



Real Like Us

*8 Fictionalized shorts explore the
humanity and emotions of Bible
characters*

With Study Guides



Nancy Virden

About this Book

Real Like Us

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A previous version of this book under the title *They Were Real* was published in 2014 by the now defunct Tate Publishing company. Few to none of those copies remain in existence. *Real Like Us* contains three new shorts.

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*A heavenward thank you to my
mom, Esther, who introduced me
to all the Bible characters*



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Introduction

This book bears witness to two truths: human nature does not change, and neither does our Lord.

From the neglected child who cannot recognize love to the leper who lost the love he once knew, people have always struggled with questions of worth. From the men who speak truth to power to the women facing discrimination with grace, courage remains a matter of heart.

The stories in *Real Like Us* expand accounts in biblical text to reveal possible thoughts and emotions of ancient persons during key moments in their lives.

You and I can relate to these stories because they are about us. The same God and Savior Jesus who met needs in the past joins us where we are today.

Ecclesiastes 1:9

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.

Miriam

Based on Exodus 1:22-2:10
1525 BC

This moment will change the future for a young protective sister, her small Hebrew family, a princess, a tiny nation, all of Egypt, and ultimately the Middle East as we know it.

This five-minute walk to the Nile river is the catalyst for her baby brother's rise to fame, exile, and eventual return as leader of their people. He will be the one to set them free and lead them to the land God promised their ancestors.

Today is the day God starts to change the world. Of course, Miriam and her mother know none of that.

Miriam can still hear the wails of mothers whose infant sons were thrown in the Nile River. Even louder is the deathly silence of those whose babies remain under threat. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, fears the growing Hebrew slave population and demands the death of all their newborn boys.

She tries to keep her eyes off the silent load her mother is balancing on top her head. They regularly carry laundry to wash in the river as do most young girls and women of her town. Today's basket is new and unusual. It is pitched with tar, waterproof.

Two days ago, in a type of dress rehearsal, this basket was loaded with rocks close to the weight of today's precious cargo. Miriam had placed it in the water to test if it would stay afloat, and it did.

Now, it is filled with homespun wool topped with a three-month-old baby boy. He is Miriam's little brother, soon to be known as Moses.

Both Miriam and her mother do their best to appear nonchalant as they make their way down this well-traveled path. With sounds and voices from the river's edge drawing close, the pair duck into reeds growing along the Nile's crocodile and snake infested shoreline.

Shoving aside tall, slender stalks with one hand, Miriam's mother steps carefully, slowing with pauses to listen. With Miriam close behind, she nears the watery area her husband had agreed is best.

It is private, around the bend and upstream from chaotic laundering and other water traffic. More importantly, Pharaoh's daughter bathes here at about this time each day. Soon the princess will arrive with several attendants.

Miriam watches her mother's joyless face as she lowers her tiny son into the water. Lifting the painstakingly woven lid and staring into his eyes for what she knows may be the last time, the woman playfully touches a finger to the tip of her nose, and then to his. The child smiles, unconcerned about her tears dripping onto his face.

For one paralyzed moment it appears she is unable to let him go. Then, more stooped than Miriam has seen before, her mother slowly moves backward, mesmerized by the tiny vessel floating her heart away.

Miriam's heart pounds. She is alone with crucial business. Sobbing silently, fearful for her brother's life and nearly overcome with pressure to play out her role to the end, memories of being his big sister stir her emotions.

It was she who fetched whatever the midwife needed as he entered the world. Her hands had often rubbed his belly when he cried. She was both scout and decoy when threat verged upon the tiny family. This is her last chance to protect him.

The baby coos, fascinated by swaying reeds against the sky. Kissing his forehead, she swallows the urge to grab him and run. Instead, she lowers the lid and gives the basket a slight shove. "I'll miss you."

He whimpers.

An inner dance of hope, terror, and grief collapses into a near-empty pit that fills her abdomen. It feels surreal to walk away, doing nothing, as dangerous waters lap around such priceless treasure. Timing is vital.

Chattering! Miriam jumps. Sure enough, the princess and her entourage are on their way!

Wobbling beyond the reeds, a full-blown wail emanates from the basket. *Hurry, hurry*, she inwardly pleads. *Only the princess hear him!*

The women, closer now, suddenly stop as the royal squints toward the sound. Miriam tenses, and her efforts at appearing casual fail.

Staring, she sees Pharaoh's daughter wave her hand in the general direction of the cries. A servant girl wades over to the basket and pulls it to shore. Miriam's breathing stalls when it lands in front of golden sandals.

The woman with power over life and death, motions for someone to open the top. She sees the baby is a Hebrew boy... and smiles! Naming him Moses, she lifts him to her shoulder, embracing and comforting him.

Suddenly, Miriam remembers her mission. Stumbling her way toward the commotion, she speaks. "Excuse me, princess. I... I know a Hebrew woman who can nurse the baby for you."

Barely glancing up, the princess nods in Miriam's direction. "Get her, and tell her she will be well paid," she commands.

There is nothing casual about Miriam's race toward home. Slowing only a little as she enters a clearing, her hopes are that no one will notice she no longer has her laundry!

What does it matter now? It worked! She laughs. Shock, relief and joy carry her across the threshold to face her anxious parents.

"Mother!" She pants. "You've been hired by the princess to care for her new son!"

Miriam Bible Study

1. Have you ever faced a personal battle you were fearful of losing?
2. What does Hebrews 11: 24-28 teach us about faith?
3. Why does God choose Miriam and Moses, and later their brother Aaron, each counted by the Pharaoh as worthy of death or slavery? See 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, and 2 Corinthians 4:7
4. Moses was named by the princess after her family line. He grew up in the palace expected to take over as Pharaoh one day. Read the account in Exodus 1:22–2:10. Imagine what might have been the result if Miriam had run away from the princess.
5. You can read the entire account of these three siblings in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Exodus 1:22-2:10

22 Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every Hebrew boy that is born you must throw into the Nile but let every girl live.”

2 Now a man of the tribe of Levi married a Levite woman, 2 and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. When she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months. 3 But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket[a] for him and coated it with tar and pitch.

Then she placed the child in it and put it among the reeds along the bank of the Nile. 4 His sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.

5 Then Pharaoh’s daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants

were walking along the riverbank. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her female slave to get it. 6 She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him.

“This is one of the Hebrew babies,” she said.

7 Then his sister asked Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?”

8 “Yes, go,” she answered. So the girl went and got the baby’s mother.

9 Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you.”

So the woman took the baby and nursed him. 10 When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, “I drew him out of the water.”

Psalm 33:10-11

The Lord foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.

Man at the Pool

Based on John 5:1-15
30 AD

Near the Jewish Temple in ancient Jerusalem, a pool called Bethesda is one part of a series of installed reservoirs fed by nearby mountain springs. A covered colonnade outlines the pool, serving as an Asklepion, a temple of worship for the Roman-adopted Greek god of healing, Asclepius.

Rooms divide the long colonnade into five porches. It is to this place that sick and injured men, women, and children regularly travel, often for days, to join blind and paralyzed fellow hopefuls. Some stay for weeks, trusting this god to reveal cures in their dreams.

Priest-physicians and attendants use some rooms for cleansing rituals and healing practices. Therapies are selected based on a patient's dream the night before. Prescriptions include drinking large amounts of water or taking herbs. Concocted remedies such as the licking of wounds by sacred dogs, or even the bite of one of the nonvenomous snakes allowed to slither freely, capture the curiosity of the desperate.

A looming statue of Asclepius guards the treasury, a table for sacrifices and offerings that sits at his feet. Ah, what needy people will give, do, or sacrifice for a chance at a better life! In this society, financial options are few outside of begging, yet the table daily piles with coins and food.

Grandest hopes are reserved for the “miracle” in the water. Something mysterious stirs the water occasionally, and the first person in the pool after such a movement is immediately healed – or so the superstition promises.

One misshapen man has been visiting the pool for thirty-eight years. Jedediah stares upward from a thick woven mat, ignoring the multitude of pained faces and voices that pass. His broken and twisted legs are painful and useless. Weakening arms have been his independence. Lately though, he has needed more help. Earlier this morning, an attendant responded to his daily plea and carried him, hugging his mat, to secure a spot as close as possible to water’s edge.

He clings to a palm-sized carving, a serpent-wrapped pole it took him months to perfect. Taller duplicates surround the porches as symbols of the mercy of Asclepius.

Today’s effort is spurred more by habit than hope. The Asklepion is nearly overrun by an influx of visitors due to the Jewish Festival planned for tomorrow. Discouragement slugs through the spirits of regulars.

“Wait, I was here first!” A sudden tug threatens to topple Jedediah to his side. “Stop!” he yells.

Grasping at his mat’s edges, he barely manages to hold himself upright as he and his bed are dragged by anonymous hands, probably those of a friend or family member of another helpless-hopeless. Landing on his back, fury is soon dismissed with a sigh. *I knew it! Why try?*

For only a moment, his eyes search for rare kindness among the

crowd. Self-interest soars in everyone's thoughts today.

He feels smaller, the temple's imposing columns shrinking what remains of his spirit. *I am done. This is a numberless lottery, a play of chance and good fortune*, he muses bitterly. Clutched to his chest is the replica of his useless god.

“Do you want to be healed?” A male voice from behind stands out among the noisy crowd. Jedediah sits up, arcing his neck to see who is talking.

The speaker walks around to face him and squats.

Jedediah nods incredulously at this apparent compassion, only a sliver of hope allowing that this man might return him to his place by the water.

Instead of answering the question, Jedediah hints at potential service. “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going, someone else steps down before me.”

Jesus' fixed gaze travels past Jedediah's sparkless eyes, as if dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. A disconcerting warmth melts Jedediah's resistance.

Abruptly Jesus smiles, stands, and says, “Get up, pick up your mat, and walk.”

Dead legs tingle. Knotted joints relax. Atrophied muscles expand. Broken and disintegrating bones reconnect and find their proper fittings. Heat runs throughout Jedediah's body with a resurgence of blood flow, instantly removing all traces of pain and dysfunction.

In bewildered awe, he senses his new body is rising, is aware as it leans over to pick up his mat. Walking (or floating - he is not sure) toward the exit, he finds himself twirling like a child, arms outstretched, and shouting, "I am healed! I am healed!"

His cure had not come in a dream though he waited for years. He had not reached the water in time. His serpent pole had done nothing to unwind his muscles. Dropping the carving, he races with unpracticed legs to the Temple of the One True God.

Jesus finds him on the Temple floor weeping in repentance and gratitude. Laughing, Jesus kneels beside him. "See, you are well again!"

Jedediah snuffles.

Resting a hand on the amazed man's shoulder and cocking his head to square off again with Jedediah's eyes and faith, Jesus said, "Now, stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."

His eyes shining, the new man nods, stands to face his Savior, and walks out into his second chance.

Man at the Pool Bible Study

The man by the pool was a worshiper of a false god. He had misplaced his hope and trust to no avail. That Jesus warned this man was a great act of mercy because the lurking danger extended into eternal separation from God.

1. Have your difficult circumstances lingered long? Do you feel helpless or hopeless at times?
2. Tell of a time when you placed your hope in a temporary or non-existent solution. What was the result? What changed when you returned your hope to Jesus Christ? Study 1 Peter 1: 3-9.
3. Read the full account of the man at the pool in John 5:1-15. What did Jesus' warning mean? This man had been sick or injured in a society where no disability checks, no accessibility laws, and no anti-discrimination practices were in place. As a social outcast, he may often have gone hungry and wished for death. What could possibly be worse?
4. Paul wrote a zero-tolerance policy for the worship of false gods and idols in 1 Corinthians 10:20-21. Read it, then consider Matthew 12:43-45. Was this the danger for the newly healed man?

John 5:1-15

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals.
2 Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic

is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. 3 Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed.

[4 Some manuscripts include here, wholly or in part, ‘paralyzed—and they waited for the moving of the waters. 4 From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had.’]

5 One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

7 “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

8 Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” 9 At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked....

13 The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

14 Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”

John 5: 21

... the Son gives life to anyone he wants.

Little Child

Inspired by Mark 10:13-16
30 AD

This has not happened before. Squeezing between the flapping coarse robes of oblivious adults, she slips around tiptoed feet and stretched legs to see a famous teacher.

A mass of thousands hinders the whispering breeze from reaching her hot face. Voices mumble above her ears, she sees an ant trying to discover safety, and she wonders how much farther she will have to go. A kind stranger's soft hand lay flatly against her back giving her a slight push, and she emerges to face a haphazard circle of faces.

Free to see, she studies the scene, glad for fresh air. *Ah, the front row.*

In the middle of the crowd, resting on table rock, the man rumored to be a healer and maybe even the Messiah, is laughing and not doing much of anything else. Children play at his feet, circling in a race to see whose head he will pat next.

In the little girl's mind, they are lucky to receive such attention. She watches with more awe than jealousy, recognizing they are the winners of this world and that is just the way it is.

Parents observe from close by, but not hers. She is neglected, basically

on her own at age six. Picking at her ragged tunic, she tries briefly to scratch off embedded mud.

Glancing around once more, she sees a forest of babbling heads and tilted shoulders with necks reaching for a better view. People who are closer to the center are solemn and quiet. Several men intently study the teacher as he interacts with his youngest visitors. A woman's voice shouts, "Lord!" Someone in the crowd calls him Jesus.

Suddenly a hush rolls backward in waves as row after row, people realize the man is standing to speak. "Come here," he says with his head turned in the small girl's direction.

Stretching on tippy toes to look about, she wonders who might go to him. No one does. Turning again, she sees that this time his hand and arm are extended, signaling for a response.

Curiosity takes over. Her head bobs left to right. *Who does he want?* After a few more seconds, she looks at him in pity, intending to let him know she is sorry no one is answering his call.

Only, this time, doubt is impossible.

Why is he looking back at *her*?

Familiar uneasiness slows her breaths, her heart refusing to believe. He simply cannot be interested. Warily she searches again for movement in the crowd. Then chin down, eyes peering up timidly, she faces this powerful and important man. Slowly pointing to her chest, in a whisper she says, "Me?"

Her brain screams this is false, even as he smiles. "Yes."

Hesitant, she moves to stand in front of him. Anger, mockery, and rejection fail to show in his demeanor.

He sits back down, continuing to smile, and pats his knee.

The other children are playing a game in the dirt now. The teacher's twinkling gaze never wavers from her face. He indicates again that he is offering his lap.

With muscles and joints and racing thoughts sounding alarms, she tensely climbs up. Then, the unimaginable happens. He embraces her in a gentle bear hug, fulfilling an unexpected yearning.

She has not known this sensation of a softhearted touch, tender strength, or being held as if she is precious. *He is safe... so this must be love.*

For an instant, her young spirit senses his vast capacity to care. For each person in this massive audience and beyond is his one and only, including her.

Jesus stands again, squeezing her gently, her head relaxed against his neck. "Let the little children come to me, for of such is the kingdom of God," he says.

She is unaware of the rest of his speech as the first peace in her short life allows her to fall asleep in his arms.

1. Read the short account in Mark 10:13-16. The Bible does not tell us of any such little girl. What else in keeping with Jesus' character do you suppose could have happened when he invited the children to come to him?
2. Why did Jesus say to welcome the children? How can we receive the kingdom of God like a little child?
3. Jesus said more about children. See Matthew 21:16; Mark 9:36-37, 42. What does this teach you?

Mark 10:13-16

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them.

14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

15 "Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

16 And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

Mark 10:15

Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of
God like a little child will never enter it."

Blind Man

Based on John 9:1-38
29 AD

He sits in the dust of the well-traveled road, tracing his finger lazily beside him. Listening for the familiar sound of voices, he can tell by passing conversations if the speakers are intelligent, educated, and perhaps rich. Still, it is often with the shuffling approach of the barefoot poor that coins land in his upheld hand.

This time he hears several men coming, and they are discussing him.

“Rabbi, who sinned, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?”

He straightens defensively. He has heard accusations of sin all his life as no one can imagine any other reason he was born without sight. This line of thinking never makes sense to him because he tries to live a good life and his parents are kind.

A voice replies. “It is not that this man sinned, or his parents.”

“That’s righ....” the blind man starts.

The speaker continues, “This happened so that the power of God might be seen in him.”

Spit.

Oh, so he's mocking me. The blind man is about to react in kind when suddenly someone grabs his chin and pastes mud on his eyes. "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam," the stranger commanded. Someone calls the rabbi Jesus.

He has been spat at before. Children occasionally kick mud on his clothes. The suggestion he go elsewhere is also not rare. Nothing quite this strange has ever happened, though. Since it is a rabbi doing the talking, spitting, and commanding, he decides to leave for the pool.

The water is cool and refreshing on this hot day. Once washed of the mud, he lingers with his hands over his face. A slight breeze seems to promise a better day. He takes a deep breath.

Wait.

Something is different - a glow, if that is what is what is adding shape to the darkness. *Are those...colors?* Carefully lifting one finger, and then two, the man does not, quite literally, believe his eyes.

I can see?

Finding a new need to squint, he remembers people calling the sparkling water blue. "Those must be trees—green," he wonders aloud.

"I can see!" he says to no one and everyone nearby. "The rabbi did it! I can see!" In awe, he begins to spin and walk, naming supposed colors his mother and father taught him as a child.

Oh! I can see my parents! There is an awkward hesitancy to his run as he counts his steps to remember at which corners of streets and buildings to turn. Visual landmarks mean nothing yet.

A man stops him and demands, “Aren’t you the beggar who was born blind?”

“Can’t be,” a woman remarks. “Just looks like him.”

“It is me!”

“Then how is it you can suddenly see?” We saw you begging this morning! Were you ever blind? We want our money back!”

Impatient to reach home, he tries to describe what happened. “A man called Jesus put mud on my eyes...”

At the mention of Jesus, a cluster of inquisitive people press close. Questions come fast.

“Jesus? He’s the preacher with the reputation of doing amazing miracles, isn’t he?”

“I heard Jesus calls himself the Son of God! Is that what you believe?”

Finally, a voice from the back says, “Where is this Jesus?”

“I do not know.” The healed man’s thoughts whirl with the emotions and sensations accompanying new sight. Added pressure from the growing crowd means little. With more people pointing and staring, he wonders only how to break through to his parents’ home.

That moment, someone suggests they take him to the Pharisees for evaluation. He is grabbed forcibly as the pressing crowd gives him no other choice.

In front of religious leaders, interrogation is worse. Bothered Pharisees point out that this once-per-week special day is set aside for the worship of God. No one is to work on the Sabbath. Therefore, Jesus cannot be from God because he fails to keep God's law in this matter.

Hoping for a direct answer, they say to the man who is busy touring the Temple with his newly sighted eyes, "What do you think of Jesus?"

"He is a prophet." Suspecting his efforts are vain, the man continues, "He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see."

They bombard him for information with which to implicate Jesus. "What happened? Were you ever actually blind? Prove it! Who did this so-called miracle on the Sabbath?"

Dismissing his answers, the inquisition calls for his parents to testify.

They rush in with hope and disbelief. Searching their beloved son's face for evidence of sight, his mother is still, seeing nothing but the happy glint in her child's eyes. He in turn stares, spellbound, meeting his mother's warm gaze for the first time.

Not-so-subtle innuendo interrupts their silent awe. To the father, Pharisees say, "Is this your son? Was he ever blind?"

"He is our son," the man says. "He was born blind."

"How is it he can see? He claims Jesus healed him. Is that what you

believe?”

Temple leaders, some jealous of Jesus' fame and others afraid of losing their powerful status quo, have already declared that anyone who claims Jesus is God's anointed one will be banished from the Temple. The father stops short of backing his son's whole story, fearful of retribution. "I do not know how he can see now. Ask him! He is of age."

Frustrated at this verbal assault on his elderly parents, the former blind beggar raises his volume. "I have answered every one of your questions more than once! No one has ever heard of this kind of miracle—the opening of eyes born blind. Surely, if this Jesus is not from God, he cannot have done it!"

Furious, the Pharisees stand as if one, pointing and shouting, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us? Get out of here for good!"

He backs out gladly intending to make his way to his parents' home and join them there. Jesus sees him from a distance and grins watching his latest miracle carefully observing every animal, bird, and bug on his way. Grabbing at a falling feather, Jesus says, "Do you believe in me?"

With hearing sharpened by years of necessity, the man recognizes his healer's voice and turns. Overflowing with gratitude, he steps toward the Savior.

Jesus hands him the feather and smiles.

Suddenly, the one with a lifetime of memories in the dark witnesses

the inner light of the presence of Christ. He realizes that faith is not based on what he can see.

Deflating even the tiniest of hopes for mercy from the religious elite, he calls Jesus “Lord,” and worships him there.

Blind Man Bible Study

It was likely difficult for the beggar to grasp Jesus' words that his lifetime of blindness was for a God-intended purpose. He cannot have known his story would stand for all time as a witness to the sovereignty of God.

Blindness to hope and purpose leaves many of us in the dark. Like the blind man, we do not understand how God plans to use our troubles for good.

It is there, in the shadows of pain that we can choose to trust God's sovereignty. He cannot be somewhat sovereign, sovereign only on Sundays, or moderately sovereign when circumstances feel comfortable. God is good all the time, almighty every minute.

Faith is not based on what we see.

1. Have you seen God use someone's difficulties for His glory?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:4-7 How does this truth apply to you?
3. Look at Psalm 109:21-22. How can you trust God's sovereignty today?
4. Read the full account of the Blind Man in John 9:1-38. Why do you suppose he was so willing to follow Jesus when he had much to lose?

John 9:1-38

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

3 “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

6 After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes. 7 “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed and came home seeing.

8 His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?” 9 Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.”

But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

10 “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked.

11 He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

12 “Where is this man?” they asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said.

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14 Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. 15 Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight.

“He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.”

16 Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So

they were divided. 17 Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

The man replied, “He is a prophet.”

18 They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents. 19 “Is this your son?” they asked. “Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?”

20 “We know he is our son,” the parents answered, “and we know he was born blind. 21 But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.” 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

24 A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.”

25 He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

26 Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

27 He answered, “I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?”

28 Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of Moses! 29 We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don’t even know where he comes from.”

30 The man answered, “Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. 32 Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”

34 To this they replied, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!” And they threw him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

36 “Who is he, sir?” the man asked. “Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

37 Jesus said, “You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you.”

38 Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him.

On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be Your name.

-Blessed Be Your Name

(Songwriters Matt and Beth Redman)

Leah

Inspired by Genesis 29:16–30:22
1921 BC

Jacob of the Old Testament wanted Rachel. He loved her and had been willing to sacrifice seven long years of labor for her father to make her his bride. However, her father had another idea. Why not slip Rachel's poor, unwanted sister into the deal?

Leah, completely aware she was being sold in a malicious fashion, and not as Jacob's first choice, may have indulged in a little fantasy.

Jacob will learn to love me because I have much to offer. He does not know me yet.

Jacob secretly longs for me. He'll be glad when he sees me in his bed.

Someday, he will love me more than Rachel. I will win his affections.

If she did not cling to any of that hope, how did she face the day of the devious wedding where she secretly replaced her sister as the bride? Was she afraid during the lovemaking under darkness without giving away who she was actually? Did she change her voice? Try not to speak?

If she did not cling to any hopeful imagining, then did she feel this polygamous marriage was a violation? How deeply buried was her sorrow, her regret, her self-loathing?

Fantasy may have been her solution. Truth is unbearable at times. Leah was a young woman who was not given much of a chance to be herself or to appreciate her strengths and beauties. Used by her father for his selfish gain, she had had her freedom stolen from her, and was now an object of derision by her own husband.

Yes, she was emotionally abused by today's definition, and sexually abused in that she had no option to refuse. In that ancient society, her status was elevated when she gave birth to many sons. Still, her life reflected the rejection of her two most significant male relationships.

Maybe she had thoughts like these:

I am only a breeding cow since that is all Jacob wants of me. He married his one true love, my sister, and although Rachel cannot have a baby, he adores her. At least I have sons!

Good moments with Jacob may be few, but there are some. Like when he pointed out certain stars last year. If I laugh at all of his jokes and serve him well, surely, he will love me! Of course! It is inconceivable that he doesn't love me. That would be too much burden.

It is so much easier to play along, to be there for him those times he does want me, for whatever he wants me.

As for father, he winked with what seemed like affection when he

slipped me an extra load of wool. If I agree to see him whenever he suggests it, am compliant and quiet, maybe then his love and approval will show through. Surely, it is there! It is in his gifts, his invitations, his playful teasing – even if his jokes hurt sometimes.

I do not enjoy those unfunny reminders of why I am the brunt of his humor. “She’s the one I had to trick someone into marrying! Ha-ha! Could not get her a husband if I gave away the entire estate! Oh, let us toast Leah—to the one saved by my quick thinking. Cheers!”

It seems Leah had some choices despite her situation. She could keep trying with all her might to please these men, further giving away her sense of self until her heart no longer existed. Or she could confront them raw, alerting them to the true results of their actions, and risk losing them forever.

Another option was to run away, but then she would lose her sons who made her so proud and gave her a reason to hold her head high. Besides, where would she go? A woman was not safe in a strange land in those days, and she would be impoverished besides.

Two more options seemed to promise to end her pain. She could end her life. On the other hand, she could feed false hopes and refuse to see reality. That was the road to emotional and physical survival she may have chosen. Denial. Fantasy. Do not feel anything.

Leah’s possible thoughts:

It will be much easier to imagine that each new day might be the

one when love feels good. Anything is possible, right? Rachel is pregnant. I cannot even be glad for her because I feel so numb. If she has a boy, my status as the son-bearer will no longer be enough to hold me above the rank of servant girl ...or breeding cow. Jacob is beside himself with joy, and my father is delighted. Precious Rachel is going to give them a miracle.

Laughter, toasts, backslapping – I do not remember such a scene from my many announced pregnancies. After all the years of trying so hard to believe I matter to these people, evidence against it is piling up fast.

Now what? Leah had lost her one advantage. The only way to continue surviving under these circumstances may have been to delude herself some more.

My father treasures me. My husband wants me. I am valuable to them. No one thinks I am a worthless object.

Deep down inside she had to have known those statements were not true. Nevertheless, if someone had approached her and urged her to admit it, she may have resisted.

“Hey, Leah. Your dad does not respect you. Ever since you were a little girl, he has used you for his purposes. Your sister cannot stand you, so you can write off that relationship, and then there is Jacob. Oh my, Leah, get a grip. He’s not into you, girl!”

To accept these facts would be to put away fantasies that fed what little sense of self-value was left in her soul. After all, what is worse than rejection by one’s entire family?

I will not look too closely. Maybe the bottom line is that I make it difficult for them to love me. Unveiled truth is not a viable option. Under my smile is my greatest fear – that I am unlovable.

There was never a question as to the value of Leah's life. Maybe she struggled to see it, yet no human experience could steal from her the love and purposes of God.

Through it all, God saw her. He *saw* her. As a woman of little importance in the eyes of the world and significant others, it was she whom God chose as ancestor to his future line of priests, worship leaders, and the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls, Jesus the Messiah.

1. See Genesis 29:31 “When the LORD saw that Leah was not loved ...” How did he respond to her needs? Who else did God “see” in her misery (Genesis 16:13)?
2. Considering the context and social order of her time, why do you think God gave her sons?
3. Is there someone who is supposed to love you who does not? Emotional neglect is a dangerous weapon. Be safe.
SEE Emotional Abuse in the Christian Marriage :
[Part One](#) | [Part Two](#) | [Part Three](#) | [Part Four](#) | [Part Five](#)
[Is Watching Porn Emotional Abuse?](#)
[More On "Is Watching Porn Emotional Abuse?"](#)
4. Human needs for love are God-given. How has God shown you his love when you do not feel lovable? See Romans 5:8

Genesis 29:16–30:22

16 Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. 18 Jacob was in love with Rachel and said,

“I’ll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel.”

19 Laban said, “It’s better that I give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me.” 20 So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.

21 Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife. My time is completed, and I want to make love to her.”

22 So Laban brought together all the people of the place and gave a feast. 23 But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. 24 And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant.

25 When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn’t I? Why have you deceived me?”

26 Laban replied, “It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. 27 Finish this daughter’s bridal week; then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work.”

28 And Jacob did so. He finished the week with Leah, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. 29 Laban gave his servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel as her attendant.

30 Jacob made love to Rachel also, and his love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah. And he worked for Laban another seven years.

31 When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. 32 Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, “It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.”

33 She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.” So she named him Simeon.

34 Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.

So he was named Levi. 35 She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “This time I will praise the Lord.” So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children...

17 God listened to Leah, and she became pregnant and bore Jacob a fifth son. ... So she named him Issachar.

19 Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. 20 Then Leah said, “God has presented me with a precious gift. This time my husband will treat me with honor, because I have borne him six sons.” So she named him Zebulun.

21 Sometime later she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah....

A heart unfed, starves to death.

Tenth Leper

Inspired by Luke 17:11-19
30 AD

It is difficult staying alive when you would rather be dead. One man ruminates on this every day.

Why am I here?

To a few happier-go-lucky types his despair may seem little more than self-pity, a pathetic and lazy response to the hardships of life. Some might judge him that way, not likely very many.

Discomfort interrupts his sleep day and night. He wishes he could lie down and at least be dead to the world for several hours.

Rest is elusive; physical pain does not allow for it. Sleep deprivation affects his mood. In this place, this meaningless hole, endless thoughts keep him company as well as the occasional stray dog.

Each unfortunate citizen of this colony is suffering. If that is not isolating enough, even this group despises him. Few speak to him, and not one wants to hear his reply. Being the only foreigner among dozens of fellow lepers, he is a target for pent-up anger and mob aggression.

Home is long gone. It has been years since the day he was forced from the village while his family screamed and cried. His beautiful

daughter would no longer know him. Rumor has it his lovely wife is baking bread for mere pennies a loaf.

The thought of losing the two most important people in his life had been too much to consider when the first lump appeared on his right cheek. In private panic he had done what he could to keep anyone from noticing. It is impossible to hide one's face for long.

“Of what use is a mirror,” he mumbles, remembering the expensive gift he had offered to his wife. No doubt his face is so disfigured even a reflection could not reveal his identity.

With a single motion, he grabs a nearby stick and scratches at his foot. He owns nothing. His food comes from scraps that compassionate people drop off at the end of the road. It is becoming harder to fetch as his arms and legs grow numb.

“Leprosy will not kill me, no! More likely, a serious injury to my hands or feet will go undetected. Or, maybe when I am finally helpless, I will starve!” Shaking his head, he smirks at his humorless ramble.

His are not the only hollow eyes tracing scant flurries of dried dirt and leaves caught up in today's scarce breeze. Other dying skeletons around him, like all the cursed who live with this disease, had once tried to hide what would isolate them from family and friends. In due course, leprosy always wins. Now they wait to die.

A foreign sound causes him to turn. Laughter? It is the sincere type too, not the fake, bitter tremble that echoes in this cave. Someone is speaking excitedly.

“Jesus is in town! We are going to see him!”

Swaying in need of sturdy support, a man whose toothless grin appears to be relighting his once-dead eyes, speaks to a nearby acquaintance. “We’re going to see the healer today. Hurry! He’ll be by soon.”

Within a minute, nine men are moving toward a nearby road. Some cry out with each agonizingly slow step, fighting a war against resistant bodies. Others lean heavily on makeshift canes and crutches. One crawls.

The noticeably uninvited man waves at them mockingly. “I’m not coming, thanks anyway,” he says.

Cynically amused, he recalls a rumor about Jesus. Gossips claim this so-called healer restored sight to a man born blind. *Ridiculous! Only God can do that. Jesus cannot be from God because he broke the laws of Moses when he performed this magic trick on the Sabbath! He may have a following but is no better than a thief.*

Sarcasm entertains him. *What will happen if this Jesus heals leprosy? Will my family welcome me? Do I have any old friends left? Hah! If he cures me, maybe my status as — oh, wait!*

What if it is possible to one day go home? He remembers he has nothing to lose.

An hour passes. The efforts of the nine have exhausted them. Society is harsh toward lepers who venture too close to the village or streets. That is why now that these men are close enough to be heard by passersby, they slump to the ground at a distance and wait.

“He’s coming!” As if with one voice, the startled men shout and call

out to Jesus. “Master, have pity on us!”

Jesus pauses briefly saying, “Go show yourselves to the priests.”

The small caravan begins to slowly turn in the direction of town. Each man engages in private amazement. Their bodies no longer hurt! Skin is clear! After wiggling all their fingers and toes and checking each other over for proof, they set off in a spontaneous race to the priests who alone can permit them to reenter society.

The nine men are so absorbed in their dramas, not one notices a tenth leper who had joined the group and also called out to Jesus. He stays in the background, understanding his place.

At the words of Jesus, his hands fly to his face and hesitate. Shaking, he reaches under a rag he had tied around his jaw to cover the worst effects of his disease.

No bumps.

Yanking away the useless mask, the tenth leper feverishly scans his face, neck, toes, and torso with now-feeling hands. Next, he bends, stretches, and twirls in the direction of Jesus, who continues to walk.

He leaps with joy and words of awe tumble into the air, failing to keep pace with his unchained euphoria and gratitude. Ecstatically, he lands on his knees, grabs Jesus' feet and bows to the ground.

“Thank you! God be praised” manage to escape between breaths.

Jesus squats. To his followers, he says, “Ten came to me for help, yet only this foreigner thanks me and gives praise to God.”

Raising the chin of his newest believer, Jesus looks with shared joy into the sparkling eyes of the Samaritan. “Rise and go,” he says with a smile. “Your faith has made you well.”

Tenth Leper Bible Study

1. How does Jesus express compassionate love in this story?
2. Read the biblical account in Luke 17:11-19. Why do you suppose the Samaritan was so expressive in his gratitude?
3. What are possible reasons the other nine did not return to show gratitude? Do you share any of these possible excuses?
4. Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 and 1 Peter 1:3-9. For what can you thank God?

Luke 17:11-19

11 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. 12 As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance 13 and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

14 When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed.

15 One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. 16 He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

17 Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? 18 Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?”

Psalm 118:21

I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.

Samaritan Woman

Based on John 4:4-30,39-42

27 AD

Her country is despised, her race of people scorned by the world, while within her race, her specific ethnicity is hated. As a woman, she endures severe discrimination and has little voice. Divorced multiple times, she knows love's rejection. Her current lifestyle draws community condemnation.

Few persons appear lower in value, and she understands this.

Besides, she believes it too.

Grasping the rim of a large, empty clay water jar with its attached cord, she peers through a tiny slit in the privacy wall that blocks her home's entrance from public view.

It is dangerous outside. Still, blasting midday heat forces her to fetch water from the village well. There are afternoons she wonders if it is worth it—if she is worth it. Those doubts have been more frequent as of late.

Seeing no one, she edges around the wall. *Whew!* It is hot enough in the house, but once outside, with the sun firing its rays as if aiming at helpless targets, it seems possible her skin could crack open like the dry grooves beneath her sandals.

Other people do not go to Jacob's well at this time of day. Early mornings are abuzz with the chatter of wives and servants, clinking jars, and splashing water. Camels bray and spit, waiting for drinks while merchandisers and tradesmen load bags of cargo onto the animals' towering backs. Men talk business while children enjoy playful moments of freedom before chores get underway.

She is not welcome during the organized chaos of dawn as if her reputation is contagious. Men who may have once been tempted to seek her company do no longer because the history she drags along threatens to unravel their publicly respectable lives.

Ostracism has its benefits, though. Today's walk is uninterrupted and quick; she will have the well to herself. The very sun that compels her to draw refreshment is also protecting her from social interaction. No one calls her names at noon.

Oh! There's a man sitting on the side of the well! She looks at who, surprisingly, is a Jew. Her face sets and breathing pauses. Vigilance is automatic.

Lowering her jar and with one eye watching it disappear into the deep hollow darkness, she is grateful for the fresh cord she braided yesterday. Smack. The jar hits bottom, and echoes of coming relief reach her ears.

"May I have a drink of water?"

The voice startles her. She notices the man is seemingly calm. He may be thirsty, but her instincts search for a better explanation. Experience supports her wariness. Men simply do not address her, unless...

“Jews do not speak to Samaritans,” she says quickly. “How is it you can ask me for a drink of water?”

“If you knew who I am, it is you who would be asking me for water.”

Facing the well again, she privately rolls her eyes. *So, this is his game. He is arrogant, making sport of me.*

“I would give you living water,” he says gently.

Annoyance gains momentum against caution. Did this stranger suggest that he could provide for her better than this ancient well has? She has heard her share of bragging before; he might as well be promising her the moon. Besides, not even male Jews who address Samaritan women will drink out of Samaritan containers.

“Sir,”—she tries to calm down—you have nothing I can fill with water.”

He is silent.

“You have no jar, sir. This well is too deep to just reach in and grab a drink!” Her defenses unleash in aggravation at his continued silence.

“Do you think you are better than the men who dug this well? This fresh water has been available since Jacob discovered it long ago. It was enough for him, his family, his flocks of sheep and goats, and his herds.”

With no measure of certainty as to where his perceived amusement might lead, she tries to end their interaction by pulling up the full jar.

“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,” he says,

nodding toward her jar. “Not with the water I offer. My water will become a spring on the inside of whoever drinks it, lasting for eternity.”

Cynical laughter erupts from her throat. “Sir, give me some. Then I will not have to keep coming out to this well!”

“Go, call your husband, and come back,” he says.

She tenses, bravado wavering. “I have no husband.”

“Actually, you have had five husbands. You are now with a man to whom you are not married. You’ve admitted the truth to me.”

Curiosity swallows fear and slowly succumbs to awe. She asks him a question. He answers. She comments. He comments back.

Suddenly, a woman without social standing leaves her water jar and runs, not to her home but into town.

Only vaguely aware of sideways glances and raised eyebrows, she feels outside herself as if watching another person grab the arms of one surprised neighbor, a second, and a third.

“He spoke to me. Me! He knew my story, told me everything I ever did. Is this man the one we have been waiting for? He’s here, by the well! Come, see for yourselves!”

People rush past forcing her to the side of the road. She is unaware that many Samaritans already believe because she said the mysterious visitor knows her. They circle the well to stare.

Jesus chooses to remain in town for two days. An eager audience listens attentively to his powerful and loving words. Many more

believe in him. A few pause to tell her, “We now know that the man you told us about really is the Savior of the world!”

After Jesus leaves, settling into the old routine is somehow not as stressful as before. With light steps and head held high, joy and wonder fill her heart, usually so empty of each. *Me! The promised king talked to me! He let me introduce him to my people!*

Social status, a spent lifetime searching for acceptance among men, living in sin, and a sense of unworthiness did not stop God’s love for the Samaritan woman. While she tried to survive one day at a time, her Holy Savior was unfolding his better plan.

With all other options at hand, he reached past proud stereotypes and the world’s expectations, lifting her to proclaim his nature in the coming thousands of years.

So it is, through the narrative of the Samaritan woman at the well, we can understand Jesus has no favorites, and does not hold to the opinions of humanity. He values the most marginalized of souls.

She is the one he chose.

Samaritan Woman Bible Study

1. How does scripture describe women? James 1:27, Matthew 28:7-9, Acts 5:14, 1 Timothy 5:1-3, Romans 16:12
2. How does Jesus see broken women? Luke 8:1-3
3. What alternative thoughts and feelings do you think the Samaritan woman may have had?
4. Have you ever felt that you were not good enough or had done too much wrong so that God could not want you? Have you encountered Jesus?
5. Read the biblical account in John 4:4-30,39-42. Consider how the Samaritan woman was set free to be her whole self, the woman Jesus created.
6. Can you relate? How?

John 4:4-30 and 39-42

4 Now he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

11 “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?”

13 Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

16 He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

17 “I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

19 “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

21 “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

25 The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

26 Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

28 Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 29 “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?”

30 They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

39 Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. 41 And because of his words many more became believers.

42 They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

John 4:25-26

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

Paul

Inspired by Matthew 23:15; Acts 7:59-8:3;
2 Corinthians 11:21-12:10; and Philemon 8,9
67 AD

Paul of Tarsus, formerly better known as Saul of Rome, sits in his cell, his body aching for lack of movement. An old and weary man, his body bears the scars of tested faith. Over many years of ministry, he has been beaten, jailed, and flogged. An angry mob stoned him until he was almost dead. His body bears the scars of tested faith. Pain is no stranger.

Near him sits Micah, a man in his thirties who had once joined a large audience when Paul was preaching. Eagerly, he had listened as Paul detailed the story of Jesus, and God's plan to save humans from eternal darkness.

That same night, Micah had tried to share this good news with his brother-in-law, who promptly and angrily began to persecute him. Now teacher and convert face each other, having never met before.

Micah speaks softly so as not to be heard by others. "I know Jesus too because of you."

Paul smiles; he is old, his wisdom hard earned. "That is good to know, brother," he says. After a moment, he sighs. "You have a long life still ahead of you, God willing. I am almost done."

“I want to be like you.” Micah is fervent in his whisper. “I can only hope to have your strength of courage, your faithfulness! I am not that good.”

“I am not good either.” Paul stretches his back and groans. “Made the mistake of thinking I was once.”

“I know you used to be a Pharisee.”

“Son,” Paul says, “I smirked and felt superior for being extraordinarily good at my religion. Performing was my talent, playing the part of one who knew everything.”

His tone flattens, deep in regretful reverie. “Oh, I’ve turned broken people away—shooed them on because they didn’t agree with the ‘right’ rules. People confessed their sins, and I thought, ‘I’m glad I don’t have to do so.’ When young peasant Jews did not change their ways fast enough or as old ones stood on outdated principles, I played judge. After all, I had understanding! I knew God and his will!”

“But that is all in the past. You have lived an honorable life!” Micah is intent on praising his hero.

“A blind beggar once stopped me on the street and asked if there was anything for which I had trouble forgiving myself.” Paul shakes his head and looks at the ground. “God help me, I was denying my sins so strongly that I said no even as I refused to give him any money for food.”

Both men are silent. Micah scratches at his beard, pondering the confession that is adding more heaviness to the already dank air. Paul wipes a tear from his deeply creased face.

“I had it all, son. Had it all. Prestige, respected parentage, deeply traditional upbringing—I was a skillful representative of obedience to the rules. No one could fault me for not protecting Yahweh’s name and the Law while I hunted down and murdered his Son's followers!

“No, I am not good. My ‘goodness’ turned young Jewish converts into twice the son of hell I was.

Micah tries to absorb each word. Paul has traveled extensively, built numerous churches, and brought the message of salvation to countless crowds. He represents strength and boldness. Why, Paul is Christ-like! The greatest Christian of all!

Recognizing in Micah’s demeanor a familiar idealizing, Paul remembers that people drawn to his celebrity status are quite as he had been as a child. He revered his Pharisee father and his father’s peers.

“My religion shielded me from truth,” he says. "When Jesus exposed what I had been doing, and who he truly is, that wall fell down. No longer do I teach or worship without an intense appreciation for mercy because I perceive that empty judgment seat of Paul. I ask God every day not to allow me to go back there.

“Micah, five times I received the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from religious people who hate Jesus, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.

“I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have

known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak?

“Listen closely to my point. Compared to all the torture and threats I have endured *nothing* pierces my heart so painfully as the memory of being good.”

Sounds of coming guards cause the two men to sit up straight. Paul studies his ardent counterpart who is already suffering for the faith.

“Until Jesus stopped me, I had not been the broken one, son. My Lord made me blind so I would want his eyes, weak so I would ask for his strength. Then he forgave my murderous sins and granted me the privilege of suffering for his sake.

“Micah, I urge you, do not be good. Be surrendered.”

1. Self-righteousness can feel good immediately because it puffs us up with self-satisfaction. It cannot hold up to inspection, however. See Ephesians 2:8-9
2. Have you been tempted to think you are spiritually better than another believer? While we can note our maturing faith, we must remember the ground is even at the foot of the cross. The only superior One is Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:21
3. What is righteousness? It is loving other people as Jesus Christ does. See 1 John 2:6.
4. How do you want to grow in this area?

Matthew 23:15

15 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. -Jesus

Acts 7:59-8:3

note: The name of Saul is also Paul

59 While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

2 Corinthians 11:21-12:10

21 ...Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I.

23 Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. 33 But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. 3 And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows— 4 was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things

that no one is permitted to tell. 5 I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. 6 Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth.

But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, 7 or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Philemon 8,9

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus...

“Beware of self-righteousness in every possible shape and form. Some people get as much harm from their “virtues” as others do from their sins.”

— J. C. Ryle