

JOURNEY WITH JESUS

A. THE PIONEER.

11. Interrupted Interruptions.

My idea of heaven is to be given a job to do – and the uninterrupted time in which to do it! With a young family I soon became resigned to manifold interruptions, but what got me to screaming point was when the interruptions themselves were interrupted!

All through his ministry, Jesus had to contend with that. Most of his miraculous healings were actually interruptions to his teaching sessions. We have a good example in **Luke 8:40-56**. Jesus had hardly entered Capernaum after a spate of travelling – probably looking forward to some time of rest in the home where he had made his headquarters – when he was met by an expectant crowd full of needs to be addressed. Most urgent of these needs was that of Jairus, a ruler of the local synagogue: his only daughter, a girl about 12 years of age, was dying. In his extremity Jairus threw dignity to the winds and humbly knelt at Jesus' feet, pleading with this man whom many of the religious leaders despised, to come and heal her. Jesus responded at once to his unquestioning faith, putting aside any dreams of relaxation to follow Jairus to his home, the crowds almost crushing him as he pushed his way through.

But here the interruption was about to be interrupted. In the crowd was a desperate woman – a woman just as desperate as Jairus, but much worse off, because her ailment of constant bleeding rendered her “unclean” and so unable to worship anywhere or have any social contact with her fellow Jews. Luke the doctor simply tells us she had had this illness for 12 years. But Mark, who perhaps had had some unfortunate experience with doctors, gives us the gruesome details – “She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.” (**Mark 5:26**). Hmmm! But this woman had enough faith in Jesus to decide that if she could only just touch the hem of his cloak, she would be healed. And so trembling, daring, hoping, she reached out, ignored by the mob around, and touched the edge of Jesus' cloak. Immediately the bleeding stopped – a fact admitted freely by doctor Luke!

Jesus stopped, too, right in his tracks. Looking around at the crowd, he asked, “Who touched me?” It seemed incredible to the disciples that he should ask: Peter, as if stating the obvious to a child, answered, “Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.” And then comes **verse 46** which we can hardly hope to understand. “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.” The closest explanation of this divine working within humanity is that God had graciously determined to heal the woman through the power that was then active in Jesus, supernatural power that once again responded to a need by overcoming the limits of his voluntary humanity.

This was the moment the woman had dreaded: her heinous “crime” had been discovered! Dire punishment would rain on her head for daring to be in public at all in her “unclean” condition, and worse still, daring to touch this rabbi, thus making him “unclean” as well. Trembling, expecting the worst, she fell at the feet of Jesus, not presuming to beg for mercy but humbly confessing what she had done.

But Jesus had no punishment for her. In **verse 48** he gently called her “daughter”, a tender address used nowhere else in his recorded words. And he followed that up with an affirmation of her faith and his benediction of peace. We might think that if he understood her feelings so completely, why was he cruel enough to make a public show of her distress? The reason is simple: by his acceptance of her he was making public the fact that she was now healed and so completely “clean”: therefore she should be accepted back straight away into the arms of the just-as-needy crowd around her.

There is an ironic juxtaposition here: Jairus, with his authority as ruler of the synagogue, leading a scrupulously clean life and accepted well in social and religious circles, and the woman, with no status, unclean and not even allowed to enter Jairus' synagogue, shunned by society and religious leaders

alike. But these 2 extremes had something in common – their need, their faith in Jesus and their willingness to humble themselves. Jesus cared equally for them both.

We can imagine Jairus' impatience at the delay, and his shattered hopes as a messenger came from his home to tell him with unbelievable callousness that his child had died so there was no need to bother the rabbi further. Jesus hastened to sooth the pain with his encouraging, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." Jairus' faith was being stretched to the limit.

Mark 5:38-40 gives us the dramatic scene outside Jairus' house when they eventually arrived: it seems the professional mourners had already been engaged and were earning their pay with a real commotion of crying and wailing loudly. But this commercialised mourning was offensive to Jesus, who quickly told them where they could go and, taking only 3 of his trusted disciples, Peter, James and John, he went inside the house to the parents who were doing the real grieving. Without putting them through any more tortuous delay, he took the child by the hand with words that could be translated today as "Get up, little sweetheart!"

And she did. Mark tells us she was 12 years old and without any convalescence she was able immediately to walk around. With enormous understatement he says her parents were "completely astonished." And then Jesus gave the master touch –the therapy they needed to regain their balance after all the trauma – he told them to give her something to eat. The scornful laughter of the mourners was silenced: now joyful laughter could ring out from the family whom Jesus had restored.

Are you a parent whose child is "dead?" Entreat faithfully – believe completely – Jesus can bring your dear child back to life.

Kingdom Sketches.

Matthew 13: 1-58. Jesus was the supreme master of the short story Very few people can grasp abstract ideas: most people think in pictures. Parables made the truth concrete, enabling the hearers to discover the truth for themselves: they were short and to the point: they were spoken, not read, so they had to be memorable. It has been said that every great idea must take form and shape in a person: in that sense Jesus himself was a parable: as Paul tells us in **Colossians 2:9**, "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." To those who believed in him and wanted to know him better, this was a revelation: to those who did not want to accept the truth, this was unbelievable nonsense. They brought upon themselves the judgement of blindness. But even then the disciples hardly understood their privilege: as Jesus pointed out in **verses 16,17** "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it." With their own eyes they could see Jesus, the Son of God, right in their midst!

Tragically there are millions in the world today who are blind: some have never heard of Jesus: some have heard but have rejected him: some of us have had the privilege of knowing him for years. Jesus himself said in Luke 12:48, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." Where do you stand?

In this 13th chapter Matthew lists some parables directly concerning the Kingdom of God, beginning with the well-known parable of the sower. In Palestine there were 2 ways of sowing seed. The sower could sow it broadcast as he walked up and down the field, or sometimes a sack of seed, with a hole cut in one corner, would be put on the back of a donkey which would then be walked up and down the field, allowing the seed to dribble out of the hole as it went. The fields were in long narrow strips and the ground between them was always a right-of-way, so that it would be trampled hard by countless feet using it as a common path. It is easy to see that some of the seed would fall onto these paths, with no chance of it penetrating the hardened soil. It was common too for a thin skin of earth to be on the top of any underlying shelf of limestone rock: on such ground the seed would germinate and grow quickly with the warmth of the sun on the rock, but when its roots, in search of nourishment and moisture, met only the rock, the plant would quickly die from heat and starvation. The thorny

ground was deceptive: newly tilled, it would look clean and healthy, but the roots of weeds were lying under the surface, ready to spring up.

The 4 types of soil are around us today! They illustrate (1) the hearer with the shut mind, blinded by prejudice, fear or pride, an unwillingness to see beyond one's own affairs: (2) the hearer with the shallow mind, who fails to think things through for himself, who embraces a new thing enthusiastically and then cannot persevere with it when the going gets tough: (3) the hearer with so many interests or concerns in life that the most important things get crowded out, one who is too busy to get his priorities right: and (4) the hearer with an open mind who is always willing to learn, never too proud or too busy to listen; he has the understanding to translate his hearing into action. The usual harvest in Palestine was 7-15% of the seed sown: a harvest of 100%, like our response to Christ, could only be the work of God!

Jesus told this parable not only as a challenge to his hearers, but also as an encouragement to his disciples. There are times when they must have felt terribly discouraged that this most wonderful Rabbi should meet with so much criticism and hostility. By this time many synagogues were shut against him and while the crowds thronged him eagerly in hope of healing and comfort, few were prepared to let go of their old life and become his true disciples.

But despite the seed that was lost, the harvest still was sure! Granted, there is no point in looking for quick results any more than the child with his "very own garden" will find shoots the day after he has excitedly planted some seeds! Silently, but steadily, the Spirit of God works in the hearts of men. How many faithful Sunday School teachers have reaped a harvest years later when their pupils have grown up? Susanna Wesley somehow found the time to teach her 19 children about God, and an abundant harvest came later through her sons John and Charles.

Do you sometimes feel your efforts for God are an utter failure? Persevere and pray. There are no failures, and no loose ends, in the ultimate plan of God.

To his little, unprepossessing band of disciples, Jesus went on in **verses 31 and 32** to liken the Kingdom of Heaven to a mustard seed, the smallest seed used by Palestinian farmers and gardeners, which could grow to a height of 3 metres and accommodate birds in its branches. And as for the value of that kingdom, Jesus added the story of the treasure hidden in a field, for which a man gladly sold all he had for the right to dig up that treasure: and the merchant who found a pearl of exceptional value, and who gladly sold all he had to buy that uniquely precious pearl. The Kingdom of Heaven was in the programme of God and nothing could or would thwart its growth and ultimate triumph.

Someone has rightly said, Salvation comes to you as a free gift – but it will cost you the rest of your life! What price can we put on eternal life?

Second Time Around.

Mark 6:1-6. Despite being rejected so violently at Nazareth at the start of his ministry, Jesus did not forget his hometown, and here we see him going back there, this time with his band of 12 followers. On the Sabbath he once again taught in the synagogue and this time his audience was amazed, a better translation being literally "thunderstruck". Who did this Jesus think he was? Why, he was merely the local carpenter who had gone off on some crazy mission instead of carrying on the business his dead father had left behind and looking after his mother Mary. He had left that responsibility to his brothers: just as well they were still here, all of them – James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. (It should be noted that the word used here is "adelphes", meaning "brother", not "anepsios" meaning "cousin.") And of course his sisters were a help: after all, it was a girl's duty to look after her mother. But one thing they could not deny: Jesus possessed an uncommon wisdom as well as the power to work miracles. How could this possibly be?

In wry response Jesus quoted a popular saying to them, reflecting the very human fact that familiarity breeds contempt. It was a more serious fact that he actually could not exercise his power where there was no faith to call it forth. Now it was his turn to be amazed – at their lack of faith. They, who

had known Jesus all their lives, stood condemned before a Gentile, the Roman centurion who had amazed Jesus with his unquestioning faith, in **Luke 6:9** – a faith Jesus had not even found in God’s own people of Israel!

Perhaps you have known Jesus for most of your life. Has familiarity dimmed the wonder of his presence? Are you in danger of taking him for granted without acknowledging his supremacy and his right to your undying allegiance?

The Practise Run.

Matthew 10:1-42. Jesus knew that time was running short and that an important part of his training of the disciples was to let them test the knowledge they had learned by putting it into action. But, like any good teacher, he sent them out well equipped – equipped with his own power and authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. It must have been a heady experience for the disciples!

Verses 5 and 6 may seem strange to us. Jesus, who had come to save the world, was limiting his messengers to their own countrymen, the Jews, atypical of the Lord who had spent 2 days with the Samaritan villagers, and had responded to the faith of a Roman centurion! There are 2 very good reasons for this. Firstly, the Jews held a very special place in God’s scheme of things, and in the justice of God they had to be given the first offer of the way of salvation through their Messiah. Secondly, it is psychologically important for an apprentice to have at least a measure of success in his first stumbling endeavours. Jesus knew that, steeped as they were in Jewish history and religion, his disciples could cope with fellow-Jews, but as yet were not equipped with either the background, the knowledge or the technique to deal with anyone beyond that culture. Failure in this first venture could discourage them enough to give up.

The message they had to preach was clear: “The kingdom of heaven is near.” (**Verse 7**) Jesus had been teaching them clearly about the kingdom, and now was the time to teach others: the ground must be prepared for the seed of salvation to be sown once Christ’s redeeming work was done, but time was short and Jesus needed helpers in order to cover the territory of Israel. His command was staggering, in **verse 8**: they had to do what Jesus himself had been doing – heal the sick, raise the dead and drive out demons! They were allowed no leniency for inexperience – after all, he had given them his power!

In **verse 9** Jesus gave them a challenge to their faith. In this urgent mission all worldly security had to be left behind: the disciples were not tourists. A rabbi at that time might not accept payment, but conversely it was considered both a privilege and an obligation to support a rabbi if he was truly a man of God. In **verses 11-15** Jesus goes on to stress that theirs was not a travel holiday with luxury accommodation: they had to be content with whatever acceptable hospitality was offered them, and concentrate on delivering their message. With that he also issued a warning of judgement to those people who would not accept the authority of the coming King. Whenever Pharisees left an “unclean” Gentile area, they would as a symbolic act shake the dust of that area off their feet: Jesus here was telling his disciples that Jews who rejected his message were to be treated like Gentiles – a revolutionary thought indeed!

Jesus gave his disciples 2 injunctions that apply equally to us today. Verse 16 warns that the power of evil is real and dangerous and to keep ourselves from Satan’s traps we must keep our wits about us, mindful that commonsense is in no way the opposite of faith, while at the same time our whole lives must be blameless for the sake of the honour of the One we are serving. Verse 8 reminds us of the unpayable debt we owe to God for His love, grace and mercy, and that in no way can we do less than give ourselves freely in the service of the One who gave freely to us. These 2 guidelines make useful tools for us to take stock of our walk and ministry with God.

In **Verses 17-42** Jesus gave some general advice as he looked to the future scope of mission, both with the disciples and with the countless emissaries who have taken his message to the world ever since. Persecution will be severe: those who hated Christ will hate his followers too, but we don't need to be afraid of those who can only destroy the body while He who has rescued our soul stands guard over us for eternity. **Verse 30** is well-known and can have 2 meanings: forensic scientists have told us that the cells in our body, including that of our hair, have their own individual DNA, so in that sense our hairs are numbered, or "catalogued." That's how valuable we are to God!

The climax comes in **verses 38 and 39**. Jesus never pandered to anyone. His challenge today is as strong as it was then: only those who give up everything of less importance in order to follow him, will be counted worthy to be his disciples. After all, the cross is simply the big "I" crossed out! As Jesus "lost" his life on the Cross, only to gain it back for eternity, so must we lose our lives of self-absorption in order to gain his awesome life – for eternity.

William Barclay once wrote, "It is the call of the heroic which ultimately speaks to the hearts of men."¹ No wonder Jesus' disciples adored their hero!

Frank Fletcher put this sentiment into a hymn -

"O Son of Man, our hero strong and tender, Whose servants are the brave in all the earth,
Our living sacrifice to You we render, Who shares in all our sorrows, all our mirth."²

¹ The Gospel of Matthew Vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible, page 386, William Barclay, The Saint Andrew Press

² "O Son of Man", Frank Fletcher, Baptist Church Hymnal (Revised), 1933, Psalms and Hymns Trust, London