

EXTRAORDINARY NOBODIES OF THE BIBLE

INTRODUCTION

A student once came to William Sloane Coffin when he was chaplain at Yale and challenged him by saying that Christianity was nothing but a crutch. "True". Sloan replied, "But what makes you think you don't limp?" All of us become Christians because we know that we are limping. We are needy; there is a God sized hole in our lives and hearts. We have a need for grace, for mercy, for salvation, for love, for purpose and for life which is life indeed.

In a certain sense the Bible is full of nobodies. After all, apart from God, who are we? Paul writes the following in 1 Corinthians chapter one describing the early Christians of Corinth:

"²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him."

Certainly though there are great figures in the Bible; people who were used by God in mighty and powerful ways. Usually in our Bible studies we focus on these important figures: people like Jeremiah, Moses and Paul. But in this study, we'll be looking at some of the minor figures of the scriptures, the people who populate the background of the story of salvation. Some of these lesser known characters have important and interesting stories to tell. Their lives

remind us that God uses all kinds of people to serve the Kingdom. Perhaps He can even use people like us.

Mother Teresa, put it this way, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." Hopefully we can learn from the extraordinary nobodies of the Bible how to humbly give ourselves over to God. In this way, we can hope that through us God might accomplish great things for Jesus Christ, or that we might learn to do small things with great love.

LESSON ONE

THE DUNG GATE GUY

NEHEMIAH 2:11-18; 3:5; 3:9-15

INTRODUCTION

In 587 BC the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem. The leaders of Judah were taken into exile to faraway Babylon. Surprisingly, this exile turned out to be a spiritual blessing, for it was in exile that the Hebrew people came into their own spiritually. They began to take their faith very seriously. They developed the Synagogue as a new center for their worship and they copied and studied the Torah (the first five books of the Bible).

When the Babylonians in their turn were conquered by the Persians, the Persians reversed many of the policies the Babylonians had initiated. The Exile was ended and many of the Jewish exiles were allowed to return home. Beginning with the Edict of Cyrus in 529 BC, they came back in waves to rebuild Israel. They managed to rebuild the temple, but found further projects to be beyond their strength and resources.

Meanwhile, back in Persia, one of the exiles, Nehemiah, became a court official to Artaxerxes (this was around 439 BC). Nehemiah was the cupbearer for the king, which meant he was a close advisor and confidant as well as a taster and protector. A visitor brought word to Nehemiah of conditions in Jerusalem, which were deplorable. Nehemiah was especially upset to learn that the wall around Jerusalem was in ruins. He received permission and support from the King to go to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. He did so and was able to enlist the

3) Why do you think that the noble(s) of Tekoa did not want to help?

4) What was the importance of the doors, bolts and bars?

5) What is a dung gate used for?

PART THREE: HOW DOES IT APPLY TO US?

1) How should we respond to God's call to volunteer? Are there jobs you shrink from (like the ruler(s) of Tekoa) because they are difficult and unpleasant (perhaps beneath you)?

2) Nehemiah allowed all kinds of people to volunteer to build the wall. How does this apply to us when we are in charge of God's work?

3) Do you think that Malkijah volunteered to specifically rebuild the dung gate or just to work on the wall in general? Do you volunteer for the tough, unpleasant tasks? Do you do them when asked?

4) What walls do you think we should build for God today? Or should we be tearing them down?

5) Is the greatest volunteer the one who does the biggest, most glorious task or the one who does the unpleasant and lowly task? Which do you seek?

A COVENANT PRAYER IN THE WESLEYAN TRADITION

I am no longer my own, but thine.

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,

Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.

And now, O Glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,

Let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

5) What happened to Paul after Ananias laid hands on him?

PART TWO: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

1) What is significant about the words, "Here I am, Lord". Who else says them in the bible?

2) Ananias raises an objection against going to help Paul. Was he right to do so?

3) Paul is called to suffer for God's sake. What do you make of that call? Is it a punishment or a blessing?

4) What does it mean for the scales to fall from Paul's eyes?

5) After he regained his sight, Paul was baptized and then took food, in that order. What does that tell you about Paul and his faith?

PART THREE: HOW DOES IT APPLY TO US?

1) Ananias was responsive to the word of God. His initial response was one of enthusiasm. Even when he learned his task and was frightened to go into the presence of a man like Paul, he did so. How do you respond when God calls you to difficult or dangerous tasks?

2) Both Paul and Ananias receive a word from God in a vision (Paul receives his vision while he is blind---interesting). Have you ever received a word from the Lord in a special way?

3) Do you think that God has ever asked you "to suffer for my name's sake"?

4) Have you ever had something like Paul's experience of having scales fall from your eyes? Describe what happened.

5) Ananias helped Paul to become a Christian. Who have you helped along the way?

PRAYER (Shaun Lambert has some words on Ananias and then a suggestion on how to pray as he did.)

- Ananias questions the wisdom of praying for a stranger and an enemy, but God encourages him out of the way of fear and into the way of love. It is clear that the prayer of Ananias has a significant impact on Saul. When Saul talks about his encounter with Jesus (which includes the prayer of Ananias when scales fell from his eyes) and he is filled with the Holy Spirit, he says he has had three important experiences.
- *'Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.'* (Philippians 3:12)

The word here for *'took hold'* is literally *'arrested.'* On the road to Damascus the love of Christ took hold of him.

- When the scales fell from his eyes he *'saw the light'*. In 2 Corinthians 4:6 he says, *'For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.'* This reference to light shining out of darkness goes back to Genesis 1:3 where God said *'Let there be light.'*

So Saul was taken hold of by the love of Christ, and the light of the love of God shone in his heart.

- He then says in 1st Timothy 1:13-14, *'Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.'*

The compassionate mercy, grace and love of God were poured into Paul like an overwhelming river.

I felt in part, these experiences were because of Ananias' prayer of befriending and compassion. So I have put them in prayer-form that we can pray first for ourselves, then a stranger, then an enemy, and finally back for ourselves. In the words of one of Jesus' most important statements *'Love your neighbor as yourself'* (Matthew 22:39).

These are the prayers

May the love of Christ take hold of me

May the light of Christ shine in my heart

May the love of Christ flow through me like a river

and then

May the love of Christ take hold of him/her

May the light of Christ shine in his/her heart

May the love of Christ flow through him/her like a river

(We pray it for our own self, then a stranger, then an enemy and finally for our own self again. Change is laid down by a succession of fresh experiences of love. In our prayer of blessing and befriending something real happens.)

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5) What word did Zechariah, son of Jehoda, give?

6) What happened to Zechariah and Joash?

PART TWO: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

1) When Jehosaphat faced the overwhelming might of the armies of the Moabites, the Edomites and the Ammonites, what did he do that was significant? Why is that important?

2) Jahaziel says that "the battle is not yours, but the Lord's." Isn't that always true, or was it especially true in this case?

3) What role if any did Jahaziel have in the victory? What role did he play after the victory was won?

4) King Joash's reign can be split into two parts; one in which he was obedient to God and one in which he was not. What made the difference?

5) What does it say about a person when they live life in two radically different ways?

6) Zechariah gave a word that was not welcomed. Did it make a difference?

PART THREE: HOW DOES IT APPLY TO US?

1) When someone faces overwhelming odds, have you ever felt called to give a word of encouragement?

2) Do you count on God to do it all, or do you feel that you and others have an important role to play?

3) If you gave a word of hope in a dark time and then everything turned out wonderfully, would you try and claim at least a part of the victory?

4) How much of your life and lifestyle are the product of the people you surround yourself with?

5) How good are you at speaking a truth that no one wants to hear? To what degree is that ever our job?

6) Do you think that Joash really needed to be removed as king? Why or why not?

PRAYER

“Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself.”

— *Martin Luther King Jr.*

PART TWO: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

1) How many people in the scriptures can you think of who were raised from the dead?

2) Why do you think Dorcas was raised from the dead?

3) Do you think that Dorcas was saved because she was such a kind and good person? Did that play a factor?

4) Why do you think Peter called on Dorcas to "get up".

5) What is significant about Peter staying with a man who was a tanner?

6) What happens next to Peter?

PART THREE: HOW DOES IT APPLY TO US?

1) Dorcas was remembered as "someone who was always doing good". How do you think you will be remembered?

2) Why is it important that we gather and remember those who have passed?

3) Since we believe in the resurrection, why do we mourn when someone dies? Does belief in the resurrection shape how you mourn?

4) Dorcas was remembered especially by the widows of her community. Who will especially remember you?

5) Dorcas experienced a miracle and was raised from the dead. Do you believe miracles still happen and do you believe that a miracle like that could still happen today?

6) What do you suppose that Dorcas did with the rest of her life? What would you have done? What are you doing now?

PRAYER

Here's a prayer of response to the events of Acts 9:36-43, where Jesus raises Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead. It comes from the Monthly Prayers (now Weekly Worship) page of the Christian Aid website.

Prayer

(inspired by Acts 9:36-43)

God,
When you heard Peter say to the body,
'Tabitha, get up'
Were you delighted with his faith?
With his belief that in Christ
death is actually overcome?

Do you will us to believe yet?
To believe that almost one billion people can;
hunger no more,
thirst no more
and every tear can be wiped away from their eyes?

Help us to hear the call to life,
to get up and serve as Tabitha
'devoted to good works and acts of charity'
and to live in resurrection hope,
that is both now and then. Amen.

*~ originally posted on the Monthly Prayers page (now Weekly Worship) of the Christian Aid website.
<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/churches/weekly-worship>*

6) How did Moses respond to Jethro's advice?

PART TWO: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

1) When Moses named his children, their names had significance. What do their names tell you about how Moses felt about his life in Midian?

2) Jethro accepted Moses into his family and Moses worked for him for many years. They were close. In addition, Jethro prays to God and offers sacrifice. Do you think he was a worshipper of Yahweh?

3) Moses was trying to do everything for his people. When people do that, what are they doing wrong?

4) Jethro advised Moses to delegate authority and multiply leaders? Why is that important?

5) How would you describe Moses' relationship with Jethro?

PART THREE: HOW DOES IT RELATE TO US?

1) Moses was an outsider in many ways; a Hebrew raised as an Egyptian who had to flee to a foreign land and live there as a shepherd. When have you felt like an outsider? How did that affect you spiritually?

2) Jethro welcomed Moses into his family and into his business. Can you think of anyone who has welcomed you? Can you think of anyone you have welcomed? What was it like?

3) At the very least, Moses and Jethro were from different cultural backgrounds, yet they were able to respect and work with each other. When have you been able to work with people from different backgrounds? When has it proven difficult?

4) Jethro saw a problem and offered advice. When is that a good idea? When should you keep quiet?

5) Moses took advice from Jethro. What does that tell us about Moses? What does that tell us about how we should respond to advice given us by others?

PRAYER

As we begin our work today;
Give us a heart to seek peace with each other;
Give us a mind to seek the truth with each other;
Give us the strength to work well with each other;
Give us the hope to have confidence in each other;
Give us such love that is ready to forgive one another;
Give us a desire to share fully with one another;
Give us compassion to care properly for one another;
Give us the emotions to truly feel for each other;
And so may we honour You this day.

From netdevotions.org

LESSON SIX **EPAPHRODITUS** **PHILIPPIANS 2:25-30, 4:14-19**

INTRODUCTION

Paul founded the church in Philippi (see Acts 16). They were the first church in Europe and the congregation remained close to Paul all the days of his ministry. At one point, while imprisoned (either in Ephesus or Rome) the church sent an offering and a delegate to help and assist Paul. That person was Epaphroditus whom Paul described in Philippians 2:25 as "*my brother, my fellow worker and fellow-soldier*". Epaphroditus devoted himself to the "*work of Christ*" so assiduously that he lost his health, became ill and almost died. Ironically, Paul ended

up caring for the one sent to care for him. Phillipians was almost certainly written to then the Philliopian church for their support and to ask them to welcome back Epaphroditus, not as one who had failed, but as one who had given his all for Christ.

PART ONE: WHAT DID WE READ?

- 1) With what words does Paul describe Epaphroditus in 2:25?

- 2) How ill was Epaphroditus?

- 3) How does Paul say they should receive Epaphroditus back?

- 4) In chapter four, what does Paul say was unique about the way the Philippines participated in his ministry?

- 5) Is Paul grateful for what the Phillipians gave to him? How does he describe these gifts?

PART TWO: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

- 1) Epaphroditus came to help, but needed help himself. What kind of a pastoral situation does Paul find himself in when he sends Epaphroditus back home? How does he deal with it?

- 2) Do you think that Paul was genuinely grateful to the Phillipians for sending Epaphroditus?

3) Why is Paul so concerned with the way in which the Phillipian church will receive the returning Epaphroditus.

4) Why do you suppose that the Philipian church alone supported Paul in his ministry?

5) What was the most important thing about the gifts the Phillipian church sent to Paul?

6) Paul describes their gifts to him as "*an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.*" How is a gift to him a sacrifice to God?

PART THREE: HOW DOES IT APPLY TO US?

1) Have you ever tried to help someone only to end up needing help yourself? What was that like?

2) Have you ever had someone try and help you, only to end up having to help them instead?

3) Have you ever been tasked with a job by people only to have to return with the job half finished?

4) In general, do you think it is more important to receive material help or is it more important to receive the personal support of others?

5) Are there some people you will take help from while refusing it from others? Why or why not?

6) Do you see the tasks you do for others as a sacrifice to God?

MEDITATION

Getting closer.

The more someone draws near to us,

The more we feel their presence.

The more someone gives time to us,

The more we can share with them.

The more someone works with us

The more we know about them.

The more someone befriends us

The more we are at ease with them.

The more someone offers help to us,

The more we give them in return.

The more someone shows real love to us

The more we are willing to give all.

How close is Jesus?

PRAYER

Bring me close to You through what I do this day, Lord Jesus. May I understand the things that You would have me do, and so do them. May I take hold of each challenge You bring me, and not avoid them. May I Embrace a right attitude to all things, and take joy in being Your servant; through Your Name I pray,

AMEN

LESSON SEVEN

JABEZ

1 CHRONICLES 4:9-10

INTRODUCTION

It would be safe to say that most people who read 1 Chronicles could be forgiven for quickly skipping over the story of Jabez. He is a minor character most notable as a prayer warrior. Yet in the midst of a long genealogy, the Chronicler thought it important for us to hear and reflect on the story of Jabez and the effect of this short, but powerful prayer. Twenty years ago, a short book was written on the prayer of Jabez by Bruce Wilkenson. It became a huge best seller, influencing millions and reminding us that scripture can speak to us in powerful ways if we will only listen.

PART ONE: WHAT DID WE READ?

- 1) How did Jabez compare with his brothers?

- 2) What does the name Jabez mean?

- 3) What did jabez pray for in regard to territory?

4) Read through verse 10 in different translations to see what exactly jabez prayed for in terms of pain. What did he pray for?

5) Was jabez' prayer answered?

PART TWO : WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

1) What kind of a family do you think Jabez was born into?

2) Why would his mother give him that name?

3) How did Jabez deal with the legacy of a bad name and a rough beginning?

4) What does it mean to pray for an enlarged territory?

5) Jabez did not want to cause or receive pain. What does that tell you about him?

6) What do the words, "And God granted his request." Tell you about Jabez? What do they tell you about God?

PART THREE: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO US?

1) Was your family a spiritual help or hindrance to you?

2) How much of an advantage is it to have a loving and supportive family? How big of a problem is it to have a dysfunctional family?

3) When you have inherited bad practices, what have you done to overcome them?

4) What kinds of things do you normally pray for? Would your prayer life be enriched if you offered the prayer of Jabez?

5) Why do you think that God granted Jabez' request? Would he do the same for you?

PRAYER

"Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from hurt and harm."