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FRIENDS, FOES AND FAMILIES

*Lenten meditations on Bible characters
and relationships*



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SPCK

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To my family

Thanks, as ever, to Paul,
my friend and mentor, and also
to everyone at SPCK

What therefore we need is not a stronger will,
but a deeper insight,
not more strength, but more light.

(H. A. Williams, *True Wilderness*, p. 58)

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Introduction



Who endowed the heart with wisdom, or gave understanding
to the mind? (Job 38.36, NIV 1984)

This is a book about relationships, particularly as recounted in the Scriptures. Using both Old and New Testament characters, some less well remembered than others, we will challenge ourselves to find, in the lives of people who lived long ago, reflections of our own relationships in all their fragility. Through these often larger than life stories, our own predicaments may be revealed in a clearer light, and we may be surprised into fresh ways of understanding. It is a truism that we learn more from our failures than our successes, so I make no apology for the emphasis in the book on the dysfunctional. Through the lives of some of the characters who fill the pages of our Scriptures, we see the common pattern of wilderness, death and resurrection repeated over and over again, and each daily reflection studies one or other of this threefold pattern.

Perhaps we will see ourselves in one of the characters, or our choices in their own decisions, our failures in their mistakes, and loving solutions in their successes. For the Bible is the ‘culminating ideal of morality and spirituality’, as Keith Ward explained in his marvellous retelling of the Pentateuch (*The Promise*, p. ix). Though our decisions always have implications for others as well as ourselves, we often treat a decision as ours and ours alone, ignoring God’s involvement altogether.

Each story will be approached according to the values of the final episode – the cross and resurrection of Jesus. That is why there is space for prayer within each piece. If we live within relationships, we are forced to make choices, so we had better pray for ‘a discerning heart’ (1 Kings 3.9). Like Solomon, whose prayer this was, we must never cease praying for wisdom, so that when we find ourselves at a pivotal moment in our lives, we are clear-sighted, not confused, capable and not frozen in indecision. We must start with a deliberate intention to search for wisdom; it will not drop from the sky as God’s

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gift of manna did, but comes only to those alert and aware that the hard work of attention is required of them.

Where is wisdom to be found? Why do some people seem to have it inbuilt, others have to learn it through trial and tribulation, and others never find it? Some people spend all their lives knowing something at an intellectual level, but never reaching the point that allows compassion to penetrate. Some never reach enlightenment about the world outside themselves, because they never achieve self-knowledge of what is hidden deep within. Because we need help in this, the wisest decisions are those we make which integrate our minds and our hearts with Christ's teaching and example.

* * *

This book traces a line from initial confusion and repeated crises to disaster and beyond disaster to the possibility of transformed lives. This is the same trajectory we follow all our lives, in all our relationships. It is also the basic shape of our Bible – from the confusion and failures of the Old Testament, haltingly discerning God's universal truths, to the tragedy of the Passion and the renewal of the Resurrection. Our progress is not linear. The Old Testament has flashes of reconciliation, and the New Testament has instances of folly. We still carry outmoded ideas, like redundant vestiges of evolution; like a grumbling appendix, they can still cause an awful lot of pain. One of the pleasures of writing this book has been making connections between the two halves of our Scripture. We meet the alienation of Cain, and of Judas; celebrate the loyalty of Jonathan, and Peter's reconciliation with Jesus. We travel from the blindness of Isaac through the stumblings of numerous women and men labouring in the shadow of selfishness and sin, until we reach the explosion of light which gave Paul new sight. Despite all our mishandlings, God keeps his promise to repair and regenerate.

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you.

(Ephesians 1.17–18)

ASH WEDNESDAY AND INTRODUCTORY WEEK



But my people would not listen to me . . .
So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts
to follow their own devices.

(Psalm 81.11, 12)

Ash Wednesday	In order to know what is in your heart	Mark 1.12, 13	2
Thursday	But Jonah ran away from the Lord	Jonah	5
Friday	Lot lived among the cities of the plain	Genesis 12—14, 18, 19	8
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Ash Wednesday: in order to know what is in your heart



Mark 1.12, 13

Remember how the LORD your God led you
all the way in the wilderness these forty years,
to humble and test you
in order to know what was in your heart.

(Deuteronomy 8.2)

Deserts are dry, brittle places. No water flows in them and only the occasional dew allows the minimum of life. Dry sand blows in the eyes and coats the lips. Plants wither and leaves shrivel. All around Jesus' feet were the parched skeletons of small creatures who had lost their search for water. Yet the Spirit had banished Jesus here, leaving him no choice in the matter. Sometimes wisdom lies in realizing we are not in control, in not resisting, but allowing a crisis to take us beyond what we thought possible or bearable.

Let the white of these pages which surround the prayers
become a space
for our penitence for the past, our present resolve,
and our future hopes.

In this heat and this thirst, Jesus craved water above anything else. By day he saw a recurring mirage of a verdant oasis, overhung by shady palms, where camels lapped at the water, children paddled and women drew water for the pot. By night he dreamed of his baptism in the Jordan – the cool of the river over his limbs, the drenching of his robes, the shock when water covered his head and trickled over his face, washing away the grit and dust. This was lifesaving water in every sense.

Ash Wednesday and introductory week

Being cleansed is not as easy as standing under a modern shower or turning on a washing machine. Some of you reading this may remember mothers or grandmothers beating clothes on the scrubbing board, pounding the stains against the wood to release the dirt from the fibres.

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
(Psalm 51.7)

The time Jesus spent in the desert was hard and bitter and parts of our lives will be too. We must not be afraid to shed tears, for they reveal our vulnerability. We fight to hold back our tears because we fear exposing our 'weakness'. But what else is this weakness but an admission that we are suffering, or are open to the suffering of others, or appalled at the injustices of this world? Tears witness to our sorrows, and our sorrows are an acknowledgement that all is not right either within ourselves or the community we inhabit. This flow of tears is proof that our hearts have been touched and these are the times we are most open to the possibility of change.

Welcome the waiting and the arriving,
the emptying as well as the fulfilling;
the struggle as much as the achievement,
the losing and the gaining;
welcome the end as well as the beginning,
for in both are we re-created.

The desert changed Jesus for good. On his return, his mission was to assuage the thirst of all whom he met. It was as if he had vowed never to be thirsty again, and he had learnt the absolute value of water. In John's Gospel, the first miracle he performed on returning from the wilderness was to attend a wedding at Cana and change water into wine. He was making up for all the thirst and hunger of the past forty days and saying: I will not allow this thirst and scarcity to afflict my people, that is not my Father's way. So he went about promising 'a spring of water welling up to eternal life' (John 4.14). This was the stream he'd longed for in the desert.

Jesus planned for us a garden bursting with new life, another paradise, cultivated by the streams of baptism and the tears of his suffering.

Ash Wednesday and introductory week

Picture this garden like one of the gardens of an Arabian palace. From courtyard to courtyard water flows unceasingly; from one level to another it cascades, always channelled on to the next shady spot. And at its heart stands a fountain, gushing with a superabundant waterfall of grace.

Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev.
Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.

(Psalm 126.4, 5)

But Jonah ran away from the Lord

Jonah

When I run away, rescue me,
when I argue, answer,
when I despair, have patience with me,
when I am foolish, help me to reflect,
when I am hasty, remind me to pray.

The book of Jonah is a beautifully crafted book of wisdom, disguised as a comic fable, and it is a book about salvation pretending to be a children's bedtime story. When God says to Jonah – Go! we plunge into a plot of escapes and returns, descending and ascending, and lots of argument. By the third verse, Jonah has run away, refusing to carry out God's order to preach repentance to Nineveh. He headed in the opposite direction to God's will and so heaped calamity on his head, and the heads of the innocent sailors whose ship he sailed in. He acted with all the impetuosity of a foolish person, and then tried to ease his conscience with a foolhardy display of heroics, by offering to be thrown overboard. 'It is my fault that this great storm has come upon you,' he declared with a flash of insight.

This Lent, make me aware of my faults and my folly,
and make me ready, willing and able to confess.

Jonah rushed about but never reflected, he seemed unable to live the faith he declared so boldly. The sailors did not know this God, but they behaved with more sense and humanity than Jonah, trying to avoid his sacrifice. Though outsiders to the faith, they gain the reader's admiration.

Jonah's descent was complete when he was engulfed by waves and entangled in weeds, and on the point of drowning. He banished himself to a watery wilderness, until along came the unnamed fish.

Ash Wednesday and introductory week

Surely this would be the end of Jonah? But instead of being executioner, it was his saviour, not his nemesis but his rescuer. Jonah had to hit rock bottom before he could come to his senses and begin to pray from within the fish. This is the pivot of the whole book. Trapped in the pitch-black of a huge fish belly, in the darkness of the ocean floor which the sun's rays would never reach, Jonah saw a glimmer of God's light and began his faltering ascent to wisdom.

This Lent, let us pray using Jonah's words:

I sank down . . . but you . . . brought my life up from the pit.
When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD.
(Jonah 2.6, 7)

A second time God's word was heard by Jonah – Go! Though Jonah had learnt enough to be obedient, he had learnt neither wisdom nor compassion. Jonah was furious that the task he'd been set was to save a heathen city – Nineveh – from its sins. His impulse was a destructive judgement and a lack of love for a people outside of his community. Though he was God's servant and prophet, he didn't share God's love for all of creation. It was Jonah who had the greatest lesson to learn, not Nineveh. Jonah was already sliding away from discernment, but Nineveh did learn wisdom, and repented.

This Lent, I will lift my eyes from myself
and pay attention to your wilderness world
where human failure has brought such pain
and people cry out for healing, homes, food and peace.

Jonah was by then so angry that he lost his temper with God, along with all sense of proportion. 'It is better for me to die than to live' (Jonah 4.3). Though he had just declaimed the great recurring credal statement of the Old Testament, he was only paying lip service to it; the meaning was not in his heart: 'You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity' (Jonah 4.2).

The children's story more or less ends with the rescue of Nineveh. But we adults must read on. Jonah built himself a shelter – a second version of the hospitable fish – in which to hide and sulk. And God decided to teach him wisdom not with words but by deeds. He

Ash Wednesday and introductory week

blessed Jonah's shelter with a cool spreading vine, but just as Jonah got comfortable, he destroyed it. 'I'm angry enough to die,' Jonah peevishly declared, taking God's behaviour as spite. And still God kept calm, and explained with a question – why weep for the loss of this small plant, but not for my people? Why would I ever want to create, in order to destroy?

Jonah's saving grace was that he was always honest and transparent as a little child. But the book ends before we discover if he ever grew up.

God, you give shade when we are scorched
and rescue us when we are adrift;
help me to mature in my faith and grow in wisdom
through every incident of my life.
Amen.

Lot lived among the cities of the plain

Genesis 12—14, 18, 19

When I'm tempted to live on the plain,
to choose a life of ease and comfort,
help me think again.

The gruesome story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is, in fact, the dramatic peak of the story of Lot, Abraham's nephew, and his life is a sub-plot of Abraham's saga. If Abraham was renowned for his faith and trust, what was Lot's dominant characteristic? Surely it was a foolishness made obvious through laziness and vacillation. Lot teaches us the danger of too much hesitation.

Already in Abraham's shadow when the extended family left Ur for Haran, Lot continued with Abraham on to Canaan. Together they thrived until their combined herds put such a strain on the local economy that Abraham decided they must part. Abraham graciously gave Lot the choice of where to settle, and Lot settled for the easy option.

There he lived 'among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom' (Genesis 13.12), where he soon succumbed to temptation and moved into town. When warfare overtook the plain, the town was ransacked and Lot, his family and possessions, were carried off. So far we might excuse Lot for just having bad luck, but it was Uncle Abraham who had to come to his rescue.

Holy God, I live close to the bright lights
where I compromise my ideals and my honour.
Preserve me from corruption.

We next meet Lot as a player in Abraham's great encounter with God, who comes disguised as three visitors (Chapter 18). After God had

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confided his plan to obliterate the cities, Abraham remained standing before the Lord, as he debated, 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked?' So the three visitors descended to Sodom to warn the righteous, and met Lot sitting by the gateway. His easy-going nature and laissez-faire attitudes had got him into very bad company. Lot gave hospitality to the Visitors, but the depraved men of Sodom attacked. Anxious to protect his guests, Lot offered to sacrifice his virgin daughters: 'and you can do what you like with them'. We'll see some very poor attitudes towards women during our exploration of Genesis, but none more flagrant than this!

All Lot's cosying up to the locals was of no avail. 'This fellow came here as a foreigner and now he wants to play the judge!' they taunted. So, keeping his head down didn't turn out to be a successful strategy.

Forgive me the sins I slip into through association,
my values tarnished and my resolve weakened.
Help me to look again at my life
and see how far I've wandered from your virtuous way.

The Visitors warned Lot that Sodom would be destroyed and he must escape – now! Lot was seriously worried and prepared to leave, but still he vacillated. The Visitors had to physically force him to go, before Sodom was engulfed in fire. 'Flee to the mountains', they warned, but this was too arduous for Lot, who always wanted to take the line of least resistance. 'Look, here is a town near enough to run to, and it is small,' he bargained.

Lot's story had a truly horrible ending. After all the fuss he had made to be allowed to settle in Zoar, he got worried and did move up to the mountains. Isolated and abandoned, reduced to living with his two daughters in a cave, none of his choices had preserved him at all. Finally, the daughters tempted him into such drunkenness that he slept with them. Without a strong web of relationships, or a guide wiser than he, Lot's family descended into chaos and iniquity. Without strong bonds to support him, this weak man was ambushed by events; without understanding, this foolish man was forever a victim.

In the following weeks we will examine many relationships, some better than these, a few even worse, and ask ourselves what makes the difference between positive and negative outcomes to our choice. One

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