

**FENCEPOST TURTLES:  
PEOPLE PLACED BY GOD  
BY BRIAN JOHNSTON**

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## CHAPTER ONE: JACOB

A pastor once said: 'When I was a schoolboy, we would occasionally see a turtle on a fence post, and when we did, we knew someone had put him there. He didn't get there by himself.'

In the Bible we come across many 'fencepost turtles' – if we may refer to people by that term – as defined by the pastor we've just referenced. By that I mean that, in the Bible, we encounter one person after another who knew that his or her position of power or prominence was given to them by God. In a sense, this is the opposite of the expression used in the world to denote someone as a 'self-made' man.

The first "fencepost turtle" we are going to look at in this series is a man called Jacob, whom we read about in the first book of the Bible – Genesis.

Perhaps some of the background leading up to the incidents we're going to consider wouldn't go amiss. We're talking about the man Jacob who was born a split-second after his twin brother, Esau. He emerged literally on the heels of his brother – in fact he was holding his brother by the heel, a posture which would prove telling, and explains why his name translates as 'the one who takes by the heel.' In life, what Esau had, Jacob wanted. In those ancient times, this amounted to what was known as the birthright and the blessing. Both these things belonged to the son who was born first. He received a double portion of the father's inheritance and was given his father's blessing. However, Jacob's mother, Rebekah, during a difficult pregnancy had been told by God that her younger son would become the greater of the two, and prove to be the one chosen by God.

Jacob had doubtless learned this information from his mother, and with her help, tried to make it happen. By a combination of taking unfair advantage and by telling outright lies, Jacob obtained both the birthright and the blessing which would normally have been his brother's. Of course, this made Esau very angry, and it was no longer safe for Jacob to remain at home. What age was he when he ran from home? It might surprise you to know that simple calculations based on information given in the Bible would easily put him at 77 years of age at this time!

He set out on a long journey to the place of his mother's relatives. It would be twenty years before he ever returned to face his brother again. We can only wonder at his

state of mind as he tried to put as many miles as possible between himself and home. Was he guilt-ridden, not proud of what he'd done, or smugly satisfied? Or some combination of all three? He was certainly exhausted. Tired enough to lie down on the ground and use a stone for his pillow. When he slept, he dreamed. He dreamt of a ladder reaching up from that place where he now was, reaching up into heaven in fact. And there were angels going up and down on it, with the Lord himself standing above it and speaking to him as he had spoken to his father and to his grandfather, Abraham, before him. God was confirming his previous plans, but was now doing this personally with Jacob. Surprisingly, there was no censure for what Jacob had done, although the means Jacob had used to align himself with God's purpose, couldn't possibly have pleased the Lord. It's reassuring that our foolish mistakes don't cancel out all God's plans for us.

Jacob woke, startled, declaring with reverence that that very place must be God's house – which was the name he gave to it now – explaining it as being the gate of heaven. It's possible he then went back to sleep, but when he rose early in the morning (v.18), he then set up his stone pillow as a memorial stone and ceremonially anointed it with oil. In that way, this stone went from being a pillow to being a pillar. And, there, he vowed his commitment to God – the first time we hear this from Jacob – and promised to honour God with his wealth. I don't think this was the 'if' of negotiation, but was like when cricketer-turned-missionary, C.T. Studd famously said 'If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then there's no sacrifice too big for me to make for him.'

Suppose at this point we use our imagination and imagine that along comes a man with a camel passing by the place where Jacob now was, previously known as Luz. Jacob is still very excited and tells the stranger that this very place is God's house. How do we think the traveller would react? He'd look around at the unremarkable tract of ground with its few scattered stones, and say: 'Where?' Jacob would say 'Right here, in this place where I slept last night. This is God's house, I've had it revealed to me in a dream.' Probably, the stranger would take another look around, again seeing nothing – for there was nothing to see – and, comparing this with his past acquaintance with religious sites, would shake his head dismissively, and lead his camel away, while muttering under his breath, 'that's one crazy guy!' Well, after a moment's thought, Jacob might've said, 'I should have expected that reaction. After all, there's nothing to

see here: no stunning architecture; no choirs of angels; no sign in the sky.’ But then he says. ‘But that changes nothing for me, because I’ve received God’s word about this, conveyed in a dream, and I know it to be true, and so from now on this place will be called Bethel, meaning ‘the house of God.’ And it’s much the same in this present Church Age, it’s still easy for people to overlook God’s house on earth because it’s not what they imagine it should be like.

But as we come to examine more closely Jacob's worshipful response, we see more clearly the things that define God's house on earth in any age. Clearly, Jacob felt respect for God was due in this place of revelation – a place where the Lord had shown himself to be exalted in authority. We see, too, that remembrance of what had taken place would be necessary, marked by the place being set apart as different from any other place with pillar and oil. What's more, the revelation Jacob had received there was affirmed by Jacob by naming the place in full agreement with what'd been shown him. And to all these things, Jacob added his commitment, and a promise to give something back to God. These are the striking features of God's house, as presented to us in the story of Jacob, where we've the first mention of the house of God. The theme of God's house on earth runs throughout the Bible and those same features always accompany it.

We'll fast forward twenty years now in Jacob's life-story. We now find him on his return journey, ready at last – or almost – to face up to his brother. Jacob is now married with two wives and 11 sons and is vastly wealthy in livestock. Just as he'd had an encounter with angels on the outward journey, so he again was to encounter angels in the homeward direction (Genesis 32:1-2). At this point once again God's invisible world openly touched Jacob's visible world.

The encounter is described with striking brevity. Four Hebrew words report the meeting: ‘the angels of God met him’ (six words in English). Jacob then named the place Mahanaim, possibly meaning “two camps.” He must have seen the camp of angels as a source of comfort to his own camp as he prepared to re-enter the land associated with God's promise. In the Old Testament, the expression “the angels of God” occurs only in Genesis 32:1 and in Genesis 28:12. Also, Jacob's earlier exclamation, “*This is the gate of heaven,*” (Genesis 28:17), compares now with his other exclamation, ‘*This is the camp of God!*’ (Genesis 32:2). In both cases Jacob

interpreted what he had seen before naming it (Genesis 28:17; 32:2), and in Hebrew the identical expression is used in the naming of both places (Genesis 28:19; 32:2). So, obviously these two passages describing the outward and the homeward journeys are closely linked. His glimpse of the angels of God assured him once again of divine protection accompanying him. This reassurance came at a time when Jacob sorely needed it.

These visitations of angels remind us that when God's work is involved, the conflict is spiritual, not physical. This was true for Jacob, it was true for Israel, and it is true today. No human effort can be sufficient for these things. Jacob had just seen the angels (God's messengers) and now he sent his own messengers to Esau.

Then the strangest thing of all happened. It happened when Jacob was all alone, and at night, and when he was at his lowest point – both geographically and psychologically. We're told that the angel of the LORD came and began to wrestle with Jacob. Jacob had no option. When someone initiates such a contest what would a man like Jacob do, other than fight back. But why this unequal contest? Was it not because Jacob had struggled life-long with God's plan (working it out for himself as opposed to surrendering to grace)? God began to wrestle with him to teach him a lesson. He now asked him 'What's your name?' Surely this made Jacob self-aware of his duplicity and deceitfulness – for the last time he'd been asked that same question, he'd told his blind father that his name was Esau. Now the all-seeing father of eternity is probing his conscience, and Jacob knows the game is up. When the Lord 'touches the socket of his thigh' (Genesis 32:25) as they wrestle, and so gives him a 'dead leg' he yields, and discovers the secret of power with God comes through holding on – to God, not his brother (Hosea 12:3). The lesson for us here is the same as the apostle Paul taught: When I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:10).

But it's time to fast-forward again, from Genesis chapter 32 to chapter 48, and the final scene of Jacob's life. The man who'd deceived his brother, has himself been deceived (again). His sons had spun him the tale that his favourite son Joseph was dead, but in reality they'd sold him into slavery in Egypt. But with God's help there, Joseph rises from obscurity to power and is able to be re-united with his father for the last seventeen years of his father's life (just as he'd been with him for the first seventeen of his own). God had ensured that Joseph was in the right place at the right time to be the ideal

candidate to administer a rationing plan for the Egyptians and their neighbours during a widespread famine. So Joseph's brothers who travelled to Egypt to buy food for their aged father came face to face with Joseph there. After testing them to confirm that they'd changed, Joseph at last discloses his identity to them and immediately forgives them. Of course, none of this happens before the brothers have unwittingly bowed down to Joseph and so fulfilled his boyhood dream.

So Jacob and the whole family end up relocating to Egypt, and this brings us to the very touching scene recounted in Genesis chapter 48 with three generations around Jacob's bed as he lies dying. Jacob reviews the key events of his life in retrospect: an unsolicited audience with God at Bethel; an unsurpassed sorrow at his wife's passing; and an unsuspected joy – that of now seeing his son as it were alive from the dead – and what's more his grandchildren also! When selecting the highlight of Jacob's faith, Hebrews 11:21 selects this occasion in Genesis chapter 48 from among all the experiences of his long life. The greatest thing in Jacob's life, from God's point of view, was his faithful commitment to the revelation concerning God's house given back in Genesis chapter 28. Jacob's strength of conviction in response to that vision is seen in his asking his son's help to keep his side of the deal – namely to have his body buried not in the foreign land of Egypt, but in the land bound up with the promise of God. Yes, Jacob was dying in faith, remaining true to the vision of God's house. In his own earlier words, he could confess: 'I am not worthy' (Genesis 32:10). He understood that he was a true fencepost turtle. God, and God alone, had finally brought him from 'wheeling and dealing' to kneeling.

## CHAPTER TWO: JOSEPH

Joseph was another ‘fencepost turtle.’ I imagine he often sat back in his Egyptian chariot or his palatial surroundings, closed his eyes, and reflected on his inauspicious beginnings: his jealous brothers; the pit they threw him into; the slavery they sold him into; the prison he was wrongly consigned to – but now this! And it all boiled down to one reason – and one reason alone – a reason that’s shared four times in Genesis chapter 39 – and it’s this: ‘the LORD was with him.’

Let’s remind ourselves of some more details of Joseph’s remarkable story, so that we might trace the hand of God – the God who spoke to Joseph as a teenager. That was the only time in his life when the Bible records that God spoke directly to him, in this case using dreams to project a glimpse of where his life was headed. By contrast, Abraham and Jacob, both experienced more frequent times throughout their lives when God appeared to them and spoke with them. But with Joseph, it was just that once, as a teenager, but the remarkable thing was that it set him up for life. It set the course of his entire life. How good it is when early in life we become convinced that God has met with us, and looking back decades later through the lens of our life’s experiences and opportunities, we can confirm the reality of that early encounter with God!

And I assume it must have been like that with Joseph. From his comfortable throne in the palace, did he not think back to those dreams he’d once had as a teenager on the floor of his tent in a far land? With profound gratitude he’d learnt to acknowledge all the way that God had led him.

But, let’s go back with him to that early time when he first had those dreams. The thirty-seventh chapter of Genesis tells us:

*“...Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a varicolored tunic. His brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers; and so they hated him and could not speak to him on friendly terms. Then Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him*

*even more. He said to them, "Please listen to this dream which I have had; for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf." Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words."* (Genesis 37:2-8)

Of course, this may well indicate a measure of naivety or precociousness. Did he really think this information would endear him to his older brothers? On the other hand, he did bear faithful witness to God's revealed truth, undaunted by the fact that it contributed to pre-existing family tensions. I salute a teenager I know like that out in the so-called Far East. He's been through the same kind of experience. His family worship ancestral spirits, but he's experienced God speaking to him through the Bible. He's shared it faithfully with his father, and he's been rejected for it, and thrown out onto the streets. I pray that, like Joseph, the truth God has revealed to him early in life will set the direction of his whole life until Jesus returns.

Back again with Joseph – we said he was an unlikely candidate for success, but the great secret of his life was the fact that: 'the Lord was with him.' That should be our one prayer. If God is for us, who can be against us? (Psalm 118:7; Romans 8:31). Sensing God with him, gave Joseph the motivation to stay pure. After he'd been betrayed by his jealous older brothers who'd faked his death and sold him into a life of slavery in Egypt, Joseph found himself the unwilling object of the sexual advances of his boss's wife. Joseph models for us how - in the case of temptation – as with an infection - prevention is the best strategy. We read in Genesis chapter 39:

*"It came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" As she spoke to Joseph day after day, he did not listen to her to lie beside her or be with her. Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. She caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" And he left his garment in her*

*hand and fled, and went outside. When she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled outside...”* (Genesis 39:7-13)

Joseph did his best to avoid this woman, trying to make sure he was never left alone with her. But she was determined and powerful, and it was only a matter of time before she cornered him. Joseph then demonstrates lesson number two: run when it's necessary to do so – or as the apostle Paul would later counsel Timothy: *'flee youthful lusts.'* Sacrifice dignity to maintain purity.

Of course, after her advances were spurned, the boss's wife became furious and had Joseph flung in prison where I'm sure Joseph experienced many dark days of doubting the goodness of God – the very God who had seemingly tantalised him as a teenager with the prospect of greatness. But God shares - with us at least - the purpose behind his testing of Joseph. He shares this in Psalm 105 which informs us that the Word of God tested Joseph. As his soul went into the iron shackles of the prison; it was as if the strength of the iron went into Joseph's own soul. Strength of character was built up all the while his patience was being proved through waiting for God's unlikely promise to materialize.

Yes, the LORD was with him, in the prison as well as everywhere else. With his God-given ability to interpret dreams, Joseph came to the attention of the king, the pharaoh. This same wisdom with which he'd been endowed, extended to a plan to manage the future famine indicated by God. Soon Joseph was installed as pharaoh's deputy, the second in command of all Egypt. Quite a meteoric rise, wouldn't you say? How did this unlikely candidate for success get to the top? The same way a turtle gets to be on top of a fencepost – someone has to put it there. God is the real hero of this story, not Joseph.

Well, the prison might have been a tough test of Joseph's character, but his toughest test was still to come in the palace, and not in the prison. Our faith is tested more in good times than in bad, for when life is easy and power is at our disposal, it's so easy to forget God and abuse our authority. It was in the palace that Joseph was called upon to display the maturity he'd gained in prison. Because who should come to beg for bread, but his treacherous older brothers! Without even being aware of it, they bowed down before this impressive ruler dressed in all his Egyptian finery – and so

fulfilled God's early revelation to Joseph – all without realizing it, of course, for how were they to know this was their kid brother? But he knew them, that's for sure. Time to get even? That's what many of us might have been thinking. But not Joseph – instead he hatched an impromptu plan to check if his brothers had learned from their earlier mistake in mistreating him. By engineering circumstances which offered the older brothers the chance to free themselves if they now abandoned Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin, he effectively made his brothers revisit the scene of their previous crime against him. This time, they chose not to abandon Benjamin to his fate.

That's when Joseph discovers that they, too, are changed men. That was made even more obvious when they begin to reveal guilt and remorse for what they'd done to Joseph, and refuse to repeat the mistake with Benjamin. Then, and only then, Joseph discloses his identity to them – and forgives them freely. With mature insight into the ways of God – the product of those long years in prison when God's Word tested him – Joseph's now able to assure them that God was behind – and over - everything that had happened in order to work out his much bigger plans. Joseph said to his brothers: *“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive”* (Genesis 50:20)

It took faith to say that, but the greatest example of Joseph's faith has been selected in: *“By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones”* (Hebrews 11:22). He'd seen how his father had died – he'd died looking forward in faith. And so Joseph also realised it was better to be bones in a box headed to the Promised Land, than to end up as a glorified mummy in Egypt's hall of fame. God's plans are so much better than the best this world has to offer! And so Joseph, the fencepost turtle, was inducted into God's gallery of the faithful. Let's learn from him.

## CHAPTER THREE: MOSES

The most popular and widely read book in human history, the Bible, has a lot to say about Egypt. Egypt is mentioned 291 times in the first five books of the Bible and 79 times in the book of Genesis alone.

Egypt's culture was obsessed with death and the afterlife. As part of this obsession, they worshipped many false deities whom they believed could enable a person's transition to heaven. Ancient Egyptians believed that one's body, image, and name needed to be preserved in this world after death in order for them to enter and exist in the eternal realm. As such, Egypt developed a massive industry on dealing with death, and it became the defining part of their culture. But first, a little background to the life of Moses.

*“Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come, let us deal wisely with them, or else they will multiply and in the event of war, they will also join themselves to those who hate us, and fight against us and depart from the land. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, “Every [Israelite] son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive.” (Exodus 1:8-10,22)*

*“Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was beautiful, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got him a wicker basket and covered it over with tar and pitch. Then she put the child into it and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to find out what would happen to him. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the Nile, with her maidens walking alongside the Nile; and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid, and she brought it to her.*

*When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the boy was crying. And she had pity on him and said, “This is one of the Hebrews' children.” Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, “Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you?” Pharaoh's daughter said to her, “Go ahead.” So the*

*girl went and called the child's mother. Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. And she named him Moses, and said, "Because I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:1-10)*

As his name in the original language suggests, Moses was drawn from the waters of death in infancy. He was rescued by an Egyptian princess, no less, whom we'll suggest went on to become an infamous Pharaoh herself. But back to Moses her adopted son, who became the leader of the Israelites – his people by birth - he surely awoke many a morning in the wilderness shaking his head in disbelief, remembering his strange past. How good of God to have put him on a fence post (although at times he found his position challenging)!

Following the standard practice of the time in Egypt, Moses left unnamed the foreign monarch who assumed the role of a dreaded enemy of the slaves he led. However, we can make an educated guess as to who it was. Numerous correspondence (known as the Amarna Letters) has been found between the pharaohs and their contemporaries in other countries. One fascinating example of this is a letter from a king (King Rib-Hadda of Byblos, an Egyptian vassal state) to a pharaoh called Amenhotep III in which he writes: "...since your father's return from Sidon, from that time the lands have been joined to the Habiru."

This suggests that the land of Sidon (now part of modern Lebanon) was conquered by the Habiru. Many scholars think the Habiru/Apiru are the 'Hebrews' of Egyptian times. This might be anecdotal evidence that the Hebrews had left Egypt before the reign of Amenhotep III – in other words it points to the pharaoh of the Exodus being Amenhotep II.

*"Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand." (Exodus 2:11-12)*

One scholar writes that the vengeance sought upon Moses was not due only to Moses' murder of an Egyptian official, but also to his possible association with Hatshepsut. Was she "*the daughter of Pharaoh [who] came down to bathe at the Nile ... and ... saw the basket among the reeds and ... saw the child*" (Exodus 2:5,6)?

Egyptian records show that one particular Pharaoh (Thutmose II) was married to someone by the name of Hatshepsut. They had a daughter, but no sons. However, there was a son by a secondary wife. This son (Thutmose III) was to become the next Pharaoh. When Hatshepsut's husband died, she was about 30 years old. She then reigned jointly with her infant stepson. This joint reign lasted 22 years until Hatshepsut died after which time the stepson, Thutmose III, assumed the sole leadership of Egypt and ruled for another 33 years.

An intriguing question is how did Hatshepsut assume power, keep it for so long and defy tradition, as well as why the male bureaucracy tolerated this aberration? There are numerous theories that try to answer that question. The most probable explanation is that she, possessed a strong character and made the most of the power that had accrued to her as regent. Although she was supposed to only be co-regent with her stepson, her aspiration to become Pharaoh was soon apparent. By year seven of her reign she had abandoned the title and insignia of a queen and adopted the male costume of a king, including an official royal false beard!

Whether Hatshepsut died a natural death, or was murdered, is disputed by Egyptologists. What is known is that many of Hatshepsut's monuments and statues were defaced or destroyed after her departure. Her name was erased from cartouches across the land and replaced with the names of her father or husband. This would indicate that Thutmose III was in agreement with the removal of her memory – which would be understandable if he had had to play a secondary role to her during the first 22 years of his reign.

Could it then be that the vengeance sought upon Moses was possibly not due only to Moses' murder of an Egyptian official, but also to his possible association with Hatshepsut? Moses returned to Egypt to speak with Pharaoh to "let my people go" (Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20, 21; 9:1, 13; 10:3) around the year 1446 B.C., the date we get for the Exodus from a literal reading of 1 Kings 6:1. Thutmose III died about 1450 B.C., when his son, Amenhotep II, ascended the throne. It's interesting that God told

Moses, *“Go back to Egypt for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead”* (Exodus 4:19). How were Moses and Aaron able to gain face-to-face access to the new Pharaoh? Well, if Moses was the adopted son of Hatshepsut, he would be Amenhotep II’s step-uncle! In addition, it is possible that royal men and women who were raised in the palace harem remembered Moses and facilitated his access. Exodus 11:3 seems to confirm that possibility when it says that when Moses returned he *“was highly regarded in Egypt by Pharaoh’s officials...”*

Does Amenhotep II qualify as the pharaoh who lived through the tenth plague because he was not his father’s eldest son? Yes, records show that another son (Amenemhet) was the eldest son (of Thutmose III), allowing Amenhotep II to have lived through the tenth plague.

Could the eldest son of Amenhotep II have died during the tenth plague, which must be true of the exodus-pharaoh’s son? Yes, the eldest son of Amenhotep II could have died then. In fact, none of Amenhotep II’s sons claimed to be his firstborn, and one prominent Egyptologist theorizes that the eldest son died inexplicably during childhood.

Can the loss of over two million Hebrew slaves, certainly Egypt’s “slave-base” at the time, be accounted for in the records of Amenhotep II’s reign? Yes, the loss of the Israelite slaves can be accounted for by his capture of more than 100,000 slaves in Canaan during his second Asiatic campaign, the only such campaign of its era.

So then, if Amenhotep II is the exodus-pharaoh, could the obliteration of Hatshepsut’s image from many Egyptian monuments and inscriptions be attributed to a backlash from the exodus events? Yes, Amenhotep II surfaces as the only logical candidate for the pharaoh who ordered this nationwide campaign of desecration. If Hatshepsut indeed was Moses’ Egyptian stepmother - and she is the only legitimate candidate - Amenhotep II and all of Egypt had adequate motive to remove her image from Egypt in a misguided attempt to remove her spirit from the afterlife.

Moses not only led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, but guided them through the desert for 40 years, bringing them to the border of the land promised them by God. He became one of the most famous leaders God’s people ever had, his name revered to this day by Israelites – yet he had such an unlikely beginning. His curious movement

between the ruling class of Egypt and their slave labour force shows the hand of God setting yet another turtle on a fencepost!

But our brief review of Moses' life wouldn't be complete unless we acknowledged the important aspects of his life as it has pleased God to record them in the Bible. Having brought the Israelites out from their slavery in the land of Egypt, Moses received a very special request from God, who said to him:

*“Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it.”* (Exodus 25:8-9)

The remainder of the Book of Exodus is taken up with the description of this portable sanctuary known as the Tabernacle. It was God's house on earth in those days, where he lived in a tent in the middle of all his peoples' tents. It's estimated that, in total, the number of people Moses led out of Egypt was in the region of 2 million. Quite a task! And their grumblings – for the way wasn't easy – tried Moses' patience severely. But God had chosen his people's leader carefully. We read: *“Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth”* (Numbers 12:3).

And he needed to be - to cope with all those people who were always prone to complaining about the journey they were making! They didn't only need to transport themselves and all their household stuff, but they transported God's house, the Tabernacle, as well, and there were many detailed regulations for that procedure. This was where another characteristic of Moses shines through – he was faithful, obedient to God's instructions. Here's a sample of what we read at the very end of the Book of Exodus:

*“He brought the ark into the tabernacle, and set up a veil for the screen, and screened off the ark of the testimony, just as the LORD had commanded Moses. Then he put the table in the tent of meeting on the north side of the tabernacle, outside the veil. He set the arrangement of bread in order on it before the LORD, just as the LORD had commanded Moses. Then he placed the lampstand in the tent of meeting, opposite the table, on the south side of the tabernacle. He lighted the lamps before the LORD, just as the LORD had commanded Moses. Then he placed the gold altar in the tent of*

*meeting in front of the veil; and he burned fragrant incense on it, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.*

*Then he set up the veil for the doorway of the tabernacle. He set the altar of burnt offering before the doorway of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting, and offered on it the burnt offering and the meal offering, just as the LORD had commanded Moses. He placed the laver between the tent of meeting and the altar and put water in it for washing. From it Moses and Aaron and his sons washed their hands and their feet. When they entered the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed, just as the LORD had commanded Moses. He erected the court all around the tabernacle and the altar, and hung up the veil for the gateway of the court. Thus Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.” (Exodus 40:21-34)*

In actual fact, in the short concluding section from which we’ve taken that extract, it repeats no less than seven times that Moses did ‘just as the LORD had commanded [him].’ That spectacular faithfulness leads to the famous comparison and contrast made early in the great teaching letter to the Hebrews:

*“Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ [is] faithful as a Son over His house - whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.” (Hebrews 3:5-6)*

So the humility, and especially the faithfulness, of Moses were the Christ-like attitudes that caught and held God’s attention. And they are things we also need to note, and try to emulate, in serving God within today’s spiritual counterpart of the Old Testament Tabernacle.

## CHAPTER FOUR: GIDEON

Could it be that you may be considering taking up fresh responsibilities in following and serving the Lord Jesus Christ? When anyone stands at the threshold of an exciting new phase of service for the Lord, it can be a bit daunting. There's nothing unusual, or even wrong with that. In fact, it can be a healthy sign. Great heroes of the Bible, like Gideon needed God's encouragement before launching out on their life's work. We hope to learn from him in this chapter. Gideon was a fencepost turtle – that is, someone who didn't get where he was all by himself. Remember his response to the angel when he was informed that he was to be commander of the Israelite troops? *“Sir, how can I save Israel? My family is the poorest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least thought of in the entire family!”* (Judges 6:15, TLB). Let's read about it again in its context and so refresh our memory of how the land of Israel, Gideon's people, back then was over-run at will by the Midianite enemy ...

*“Then the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior.” Then Gideon said to him, “O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.”*

*The LORD looked at him and said, “Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?” He said to Him, “O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house.” But the LORD said to him, “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man.”* (Judges 6:11-16)

Gideon's act of threshing wheat in a winepress reflects both his fear of discovery and the smallness of his harvest. Normally, wheat would be threshed – that is, the grain separated from the wheat stalks - in an open area on a threshing floor (cf. 1 Chronicles 21:20-23) by oxen pulling threshing sledges over the stalks.

The Angel's introductory remarks both affirmed the Lord's presence was with Gideon and also described him as a mighty warrior. Perhaps the intention was to reflect Gideon's potential by God's help. But Gideon reacted by speaking of the national crisis, questioning the reality of God's promise in view of his people's present circumstances. Gideon seems also to be implying that the family that he was part of had become small. They could do little against their enemies.

Gideon is making a modest objection against this commission. Was he being distrustful, inquisitive, humble, self-diffident or self-denying? Or any combination of these? God often chooses to do great things by using those who are little, especially in their own eyes. God delights to advance the humble. God specializes in setting turtles on fenceposts!

Gideon asked if he might prepare some food for his visitor. He was told to put it on a rock and the visitor touched it with his staff. Fire then burst out from the rock and consumed it while the visitor vanished. It was then that Gideon more deeply appreciated that the guest he'd entertained was none other than the Lord.

Afterwards, he was told to destroy his father's pagan altar, which he did by night. If we wish to try to apply any of the features of Gideon's experiences to our own need to move forward with God, we can perhaps do no better than beginning with a greater sense of God and the need to dismantle the past – both things which Gideon faced, as we've seen. I come across many people, who after a genuine struggle, turn away from biblical convictions and return to their previous erroneous ideas. It's not that they haven't understood new insights from the Bible, but their previous thinking was more ingrained and it gradually resurfaced. That emphasizes the need to be as thorough as possible in demolishing past ideas, learning from Gideon's total demolition job on his father's pagan altar.

Now let's read on further ...

*Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the sons of the east assembled themselves; and they crossed over and camped in the valley of Jezreel. So the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him. Then Gideon said to God, "If You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know*

*that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken.” And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. Then Gideon said to God, “Do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground.” God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground.”* (Judges 6:33-40)

Gideon's commission by the Lord seems to have preceded the next annual invasion of the Midianites and their allies. They crossed the Jordan River not far south of the Sea of Kinnereth and camped in the rich agricultural area of the Jezreel Valley. It was at this time that the Spirit of God came upon Gideon (cf. Judges 3:10; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6,19; 15:14), to enable him to fulfil his task. Gideon immediately began to muster men.

Gideon's apparent lack of faith in asking for a miraculous sign from God seems strange for a man who's later going to be listed among the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:32). As it was, Gideon already had a sign from God at the time of his commission (Judges 6:17,21). But it's clear, isn't it, that Gideon wasn't using the fleece to discover God's will? He already knew what God wanted him to do (v. 14). The sign involving the fleece was more a confirmation or assurance of God's presence and empowerment for the task at hand. God condescended to Gideon's lack of conviction, and saturated the wool fleece with dew, so much so that Gideon wrung out a bowlful of water.

Perhaps Gideon had second thoughts about the uniqueness of this event since the surrounding threshing floor might naturally dry before the fleece. So he requested the opposite - this time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew. God patiently did so, and Gideon was reassured to continue his assignment. It's good, too, whenever we receive clear confirmation that God is with us – and also when – like the fleece and its contrasting surroundings – we evidence a distinct difference from the environment we live in. Living in that way, will have the effect of strengthening our convictions.

*“Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him, rose early and camped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley. The LORD said to Gideon, “The people who*

*are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.'* “Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead.’” So 22,000 people returned, but 10,000 remained. Then the LORD said to Gideon, “The people are still too many; bring them down to the water and I will test them for you there. Therefore it shall be that he of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go with you; but everyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go.” (Judges 7:1-4)

Gideon camped at the spring of Harod (probably at the foot of Mount Gilboa) with all his men, who numbered 32,000 (v. 3). The Midianite force of 135,000 (cf. Judges 8:10) was camped three or four miles north of them. When you consider how the enemy already greatly outnumbered them, Gideon was no doubt perplexed by God's words, ‘You have too many men.’ Only 300 would pass the test God set for them down at the water, and the Jewish historian Josephus believed the 300 men who passed the test were the less watchful ones, which, if true, would result in an even greater recognition of God's power. God was asking Gideon to demonstrate the courage of his convictions in the face of declining numbers. Sometimes God asks the same of us. The majority vote was never the way to decide truth. With only a relatively few remaining fighters, Gideon was again reassured by a divine promise: with the 300 men ... “*I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands*” (cf. Judges 6:14).

“*So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands. When the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and cried, “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!” Each stood in his place around the camp; and all the army ran, crying out as they fled. When they blew 300 trumpets, the LORD set the sword of one against another even throughout the whole army; and the army fled.*” (Judges 7:19-22)

Gideon divided his small army into three groups – each of 100 men - whose strange weapons were trumpets and jars with torches inside but otherwise empty. At the critical moment, the Israelites blew their trumpets and broke the jars - both making a terrible noise and revealing the glowing torches. They shouted out loudly, ‘A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!’ This battle cry indicated their confidence in the Lord to give them victory and also identified them to the Midianites and aroused fear in them. The confusion in the Midianite camp was unbelievable as they imagined a much larger Israelite force attacking them.

This divinely orchestrated confusion caused the Midianites to turn on each other with their swords while the Israelites apparently watched in safety around the camp. Then the Midianite army fled to the southeast. It’s good when we rely only on God for deliverance in our troubles. It seems this story was in Paul’s mind as he wrote in 2 Corinthians 4 about the ministry of the Gospel being in us like a treasure in a jar of clay. It’s a treasure which flames with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

*“Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son’s son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.” But Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you.” (Judges 8:22-23)*

Following this significant victory, the Israelites turned to Gideon with the request that he rule as king over them and establish a ruling dynasty (you, your son, and your grandson). Gideon declined both the rule and the dynasty. The people couldn’t persuade him otherwise.

Gideon remained convinced that he was a fencepost turtle. And we, too, if we’re to move forward decisively with God need to learn the various lessons from the life of Gideon, lessons such as we’ve observed like: gaining a deepening appreciation of who the Lord is; removing the obstacles of the past including unlearning false teachings; evidencing in lifestyle a clear difference from our surroundings; demonstrating the courage of our convictions even when in a minority situation; and finally revealing the bright treasure of the full Gospel which we possess today in the clay jars of these bodies of ours.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DAVID

Our 'fencepost turtle' in this chapter is David, king David. God valued the 'inner qualities' he found in David, despite the fact that he was the youngest son in his family, and apparently overlooked initially even by his own father. When God announced he was looking for a new king to replace Saul who'd become disobedient, he said ...

*"... to Samuel, "I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."... Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered, "but he is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one." (1 Samuel 16:1-13 NIV).*

It's quite obvious what the family dynamic was here. David was the 'baby' of the family. Being the youngest, he was the son relegated to looking after the sheep. Now on this auspicious occasion, Jesse would be looking to honour his unexpected guest by respecting Samuel, the priest, the revered man of God in every possible way. As such, Jesse never entertained the notion of fetching David indoors to be presented before him. The smell of sheep and the great outdoors would not be welcome in such company.

Samuel had asked to have Jesse's sons introduced to him, and it seemed a quite unconscious, even artless, decision to overlook young David. Jesse clearly never entertained for one moment the possibility that anything remarkable would develop in the life of his youngest. After all, he'd such impressive older sons – surely they were more than enough to impress their esteemed guest – what could David bring to the table with his flushed cheeks and grass-stained clothes? It was a no-brainer.

What's more, David had grown to expect no more. The attitude of his older brothers, perhaps picking up their father's unspoken vibes, was no different – if anything, it was even more unguarded. Their contempt for their kid brother was to become increasingly vocal. As Joseph's rehearsed dreams had irritated his older brothers, the fact Samuel had singled David out for honour would no doubt have caused his older brothers to

bristle. Even though they probably thought nothing would ever realistically come of it, David's selection that day had been a blow to their pride. How can we forget the sneering tone so obvious in the biblical text leading up to David's acceptance of the enemy giant's challenge. His success in that one-sided contest by the evident power of God would propel David onto centre stage, but first he had to endure the biting 'put-down' of Eliab. Here we have it:

*“And the men of Israel said, “Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. And the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches and will give him his daughter and make his father's house free in Israel.” And David said to the men who stood by him, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?”*

*And the people answered him in the same way, “So shall it be done to the man who kills him.” Now Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spoke to the men. And Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, “Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle.” And David said, “What have I done now? Was it not but a word?” And he turned away from him toward another ...” (1 Samuel 17:25-30)*

'What have I now done?' David asks. Years of living with such remarks surface here in David's response. Such a little share in his family's affections! But David had found his refuge in God – the God with whom he communed under the starry night sky while guarding the sheep. He was little esteemed in his family's eyes, and little in his own sight too, and it seemed barely credible to David that the one who'd garnished the heavens with such awesome beauty should take any account of him at all, but in his heart he knew this was the ultimate truth that mattered. In Psalm 8 he pours out his meditation:

*“O LORD, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens! From the mouth of infants and nursing babes You have established strength Because of Your adversaries, To make the enemy and the revengeful cease. When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon*

*and the stars, which You have ordained; What is man that You take thought of him,  
And the son of man that You care for him? (Psalm 8:1-4)*

When we're convinced that we're loved – by the Creator of heaven and earth – then we can endure most, if not all, things, including little recognition at home. Was David ever conscious that in this experience, he was entering into the fellowship of the sufferings of his great Son, the coming Christ – who would later describe himself as a prophet without honour at home (Mark 6:4; Luke 4:23)?

We learn from David that the sufficient sense of our own worth comes from thinking accurately about who we are in God's sight. This would allow David to endure the outside place in the family, as well as living for years as the most famous 'outlaw' in the country while he was chased by a jealous king who suspected David was after his crown. David was content to allow God to steer the course of his life, and he was so conscious that reaching the throne of Israel from such an unlikely beginning was all God's work. Listen to how he expresses this in Psalm 118:

*“The LORD has disciplined me severely, But He has not given me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness; I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the LORD. This is the gate of the LORD; The righteous will enter through it. I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me, And You have become my salvation. The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner stone. This is the LORD'S doing; It is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the LORD has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” (Psalm 118:18-24)*

It could well be that this was originally written for the time of David's coronation. He'd endured such bitter disappointments. The strange delay in God's revealed purposes for his life had tested him deeply. The builders of his own family had rejected him from the outset. But now God's hand had raised him up to the chief place. David is under no illusions of grandeur. This is all of God's doing. He rejoices in the knowledge that he's a fencepost turtle!

Four recurring themes in David's psalms reveal the major factors at play in his life. Let's take a short example extract from Psalm 119 (on the assumption this is one of David's), but we'll supplement its points in any case from other psalms of David.

*“Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it. Incline my heart to Your testimonies And not to dishonest gain. Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, And revive me in Your ways. Establish Your word to Your servant, As that which produces reverence for You. Turn away my reproach which I dread, For Your ordinances are good. Behold, I long for Your precepts; Revive me through Your righteousness.”* (Psalm 119:35-40)

The four recurring themes are all touched on here, and they are overcoming opposition; loving respect for the Bible; deep reverence for God; and fourthly, personal integrity.

Let's begin with overcoming opposition. David often spoke of being faced with the opposition of evil-doers. Here he simply says 'Turn away my reproach which I dread.' When people reproach us, we sense their rejection. This comes out most clearly in Psalm 118 which we looked at earlier. David bore the reproaches of his older brothers as he experienced rejection by the builders of his family (including his father Jesse); and he was also later to know rejection by the builders of the nation (they being Saul and his administration). Of course, God permitted all this to happen to David. He was moulding the man he wanted David to become. Ravi Zacharias quotes an abridged poem when he says:

*When God wants to drill a man and thrill a man and skill a man...  
When God wants to mould a man to play the noblest part;  
When He yearns with all His heart to create so great and bold a man that all the  
world shall praise...  
Watch His methods; Watch His ways!  
How He ruthlessly perfects whom He royally elects...  
How He hammers him and hurts him,  
And with mighty blows converts him  
Into frail shapes of clay that only God understands.  
How his tortured heart is crying and he lifts beseeching hands...  
How he bends but never breaks when His good he undertakes.  
How He uses whom He chooses...with every purpose fuses him;  
By every art induces him to try His splendour out...  
God knows what He's about!*

David rested in the knowledge that God knew what he was about. Now, the second theme of David's life revealed through the psalms is one of loving respect for God's Word. Commandments, testimonies, ways, ordinances and precepts are all alternative ways in which David references it in the short section we read from Psalm 119. He says: *'Make me walk in the path of Your commandments, For I delight in it.'* David's delight in God's Word was the key to his prosperity. We're told that David prospered in all he did. Why was that? The very first psalm gives the secret.

*"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers."* (Psalm 1:2-3)

Love for the Word of God, such as characterized David, is said here to result in a sense of stability, that is, being settled in our convictions; as well as being productive in our service; while experiencing vitality and prosperity – those latter qualities being primarily in the spiritual sense.

Then there's deep reverence for God, which is the third of the recurring themes of David's psalms. This, of course, is closely bound up with love for God's Word. David says: *'Establish Your word to Your servant, As that which produces reverence for You.'* God himself acknowledged David as being 'a man after his own heart.'

*"... after he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, concerning whom he also testified and said, 'I have found David he son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my will'"* (Acts 13:22, with quotes from Psalm 89:20 & 1 Samuel 13:14).

It's worth pausing to think about what that means. It means that David would make the will of God the great rule of his reign. It signifies a life in harmony with the Lord. What was important to God was important to David. What burdened God also burdened David – and it was this which produced in David a strong longing for God's house, the place God had selected to make his presence known on earth in a special way. It was the crowning revelation (Jacob-like in Genesis 28) of David's life when he was led to discover the site God had chosen for the future temple at Jerusalem. At the close of a distressing episode in David's life, in First Chronicles 22, we read:

*“Then David said, **This is the house of the LORD God**, and this is the altar of burnt offering for Israel.” So David gave orders ... and he set stonecutters to hew out stones to build the house of God ... Then he called for his son Solomon, and charged him to build a house for the LORD God of Israel.” (1 Chronicles 22:1-6). That, we say, was the crowning revelation David received from the God he revered and loved, and whose dwelling-place he also loved.*

And finally, of those 4 recurring features of David’s life, there’s personal integrity. David could say: *“Incline my heart to Your testimonies And not to dishonest gain. Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity.”* (Psalm 119:37)

When you - like David - are a man or woman after God’s heart, you’re deeply sensitive to spiritual things ... You long to please him in your actions. You care deeply about the motivations behind your actions. God’s not looking for magnificent specimens of humanity. He’s looking for deeply spiritual, genuinely humble, honest-to-the-core servants who have integrity. ... It’s what you are when nobody’s looking. We live in a world that says, in many ways, “If you just make a good impression, that’s all that matters.” But you ... can’t fake it with the Almighty. He is not impressed with externals. He always focuses on the inward qualities, like the character of the heart ... those things that take time and discipline to cultivate. (Taken from Charles R. Swindoll, “Becoming a Man or a Woman after God’s Own Heart,” *Insights* (April 1997))

Yes, David practiced the presence of God (Psalm 16), including the humbling lesson of being granted repentance after his infamous sin (Psalm 51). Even in his own house, with no-one watching, he desired to live blamelessly before God (Psalm 101:3), and to have his errors corrected. That’s the mark of this man.

## CHAPTER SIX: ESTHER

Another 'fencepost turtle' was Esther, the Jewish orphan who rose to become the unlikely queen at the pinnacle of a Gentile world Empire. The story of Esther is one of the most remarkable stories in the Bible. It has all the intrigue and as many twists as a modern thriller. Dark forces of evil, in opposition to the good, swirl around the lead character. Some have classed the whole drama as a rags-to-riches or even a peasant-to-princess type of adventure.

You certainly get the unmistakable impression as the book progresses that a sense of destiny is interwoven throughout all the varied circumstances Esther encounters. At first she's orphaned, then adopted, then she's selected for - and finally chosen by - the king of Persia to be his new queen. There may have been a thousand other contestants! Why was Esther chosen from an ethnic minority grouping across the vast Persian Empire? Was it mere chance? Was it simply because she was the most beautiful? Or was this her date with destiny? We're told that last idea was her cousin's understanding of what was happening.

The story as we'll see it unfold is one in which Esther is enabled to find favour with the king (she pleases him) and then goes on to use that favour to achieve God's purpose for her people. Every believer on the Lord Jesus is in a position to recognize the grace God's already shown them. Was that promotion at work or that successful relocation purely down to our own efforts - or do we acknowledge the hand of God behind it? But without any more comment, let's launch ourselves into the story of Esther. Persian Queen Vashti, had fallen into disfavour.

*"... when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king's personal attendants proposed... Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring ... beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai ... who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon ... Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither*

*father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.*

*When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. The girl pleased him and won his favour. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem... Anything she wanted was given to her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.” (Esther 2:1-13 NIV)*

So far we've discovered that this Jewess, Esther - or Hadassah to call her by her Jewish name - had been orphaned and then adopted, and now has been selected to participate in the contest to find the next queen of Persia. At first reading that might seem to have a kind of fairy-tale glamour about it, but in reality it must have been very far from that. True, they probably got clothes, jewellery and perfumes which they'd never otherwise have had access to – 'anything she wanted' it says; but out of the possibly hundreds of girls only one would be chosen. The others might never see the king again, but they'd hardly be allowed to return to normal life.

Here are the first indications of God's hand arranging things in Esther's favour. No sooner than she's introduced to Hegai, the man in charge of all the contestants, than she finds favour with him. As we'll see that will prove a small, but vital, step towards finding favour with the king. Since she pleases Hegai, he's prepared to accommodate her special dietary requirements. It's at this point we might make a connection with the story of Daniel who, when he was brought as a captive to Babylon, also found favour, and was able to avoid food which he as a Jew would have had scruples about eating. Presumably, it's something similar here with the Jewess Hadassah when brought into the citadel of Susa – in a sense she was a captive too: she wasn't there of her own free will – but behind the will of the king's agents there was the sovereign will of Almighty God. Did you notice how it was that Esther won the favour of all who saw her – including the king especially?

*“When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's*

*eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favour and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti” (Esther 2:15-17).*

It’s in chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Esther that the story takes a dramatic turn, and we find a life-and-death struggle at the heart of the Persian royal court, four centuries before Christ. We’re about to discover why God has been pleased to oversee Esther’s rise to royal position in the mighty Persian Empire. One reading of history would seemingly indicate that King Xerxes had personally led his troops into a disappointing invasion of Greece immediately after his marriage to Queen Esther. Some time went by before he returned to his palace at Susa. Perhaps the king’s absence paved the way for one man to accumulate incredible power and influence. Chapter 3 tells us about him ...

*“After these events, King Xerxes honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king’s gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour” (Esther 3:1-2)*

This set the scene for a showdown. This paved the way for a huge over-reaction by Haman that seriously threatened the destruction of all Jews throughout the Empire. Mordecai had not previously asked for Esther’s intervention when the matter was personal between him and Haman, but now that the future of the whole nation hung in the balance, he lays it on the line ...

*“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:13-14)*

Now it’s the turn of Esther to demonstrate her faith in God. She called for a fast. Whenever something was of such concern to them that they were prepared to go

without food, they were proving their earnestness in the matter they were bringing before God.

Esther knew the protocol of the king's court. In Persia, no-one could enter the inner court of the king unless they'd been invited – not even the queen. But Esther knew there was a higher court, the court of heaven. It was essential to access the court of heaven by prayer and fasting before attempting to enter the inner court of the king of Persia.

Having brought her petition first within heaven's court through prayer, she was then prepared to go against the law of Persia and enter the king's earthly court with her request to spare the life of all her people. And she says: 'And if I perish, I perish'. By any standard these are remarkable words. She could still have entertained the notion that her royal position and secret identity would guarantee her personal safety despite Mordecai's warnings. But she chose to resign any possible rights of her own, and side with her people in order to intercede boldly for them.

We've now reached the point in the unfolding drama where Queen Esther reveals her Jewish identity to her husband the king and in so doing exposes Haman's plan to exterminate the Jews as being a personal attack on her and her people. Esther has waited to choose her moment at the second of two private banquets with the king and Haman, the prime minister:

*"... the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther, and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted." Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favour with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life - this is my petition. And spare my people - this is my request." (Esther 7:1-3)*

God, whose name is not mentioned in the Book of Esther, but whose guiding hand is detected throughout it, honoured Esther's courageous faith, even as she was moving in his plan. The king listened to Queen Esther, and Haman was not only humiliated but sentenced to death. The Jews were put in a position to defend themselves, and so God's people was preserved. In summary, we have seen that Esther, aware she'd been placed in the palace by God, fulfilled her date with destiny, and used her position

to advance God's purpose. And so should we: let's not forget any way in which we too can sense that – in some aspect of our service at least – we too are fencepost turtles!

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DANIEL

Some, if not all, of the ‘fencepost turtles’ that we have been considering were very humble, but let’s remind ourselves that humility is not denying what others consider to be our good contribution – rather it’s freely acknowledging how little of that is down to us - and how much of it is down to God.

In this chapter, our selected Bible ‘fencepost turtle’ is Daniel. As a young man, Daniel found himself catapulted into a hostile environment – but one which we can increasingly relate to in the modern western world. From a privileged background, life for Daniel changed radically when he was taken captive, and injected into the court of the Babylonian monarch. Nebuchadnezzar was the most powerful sovereign ever to rule the world. He’d got such a feel for holding absolute power at court that, at times, he exuded the confidence that God didn’t exist. The corridors of power, the entire education system, and whatever mass media existed then, were all filled with a kind of thinking that was radically different to that of Daniel and his three closest friends who were now suddenly injected into this alien culture.

The world Daniel had been plunged into – at the pinnacle of the Babylonian Empire - was a world that squeezed everything into its mould (Romans 12:2), and didn’t tolerate alternative views. Sounds familiar? Isn’t it what we, as Christians, face in the modern world? Take, for example, opinions with regard to origins science. Conventional wisdom today is a long way removed from what the Bible plainly says. Relatively few people – but they are generally the scientists with the most relevant background – appreciate that it’s really philosophy – not facts - that shapes the modern view of origins. This is very different from the solid experimental science which has won for us a good measure of understanding of such things as light, electricity and gravity.

But let’s come back to Daniel – although it’s worth having these digressions, I suggest – so that we realize the relevance of his situation to ours. The externals may be different, but the issues brought into focus are the same as we face today. In Daniel we find a man whose native land had been over-run in his youth, and now he’s a deportee in a foreign culture, confronting the greatest autocrat ever. I don’t think it’s going too far to say that. After all, didn’t God describe him as ‘the head of gold’? His experience was one of wielding pure power.

So then what was Daniel to do? Should he go with the flow? He was away from home and family and all past expectations. He was cut completely free from his moorings. He now had freedom to become whatever he needed to become in order to increase his chances of survival in this totally foreign culture. What more was there to lose – had he not already lost everything that'd previously mattered to him - desperate times surely justify desperate means, do they not?

But the Bible tells us something amazing about this man, Daniel. He even rejects a ham sandwich - when there was no-one to criticise him for eating it! (Now, forgive me, the Bible doesn't exactly specify it like that, but I do think that conveys a reasonably accurate impression of how Daniel was unwilling to compromise in even the slightest way with the food laws he'd been brought up with.) For him to make such a stand, he must surely have considered the detailed commands within the Law of Moses to be an essential part of who he was within his relationship with God. Such things struck at the heart of who he saw himself as being. So if we smile patronisingly when I talk about Daniel avoiding even a ham sandwich, it may mean we think it was no big deal – and that simply shows we're not a Daniel!

His beliefs were convictions not preferences. The United Nations have found it necessary to distinguish between a preference and a conviction as they try to respect people in fair judgements. They have said that a preference is a belief you would be prepared to change under pressure; but a conviction is a belief you would never change, no matter what the pressure was. In the small matter of the ham sandwich - or whatever it was - we're introduced in chapter one of the book of Daniel to a man of total integrity in his convictions – someone who in the battle for ideas was quite prepared to take on the entire world.

As we come into the second chapter of the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar is bossing the world: not only incomparably powerful, but he's really smart too (if you thought he was the absent-minded incompetent who forgot his own dreams you've got the wrong man ...). Asking the candidate interpreters to state the dream first before proceeding to give its interpretation, was simply his strategy to have a way of evaluating the genuineness of the answer given. Oh, and did I mention he was ruthless? For he authorised the execution of all the intelligentsia for their inability to do this.

That would have included Daniel and his three friends of course: they weren't going to be exempted from such a petulant and blanket edict. So, this is some test, a real tight spot. Daniel's got 24 hours to live, the pressure on young Daniel was immense. But he's God's man, and God's man comes through: if you're in touch with God, you can withstand the full brunt of the power of a society or a culture or even an empire. Daniel proves it – as do his three friends in the next chapter of the unfolding drama. Faced with the world's most powerful man, the world's hottest fire, and the world's loudest band, the entire population as directed falls to its knees before a gigantic image. All except Daniel's three friends. As you will remember from the Ten Commandments, bowing down to any pagan image was strictly prohibited for a Jew.

It's here we see a vital spiritual law being demonstrated, and one that will again be required for the prophetic times lying ahead when those who know their God will once again need to do exploits (Daniel 11:32). Both the great prophecy books of Daniel and Revelation were given in times of extreme adversity (and both their authors were exiled).

In the fourth chapter of the Bible book of Daniel, we have the testimony of this colossal leader of Empire: the colossus who was Nebuchadnezzar. When he refused to acknowledge the true God, he became bestial. But using the witness of Daniel and his companions, God changed even that supreme monarch and brought him round to acknowledge the book's thesis: that the Most High rules in the kingdoms of men (Daniel 4:24-6).

After straddling an overnight change of world empire (chapter 5), and facing a den full of once slaving lions (chapter 6), and absorbing appalling apocalyptic visions (chapter 7), Daniel enters into the role of elder statesman. That's what I mean about Daniel being a 'fencepost turtle.' He didn't get there by himself. Able man as he undoubtedly was, we have traced God's hand on his life, steering his course. Daniel was the man whose happiness God desired, greatly loved and esteemed by God.

It's not my intention to go into details about these things, but I do want to set the scene for our final challenge in this way. It's been 50 years since a temple last stood at Jerusalem, it's now been 70 years since the deportation of God's people from their land, and many more years since Daniel's compatriots had first begun to spurn God's laws. But I want to show you that though they may have succeeded in taking the man

of God away from the house of God; the Babylonians had spectacularly failed to take God's house away from God's man. Is this not a clue to his special place in the divine affections (Daniel 9:23; 10:11,19)? The things that broke the heart of God were the same things that broke Daniel's heart.

What do I mean by that? Allow me to explain. As we turn to chapter 9 of the Bible book that bears his name, we discover that Daniel's daily schedule of time-keeping is still being regulated by the timetable of the altar belonging to God's house at Jerusalem – the temple there which by this time had been demolished at least 50 years before. What's even more revealing is the fact that his undistracted thoughts are overshadowed by the spectre of the desolate sanctuary. And his outlook is ever through the open window of his prayer chamber, a window strategically opened toward the place of God's Name at Jerusalem. Let me show you where I'm getting that from because it has again made such an impression on me that I really want to share it with you ... [Daniel] went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem (Daniel 6:10), and in Daniel chapter 9 we hear him praying:

*“So now, our God, listen to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplications, and for Your sake, O Lord, let Your face shine on Your desolate sanctuary. O my God, incline Your ear and hear! Open Your eyes and see our desolations and the city which is called by Your name; for we are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion.*

*O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name.” While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my plea before the LORD my God for the holy hill of my God, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the first, came to me in swift flight at the time of the evening sacrifice. He made me understand ...”*  
(Daniel 9:17-22)

Whatever Daniel's fame was in Babylon, his thoughts and desires were bound up with the desolate ruins of Jerusalem. Whatever the constraints of his secular schedule in his demanding post in the administration of a world empire, he still marked time in the

way required by the law and the prophets of his God. There were no lapses in his official duties (Daniel 6:4), but his attention was focused where God's own eyes were focused (1 Kings 9:3).

And just before this, Daniel had opened the Bible book of Jeremiah the prophet and been 'arrested' – not by the secret police, but by the Spirit of God – for he'd discovered that in God's prescribed will, the discipline of his people, even their banishment away from Jerusalem would be for a 70-year term – and he now realizes that the time is up! He turns the information which so grips him at that moment of insight into passionate prayer.

Are you cynical about answered prayer? When you take such a man of godly integrity; who's correctly understanding God's agenda; and who so really means business in fired-up prayer; see what happens. That prayer penetrates heaven, becomes decisive in tipping the scales in a cosmic contest fought between angelic beings - read about that for yourself in chapter 10 - the result of which is projected down to earth and is reflected in the astounding foreign policy developments of a newly rising empire – which led to God's temple being rebuilt.

As our application of this lesson, may I ask: If it were you in a minority of one against the world, would you retain your convictions about God and his house and what it means to be in a Church of God?

## CHAPTER EIGHT: ISAIAH

Our next example of a 'fencepost turtle' is Isaiah. In an essay titled "Meditation in a Toolshed," C.S. Lewis describes a scene in a darkened shed. The sun was shining brilliantly outside, yet from the inside only a small sunbeam could be seen through a crack at the top of the door. Everything was pitch-black except for the slender beam of light, by which he could see flecks of dust floating about. Lewis wrote: "I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it. Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving in the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences."

Previously, in ministry, Isaiah has been, as it were, looking at the light-beam in a darkened room compared to now being invited by God to step into the beam itself and see right into heaven – and to see the Lord sitting on heaven's throne. John in his Gospel (John 12:41) tells us that the glory that Isaiah saw was, in fact, the glory of Christ. The occupant of the throne whom Isaiah saw was the pre-incarnate second person of the trinity. When he had this vision, I'm sure Isaiah said the equivalent of 'Wow!' Let's read from the top of the chapter:

*"In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.*

*Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for*

*Us?” Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!” He said, “Go, and tell this people...” (Isaiah 6:1-9)*

Isaiah fixed his eyes on the throne-sitter. Whatever happens that's got to remain our posture too. Eight times in Revelation, God's not called God, but rather we find him being called 'him who sits upon the throne.' We learn along with Isaiah that whatever happens in life and ministry that's got to remain our vision – with our eyes on the throne of heaven and him who sits upon it.

But let's come back to exactly who it was that Isaiah saw. Remember we said it was the pre-incarnate Christ whom he saw. You'll probably notice a contrast in the print of your Bible between 'Lord' (in small letters) in v.1 and LORD (in capitals) in v.3. The reason is to show the same word we use in English is actually translating two different words here in the original Hebrew. 'Lord' (with the small letters) stands for Adonai, or sovereign lord, and is the highest possible title of God. 'LORD' is God's personal name, Yahweh, as was first revealed to Moses (Jehovah was a combination of the consonants of Yahweh with the vowels of Adonai in printed copies of the Hebrew Old Testament. By Jewish tradition the reader said Adonai when he read Adonai, but he also said Adonai when he read the consonants of Yahweh. We need not be confused by this, as Lord represents Adonai v.1, and LORD represents Yahweh v.3). So, there are two words for 'lord' here. One is usually spelt as 'Lord' in small letters ('Adonai' in v.1), and the other as 'LORD' in capitals ('Yahweh' in v.5).

It might be worth here referring to the famous hymn fragment in Philippians chapter 2 which declares Jesus as Lord. The name Jesus itself is the Greek form of Joshua or Yahoshua, (literally 'salvation is from the LORD or Yahweh') and kurios is often used to translate 'Adonai.' So what we have is that the one whose own name incorporates the personal name of God is acknowledged in Philippians chapter 2 as the sovereign lord, adonai – this is the highest name or title, and so what we have in Philippians chapter 2 corresponds with the situation we've already seen in Isaiah chapter 6. One day to come, all people will have revealed to them what we've already had revealed to us: that the once rejected Jesus of Nazareth is – just as Isaiah said – the sovereign lord, adonai, the throne-sitter – because Jesus Christ is Lord!

We soon learn, as Isaiah did, that evangelism is hard. Surely that's why the vision he received in Isaiah chapter 6 (vv.1-7) comes before the commission (which is vv.8-13)

in Isaiah chapter 6. We too have a (great) commission which the Lord gave us at the end of Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 28:18-20), and we, like Isaiah, will need to revisit the vision often, so as to fulfil the commission - especially when results don't encourage us.

Now I want to come to verse 3. Isaiah saw him as glorious in holiness for the six-winged angels or seraphim surrounding that heavenly throne were shouting to one another 'holy, holy, holy.' Why three times, we might ask? Some have seen this as an authentication of the trinity. But we can't prove the trinity from this, can we? The most we can say is that this triple proclamation of holy is consistent with the idea of God existing as a trinity – but it's a weak argument to rely on (esp. when others are so strong). So why three times then? Because this is how the Hebrew language provides emphasis. While we might embolden or underline, they simply repeated the same word again and again. The message here is God is very, very, very holy.

This was likely a time of great uncertainty in the nation, for the first thing we read in this chapter is that the earthly king over God's people in Jerusalem has died. Was Isaiah seeking a message from God for his people in this time of crisis? Did he enter the precincts of the Jerusalem Temple to seek an audience with God? If so, God grants him an answering vision of the heavenly temple. Isaiah was already a preacher as he arrived. If we compare what we read at the beginning of his Bible book of prophecy - in Isaiah 1:1, this was not the beginning of Isaiah's prophetic ministry. But it was surely a defining moment.

That's the ongoing relevance of this passage for us. We can only begin once, but we can have other defining moments. This was the moment when – as we presume – Isaiah came into the precincts of the Jerusalem Temple (he couldn't enter in fully since he wasn't a priest) and there God granted him this vision of seeing into the heavenly counterpart temple. Perhaps, as we've thought, Isaiah came as a preacher to ask God for a message at this time of national loss and potential instability. If we seek him, in times of uncertainty or otherwise, God will allow himself to be found by us - the Bible promises that. What a thrill for any preacher to encounter God in the preaching (or at least in the preparation for it) – and then to be enabled by God's help to communicate something of that to others – as Isaiah has done here.

But then Isaiah goes from a 'wow!' to a 'woe!' In the light of God's dazzling holiness, Isaiah sees how shabby his own life is. He'd never thought of it that way before, but this is how he reacts to this vision of splendour.

But answering to his sense of failure is the Lord's victory. Where's the victory in this chapter, you ask? It's pictured in the fact that the train of the Lord's robe is described as being so long that it filled the whole temple. In those days the victorious king's robe was extended after each successive victory. The train of the robe of one English king in fairly recent times (George IV) was long enough to be carried by eight persons. The rank of others in these coronation processions, even to this day, is reflected in how long the train of their robe is. Well, the train of the Lord's robe fills the temple here - informing us of the great extent of his victorious majesty.

So, our Lord Jesus' status as victor is emphasized here in Isaiah chapter 6. Isaiah's been involved in ministry for some time – maybe even a long time. But now God's searchlight has shown up something he'd always covered up – and that was lapses in his speech. Now I think it very likely that contemporaries of Isaiah would have found little fault with his speech. But Isaiah has just seen the Lord, and that's lifted the bar for him. Surely, as the hymnwriter put it, it's another case of 'those who fain would serve him best are conscious most of sin within.' Wonderfully, the Lord showed his mercy towards Isaiah, and Isaiah's failure was swallowed up by the Lord's victory. The same grace that was later fully demonstrated at the cross is symbolised here in the burning coal from the altar which was brought into contact with Isaiah's sinning lips.

Like Isaiah, we need to allow times in God's presence to challenge us, and respond to the Holy Spirit drawing our attention to any aspect of our lives and behaviours which require attention.

Humbled by this awesome vision, Isaiah would have been the first to acknowledge now, that he was not worthy to serve such a Lord. In other words, he would have realized in our terms for this series, that he too was a turtle on a fencepost. Unworthy as he was, he'd been lifted up into the service of God by the Lord himself. Humbled and awed, he now went out from God's presence to fulfil his daunting ministry. Can we do better than to follow his example?

## CHAPTER NINE: ZERUBBABEL

We read in the Bible book of Haggai (Haggai 1:14 NLT): *'So the LORD sparked the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel ... and ... Jeshua ... and ... God's people ... to work on the house of their God.* It's the first of the people named there I want to consider – Zerubbabel, whose enthusiasm was sparked. He lived at a time when God's people had the Wrong Priorities; the Wrong Perspective; and the Wrong Perception.

God was using the prophet Haggai at this time, in the fifth century before Christ, to call on his people, Israel, to re-evaluate their performance. *'Consider your ways'* ('set your heart upon ...', Haggai 1:5,7; 2:15,18a,18b), he demanded of them. *'Is it a time for ...'* you to embellish your own houses *'while this house ...'* (Haggai 1:4) of mine, God said, lies in ruins?

Wrong priorities indeed. But there was also a wrong perspective. God challenged them again through his prophet: *'How do you see it now?'* (Haggai 2:3). That is, what's your take on this temple you're rebuilding? Part of the problem was that they had among them some *'who saw **this temple** in its former glory ...* and what they could now see in terms of the rebuilding project at hand was nowhere near as magnificent as the temple Solomon had built and into which the visible glory of God had descended. What they were experiencing seemed to pale into insignificance by comparison.

But they'd the wrong perspective. God now revealed to them that *'the latter glory of **this house** will be greater than the former ... in **this place** I will give peace'* (Haggai 2:3,9). God was sharing with them a sense of the continuity of his divine purpose in living with men and women on this earth. God wasn't counting first temple, second temple, third temple, etc. - they all merged together in his single gracious purpose to reside in an earthly house at that site. That latter temple referred to, when Christ reigns on earth in the future, will be more glorious than even Solomon's earlier temple for the Lord will be there in glorious person.

As regards their wrong perception, God reminded them out of the Law that sacredness is not transmitted like defilement. Contamination is contagious; but consecration isn't. The point was, God said: *'... so is every work of their hands; and what they offer'* (Haggai 2:14). Dull attitudes pollute our worship, and it was certainly true then. God promised them: *'from the day the temple of the LORD was founded ... from this day*

*on I will bless you'* (Haggai 2:18,19). All of which shows that attitude to God's house is key to God's blessing.

God's people then felt their insecurity among the political and military powers surrounding them. However, God said that they didn't need to be afraid of these powers. He was going to shake them up, as he'll also shake all the nations of the earth in the future before the Lord returns to reign. God's intention for his own people, by contrast, was that they should be stirred, not shaken. 'Stirred in spirit' is translated in one version as 'sparked with enthusiasm', as when we read: *'So the LORD sparked the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel ... and ... Jeshua ... and ... God's people ... to work on the house of their God'* (Haggai 1:14 NLT).

On the other hand, God warned: *'I will shake all the nations ... I am going to shake the heavens and the earth'* (Haggai 2:7,21). And the writer to the Hebrews picks up on this and says it *'... denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken ... so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us ... offer to God an acceptable service ...'* (Hebrews 12:27,28).

In other words, as applied to God's New Testament people, we shouldn't be daunted and intimidated by secular and cultural opposition today any more than they were to be in Haggai's time. For the things of God are unshakeable. God's Word is forever settled in heaven. Opponents may offer up great swelling words, but our convictions are to be unshakeable, as rooted in the promises of the eternal God found in the words of Scripture which cannot be broken.

These things, back in Haggai's day, come into sharp focus in the man leading the temple-building project, Zerubbabel. He was stirred, not shaken at this time when the word of God came to him through the prophet, Haggai. We're viewing him as another fencepost turtle in that he was placed into this position of leadership among God's people by God. His name, the word 'zerubbabel' means 'born in Babylon.' Hardly an inspiring name! For it contained the reminder that God's people had only recently returned from an exile which God had imposed on them as a result of their previous chronic disobedience. Could a man born in Babylon be a builder for God in Zion, in Jerusalem? By the grace of God he could be! Zerubbabel had been infected with

apathy just like the rest of the people at this time. His priorities, perspective and perception had to be corrected too.

But God sparked his enthusiasm once more – it had been there before, for had he not made the journey from exile to willingly offer to be part of this Jewish taskforce attempting to renew their spiritual foundations. It'd been then a movement of God, and God was stirring his discouraged workforce back to the realization that he was still with them – if only they would recommence the building and enter into his blessing.

At the end of this short prophetic message captured in the book of the prophet Haggai, we find it stated very explicitly that God planned to make Zerubbabel to be like a turtle on a fencepost – in other words a man in a position which he could not have reached all by himself. But God used different imagery when he said: *'I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel ... and I will make you like a signet ring'* (Haggai 2:23).

It's easy to miss the full significance of this. This statement of blessing by God reverses an earlier curse once made in the same terms:

*'Even though [Je]coniah ... were a signet ring on My right hand, yet I would pull you off ... I will hurl you ... into another country ... there you will die. But as for that land to which they desire to return, they will not return to it ... write this man down childless, a man who will not prosper in his days; for no man of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah'* (Jeremiah 22:24-30).

This curse had been spoken before God swept his disobedient people away into captivity under the Babylonians more than 70 years before. Jeconiah had been one of the very last kings to reign in Jerusalem before it fell to the Babylonian invaders around 587 B.C. What happened to this king against whom God had spoken these strong words?

Well, he was indeed taken into captivity along with his remaining subjects. Strangely, despite Jeconiah's personal prosperity being restored, he died in Babylon. He did have a son, Shealtiel. But his son Shealtiel never succeeded him to the throne. There was no opportunity for that because he too died, somewhat prematurely, and in Babylon. So the prediction is clarified: Jeconiah would be childless as far as the throne was concerned.

But still there's more to this intriguing personal history. Jeconiah had married the daughter of Neri. This woman was already a widow - with a son, Pedaiah by her deceased husband - before re-marrying Jeconiah (he's sometimes called simply Coniah, by the way). Then Jeconiah and his wife had a son together, Shealtiel whom we've previously mentioned. In turn, Shealtiel married, but alas he died before fathering a son. According to the biblical custom applying then, it was the duty of his step-brother (see Deuteronomy 25), Pedaiah, to marry his step-brother's wife to raise up descendants on behalf of his step-brother, Shealtiel. This he did, and this resulted in the birth of Zerubbabel who was among those who returned from the captivity to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem.

So Jeconiah's descendants did return to Israel – those from his grandsons' generation. But the cursed bloodline ends with Shealtiel, and the blessing is restored upon Zerubbabel. He was a legal descendant of the kingly line in the way we've described but was not a blood relative of the cursed Jeconiah. So the curse was upheld against Jeconiah, but graciously the ruling lineage returned to blessing under Zerubbabel.

There's something even more involved in Zerubbabel being this fencepost turtle we've been thinking about. Check out our Lord's genealogies as given in Matthew 1:12 and Luke 3:27 (note the mention of Neri, so it's the same Zerubbabel & Shealtiel featured in these genealogies). Mary's bloodline was literally free of Jeconiah. The actual bloodline through Nathan, in combination with the legal title to the throne through Solomon – as given by Matthew - are brought together in Zerubbabel. This ensured the Messiah's right to reign, clear of the curse which had once been pronounced on the kingly line in the time of Jeconiah. The unusual parentage of this man Zerubbabel is key!

What an honour for this man who was 'born in Babylon'! He actually has become in some ways representative of Jesus: in that, he was legally of the royal lineage; actually of David's bloodline; turning the curse of (his grandfather's) disobedience into blessing through (his own) obedience; a leader of God's people; and of course a builder of God's house.

Wow! Now that's what I call a fencepost turtle! Every attainment was by God's sovereign grace operating in his life.

## FURTHER TITLES IN THIS SERIES

**If you've enjoyed reading this book, first of all please consider taking a moment to leave a positive review on Amazon!** Secondly, you may be interested to know that, at the date of the publishing of this book, the Search For Truth library now stands at almost fifty titles; each contains excellent reading material in a down-to-earth and conversational style, covering a wide range of topics from Bible character studies, theme studies, book studies, apologetics, prophecy, Christian living and more. The simplest way to access this material for purchase is by visiting Brian's Amazon author page:

- Amazon.com: <http://amzn.to/1u7rzlA>
- Amazon.co.uk: <http://amzn.to/YZt5zC>

Alternatively, the books can also be found simply by searching for the specific title or "Search For Truth Series" on Amazon. Paperback versions can also be purchased from Hayes Press at [www.hayespress.org](http://www.hayespress.org).

A flavour of some of the books in the library are below:

### **Healthy Churches: God's Bible Blueprint For Growth (FREE)**

As Brian notes in the opening chapters of this book, many churches in the Western world seem to be declining in numbers and spiritual vitality. He explores some of the root causes and also how this trend could be reversed. The good news, as Brian reminds us, is that God gives us the growth blueprint in His Word through a number of key Bible words, such as sowing, reaping, planting, watering, cultivating, building and edifying. Find out the importance of each step in the process and get inspired to go for growth with, in and through, God!

### **A Legacy of Kings...Israel's Chequered History**

Apart from the most famous kings, such as David and Solomon, many of the rest of the kings of the Old Testament have faded into obscurity - the life-lessons that can be applied to the lives of Christians are often over-looked as a result. This book rectifies this by bringing twelve of these kings back into the spotlight. You'll encounter good kings, bad kings, good kings that went bad and bad kings that came good! All of them, though, have something important to teach and challenge us as we look to serve the great and faultless King Himself - Jesus Christ. If Jotham, Rehoboam, Hezekiah, Manasseh and the rest have become strangers to you - why not get reacquainted?

### **Tomorrow's Headlines – Bible Prophecy**

This book provides some key principles for unlocking the meaning of Bible prophecy and surveys what the Bible says about the future, primarily from the books of Daniel and Revelation. Topics and questions include:

- Will there ever be a United States of Europe?

- Will there be a single world currency?
- What is the critical position of Israel in God's purposes?
- Will the temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem?
- What can we know about the Antichrist?
- Will Jesus Christ return once, or twice?
- What is the role of Babylon in the end times?
- What is the significance of the spread of Islam?

### **Overcoming Objections to Christian Faith**

This book provides a concise introduction to answering 10 key objections to the Christian faith by giving a number of insightful illustrations and Biblical references which all Christians can use to help them give “a reason for the hope that is within us” and whet the appetite for further research on each question in greater depth:

- Why do the innocent suffer?
- Don't all religions lead to God?
- What about the heathen?
- Isn't the Christian experience only psychological?
- Are the miracles possible?
- Isn't the Bible full of errors?
- Won't a good life get me to heaven?
- How can you believe in hell and a God of love?
- Hasn't science done away with the need for faith?
- What about all the bloodshed in the name of religion?

### **Edge of Eternity - Approaching the End of Life**

This book was written by at the request of many people who have found it very difficult to witness to someone who was nearing the end of their lives, either through terminal illness or old age. How could they find a way to tactfully and gently raise the matter of eternal future at this difficult and stressful time? Brian provides a helpful way to do this by drawing from parts of Luke's gospel which are all connected to death or near-death experience in some way. The gospel is clearly presented in a gentle way with the intention of winning someone to Jesus Christ even at the very end. This book, however, is also a very useful witnessing tool to anyone who has not yet become a Christian.

### **Double Vision – The Insights of Isaiah**

The Old Testament book of Isaiah can be difficult to understand. This book provides the key to open up Isaiah's message by explaining the “double vision” model that God used in speaking through the prophet. While what much of what Isaiah said had a current application to the people he was speaking to, there was usually a double meaning which either spoke of the coming of Jesus Christ hundreds of years later, or of events which are still yet in our future. This book is bound to leave you more aware of, and appreciating more fully, the sovereignty of God and his gracious dealings with

both Israel and followers of Jesus Christ.

### **Abraham – Friend of God**

Brian provides an informative biography and commentary of one of the most important characters in the Old Testament of our Bibles – Abraham the nomad. Abraham was known for his great example of faith and for being a “Friend of God”, but his life was far from plain sailing. Brian draws out a number of lessons for our discipleship today in this helpful Bible study.

### **Praying With Paul**

Prayer is one of the greatest assets that a Christian could possess, but sometimes it seems to be a real challenge to make it a full part of our devotional life. Brian examines the way the great prayer warrior himself - the apostle Paul - approached prayer. What were the key things that Paul prayed about and how did he do it? Paul was an expert in how to have a productive prayer life with real intimacy with God. There's no better example of the practice of prayer that we can follow - may it challenge us all to a more productive prayer life in the secret place! A bonus book, *Passing the Baton*, also features in this book, and takes a look at 4 important relationships in the Bible and the handover of service for God from one to the other.

### **Unlocking Hebrews**

The letter to the Hebrews has been called “the forgotten letter of the New Testament”. But, as Brian outlines in this little book, the letter contains a marvellous, divine revelation that is not found anywhere else in the Bible! The writer of the letter is concerned that new believers might be soon be walking away from their new-found faith and reverting back to Judaism. He passionately explains through a series of “warnings” exactly what they will be missing, the unique superiority of Jesus Christ, but also an amazing insight into the location of the collective worship of God, which remains unchanged 2,000 years later!

### **They Met At The Cross – Five Encounters With Jesus**

Brian discusses what happened when five very different people met Jesus at the cross:

Chapter 1: Pontius Pilate – Under Pressure

Chapter 2: Simon Of Cyrene - Under Obligation

Chapter 3: Barabbas - Under Conviction

Chapter 4: Joseph Of Arimathea - Under Cover

Chapter 5: The Centurion – Under Authority

### **James – The Epistle of Straw?**

Martin Luther didn't seem overly impressed with the Bible letter by James, describing it as ‘a right strawy epistle’! It seems he felt disappointed that it didn't contain any exalted description of Christ, nor make reference to the work of the Spirit, and didn't work hard to defend the faith. It's true that James doesn't deal with the glories of Christ

and his Church or with the great Christian blessings, nor does he transport us to the world to come. James seems to be at home in more mundane matters. He doesn't write in great soaring passages, nor are there many strongly motivating exhortations. But the value of his contribution, under God, is in forcing us to face up squarely to practical realities and their ethical implications. Brian Johnston, brings us face to face with these realities in a down to earth style that perhaps James himself would have appreciated!

### **Other Titles**

- An Unchanging God?
- The Kingdom of God – Past, Present or Future?
- God's Appointment Calendar: The Feasts of Jehovah
- Seeds – A Potted Bible History
- AWOL! Bible Deserters and Defectors
- The Way – New Testament Discipleship
- 5 Sacred Solos – The Truths That The Reformation Recovered
- Salt & The Sacrifice of Christ
- Turning The World Upside Down – Seven Revolutionary Ideas That Changed The World
- Windows To Faith
- The Visions of Zechariah
- The Last Words of Jesus
- Closer Than A Brother – Christian Friendship
- Experiencing God in Ephesians
- About The Bush – The Life of Moses
- Trees of the Bible
- Once Saved, Always Saved?
- After God's Own Heart: The Life of David
- Knowing God: Reflections on Psalm 23
- Jesus: What Does The Bible Really Say?
- No Compromise!
- The Glory of God
- Jesus: Son Over God's House
- The Way: New Testament Discipleship
- The Tabernacle: God's House of Shadows
- Esther: A Date With Destiny
- Power Outage: Christianity Unplugged
- Life, the Universe and Ultimate Answers
- Living in God's House
- The Supremacy of Christ

In addition, SFT recommends [www.hayespress.org](http://www.hayespress.org) which carries a large selection of recommended titles as well as over 100 attractive gospel tracts and posters, a range of daily Bible reading calendars, Eagles Wings children's magazines and more!

## SEARCH FOR TRUTH RADIO BROADCASTS

Search for Truth Radio has been a ministry of the Churches of God (see [www.churchesofgod.info](http://www.churchesofgod.info)) since 1978. Free Search for Truth podcasts can be listened to online or downloaded at four locations:

- At SFT's own dedicated podcast site: [www.searchfortruth.podbean.com](http://www.searchfortruth.podbean.com)
- Via Itunes using the podcast app (search for Search For Truth)
- On the Churches of God website:  
([http://www.churchesofgod.info/search\\_for\\_truth\\_radio\\_programmes.php](http://www.churchesofgod.info/search_for_truth_radio_programmes.php))
- On the Transworld Radio website:  
([http://www.twr360.org/programs/ministry\\_id,103](http://www.twr360.org/programs/ministry_id,103))

Alternatively, see below for details of digital and analogue radio timings.

### **Europe**

Sunday, 08.00 British Time on TWR

41m band SW (7400 kHz.); 49m band SW (6105 kHz.)

Listen online at [www.twr.org.uk/live.htm](http://www.twr.org.uk/live.htm)

SKY Digital Channel 0138 (11.390 GHz, ID 53555) and Freesat channel 790 in the **UK** Saturday at 15.45 and Sunday at 08.15.

### **Malawi**

Sunday on TWR Malawi FM Network at 06.45 UTC+2 (89.1 - 106.5 FM)

### **South East Asia**

On Reach Beyond – Australia on Mondays 13.15 UTC, 25m band SW (15540 kHz.)

### **India**

Tuesday and Friday on TWR Guam at 14.07, 31m band SW (15200 kHz.)

### **Thailand**

Wednesday on TWR Guam at 08.50, 19m band SW (15170kHz.)

### **Jamaica**

Sunday on MegaJamz at 09.00, 98.7 FM

## CONTACTING SEARCH FOR TRUTH

If you have enjoyed reading one of our books or listening to a radio broadcast, we would love to know about that, or answer any questions that you might have.

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Email: [sft@churchesofgod.info](mailto:sft@churchesofgod.info)

Also, if you have enjoyed reading this book and/or others in the series, we would **really** appreciate it if you could just take a couple of minutes to leave a brief review on Amazon – it really is a very good way of spreading the word about our ministry – thanks and God bless!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Responding to God's call in his life Brian Johnston left his post as a UK government scientist in 1987 to become a fulltime Bible teacher and evangelist on behalf of the Churches of God ([www.churchesofgod.info](http://www.churchesofgod.info))

For many years, he has been spending much of his time in missionary church-planting activity in Belgium and the Philippines. He also presents on Search for Truth Radio and is an editor of Needed Truth magazine (see [www.neededtruth.info](http://www.neededtruth.info)).

He has authored the book Exploring Issues of Life. He is married to Rosemary, and they have two children, Michael and Anna.