour in admiration of this greatest prophet of all, and He said that he was the greatest prophet born of women - but blessed is he who is not offended in Me!

I'm sure there is not one here that has never doubted, there's not one here who hasn't stumbled at the way God's plans in your life seem to have taken. You've questioned His leadings and His dealings in your life, and there are times when our lives are filled with mystery, and we may think and feel that the Lord has let us down, or that He hasn't worked things out the way that He should have. Especially those, at times, who serve God are wrecked with doubt. They feel like the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, and the fire has been heated seven times over again and again - and in days of weariness and nights of sorrow and anguish we feel that God has forgotten us, God has hidden His face away from us. At times the hand of man is against us, and at times we even doubt whether or not the hand of God Himself is against us. Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has He shut up His mercy, and is He angry? We feel like Job's wife: why don't we just get it all over with, and curse God? It would be easier than this - but the Lord says, listen: 'Blessed is he who is not offended, who does not stumble at me or the way that I lead'.

Well, John Baptist did die, but he didn't die through cursing God, he died as a martyr for God. We find, sixthly, that he paid the highest price for his ministry - and who of us, I ask you tonight, could or would do this? How many unknown souls in our world even today have paid the ultimate price for service? I know we have our problems in Ulster, and even in the church, but I doubt that none of us have ever run the gauntlet for our life every day because we kneel in prayer, because we read the Bible, because we name the name of Christ and sing His hymns. How would we fare? What would we do if we stood before the executioner's rifle, or we were led to the electric chair for our faith? The day may come, sooner or later, when it will happen - but the point is this: like John the Baptist, listen, when you've given everything up for Christ on earth, all your privileges, all your comforts, all your rights, you've nothing to lose in death! Death is a sweet release - how many of us think of death like that? John was set at liberty.

I read a story recently, you may have heard on news bulletins in recent years about Rwanda that has been filled with civil war between the Hutus and the Tutsis. The conflict has been going on for many years, it's not just a recent thing - and in the 1970s many Hutu Christians went to their death expressing peace and asking forgiveness for their executioners. One man called Abel Beniona (sp?), the principal of a Quaker mission school, and also a lay-leader of a local church, stood before his executioners. Before the missionary friends left Burundi he wrote this letter to them, a farewell and thanks and appreciation: 'We have nothing that we could return to you for all that you have done to help us, but we know well that our Lord, who is also your Lord Jesus, will not fail to repay you abundantly over and above what you have done for us'. Well, Abel Beniona one day, 1972, was martyred. A Christian soldier reported the details of his death. He says that after he stood up to be shot he asked if he could sing, permission was granted. He sang one verse:

'Out of my bondage, sorrow and night,
Jesus I come, Jesus I come.
Into Thy freedom, gladness and light,
Jesus I come to Thee'.

The firing squad hesitated for a while, absolutely astounded, and then they fired. Paul said, did he not: 'For me to live is Christ, to die is gain'? Did he not say: 'For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us'. What kept John going, what kept all of these suffering saints going was that when the axe was falling down upon their heads, they kept the faith! Like John, all of them received divine commendation for their ministry - none greater than John the Baptist. Even in his moment of failure, in his moment of doubt in prison, the Lord Jesus waited till those disciples of John had gone, and He said to the multitude: 'There's no greater than John the Baptist'. One writer has said well: 'Heaven judges not by passing mood, but by the general tenor and trend of a man's life; not by the expressions of a doubt, but by the soul of a man within him which is much deeper than emotion'.

John did no miracle, but John throughout his life trod faithfully the path of God had chosen and ordained for him, and God commended him in the end! What more could we ask? I ask you, as we conclude tonight, in a day of small things are you discouraged in your service for the Lord? Are you downhearted? Can I ask you and exhort you: lift up your head! You may face ultimate rejection of your ministry, you may even experience doubts, you may be asked to pay a very high price - maybe even some day the highest price - but rejoice! You have divine appointment, God has called you, and if you eclipse yourself in the Light of the world, the glory of Christ, do you know what the word of God says? Do you know what Christ says? You will have a ministry and a blessing that is even greater than John's! Look at verse 11: 'Notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John'.

The kingdom that John preached, the kingdom that he ushered in, he never was part of it. John could never preach the cross of Christ and the glorious resurrection and ascension, and the mediatorial ministry that He

has now, but we can - and we can be greater even than John! But here is the challenge tonight: if we are to be greater than John in our ministry, how great ought our suffering to be?

Our Father, we thank Thee this evening for the character that we know in scripture as the friend of the Bridegroom, the one who find it all his joy to present Christ to the world: 'Behold, the Lamb of God', he cried, 'that taketh away the sin of the world'. But what a ministry, Father, one that started out in a blaze of glory and ended when he lost his head for Christ. But what a lesson there is in it for us, our Father, that we must decrease - all of us - and Christ must increase. We pray that that will be our testimony and motto here in the Iron Hall, individually and corporately, that we may glorify God in our ministry and in our suffering, that Christ may eclipse us and this world may see the Light. Amen.

As Sparks Flying Upwards - Chapter 12

"The Pain Of Paul"

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I Corinthians 11

1. *His Public Suffering*
2. *His Private Suffering*
3. *His Philosophy Of Suffering*
4. *His Prize For Suffering*

If you want to turn with me in your Bibles to Romans chapter 1, this is not our text or in any sense our reading - it would be very difficult to pick out one specific reading for the apostle Paul right throughout all of his great epistles, and the narratives concerning him in the book of the Acts. What we hope to do tonight is to really scale through them all - well, not them all, but trying to get a consensus of opinion of the Scriptures to paint a proper portrait and biography of this great man. I'm sure that we will fail in doing that, but we want to try our best in the time that is left to us. We want to look specifically tonight not at the whole life story of Paul, from his birth to his death, but specifically - as we've been looking in these character studies week after week - at the sufferings of these individuals. These are the 'sparks flying upwards', the sparks we have taken as an illustration and a metaphor of these characters who were born unto trouble, and how they came through it, and how God blessed them. Tonight we're looking at 'The Pain of Paul'.

Before we read anything let me just say that Paul is probably the most difficult character in all the Bible to preach upon - apart from our Lord Jesus Christ, of course, Himself, who no-one can fathom the depths of His person, His attributes, and His great divine work of atonement. In the mere human realm I think Paul must be the hardest man to preach upon from the Bible, not because he had a moral lapse, because as far as we can see throughout his converted life there was no specific dramatic moral lapse that we see in the characters of others - especially those in the Old Testament Scriptures, and even John the Baptist last week that we looked at, who doubted the Lord's Messiahship even if it was for a mere moment. It certainly is not for lack of knowledge that we find it difficult studying the apostle Paul, but in fact it is for the converse of that: it is the amount and the surplus of knowledge that we have. In fact the narrative of Paul's conversion that we find in three places in the book of Acts - once told by Luke who is the author of Acts, twice by Paul the apostle himself - we find that the narrative, the actual literary words, exceed anything else throughout the Scriptures, any story and any other event except the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that great emphasis alone, literally in the Bible, is laid upon Paul's conversion - let alone the rest of his life. Because there is so much written about the great apostle, it is so difficult to really deal with his life and even his sufferings tonight - but we want to do it as far as we can, and this is a Bible Study and you will be worked hard tonight, and your fingers will be sore flicking through pages of the Scriptures! Clarence McCartney, the great character preacher, captured the greatness of Paul's character and indeed the great gamut of all the truth about him biographically in this statement: 'It would take the golden measuring rod of the angel of the apocalypse to measure Paul. It would take the sevenfold chorus of the archangels to sound his praise'. Isn't that true? He was not divine, he was a mere man as you and I are - or woman, of course! He was an apostle, he was chosen - we are told in the Scriptures that he was separated, in the book of Galatians, for God from his mother's womb for a special use. He was a special man, and I think we're right in saying that all of the characters that we've been studying on these Monday evenings were all special men in one way or another.

As we looked at John the Baptist last week we found that the greater the man becomes, the greater the suffering he endures. Paul, by no means, is an exception to that rule - in fact, I would say that perhaps, arguably, he is the greatest sufferer in the Bible, certainly in the New Testament, beside our Lord Jesus Christ, the Man of Sorrows. In Philippians chapter 3 we find that Paul's lineage was of the tribe of Benjamin, he confesses himself that he was a Pharisee, indeed, of the Pharisees. His own father was a Pharisee also, and then we are introduced to his new life in Christ in the book of Acts. We find that around AD 33-34, at about the age of 30 years old, this man was saved. After witnessing the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr; after seeing his face as an angel, as he saw Christ standing at the right hand of God; I believe Paul's conscience began to be pricked and the Holy Ghost began a work in his life. Then we find that on the road to Damascus this great man was converted, and from that point seeing and witnessing the risen Lord Jesus Christ, not only was he converted by the grace of God, but by the grace of God he was appointed an apostle of Christ - and later would be the apostle of the Gentiles. Once converted, at that very moment of new life, this great man, this great sinner - the chief of sinners as he was - became the greatest propagator of the gospel of Christ.

As soon as he was converted he began to preach the Gospel. The one who once destroyed the Gospel was now distributing the Gospel, the one who once persecuted those who held to the Gospel is now the very one that God has converted, changed, and is now using by His Spirit to publish the Gospel. Out of all Christians and out of all the apostles and all the prophets and evangelists, Paul primarily is responsible for the spread of the Gospel in the Roman Empire. This great testimony that we have been singing already tonight is found in Romans chapter 1 verses 16 and 17, his epitaph if you like and his motto: 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith'.

It doesn't take you a long time reading the biography of Paul to realise that his words were measured up by a true, godly, righteous and even persecuted life. He was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, and that can specifically be seen in the fact of how he suffered for the gospel of Christ. During his three missionary journeys alone in the Mediterranean world, first of all we find that he was falsely accused by the Jews in Acts 21, then later on he was beaten in Acts 21 again, thirdly he was arrested by the Romans. He was brought before two Roman Governors - Felix and Festus - and then he was brought before Herod Agrippa. Thirdly we find that he's moved on, although he's found not guilty, he is moved on a stormy shipwreck right through. The Jews keep him in prison on one occasion, after two years he exercises his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar and, after two weeks on that stormy ship across the sea, Paul eventually reaches Rome. He is arrested again, he's taken to prison under house arrest, and eventually he's taken before Caesar - and we find within the word of God that between AD 65 and 67 that Nero executes him at approximately 66 years of age.

Paul is another suffering servant of Jehovah. Like those already studied we find that he follows the vain and the testimony of those in Hebrews 11, specifically verses 36 onward: 'Others who had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth'. All these Old Testament saints obtained not the promise, but of course Paul obtained the promise. It is doubtful, I believe, that any other human being ever suffered as much for Christ as Paul the apostle did.

Let's look first of all at his public suffering, and we'll scale through this very very swiftly, and I want you to please just record in your mind at least the magnitude of what this man suffered publicly for Christ - you'll

never be able to record it or memorise it, but just let it flood over your heart and your mind and your soul to realise what this man suffered for Christ. We're led to believe in the record of the Acts of the Apostles that he was plotted against on many occasions. First of all in the city of Damascus straight after his salvation, we find that in Acts chapter 9 verses 23 to 25 - as soon as he is converted people are plotting against him. Then in Jerusalem we find, during his first visit as a believer in Acts chapter 9 again, we find that he is plotted against once more. Then in Macedonia during his third missionary trip in Acts chapter 20; then again in Jerusalem before a Jewish mob in Acts 21; then in Jerusalem again before the Sanhedrin in Acts 23; then in Jerusalem at the hands of 40 men in Acts 23, the latter half; and then in Caesarea at the hands of even more Jews in Acts chapter 25.

So Paul was not ignorant of being plotted against, he was not a stranger of men turning against him and persecuting him and planning all sorts of evil for him. It wasn't just the enemies of the Gospel that he suffered from in his public ministry and life, because we find in Acts chapter 9 that he was first mistrusted not by the Jews but by believers! In Acts chapter 9 verse 26 we find that straight after his conversion: 'When Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple'. That would be enough to put any of us off who were young in the faith! But there Paul the apostle, having a tremendous arresting of the Saviour on the road to Damascus, a conversion experience that is perhaps second to none and certainly far exceeds any that we have experienced, yet his fellow brethren and sisters in Christ at first mistrusted him.

We find that not only did they mistrust him, but in Philippians chapter 1 verse 14 he was disliked by some believers. Even after a little while in the faith it says that: 'Many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear'. We find also that not only was he plotted against, mistrusted by believers, persecuted by some believers and disliked, but his work was constantly opposed wherever he went by his own countrymen specifically. He had enemies within the church, but he also had enemies among his own kinsmen and even other Gentiles. We find when he goes to Antioch in Acts chapter 13 that he's persecuted, constantly opposed, people following him. In Iconium in chapter 14 we find it, Thessalonica chapter 17, and then in chapter 14 we find that his persecution comes to a climax when he is stoned and left for dead! What suffering this apostle of Christ endured! He suffered in Berea in Acts 17, in Corinth in Acts 18, in Ephesus in Acts 19, and we could go on and on and on. So he's suffering from those in the church right from the beginning of his conversion, he's suffering from those outside the church - namely those in Judaism and also other Gentiles - he's left for dead on one occasion, and we find that if it wasn't enough to suffer from them, he suffers from the devil himself and all the hordes of hell. He comes under satanic pressure.

In Acts chapter 13 and verse 8 we read of Elymas the sorcerer who withstood those preaching the Gospel, and specifically Paul. In Acts chapter 16 we read: 'And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying' - and this woman followed Paul about! We find when we go into the first Thessalonian epistle chapter 2 and verse 18, that he says to them: 'Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us'. There was a continual hindering of satanic pressure and influence upon Paul's ministry and life - and perhaps the greatest of all influences, satanically, is found in 2 Corinthians 12 verse 7, and we'll look at it in a little bit more detail later on - but that thorn in the flesh that Paul endured, which he specifically named as 'the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure'. A messenger sent from Satan to Paul!

In Acts 16 we find that he was beaten and jailed at Philippi, and we know the story about the Philippian jailer and how Paul and Silas were miraculously and dramatically freed through that earthquake - but don't forget that he was in prison, he was beaten, and he sang praises to God and prayed all night. He was ridiculed in his public ministry, he was heckled, he was shouted down at Athens. In Acts chapter 17 we find these words:

'Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection...And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter later'. In other words: 'We don't want to listen to this type of nonsense at this moment, but we'll hear you about it another day'. In Caesarea, Acts 26 verse 24 it says: 'And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad'.

Plotted against, mistrusted by his brethren, disliked by some believers, constantly opposed by the Jews and Gentiles, stoned, persecuted, beaten, subjected to satanic pressures, ridiculed in his public preaching, and often falsely accused. We read of Tertullus in chapter 24 of Acts and verse 5, he says of Paul this testimony: 'We have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes: Who also hath gone about to profane the temple: whom we took, and would have judged according to our law'. In chapter 25 verse 7 we find: 'And when he was come, the Jews which came down from Jerusalem stood round about, and laid many and grievous complaints against Paul, which they could not prove' - but it didn't matter that they couldn't prove it, they ridiculed him nevertheless.

Let alone to say, of all the sufferings that he endured, perhaps one of the greatest in all of nature is chapter 27 of the Acts of the Apostles which has great detail of that shipwreck that took place as he was being taken to Rome as a prisoner. He suffered that terrifying ocean storm, and in the midst of it he showed great leadership and the power of God upon his life. Then as they landed after the shipwreck in chapter 28, we find that he experienced the bite of the poisonous serpent. Then as he got off the boat and was in Rome he was imprisoned, we find that imprisonment goes right throughout his whole life. He was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years, Acts chapter 24; he's imprisoned in Rome, we read of it in Timothy, in Ephesians, and Philippians. But perhaps one of the most poignant and piercing and stabbing pains that Paul endured within the whole of his ministry and life was the moment in his actual evangelistic and Gospel work when he says he was forsaken by all those around him. In his public life, he says in 2 Timothy 4:10 and 16: 'Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia...At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge'.

Are you beginning to witness a portrait of the suffering of the apostle to the Gentiles? More generally Paul's overall testimony concerning all of his sufferings can be found in a few specific texts, and I want you to turn with me to them. First of all 2 Corinthians chapter 4, and we begin reading at verse 8, he says: 'We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body'. Chapter 6 of the same book, verses 4 through 10: 'But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things'.

What suffering! Chapter 7 verse 5 alone testifies it: 'For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears!' Chapter 11, of course I hope you're beginning to see that 2 Corinthians is a great epistle about suffering and trouble. In chapter 11 he continues in verse 23: 'Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool)', speaking of false prophets, 'I am

more a minister of Christ; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches'.

If you turn to Philippians, and remember that this epistle was written when Paul was in prison in Rome, Philippians chapter 3 and verse 7, verse 8, and verse 10: 'But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things', now don't run by that phrase and statement, 'for whom I have suffered the loss of all things' - why? - 'I count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death'.

Finally, Romans chapter 8, Romans 8 and verse 18, his conclusion of the whole matter is this: 'For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us'. Now if you have observed with a keen eye tonight, with the eye of faith, the sufferings and the pain of this man Paul - imagine what the glory's going to be like when we get to heaven! Alexander the Great's veterans on one occasion threatened a mutiny on the grounds that their great leader was indifferent to their hardship and to their wounds that they bore for him. When it got too much he sprang up and he stood on the dais, and he said to his disgruntled men: 'Come now, who of you have wounds? Let him bare himself and I will show mine - no member of my body is without wounds! I have been wounded by the sword, by the arrow from the bow, by the missile from the catapult. I have been pelted with stones and pounded with clubs while leading you to victory and to glory!'. But Paul, who was a greater than Alexander the Great, could say finally: 'Let no-one cause me trouble, for I bear in my body the marks of Jesus'.

This man suffered for Christ, and I believe that that is one of the greatest reasons why he succeeded for Christ. More than any apostle or perhaps any Christian, or any man besides our Lord Jesus Christ, he was exposed to suffering, hardship, distress. His sufferings are listed - there are so many of them that I'm caused to think it seems more than any normal human being would be able to survive! Yet this man of God survived it and emerged triumphant as a 'more than conqueror'!

That is his public suffering in a brief survey, but we haven't even touched on his private suffering. When we look at that we see that, more than any apostle again, as in his public suffering in his private suffering he suffers immensely. Perhaps the greatest of all that would be conjured right away to your mind is what is found in 2 Corinthians chapter 12, turn to it with me. In verse 1 he feels necessary to declare his experience that he has in his life, not out of boasting or pomp, but out of the fact that other false prophets were coming into the church and boasting their experiences that were false. He says: 'It is not expedient', verse 1, 'for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ', speaking of himself, but he doesn't even speak of himself in the first person out of humility and modesty, 'above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter'. What an experience! Paul had been granted, not only on this occasion but we're lead to believe on other occasions, special revelations from God - none other and none less than the mystery of the church of Jesus Christ in this particular age.

This was unique, Paul was a unique man, he went through unique experiences such as these. This experience in particular, Paul says, was so unique that it presented him with an opportunity and a temptation to pride. Would it not do that to you? I'm sure it would do it to me, I'm certain it would. That pride that he was tempted to fall into would have inevitably limited his great ministry that God had planned for him, and ordained for him from his mother's womb - so God had to do something to equalise the balance, an equalising factor was introduced. He says in verse 7: 'Lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure'. God gave him a thorn in the flesh to redress the balance, to guard him against pride, and to safeguard his ministry from the great fall of it.

Now his description of what this thorn in the flesh is is very unspecific, and it seems that the great apostle is even reticent in his expression. For that reason, down all the ages, theologians and Bible scholars and commentators have speculated beyond reason, and been divided over what this thorn in the flesh is. Some put it down to a mental problem, a spiritual problem, doubts and depressions of the great apostle, internal problems, external problems, physical problems, sickness, disease. Some say it was epilepsy, some say malaria, others say bad eyesight because of indication and evidence in the book of Galatians - but the fact of the matter is this: the Holy Spirit not only includes things in scripture for our benefit, but He excludes things also for our benefit and for our learning. I think it is no mistake that the Holy Spirit does not specify what Paul's thorn in the flesh is, and I believe it is for your benefit and for mine, so that we can come to this passage - the whole epistle, the whole life of Paul, the whole pain of Paul - and we can identify with it, and not only identify with his pain but look at the problem and how he got through it.

Perhaps more than identifying with his pain, we can identify with the grace of God that was administered to him in verse 9: 'And he', God, 'said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness'. If it was eyesight or malaria or a spiritual problem, if it was depression, if it was anything like that we would be narrow in our interpretation according to the context - but God does not do that, He tells us just that it was a thorn in the flesh from Satan to buffet him. But what we need to take away with us tonight: in all of Paul's public pain and all of his private pain, the grace of Almighty God was sufficient for his need! Praise God, the Holy Spirit has allowed us to take that with us tonight, and identify it with ourselves and personalise it in our particular lives! We can take it as this scripture to us.

The point was that in Paul's life, whatever this thorn in the flesh is, it doesn't really matter, the fact is that it is introduced into his life, it is the painful humiliating price of the greatness of Paul's ministry. There you see it again: the greater the service the greater the suffering. It was a consequence that if he wanted to do for God what God wanted him to do, he would have to suffer pain, he would have to have this thorn in the flesh - otherwise his head would get too big, and his whole dream would burst and it would be over. It was a messenger of Satan to buffet him, there's no doubt about it, but like Job it was divinely appointed. It was allowed of God, it was directed in God's sovereignty, and although it came from the hand of Satan it was allowed actually to save the ministry of Paul that inevitably has brought us the Gospel even in these isles.

If you think of it and rationalise it and reason about it, it was actually an equipment for Paul's ministry! It was something useful, and although he prayed three times that it would go away, in all probability without its presence, the presence of this infirmity and this thorn, Paul could and would never have achieved the great work that he did. It was necessary, it was needed and God ordained it. Even though we don't know the nature of the thorn, there are certain facts about it that we do know that we can identify with tonight, and we can see the great value of looking at our sufferings in the light of Paul's private personal suffering.

First of all we notice that it was over a period of time, it was with him for a while. It was something that continued, and if any of you are going through trials and problems, even in these twelve weeks of studies: have you entered into and exited and even embarked upon the greatest trials and problems that you've ever

faced in your life? Well, that's what Paul faced. Secondly, it was the subject of repeated but unanswered prayer, verse 8 he asked three times that the Lord would take it away - and how many of you have asked that the Lord would stop this problem, or take this trial out of your life, but God has not given you the answer that you want? Thirdly, it was an instrument of humbling - it says in verse 7 that 'God gave it to keep me from becoming conceited'. It deflated his ego, it sapped his self-confidence - and there are things that come into our lives that are deeply humiliating experiences, that we just feel takes away any self-gratification of pride that we ever had.

Fourthly it afforded Satan the opportunity of tormenting him, we see it in verse 7. How many of us are tormented, perhaps even on a daily basis, by the devil and all the hordes of hell themselves? Fifthly, it became a channel of grace. My friend, you could be going through troubles, a thorn in the flesh, over a period of time; you could have experienced repeated and unanswered prayer, it could be Satan himself tormenting you, your ego could be deflated and you're absolutely humiliated and downcast - but never forget that in Paul's life this was a channel of the grace of God. Rather than God coming in and intervening in his life, and bringing a remedy or solution, God compensates with His divine grace. He doesn't take away something that is harming him, but He gives him something else to help him. It's not answered by subtraction, but the addition of the grace of God into the apostle's life. It was an opportunity for Paul to experience the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ, and ultimately to experience a fresh knowledge of God.

Sixthly it provided the occasion for rejoicing in his weakness. He said: 'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, I delight in weaknesses for when I am weak, then I am strong'. Seventh and finally, it proved and provided a backdrop for the displaying of Christ's power, because when he was weak Christ's power was strong - 'so that Christ's power may rest on me', he said. Isn't it amazing that in the life of Paul what many and most of us regard as a restricting handicap, in reality was heaven-sent? In fact, it was a heavenly opportunity and an asset to his ministry, and it is the very thing perhaps above many things that enlarged the ministry of Paul! Thus his weakness became a potent weapon in the hand of God.

Violet Allen's story in a book entitled 'Tea in an Old House', writes about great men of history. She says this: 'Milton the blind, who looked on paradise; Beethoven deaf, who heard vast harmonies; Byron the lame, who climbed toward alpine skies - who pleads a handicap remembering these?'. In the spiritual realm we can say exactly the same with regards to Paul, and even Moses - all the excuses that Moses gave - and all these excuses are put to shame in the life of Paul, because he uses his weaknesses, that Moses used to get out of the work of God, for the work of God, for the power of God to be channelled through his ministry! He used his weakness in the hand of the Holy Spirit as a weapon against evil. As an unknown poet has said, speaking of Paul:

I asked the Lord that He should give me success
To the high task I sought for Him to do.
I asked that every hindrance might grow less,
And that my hours of weakness might be few.
I asked that far and lofty heights be scaled,
And now I humbly thank Him that I failed.

For with the pain and sorrow came to me
A dower of tenderness in act and thought.
With the failure came a sympathy,
An insight which success had never brought.
Father, I had been foolish and unblessed
If Thou hadst granted me my blind request'.

Note that Paul didn't say a thorn was imposed upon him, he says 'there was a thorn given to me' - a gift of grace. By the time it took him to reach this point in his life, he realised that it was no longer a messenger of Satan to torment him and buffet him, but he viewed it as the grace of God's gift to his life to prepare a way for his wider ministry in the community. Now what that tells me, and we've learnt this in the weeks gone by: how you will come through suffering, and how you will or may eventually get out of suffering, will be largely determined by your attitude to the suffering. When will your suffering change from a messenger of Satan to buffet you into a grace of God that has been given to you for your good? That will be the revolutionary time in your life.

Thirdly we find within his epistles, specifically in his teachings, that out of his public suffering and pain and private turmoil there evolved a philosophy of suffering that was inspired by God's Holy Spirit. Now you know and I know that in the world in which we live that worships power - military power, economic power, scientific power and even in the church today we're worshipping charismatic power - yet God says in Isaiah 55: 'My ways are not your ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts' - and unlike anything that we find in worldly philosophy that's based on survival of the fittest and the strongest and the smartest, isn't it wonderful that the gospel of God's grace comes to the sinner? It comes to the weakest, and even Paul could say: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief'. He comes to save the weak and the poor and the needy and the destitute - those who need a physician. It's not even the fact in Paul's philosophy of weakness that he teaches that God uses us despite, or regardless of our weaknesses - don't get that into your head. He doesn't bypass our weaknesses, it's the exact opposite: Paul teaches, the Holy Spirit inspired him to tell us, that it is precisely because of our weaknesses that God uses us! Have you got that? Not in spite of them, not regardless of them, but because of them.

Now listen to some of the great apostle's statements: 1 Corinthians 1:27: 'God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. First Corinthians 2:3: 'And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling'. Second Corinthians 12:10: 'Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong'. 'My strength is made perfect in' - what? - 'weakness'. 'Of myself I will not glory', he says, 'but in mine infirmities'. It's a complete reverse of the worldly standard, isn't it? The opposite of it! This is what his ministry was based on: who would think that weakness was an asset to leadership, and a quality to look for? But he learned in his life that God's philosophy of ministry is that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, and the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of men!

Look at 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 26 for a moment, 1 Corinthians 1 verse 26: 'For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his sight'. That's the key! If you want a ministry that does anything for God and for Christ, you can't glory in it! All you can glory in is your weakness, for that lets the strength of God shine forth. Never forget that the Lord chose His own disciples out of a band of unschooled fishermen and terrorists of Galilee. Isn't it interesting that He passed by the intellectual rabbis - do you know why? Because with all their learning and schooling their heart was not open to the Spirit of God, and I believe that God is doing the same thing today.

The Scottish preacher Dr James Stewart said this: 'Nothing can defeat a church or soul that takes not its strength but its weakness, and offers that weakness to God as a weapon. It is always upon human weakness and humiliation, not human strength and confidence, that God chooses to build His kingdom - and He can use us not merely in spite of our ordinariness and helplessness and disqualifying infirmities, but precisely because of them, and that discovery will revolutionise your ministry!'. Our problem is today that we're too

big for our boots, we're too advanced and sophisticated and theological and intelligent for our great God to use - our strengths, today, have become our weaknesses! We need to remember as F. W. H. Meyer says in his poem:

'So with the Lord, He takes and He refuses,
Finds Him ambassadors whom men deny,
Wise ones nor mighty for His saints He chooses,
Nor such as John or Gideon or I.

I for this Paul, a scorn and a despising,
Weak as you know him and the wretch you see
Even in his eyes shall ye behold him rising,
Strength in infirmities and Christ in me!'

You may argue, and you argue rightly, that Paul out of many people was wise, and he was noble and he was influential. Note what it says: it doesn't say not any wise, noble and influential will be called, but not many - but the fact of the matter is that Paul didn't rest upon his intellectual prowess and power, he didn't rest upon his Pharisaical zeal and legalism. He didn't rely on them, he said himself: 'I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of men's wisdom but in a demonstration of the Spirit and power' - and that's what made the difference! A theological education means nothing in the eyes of God, but the demonstration of power in the Holy Spirit means everything!

Samuel Chadwick said - and I remember, I don't know whether they knew it was me or not, but I pinned it up on the noticeboard of the Bible College when I was there - that God doesn't want a college trained ministry, he wants a Spirit-filled ministry. D.L. Moody, the great evangelist, I'm told in physical appearance was unattractive, he was lacking in education, his voice was high-pitched and nasal. On one occasion a press reporter was assigned to cover his campaigns, he was given the assignment to discover the secret of this man's extraordinary power and the influence he had over people all types and strata of society. This is what that reporter wrote: 'I can see nothing at all in Moody to account for his marvellous work'. When Moody was told this he chuckled, he said: 'Of course not, because the work was God's, not mine'. Moody's weakness was God's weapon. We use our weaknesses as getting out of serving God, don't we? We're too sick, we're too weak, there's too much wrong with us - but God is saying: 'I've given you these things as a weapon to use in my service'.

Fourthly and finally, his prize for suffering. Philippians 1:23 and 24, he said that he would long to depart and be with Christ which is far better, but it was expedient for him to stay for the good of the church. Many of us can say that: if we'd be invited to go to heaven now we would just take the ticket right away! He said: 'I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, but it's more needful that I stay'. Now look specifically at 2 Timothy, and we're nearly finished - I want to finish this tonight - 2 Timothy chapter 4 verses 5 to 7: 'But watch thou in all things', verse 5, 'endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry', his advice to Timothy, 'For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing'.

He wrote that from prison, and he held on right through his life of persecution - public and private suffering and everything - he took that philosophy right through, why? Because he was going towards a prize he had to gain at the end of it all! The poet F. H. Allen said:

Blessed is he whose faith is not offended
When all around his way
The power of God is working out deliverance
For others day by day.

Though in some prison drear his own soul languish
Till life be spent,
Yet still can trust his Father's love and purpose,
And rest therein content.

Yea, blessed art thou whose faith is not offended
By trials unexplained,
By mysteries unresolved, past understanding,
Until the goal is gained'.

That's what kept him going, and that word 'depart' in the Greek literally means 'loosing the moorings of the boat'. He saw that he was departing, embarking on a heavenly shore, leaving the world, for his mission was almost accomplished. Tradition has it, you don't find it in the Bible, that after Paul appealed to Nero he went to Rome. When he arrived in Rome, during one of Nero's little holidays on vacation somewhere else, his favourite mistress was converted to the Lord Jesus Christ by none other than Paul the apostle. When Nero arrived home he was none too pleased, for she had left and joined a Christian band and was away ministering the Gospel. Tradition tells us that Nero was mad with rage, and he took vengeance on Paul, and they took him out onto the Ostian Way and they beheaded him.

Lord Nelson reported to the British Admiralty his great victory over the French fleet in the battle of the Nile. He said that 'victory' was not a large enough word to describe what had taken place. When Paul spoke of his victory through Christ in his life and in his death, over all his trials and all his adversaries and adversities, and temptations and woes of life - the greatest of all words was not sufficient, 'conqueror', what did he say? More: 'Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us'.

Do you know what's amazing to me right throughout this whole series, and as we close our message and our meetings tonight? He didn't say: 'I am more than conqueror', what did he say? 'We', 'What shall separate us from the love of God' - and what greater message at the end of these meetings, and at the end of this man's biography, than this: he could say for us and of us, 'If God be for us, who can stand against us?'. Can you take that with you tonight? God is for you, and nothing can be against you.

I hope in these weeks that, as you've looked into the mirror of God's word, that you've have seen a little bit of why - or at least how - you can go through what you are going through, and how you can do it to the glory of God, and in the communion of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit, and how others can see it and fear and trust in the Lord.

Faint not, nor fear, His arms are near,
He changeth not and thou art dear.
Only believe and thou shalt see
That Christ is all in all to thee'.

Father, we believe that whatever we do, whether we eat or drink, whether we live or die, whether we suffer pain, cancer, loss - that we can, through the grace of God that is sufficient for us, do it to the glory of God. We have to believe upon Thy word that in our weaknesses God can be seen; and we pray, Lord, we believe, but help us with our unbelief, and enable us to stand in our suffering upon the word of God, and do what

Paul did: look unto the Author and Finisher of our faith, considering Him who suffered such contradiction of sinners. In Whose name we pray, Amen.

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