# I.A.M.

IDENTITY. AUTHORITY. MANDATE

By MANI ERFAN

# VOLUME I

Knowing and Living Your Identity in God

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# Introduction

I have been involved in ministry for twenty years, from pastoring local churches to helping produce evangelical and teaching programs on satellite TV to conducting revival conferences overseas to standing in the position of a prophet for local ministries. One can say I have done a little bit of everything. But the path the Lord set my feet and focus on in 2011, and the journey that has led me to write this book, has been the most important task of all.

If someone had told me that it would take me almost 10 years to see this book to completion, I would have thought it impossible. When I penned the first words back in October 2012, I thought it would be done quickly, that I would finish it within a few months. After all, I imagined I had all the revelation I needed to write it then and there. But as life would have it, many things had to occur, both good and bad, and I had to experience much success and tragedy to receive the inspiration and proper revelation to write the book God had in mind.

I never considered the valleys and peaks I would and am traversing from the time I felt compelled to write down the revelations of the triune identity, authority, and mandate God disclosed to me. What I know now is so much more than what I thought I knew when I began writing. It is also clear that I have much more to learn for this work to be truly finished. Perhaps the work will never be completely done, as God is endless within Himself, and there is no end to the process of knowing Him; therefore, there is, ultimately, no end in the revelation of oneself in Him.

So perhaps this book is actually a launching point of a life-long journey into knowing and finding ourselves in our God. After all, the God of the Bible made people in His image and likeness, and what we do in the search for human spiritual identity and calling is, in the end, about knowing our Maker and Creator. Is not coming to know Him more intimately the endpoint of all godly pursuit?

For every student of the Bible, they can see the great harmony within its pages, connecting the events and people of the past with the events and people of the present and the future, as if the tapestry of time and events all connect and weave together to make the perfect, singular story of our God and His will for His creation. We see in the Bible a grand design at work, one that I have come to caption, after the book authored by the world-famous astrophysicist Steven Hawking, *The Theory of Everything*, by its spiritual counter, *The Unifying Theology of the Gospel*.

One day, when the final words of the final chapter of this three-volume series will be finished, the theological revelation and transformation it will present to the church will not bring further division but will, at last, bring together all Christians from all walks of life, from every denomination and from each cultural background, in agreement and scriptural unity. The truths God has revealed to me are simple in nature, and they traverse prior theological divides. It is ultimately His purpose that His people know Him and come together in one mind and one Spirit to prepare the Church for His return.

This is a tall claim. But I honestly believe the I AM revelation is that unifying force and teaching that can build bridges between us believers where none has existed. It overcomes prior misconceptions and misunderstandings, reveals simple, life-changing truths, and activates the church into its ultimate destiny.

How did this all begin?

The journey started by the Holy Spirit asking me to answer three questions for myself:

- Who am I?
- What is my purpose?
- What am I supposed to do?

Honestly, I thought these were silly questions, for they seemed basic concepts of faith considering my vast knowledge of the Word and that I had taught and studied some of the so-called deepest teachings in the Christian world. Or so I thought.

I quickly realized that I did not have concise, clear, and complete answers to these questions. I could answer them in part and or in a way that I thought was right. But I struggled to provide the answers I knew would satisfy the Holy Spirit completely.

For example, my answer to the question Who am I? was a quick response: A child of God, of course! But that is where I stopped. Then I deviated into Christian phraseologies such as "I am the salt of the earth," and "I am the light of the world," or "I am the bride of Christ." At that point, the Holy Spirit stopped me dead in my tracks and quizzed me if I actually even knew what it meant to be the salt of the earth, how to be the light of the world, and, in case I did get to wear my wedding dress, act like and be a bride to another Man!

Honestly, I did not do well in this discussion with the Holy Spirit. I sort of called a time-out and settled into my chair to watch TV. But the matter remained unsettled, and the questions were left unanswered. In order to go further in my walk with the Lord, I had to take a giant step backward. Sort of walk back all the way to the very beginning of the line.

Truth be told, I had a tough time reconciling the fact that I came up short in answering these basic questions. I had been digging into the Word for twenty years. I studied and deciphered end times prophecies. I mined the Word, seeking the deeper truths on hard topics such as the rapture of the church and the principles of receiving biblical blessing and prosperity. And I not only examined the Bible but also, as a pastor and teacher, taught these subjects to many people. So, to realize that after all of this time and effort I did not have clear and concise answers to such elementary questions asked of me by the Holy Spirit was a blow to my pride.

I mean, come on! Who am I? This is kindergarten stuff. A first-grader question . . . sort of. Is it even important? I mean, doesn't everyone know the answer?

Or take the question: What is my purpose? Of course, I am supposed to serve the Lord and be the best Christian I can be and be the most successful businessperson I can become. Yes? Well . . . maybe not? The Holy Spirit did not jump up and put His complete stamp of approval on my initial answers, which really irritated me. I was figuring I would get an A+ on theologically nailing that answer. I deflated at the rather disappointing tepid "Nope" from His Highness.

On the question of What can I do as a believer? I was absolutely ready for this one. I rattled off a rapid-fire answer: "Heal the sick, cast out demons, prophesy, preach, do miracles, pray in tongues, worship, have wisdom, discern, exercise faith." I waited, fully expecting wild applause and a "Bravo!" from the Holy Spirit followed by ecstatic shouts of "Amen, brother!" Instead, I got, "Well, not exactly what I was hoping to hear, Mani."

By now I felt fully dejected. Stumped and, frankly, clueless, I wondered what the Holy Spirit was expecting from me and what answers would satisfy Him. What did my apparent failure in Basic Biblical Truths 101 mean?

I wish I could tell you that at that moment, the Holy Spirit gave me this great revelation, that suddenly I understood the mysteries behind the three questions, and that I could clearly comprehend His real intentions by bringing me to that point. But it did not. Rather, the great revelation has come through a journey of discovery, a gradual path of relearning basic biblical truths over the last thirty months.

This is certain, however: the most important truths in the Bible are the simplest truths. The most important foundation that believers are to build their lives on is a result of properly and accurately answering these three simple questions. It is far more important to help a believer, be it a brand-new babe in Christ or an old-timer in the church, answer these questions

correctly and then apply them properly in their lives than to teach any other biblical subject.

These three questions form the foundation of the greatest theological study a student of the Bible can undertake. They form a sort of trinity of truth of what Jesus accomplished on the cross for humankind and the church eternally. They are the foundation stones on which to build a personal house of faith and a healthy church.

Once a believer knows who they really are in God, what they have been empowered to do by the infusion of the Godhead into their lives, and what their clear mission statement is for their lives, they become incredibly powerful and the gates of hell cannot prevail against them.

I know this without a doubt: the Holy Spirit commissioned me to teach these truths and to help His church successfully answer these three questions. It is the most important task before me. I hope that this effort will be both beneficial and a blessing to you. More so, I pray that it will help you form a firm foundation of faith, activating and enabling you to be a far more successful Christian and kingdom builder than you ever imagined.

On a final note, I wish to reiterate that the truths shared in this book are universal in application. They are applicable for all Christians of all denominations who love the Lord and seek to serve Him. These questions have to be correctly answered by Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Charismatics, Seventh Day Adventists, Church of God, and by any true believer of any denominational persuasion. I am pleased that the Lord has chosen me to embark on a path that can bless the entire household of faith.

Are you ready for the journey to answer the three questions? Let's go!

**Mani Erfan**

February 21, 2015 (at an altitude of 33,000 feet)

# PART 1

**YOU ARE A CHILD OF YOUR FATHER**

**Your Identity in God**

# Chapter 1 - Identity Crisis

Understanding one's identity is by definition the answer to the first question, who am I?

That is a fundamental question every believer must answer. Most Christians have a partial or incomplete understanding of their true identity. Some have a corrupted or false view of themselves.

Almost all behavior is rooted in self-identity: the perception a person has of him- or herself. If a man perceives himself to be a winner, an achiever, and successful, his belief will be reflected and reinforced through his behavior. He will present himself as confident, determined, optimistic, and probably a risk taker. He more often than not succeeds in his endeavors.

In contrast, a person who, due to her past failures, experiences, or shortcomings, perceives herself as a failure, undesirable, unattractive, or weak is usually fearful, tepid, insecure, and indecisive. Her behavior follows an ongoing pattern of failure.

A false identity causes major behavioral insecurities that can result in destructive patterns of behavior that have the power to destroy relationships, scuttle marriages, cause business and partnership failures, impede church and ministry growth, and result in social and spiritual isolation.

*One can say with absolute confidence that how people see themselves is critical to their behavior.*

The greatest example of this in the Bible is seen in the account of the twelve Israelites sent into Canaan to spy on the land. Their mission was to gather information prior to the intended twelve tribes' crossing of the Jordan and to facilitate a successful conquest of the Promised Land.

The Jews had experienced some of the most spectacular miracles ever seen by human eyes up to that time. They had walked in the midst of the Red Sea on dry land and witnessed God miraculously destroy in mere moments Pharaoh's army, the most powerful army of ancient times. They had lived through the ten plagues, each on a supernatural miracle, which befell Egypt. They had received God's miraculous provision of food and water while wandering one of the most barren deserts in the world.

One wonders how anyone could survive a week let alone forty years in such an inhospitable barren place and not just one soul but millions. Having often driven hours in the Sinai without ever seeing one single tree or shrub, I understand why God brought His people through such a place. He wanted the Israelites to know with certainty who their God was, and He wanted them to know that they could depend on Him and trust Him. They would have no cause to doubt that their God was able to meet all their needs and fulfill all of His promises to them.

But what happened is incredibly strange. The twelve spies returned with a frightening report. We pick up the story in the book of Numbers:

> *But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land*

> *they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."* (*Numbers 13:31–33)*

The phrase "we seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes" says it all.

In contrast, Caleb, one of the twelve spies, has a completely different perception of the situation, as he adamantly proclaims: "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it" (v. 30).

Caleb surely saw everything the other eleven spies saw. Or did he? It is clear that this man saw himself not as a grasshopper but as a victor, a warrior. He was absolutely confident that God would come to his aid. His perception of the situation and his sense of identity influenced his view of the world and the situation he faced. Seeing the same facts as the other eleven spies, he came to an opposite conclusion about himself, the outcome of the future engagement with the people in the land, and, ultimately, the future of his people. Caleb's identity was not defined or limited to himself, his tribe, or his countrymen. His identity was defined by his God.

The story of the twelve spies is telling in many ways. Failure to understand one's identity can lead to terrible and disastrous consequences and ultimate defeat. A life destined for greatness can end up in the desert of mediocrity or, worse, destruction. Hell withholds nothing from its attack on believers from the moment they enter God's kingdom. If we view ourselves as mere grasshoppers before the demonic giants that come against us, we will run away from engagement, ceding kingdom territory to the Enemy. We will never be brave and courageous enough to cross the river of faith and enter the land of promise.

Ultimately, heavenly destinies and the fulfillment of our Father's hopes and dreams for our lives depend squarely on how we perceive ourselves. We are assured of this thing, as the Word of the Lord in Jeremiah 29:11 states:

*"'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"*

A wonderful destiny is in the balance, the attainment of which hinges on our understanding of our identity in God.

Our very characters, daily behavior and habits, our reactions to events and responses to difficulties, our ability to remain in the faith and ultimately to endure so that we can experience true victory are based on our correct understanding of our identity.

Jesus summarized his understanding of His own identity in a simple statement:

*"I and the Father are one" (John 10:30)*

This is one of the most important recorded statements Jesus ever made, and it shows how He perceived Himself. If you take away from reading this book only one thing, I hope it is this: Jesus was not only speaking for Himself but prophetically on behalf of the church that was born out of Him.

By direct inference, since Jesus and the Father are one, you and the Father are one.

But before we go further, let me ask this question: Have you heard a pastor or Bible teacher say, "We need to be more Christ-like," or "We need to become more like Jesus"?

While these are true statements, they are rather incomplete. What we should be saying is that we need to become more like God Himself or, better said, more God-like. The phrase does not roll out of our tongues easily, and some part of us feels that it might be sacrilegious to even think this. But we

are made in the image of God; hence, our identity cannot be defined only in the Son, but in God Himself and within the Trinity that defines him.

In order to understand our complete identity, we have to understand that we have a unique identity not only in Jesus (the Son) but also in the Father and the Holy Spirit. Now that we know we have three distinct identities, we must ask what these identities are.

A unique depiction of these three distinct identities we have in the Godhead is found in one of the most unusual creatures ever described in the Bible: The Cherubim, as described in the book of Ezekiel and seen again by John in the book of Revelation:

> *Also, in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, and the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. (Revelation 4:6–8)*

Four living creatures and four distinct faces or depictions, and all of them before the throne room of God. It is as if they reflect how He sees Himself. I call these four living creatures God's "talking mirrors." They speak to Him of who He is and His eternal identity. Let us study these living creatures more closely.

One has the face of a lion. If there is one creature in all of nature that's very name and appearance resonate with kingship authority it is a lion. The lion then depicts the identity of God as King.

Another has the face of an ox. An ox is made to serve and toil to meet the needs of its master. The ox depicts the very nature and identity of servanthood. Therefore, the ox depicts the identity of God as Servant.

A third creature has the face of a man, for Christ came in the form of man and in the nature of the Son of Man. Christmas is all about the birth of a miracle, a

human child born of the Holy Spirit who calls God Abba Father so that through His death and sacrifice, all of humanity can call Him Father, too. He grew into a man who was and is and will always be God. There the face of a man depicts the identity of God being born as a child of man.

The last and fourth one is the face of an eagle. Eagles are meant to soar in the heavens, and they have great vision to see all that is beneath them. The eagle is the creature that speaks of God's divinity.

If I may be so bold to say that God sees Himself as the divine Creator of all things who took the form of a man and chose to serve His own creation but will ultimately rule as the King of Kings.

There are therefore three distinct identities that we share with our God in His divine Trinity.

1. *I am a child of my heavenly Father and heir to His glorious kingdom.*
2. *I am a bondservant (slave) of my Master and Redeemer, Christ Jesus.*
3. *I am a king destined for greatness and called for exercising dominion through the power and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.*

A healthy and complete Christian identity can only be understood through the proper revelation and understanding of all three identities. In fact, each distinct identity defines the very parameters, rules, and guidelines of how we are to conduct ourselves and interact with heaven, the church, and the world around us.

Only after truly understanding our child identity can we grasp the very foundations of how we ought to interact with heaven and the heavenly Father. We then can truly embrace the father's grace and apply it successfully to our daily lives. We are liberated from the bondage of self-righteousness once and for all.

Only after embracing our servant-slave identity can we wholeheartedly receive and accept the lordship of Jesus over our lives and embark on washing the feet of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ with joy and gladness. We are then made free from the bondage of self-gratification and the chains of self.

And only after believing that we are meant to be kings and are called to exercise dominion in this world can we understand why the Holy Spirit was given to us with such dynamic and incredible power. It is only then that we comprehend the purpose of our being sent out to this dying world as ambassadors of heaven, equipped with the power and majesty of God's Spirit.

# Chapter 2 - You Are His Baby

In the book of Genesis, we find the record of the creation of the man called Adam.

> *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (Genesis 1:29)*

After his creation, Adam walked the garden and had fellowship with not only all of the living beings that were placed on the earth but also, and more important, God. He had direct fellowship with God. They knew each other and walked together in the cool of the garden. They talked and shared a deep companionship as friends, which makes this verse quite puzzling.

*"The LORD God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (Genesis 2:18).*

It is not good for man to be alone? Wait a minute! What more does a man need but to walk with God? If I were to ask you if you would feel lonely if you literally walked and talked with God every day, I cannot imagine you saying yes. How could Adam be lonely?

He must have felt alone; otherwise, God would not have said so. He must have noticed that Adam felt something missing in his life. But let us not forget that Adam was made in the image of God. So inherently his loneliness was not as much rooted in his circumstances or place as it reflected the heart condition of the One who had made him.

From the beginning of time, or before even time was, the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit co-existed and had fellowship with one another.

The whole exercise of creating Adam is clearly intended to expand the fellowship to include another who is made in the image and likeness of God. It seems that God wanted to include another person at His table to communicate with, talk to, fellowship with, and just hang around with.

While it seems that God was pleased with Adam's fellowship, Adam was not fully satisfied. Why would I say that? If he were satisfied, he would not have been lonely. I believe that Adam failed to grasp the fellowship intended between him and God and yearned for another in the image and likeness of himself. He felt lonely and God clearly noticed it.

To solve the problem, God put Adam into a deep sleep and took from his side a rib, out of which he fashioned the woman, Eve. Adam then spoke these words over Eve:

*"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man" (Genesis 2: 23).*

Thus, Eve is born from the bone and flesh of Adam. She is literally taken from and formed out of him.

This may have solved Adam's problem of loneliness, but what about God's? We know Adam was lonely and Eve addressed that need. But what and who would meet the need of companionship and friendship that God sought and longed for? God had opened the door of eternal fellowship to Adam, and Adam had essentially looked for another to fulfill his need.

As I was pondering this question, I asked the Holy Spirit why God would be alone since a multitude of angels and heavenly creatures surrounded Him. He had no lack of a crowd around Him. Why would he be alone? The answer I received was rather astounding.

While heaven is filled with angels and created heavenly beings, they could not satisfy the earnest desire of God to commune with one like Him. It is more like living in a home with a number of pets. For example, dogs are faithful, loving, and great companions, but when they start barking, we really

do not know what they are "saying." If we were to put ourselves in their place, we would realize that they have no idea what we are saying when we talk. There is a limit to the level of friendship a man can have with his dog. They are of different DNA.

I am not saying that the relationship between God and His angels is as rudimentary and limited as ours with our furry friends, but this analogy is a picture of the real limitations of communication and intimacy that exists between two beings who are not equal in creation. One can only have true fellowship and intimacy with an equal. The angels were not made in God's image. There is a real limit to what God could share and communicate with His created angels and heavenly beings. He had no one in heaven equal to Himself. By this I mean the fullness of Trinity since the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have always been in fellowship with each other, but the desire was to add another seat at the table of this eternal fellowship.

Hence, Adam is created, but the plan is soon scuttled because of sin. As if God already knew that there will be a problem even before the sin happens, He prophesied:

*"For this reason [the woman] a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife (Genesis 2:24, author's paraphrase).*

This verse is used often in wedding ceremonies and is the earliest prophecy about Jesus Himself, for He is speaking about leaving His Father's house to come and join with his wife, the church. Jesus knew then and there that when Adam did not accept the fellowship of God for what it was, He would have to leave the fellowship of the Godhead one day and bring forth a new creation that could come into the eternal fellowship that Adam was destined to do.

Fast-forward several thousand years and we see ourselves standing at Golgotha, watching Jesus hang on the cross, beaten, bruised, bleeding, and humiliated. His body is failing, and His strength is fleeting. Gasping for every last breath, He musters what little strength He has left and says, "It is finished." And with that, He dies. Moments later a Roman soldier pierces the

Lord's side, releasing a flow of water and blood (John 19:34), assuring the observers that death has occurred.

This is a beautiful picture of what truly happened on the cross: Adam was placed in a deep sleep so that his side could be pierced, and a rib taken out to create Eve, his wife. Likewise, Jesus, the second Adam, is placed in a deep sleep on the cross, and His side is pierced, releasing the life source, which births the bride of Christ, the church.

We are born out of His blood and the river of life that flows through Him. The moment we believe in and trust Jesus as Lord, we are washed in His shed blood and the water of life of the Holy Spirit. At that very instant we become the blood of His blood, spirit of His Spirit. We are a new creation made with the same DNA as Jesus. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one." Jesus is the Word of God made flesh.

*So, this new creation (us) then comes forth out of Jesus, who is the same as the Father; therefore, we are born out of the Father. Just as Jesus was called the beloved Son, our Father looks on us and considers you and me His babies.*

In other words, the cross was not just about salvation but actually the means to birth, the creation of a new and unique generation of people who not only resemble God's image physically as Adam but also are of the same Spirit and blood with Him. You and I have a lot more in common with our Father in heaven than we think.

Unlike Adam, this new creation does not and will not say no to the eternal fellowship offered to it. We are one with Jesus and being one with Him is quite different from being made in the image and likeness. We have the same DNA and are born not of the dust of the earth but of His very essence.

At the eternal tables of God, three have always been in perfect fellowship–Father, Son, and Holy Spirit–and three shall always remain. But how can you and I and the entire church be added without getting to numbers four, five, a million, a billion at the same table? It is by marriage. When two people marry, they become one. You and Jesus together add up to one, and you and I and every believer married to Jesus still add up to one. So it is through Christ that the Father has millions of new babies, sons, and daughters, He can call His own and maintain the perfect fellowship of the three.

Knowing that the Father went through all of this trouble to birth physical sons and daughters to Himself through the cross, we are assured of this one thing: His immeasurable love for all of us who belong to Him.

*Monsters at 32000 Feet*

Long ago when I started my sales and marketing career, I set a goal for myself, which I finally accomplished several years back: Joining the coveted million miler club. This was not a million miles on my frequent-flyer program by using bonus miles or credit card miles or rental cars plus hotel stays. No sir, this is actually logging a million flight miles. Few people can claim they have flown a million miles, except astronauts and my fellow world-traveling sales comrades who, like me, have spent hours strapped into those lovely twenty-four-inch-wide seats at an altitude of 32,000 feet.

I have been on a lot of long-distance flights, and while a number of things can make the trip uncomfortable or challenging, one thing I fear the most has nothing to do with a possible plane crash.

On one of my recent business trips, my biggest fear happened. I had just settled into my very comfortable business class seat in the front of the plane. I was checking out the amenity bag and the entertainment system when I

caught a glimpse of a potential nightmare stepping into the plane and walking down the aisle. No responsible airline company should allow the boarding and transfer of full-fledged diabolical monsters on their planes. If forced to, they should at least stow away these creatures in the luggage compartment where they belong and save the rest of the poor souls on the plane from twelve hours of torture.

If one is not bad enough, this bunch boarding the plane was made up of three of them. Alongside these terrifying creatures were two poor souls who certainly were paying penance for some recent past sin and were assigned the task of caregivers. The plane was a big Boeing 777 with several rows and seats. While I was concerned with what was coming down the aisle, I felt the chances of this party sitting in the business class section was low, and the hell they were sure to wreak was for others to bear.

Just about the time the entourage passed my seat, and I was about to breathe a sigh of relief, one of the caregivers stopped, checked the row numbers, and directed the monsters to seats next to and behind me. My heart sank. Deep hopelessness washed over me. You have probably felt this, when you know something really bad is about to happen and you can't stop it from coming right at you. My mind raced through several scenarios. I wish I had taken sleeping pills before the flight. Maybe there is an open seat somewhere else I can move too. Perhaps a different flight is available. Anything to avoid what was about to happen.

The problem with flying is that you are trapped in a long metal tube with nowhere to run!

By now, all you Sherlock Holmeses know what I am writing about: small children on a plane for twelve straight hours, cooped up with nowhere to go, or play, or run, or to burn up that incredible God-given natural energy. This picture can end only one way: not good. They board the plane as cute little children with their dolls and toys in one hand and pulling their mini carryon bags behind them. But we frequent flyers know all too well the dark

transformation that will take place somewhere after dinner and when you are about to pack it in and go to sleep.

The inevitable happened. It started small, with some fidgeting and fussing. Then it grew into crying and fighting between the children. Then it exploded into out-of-control, high-pitched screaming that tore up pretty much everyone's eardrums.

Welcome to monsters unleashed at 32,000 feet.

But what is perhaps fascinating in the midst of this unraveling disaster was how calm and unbothered the parents remained throughout the flight. With an occasional word of correction and "Be nice to your little sister" or "You want a time-out, little man?" (Notwithstanding where in that plane the time-out could take place), the parents spent most of the time comforting, holding, and calming the children while not succumbing to anger. When I looked over to catch one of them eye-to-eye as to express my plea for some form of intervention, all I got was a shrug that said, "What am I supposed to do? They are kids!"

Had I spoken what I was thinking, I would have said, "Yeah, they are your kids and not mine!"

And that is exactly the case regarding our being children of the Father. We are His kids and not someone else's. When we mess up, fuss, cry, scream, and throw a temper tantrum, He has this incredible ability not to be bothered by it. The Bible says, "He is slow to anger," and that is an absolute truth. True, He may throw an occasional word of correction and threat of a time-out, but most of the time He is in the act of loving, comforting, holding, and soothing what ails and hurts us, even when most, if not all, of it is self-inflicted or self-induced.

Just as those parents in the plane, having a deep understanding of the nature of their children, treated them with loving care and not with harshness, our loving Father showers us with even a greater measure of grace every day.

*He Loves His Babies!*

I have been blessed with two wonderful natural children: Esther and Micah. I could not have asked for better children. As such, our children hold an incredibly special place in my life, and my heart is full of love for them. I cannot imagine loving anyone more than I love my children. I love and accept them equally. They hold that place in my heart out of one simple fact: they were born out of me and were created through and by me.

I remember when my first child was born. The moment she emerged from her mother's womb; she was loved. I do not recall a stronger emotion than seeing my child being born. It is powerful. Every mom and dad know what I am talking about. Giving and bringing forth life is the most powerful thing that anyone can do. Do you notice that no matter what the child looks like–some newborns are not cute–the parents just cannot get enough of them? To parents, their children are the most beautiful and wonderful beings in the entire world. It really does not matter what anybody else thinks.

> *They bring the child home and provide a loving environment of full acceptance and unconditional love. I want you to remember these two phrases because they underpin the foundational basis on how the heavenly Father deals with His own babies. As newborn children, we are fully accepted by our heavenly Father, who unconditionally loves us. The natural extension of this is the grace that abounds in the life of believers. If the cross could be summarized in one word, it would be grace.*

Children are given a steady dose of grace by their parents every day. Trust me, I keep withdrawing from the Erfan Family Grace Account, and it seems that no matter how much I spend, the account seems to be always full. It is incredible to see the unlimited, unconditional grace that flows from parents to their children in a lifetime. While children excel in finding ways to mess up, parents earn a doctorate on finding ways to extend grace.

I cannot tell you how many times I have had to repeatedly correct my children on the same mess-ups. But I also notice that while I get frustrated, I

do not seem to have a problem loving my children regardless of their regular infractions. I seem to suffer from a form of selective amnesia when it comes to my children. I can easily forget a lot of their mistakes, but I tend to remember their successes.

I will use another of my airplane stories to drive home this point about unconditional love and grace. It, too, involves humans standing no taller than two feet. Recently flying back from Mexico, a cute three-year-old boy, his five-year-old sister, and their young dad sat by me. The flight was to be short, so I decided that I was not going to hit the panic button but instead use this as an educational opportunity to learn something new about how parents treat their children. I could then consider how it applies to the doctrine of the child identity I have been teaching.

Before the flight even started, the little boy was having difficulty figuring out why he had to be buckled into a seat. As much as his older sister tried to convince him that he had to sit right and keep his seat belt on, he had figured out that the proper way to sit was facing backward, with his face smashed up against the seat and his bottom sticking up in the air!

The flight attendant came by two times and got the boy turned around. Dad did his best, using kind words to coerce the boy to turn around before the plane took off. Just about the time when they all managed to get him facing the right way, he discovered a fascinating little thing to play with called “the tray table.” Once unlatched, the tray table plopped down. The look on this boy’s face said, “Wow! This thing is awesome!”

Then it started. He would twist the latch and let the tray plop. The dad would put it up again. The boy quickly unlatched it, and the tray again plopped down. The dad said, “Son, no. Do not do that. We have to take off.” Sure, logic and reasoning with a two-year-old was going to work. Plop! Down again.

This went on for seven or eight times. Each time, the dad spoke in the same tone of voice and with the same measure of kindness. “Son do not do that. Not now. Wait until after we take off.” Finally, with the plane barreling down

the runway, about to lift off, the dad put his big hands on the closed tray table and held it back, not letting the little boy get to it.

With growing frustration, I watched this ordeal. Where does this patience and tolerance of insubordination come from? How was this man able to calmly deal with another being bent on disobeying him?

It is what we call love, and love is able to cover a multitude of sins.

While I am in a situation of having to repeat myself over and over again about the same thing my children are doing wrong, I sometimes get angry, and at times I become frustrated. But my heart makes a quick U-turn when my children's eyes fill up with tears, and I hear, "I'm sorry, Daddy." And frankly, even if they do not say they're sorry, I cannot help but shower them with grace and unconditional love.

A good parent loves all the time, gives all the time, forgives often, forgets the past, and hopes for the best future for their children. But more so, our heavenly Father's love far surpasses the love of an earthly parent. His love is incomprehensible by us in a natural way, but we live it experientially as we enter the kingdom of God through Christ.

*It is this identity of a child born to a good father that defines our personal relationship with our heavenly Father. Everything we are and hope to become and everything we do and hope to accomplish ultimately emanates from this relationship and a proper understanding of it.*

But perhaps the most important reason we need to understand this identity and apply it correctly in our lives is that it protects us from being snared in the most sinister trap Satan can ever set in the life of a believer: *false religion.*

# Chapter 3 - Humanity in Chains

Nothing is more dangerous to our faith and more harmful for our relationship with our heavenly Father than believing we can do anything to earn His love or manipulate Him to gain His approval. And yet millions of Christians around the world believe they have to do just that.

This plays out in two ways: First, it is embedded within the theology of the denomination or the individual church itself. Second, it is internalized within the soul and mind-set of individual believers who love God and yet cannot come to terms to totally accept what grace has provided for them.

In the former case, one can find all sorts of overt religiosity and legalism being acted out in churches around the world. For example, some churches

- ban women from sitting with men,
- force men to wear long-sleeved shirts,
- require women to cover their hair,
- forbid the use of makeup,
- consider the use of alcohol or tobacco as a cause for severe church discipline,
- ban going to the movies,
- forbid listening to modern music,
- frown on using musical instruments in church,
- mandate weekly fasts,
- consider water baptism a mandatory requirement for salvation,
- require Communion to be performed through authorized clergy only, or
- keep the Old Testament feasts.

If one were to write down every form of institutional legalism that has crept into the church, it would be a volume in itself. But what these dos and don'ts reveal is a real identity crisis going on within these houses of worship. Members of the body of Christ exposed to these rituals of worship and expected conduct experience a human-devised form of bondage rather than the freedom Christ bought for them.

In the second case, this identity crisis affects both the strong, devout believers and the more typical everyday Christians. Many devout believers struggle to be happy with themselves. In fact, this is a common trait of many ardent followers of Christ. They strive to be good, but they are never good enough. They torture themselves with the thoughts of past mistakes and cannot seem to overcome the hurdle of personal perfection. They eventually tire of trying and may even slip back into the world because of the enormous effort and the incredible spiritual equity they have spent trying to please God while never being certain that He is happy with them. Such individuals vacillate often between being totally happy, strong, and full of faith and being completely depressed.

I am not sure how one can define a typical Westernized Christian believer, but I will give it a shot since I am most familiar with them. These individuals play by the so-called "church rules." They pay their tithes and offerings, do what is considered "right," attend church every Sunday, try to read the Bible daily, and, if time allows, throw in a ten-minute, super-fast combo prayer. They might even try to avoid the newly released R-rated blockbuster movie, and you certainly will not find them drinking and smoking in public. They use "Amen, brother," "Praise the Lord," or "We sure love you" as often as Tom Brady throws the football around on an NFL Sunday afternoon. Deep inside they love the Lord, know that they are saved and going to heaven. But they also feel that all of this is not good enough and that they must be more special and more righteous in order for the Father to hear them and answer their prayers. When things do not happen as planned, they question their relationship with God. They wonder if their little spiritual miscues have

caused heaven to shut its doors to them. When a brother or sister in the Lord is blessed, they ask the question that has been asked a million times before: What are they doing that I am not doing? or What did I do wrong to miss out on that blessing?

I assume that many believers fall within one of these two categories.

*Two chains keep humanity in bondage. Even when a person comes to faith in Christ, they often remain shackled with these chains throughout their lives. The two chains are called: the "chain of false religion" and the other the "chain of self."*

One chain is wrapped around one hand while the other chain is wrapped around the other hand, fully immobilizing, and imprisoning us, preventing us from moving forward in our spiritual walk. So much of our anxiety, fear, timidity, unhappiness, defeatism, lack of self-worth and self-confidence, and a whole lot of spiritual failure can be traced back to behavior that is rooted within these chains. I am fully convinced that a believer cannot truly experience a successful life of faith unless he or she breaks these chains and experiences true freedom. As John so aptly says, *"Whom the Son sets free is free indeed" (John 8:38).*

After thirty-five years of considering myself a Christian, I can now say that I finally understand what the Lord was talking about in John 8:38. The purpose of the cross is for me not only to be free from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death, but more so the power of sin in my life.

But what is sin after all? Is it adultery, lying, murder, using God's name in vain, or something even worse?

*It is all that, but in a deeper sense, sin can be best defined as the unwillingness of people to suffer and the willingness of people to engage in God manipulation.*

When we refuse to say no to the flesh and shut down the Spirit, we are in sin. When we engage in false worship, false prayer, false holiness, and even false sacrifice that is entrenched in our fallen human nature, we are sinning.

In fact, it is within this definition of sin, which I call the "sin against the cross," that we can understand why Jesus reacted so strongly and negatively against the Pharisees and the temple religious leaders. After reading the verses below, we can truly appreciate how indignant and incensed Jesus was with the religious leaders of his time.

> *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.*
>
> *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.*
>
> *Woe to you, blind guides! You say, "If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath." You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, "If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath." You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Therefore, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.*
>
> *Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters*

> *of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. (Matthew 23:13–23)*

Sown within the fabric of these words is the railing of the Son of God against the men who preached a gospel of self-righteousness. A gospel that would never free men from a life of sin but rather would place them in even greater bondage. One can say that it is easier for people to live in sin in the world than to enter a false kingdom based on the ultimate untruth that we can please God through self-effort, of following a set of rules that are impossible to obey, even by those who preach and mandate them.

Nothing can be more destructive to establishing a healthy child-Father relationship and living the life of joy that is grounded in the proper acceptance of our place, divinely given, and granted to us by and because of the grace of God through the work of the cross, than embarking in a life of dependence on dead religious works.

*Cain and Abel*

Do you ever wonder why God rejected Cain's offering but accepted Abel's? The whole precedent on how we should approach our Father was set at the very beginning of creation. The Bible's account on this event is found in Genesis 4:3–5:

> *In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So, Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. (Genesis 4:3-5)*

I am sure God had communicated to the family of Adam the need for an offering; otherwise, they would not have brought one to Him. I am also certain that God must have made it clear what type of offering was acceptable to Him. It had to be sacrificial in nature and intended for substitutionary atonement. We read in Hebrews 11:4, *"By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did."*

The name *Cain* means "to acquire" or "to get" or to build a nest. The rejection of Cain's offering was due to the nature of his offering, a sacrifice made and created by his own hands. However, Abel's offering was a sinless animal that stood as an example of the ultimate sacrifice the Lamb of God would provide for humanity thousands of years later. Cain's was born out of human effort; Abel's offering was rooted in faith.

That is why it is so important to understand that the chains of false religion not only rob us of our promised joy and freedom that we have in Christ but also turn our entire lives of faith into an object of scorn and rejection to Him. In the same manner God rejected Cain's offering, He rejects all efforts coming from the flesh. We end up wasting an entire lifetime trying to "please" Him our way, just to find out He never looked with favor on our effort.

Another example is found in the book of Galatians. Paul refers to Ishmael and Isaac. One son is born out of the flesh, and the other is born out of the promise.

> *At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." (Galatians 4:29–30)*

It is incredible that God commands Ishmael and his mother to be thrown out of Abraham's house. Isn't this rather cruel? Don't you think God is demanding a bit too much of Abraham to throw out his own son? What did Ishmael do to deserve such a treatment? He came out of Abraham's seed as Isaac did. He was the result of a well-intended man of God and his wife trying to do something good, to help God with His plans. And right there is the problem. Truth is, Ishmael was the product of human effort. In the end, Ishmael was no different from the offering Cain presented to God. What is born out of human hands and effort to appease God and in some way fulfill His will for our lives is rejected and cast out.

This is the mystery: God abhors those who propagate false religion far more than those who simply are ensnared in day-to-day sin. He was willing to go to the house of a hated tax collector. He let a woman of questionable reputation wash His feet with her tears and anoint Him with incredibly expensive oil. He forgave a prostitute in front of a crowd bent on bringing her to "justice." But he reserved his harshest criticism and his strongest words to the most religious men of His time: Pharisees and the scribes. They infuriated Him.

I want my life to be pleasing to my Father and my relationship a source of comfort and joy for both of us. It is the very essence of being a good son to a loving Father.

Being raised as a Muslim before my conversion to Christianity, I witnessed firsthand what the chain of false religion can do to good people who sincerely love their God. People have asked me, "Is it not difficult to preach to Muslims?" Oddly enough, I do not think so. They love God and seek Him fervently. Think about this: A person who stops what he is doing five times a day, spends fifteen minutes each time humbly prostrating himself before God in humility acknowledges and honors God more than most Christians in the West. That being said, devout Muslims constantly struggle. They lack confidence in their eternal disposition (salvation), and their lives are filled with a never-ending struggle to do more to make up ground for past and present mistakes and shortcomings.

For this very reason, the seed of false religion has grown in Islam so that its branches have brought forth its bitter fruit. One of these fruits is legalism. We do not have to search far, just look and see what ISIS or radical Islamists have done in nations such as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan under the banner of strict adherence to Sharia law. This law is supposed to be the expression of holiness and life pleasing to "God." But under its banner young girls are forbidden to go to school; innocent young women and men are flogged for merely talking to each other in public; women and men are shot or stoned because of accusation of adultery; homosexuals are thrown of tall buildings; hands and feet are cut off for the crime of theft; dancing, music, drinking, carbonated drinks, wearing Western clothing that, God forbid, is brightly colored or show any portion of the hands or feet or anything that doesn't align with radical, legalistic Islam religion are harshly punished. The pursuit of a holy life on earth becomes life in hell itself.

These self-appointed keepers of the law have chained good people to a life of constant fear. Legalism places the burden of impossible-to-obey religious laws and legal precepts on individuals' backs. This is an outward and clear picture of what happens when false religion takes hold of a person, community, or nation. Likewise, the same results, though more hidden and sinister, can occur in our churches, homes, or lives as believers.

We can live in the same bondage and be strapped to the same awful and deplorable chains that we see in the lives of poor Afghans, Syrians or Iranians yet be attending a local church right here in the United States of America or any so-called free nation. This deception and bondage in the life of believers run deep, its roots have made their way into the inner chambers of the hearts of believers, poisoning their perceptions of who they really are. Its negative effects impact their daily thoughts, prayers, expectations, and emotions.

Remember earlier that I mentioned the foundation on which a healthy relationship is established between a child and his or her parents is full acceptance and unconditional love. We know by now that we are our

heavenly Father's babies, the apple of His eye. That should put to rest any misgiving or doubt in our minds about how our Father sees us.

Children fail far more often than they succeed. They fall more often than we care to count. If you want to make life miserable for your children, make your home a house of dos and don'ts, in which every action is watched, every deed is measured, and every mistake is judged and punished. Correct them often and every day. Remind them of how incapable they are of ever meeting your standards and high expectations. Treat them like the little failures they are.

But we have a Savior who has made us worthy to be called children of the living God.

Was Jesus fully accepted and fully loved by the Father? The answer is a resounding yes! Therefore, since I have been saved by Him and the blood of Jesus has atoned for my sins, I am fully righteous. I can rest in my Father's love, knowing that I am *fully accepted* and *fully loved*.

*I am not obligated to do anything to be accepted by Him. I stand in my Father's house loved, not because of me and what I can do, but because of Him and what He has already done.*

By believing and living according to this truth, we are able to break the chain of false religion once and for all from our lives. We are free to enjoy our fellowship with the Father and bask in His lovingkindness and mercy. We live a child-like life, not childish (immature), but in simple faith and trust in the everlasting love of our heavenly Father. We can rest in that and refuse to enter into a pattern of self-incrimination and doubt about our real worth and value.

You are His baby. You are loved and accepted just the way you are. Now break the chain of false religion and live in the freedom Jesus bought for you.

# Chapter 4 - Life as a Baby

When you bring your baby home from the hospital, you quickly realize that this little bundle is a lot of extra work. Let us be honest. Every couple of hours they need their diapers changed, they must be fed in the middle of the night–often several times–they cry a lot, occasionally screaming at a pitch that permanently disables healthy adult brain cells, occasionally throw up on a good clean shirt, are often fussy, and, to top it all off, they demand constant attention.

They take and they take, and they take. And they do not give much back. Nothing is easy about babies and helping them to develop into children and eventually responsible adults. It is a monumental task. If one were to measure the cost in human emotion and financial commitment to rear children, we would consider it absolute insanity to engage in parenthood. But we do it anyway.

Our heavenly Father engages in the same apparent “irrational” behavior. It is obvious to any observer that the only reason logical, sane adults subject themselves to the troubles, heartaches, fatigue, and constant care and concern that parenthood requires is love. The purest form of love that can be found on the earth is exhibited and put on display every day in the life of a newborn child with loving parents.

It is a wonder, and a spectacular display of what humanity is capable of achieving when it surrenders to the power of unconditional love.

All humanity is made in the image of God. Whether reborn and regenerated by the cross or unsaved, part of the nature of God is in all of us. The Bible states that the nature of the Godhead is love (1 John 4:8), so the ability to engage in this type of love resides in some form or fashion in every individual. Of course, when we are born again and regenerated within our

spirits, we are enabled and activated to fully walk in the nature of the Father and exercise love in ways we could never imagine before (that will be subject of an entirely different volume by itself).

But our Father is not limited by human frailty. He constantly engages in releasing His unconditional love and acceptance toward His children. He is simply acting according to His own nature.

I long for you to grasp this reality. If we humans are able to fully accept and love our newborn babies without any precondition or expectation of anything in return, our heavenly Father can do far more. In no other time in the life cycle of children is this indubitable and unequivocal expression of full acceptance and love better displayed than those early days and months when the child is completely incapable of acknowledging the parents' love or returning even a fraction of it.

Parents expect nothing from their newborns. Something inside of them drives them to love and care for the child, placing him or her as the most important object of their affection and attention in the universe. If the baby cracks a little smile, well, that is just icing on the cake.

Do you realize that this is the exact manner in which the Father loves and accepts us? You are perfect before Him, and as a perfect child, He cannot withhold His grace, forgiveness, lovingkindness, patience, and blessings from you. You are on the receiving end of the greatest gifts the Creator can bestow.

And, yes, I said you are *perfect*. Don't you know that only perfect people make it to heaven? That may sound very strange, but technically speaking, only sinless perfection can exist there. Heaven and sin do not mix.

Everyone has at least that one verse or story that just does not sit well with our understanding of the universe in general. We elect to disregard that part of the Bible altogether or quickly change subjects if the topic ever comes up. One verse in the Bible always bothered me:

*"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).*

Be perfect! Are you kidding me? I can't even go through breakfast and not mess up somewhere: being grumpy and mad because I have not had enough sleep, being selfish because I want others and life in general to served me first. . .living with so much pride and wrongful desires and right now, being in constant fear and faithlessness because I don't know what life has in store for me or considering a dozen other things I do or think wrong. How can God expect me to be perfect? And if the condition of salvation and being accepted is perfection, then this is truly hopeless.

But when Jesus said this, He was neither kidding nor speaking an allegory. He meant it. If we are not perfect as our Father is, we will not make it. This is a fact that is often lost in modern Christian thought. We talk about grace so much we lose sight of what grace actually accomplishes and does in our lives. Grace, for most of us, is a one-way street. We get Jesus and we get to dump all of our sins on His grace. But is that all that Jesus did for us?

Let us take a closer look at a passage from the Old Testament that reveals the greater work Jesus accomplished for us on the cross.

> *If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you are to offer a male without defect. You must present it at the entrance to the tent of the meeting so that it will be acceptable to the Lord. You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you. (Leviticus 1:3–4)*

Why lay hands on the head of the offering? Why not just slay the animal and present it?

By laying hands on the sacrifice, two things were accomplished. First is the transfer of the guilt and sin of the one offering the sacrifice to the sinless animal, and second is the transfer of the sinless state or perfect state of the sacrifice to the one offering it. At once the sinful became sinless and the imperfect became perfect.

*That is exactly what happens to us when we receive Jesus Christ as our Savior. We receive His perfect state through faith. We are as perfect as He was and is. As long as we believe and have faith in Him, we are walking around with our hands glued on the head of the perfect Lamb of God, and as He is (blameless, perfect, and fully justified), so are we.*

A very interesting fact about the burnt offering is that it was to be completely consumed by the fire. No part of it was to be eaten or left, except the hide, which was removed and then worn by the priests. Wow, this is a vivid picture of us in Christ. While He became our burnt offering and He was all consumed, He covers us with Himself like a garment.

So now that you are perfect, no obstacle exists between you and the heavenly Father. As one of my apostolic teachers Dr. Richard Hayes would say, “Life is always better with an Open Heaven.”

How do you see yourself?

Identifying as a child born out of God, in the image of the Father, fully loved and accepted should bring joy into your Christian life. You can rest from your labor of “trying to be enough,” knowing that your prayers are heard, and you are never far away from His thoughts. As good parents always think of their children’s well-being, He is always thinking of you. His love for you is absolute and never shaken (“Who can then separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus?”).

Go to bed knowing this: He is happy with you. Have faith in this, knowing that it is true. You may say, “Brother Mani, this cannot be! You do not know my past.” I say to you, “If you believe that, you don’t really know your Father and the grace He has abundantly showered you with.”

Having and exercising faith is not always just about having enough faith to believe in a miracle or healing or a new car or a better job. A faith pleasing to God is actually more about trusting Him and believing Him to be who He says He is. I dare to say that to believe you are loved unconditionally and to operate in your life accordingly requires more faith than just about anything else in life. This kind of faith has to be exercised daily, not just one time or on occasion and or in a dire situation, but even minute-by-minute.

This type of faith will revolutionize your thinking and will eventually change you from within. For you to live consistently in this type of faith, you will have to fight your mind and your sin nature that constantly tries to tell you that you are fallen, sinful, inadequate, unlovable, undesirable, fearful, deserving of judgment, condemned, incomplete, and powerless to change. This type of faith will make you live with a new mind-set, which becomes part of what the Bible calls *"the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16).*

*That is why having the right identity in the Father is such a critical part of our spiritual walk. It defines not only our behavior toward the heavenly realm but also the reciprocal reaction from heaven back to us.*

A while back while I was driving my car, I received a call from a close ministry friend of mine. He was very excited to share with me something that God had shown his wife about me. I have long considered his wife to be a prophetess and someone who is deeply devoted to prayer. Only about two weeks prior to this phone call, I had been exercising my faith diligently in the realm of walking in my child identity. I have always been very hard on myself, especially as it relates to my Christian walk. Often, I would say to myself, "There is no way God can trust you, Mani, looking at what you do and think. Man, you blew it. There go the blessings that were coming your way." Sometimes I even heard myself asking the Father to just take me home so I would not become an embarrassment to Him and the church.

Enjoying my Christian walk has not always been easy. When you think like this, you are constantly tormented by your own failures. So, this new way of thinking and walking daily and my new perspective of who I really am in Him was, well, quite revolutionary.

My friend said that he and his wife were praying for me diligently when the Lord stopped his wife and said, "Stop praying about Mani and let me tell you about my son!" From his account, the Lord went on for a quite a while singing my praises, telling them how much He loved me, how proud of me He was, and that I was absolutely special to Him and His kingdom.

While I was listening to my friend, a part of me was blushing, like *Lord, You are not talking about me, are You? I mean really, I do not deserve any of these accolades and affirmations. I know myself too well.* But right there I suddenly realized what I was doing. I quickly stopped myself and said, "Yes, I am all of these and more. I am the apple of His eye, and He is proud of me because I am special to Him. Instead of feeling undeserving of all this, I am going to embrace His love, and I am sure not going to waste this precious lovefest between a son and his Father and throw it into the garbage dump of false humility." I received by faith the great joy that came to me by hearing those words. I let my soul and spirit bask in the love of my Father, and I allowed Him to embrace me fully. I felt I was right there in His arms in heaven, home where I belong and where I will spend eternity.

I was home. I was accepted. I was complete in Him.

The way I saw myself at that moment and what I confessed as true is the way the Lord sees me.

> *The LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight. To the faithful you show yourself faithful to the blameless you show yourself blameless, to the pure you show yourself pure, but to the crooked you show yourself shrewd. (Psalm 18:24–26)*

Stop reminding Him of your sins and failures. Believe you are the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus so you can experience His faithfulness and love.

In a practical way, a life lived with this correct identity is quite unique and different from a typical Christian mind-set and life. It is *filled with joy*. A natural by-product of living in this new identity is the removal of endless shame and condemnation. This leads to true spiritual liberation.

I was driving with a family friend recently. This friend was going through a very difficult time in her marriage. She had slipped and fallen into a relationship outside of her marriage several years earlier but had asked for forgiveness. Now her husband had fallen into the same trap and the marriage was not going well. My friend, a believer in Christ, said, "I just wished I had told that guy three years ago to get lost. I never would have gotten into that mess. If I just would not have sinned, maybe we would not be where we are right in our marriage."

I took this as a great opportunity to teach her about her identity in the Father. I looked at her in amazement and said, "What are you talking about?"

"You know what happened between me and this other person three years ago," she said.

I repeated, "What are you talking about?" I wore bewilderment on my face and acted surprised at her self-accusation. I wanted her to think I had no knowledge of what had happened. This went on for a few minutes. When I noticed that she was getting really concerned about my memory loss or the onset of Alzheimer's, I stopped, looked at her, and said, "Why are you trying to remind the Father about something He has chosen to completely forget about? In heaven and in God's timeline, if you bring up past sins and mistakes, what you are talking about *never happened*."

She was shocked! "What do you mean it never happened? I sinned. I did all those things."

My response was even more shocking. “No, you did not.” I explained that when she repented and asked for forgiveness, the Father chose to forgive her. He exercised His sovereign right to remove the event from the annals of history and the records of heaven. What she was saying was news to the Father. She was condemning herself for something that did not exist. It is utter madness to punish oneself for something never done.

Occasionally, we hear news of people sometimes getting released from jail after serving years for crimes they never committed. At times, innocent people die in jail or are executed. We cannot imagine the injustice and utter waste of a life spending years behind bars for a crime that was never committed by that person. It is even worse if the person dies in this state.

Every day, good Christian people, by their own choice, walk into a jail cell and lock the door behind themselves for crimes and sins of the past that are no longer remembered by the Father. They torture themselves, lament the loss, cry over and over again for forgiveness–a thousand times–for a sin that no longer exists.

That sounds like utter and complete foolishness. Every day of our lives is precious, and we are commanded to live to the fullest, bearing fruit, multiplying, and taking dominion over the earth on behalf of the kingdom of God. We cannot do that while living behind bars.

The Bible says, *“Now there is therefore no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).*

*Understanding one’s child identity is liberation theology practiced every day.*

When you fall, pick yourself up, dust yourself off, say you are sorry, and roll on. Children do not need to say they are sorry two or three or a hundred

times for the same mistake. Neither does a true child of God who understands his or her real identity in Christ. Do not waste a moment in false humility, and don't you dare lock yourself up behind bars of condemnation. Break free from the past, break free from dead memories, let go of yesterdays that no longer matter. Live free. I say again live *free*.

# Chapter 5 - Who Said You Are Naked?

Every so often when years ago when I was taking a shower in the morning, a certain young eight-year-old boy would show up with droopy eyes and asks, "Dad can I come in and take a shower with you?"

You had to see the shower in my old bathroom to appreciate the request. It was gigantic. The original builder must have had a thing for showers and bathrooms because my bathroom is almost as big as my first apartment. You could easily fit six people in the shower area. It actually had six showerheads spraying water from all directions. For a young boy hungry for any one-on-one time with his dad, the Erfan's shower was as irresistible as anything.

Of course, I had no reason to say no. What was I going to do with a glorified shower room as big as a football field by myself? So, he would join me. As expected, this always led to some adventurous water-based playtime, and some badly needed clean bodies.

Why is this worthy of including here? Actually, the Holy Spirit showed me an incredibly deep spiritual truth about this time I had with my son in the shower. Naturally, when a person takes a shower, they are naked and uninhibited. When two people are taking a shower together, they stand unashamed. No inhibition, no shame, and no apprehension. It is a father and son next to each other, playing, having fun, talking, and sharing stories while both are naked and without shame or judgment. No sense of guilt that would separate them. Are you getting where I am going with this?

In Genesis we read:

> *Now the serpent was craftier than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"*

> *The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, [3] but God did say, 'you must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"*
> *"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*
> *When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so, they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.*
> *Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*
> *But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"*
> *He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so, I hid."*
> *And he said, "Who told you that you were naked?" (Genesis 3:1–11)*

Verse 10 says it all when it comes to explaining the condition of man. "I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." The entire reason we need to learn of our new identity in our Father is to overcome this incredible tragedy that happened in the garden such a long time ago. Ever since then, every generation and every individual has been infected with this hidden shame, inextricably driving each and every one of us away from our heavenly Father. We find it easier to hide in the shadows of our own guilt, crouching behind the trees of self-righteousness. We have been trying to hide ever since, and we have become pretty good at it. When our Father calls us, we do not feel worthy enough to stand in His presence. Certainly, if we have to go before Him, let us not go naked, Lord. At least let us cover ourselves with something! But the Father's response in verse eleven is telling: "Who told you that you were naked?"

You have Christ in you and have been redeemed by His precious blood. You have been called to be a child of our heavenly Father. You have been granted the right to called him Abba, or Daddy. You have been made the righteousness of God through Christ Jesus. Because of all this, who dare tells you that you are naked? Who has bewitched you to feel unworthy to come to Him? Who has lied to you so that now being called children of God, you still feel shame, dirty, and insufficient to stand before Him?

We should no longer recognize or see our own nakedness. Just like my son, who so willingly and unabashedly jumps into the shower with me, wearing his birthday suit, and does not give it a moment of thought, you and I should be just like that with our Father if we understand and embrace our new identity as His beloved children.

The entire objective of the cross was and is to remove this shame. It was removed eternally on the cross, and it continues its work in us every day to renew our minds so that we can accept and receive the tremendous freedom it has granted us. No one can possibly experience the fullness of the freedom that comes through Christ's redemptive work without overcoming this hidden shame that has made its residence in our fallen nature. It is so deeply ingrained in our psyche and thinking that we revert to and rely on it for every aspect of our spiritual walks and lives.

We continuously judge ourselves, seldom ever feeling good enough about who we are to ever think that God can use someone like us. We remain spiritually moribund, never experiencing true life, and we are bound by our own fears of imminent failure of the high standards of heaven set before us. It is simply a matter of time before we end up disappointing God one more time. With all that swirling in our minds, which is the foundation of how most believers really think, no wonder we remain weak as a body and cannot accomplish kingdom work like we are commanded and expected to do.

That is why learning about biblical identity and truly embracing your child identity is foundational in experiencing a victorious Christian life.

In Luke 5:8 we read an example of what happens when an unredeemed man comes into the presence of God's Holiness: *"When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!'"*

This is completely natural. When a person who has not experienced the cross comes in proximity to perfectness and absolute holiness, there is no other conceivable reaction one can imagine. There is no other place to go but to one's knees, begging for mercy and forgiveness or, as Peter did, plead for separation.

But is this what a normal reaction or acceptable response from a believer should be? Are we to throw ourselves onto the floor and beg for forgiveness every time we have an encounter with our Father? Imagine a home where children tell their father not to see them or come close to them because they are unworthy of Him? What a strange household that would be. But that is exactly how many of God's own children think and behave in their spiritual homes. They cannot imagine being accepted and received by a holy God. Let me bring this into perspective in a very practical way from my own experience.

As a father, several years back I set very high expectations and standards for my two children, and especially for my daughter. I wanted her to grow up and be more mature, take more responsibility. But even more so, I wanted her to do everything right. There came a point that everything she did I over-analyzed and was quick to criticize. On one occasion, she was in the back seat of the car, playing a song that was connected to my Bluetooth device. The title of the song contained an explicative. I know because it popped up on my screen. Daddy Erfan the almighty went into his rampage on this not being appropriate. After my two-minute tirade, I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw my daughter crying. I asked her why. She said, "Dad, I keep failing you. Nothing I do is good enough, and I am so sorry that I disappoint you so much."

Her words pierced my heart. What had I done to my precious daughter? What a terrible world I had created for her. I had pushed her away. No wonder she did not feel close to me. No wonder she preferred to hang out with her friends. Around me, she felt like a failure who could not do anything right. Running away from me was her only solution.

God's high standards and moral perfectness can easily become the Achilles heel of any healthy spiritual son- or daughter-Father relationship if these are misunderstood and misapplied by the believers. While my intentions toward my daughter were not evil but from wanting the best for her, the way I

applied my high standards to her life, I ended up pushing her away from me and her destiny by focusing on her failures.

The best method would have been to establish and maintain those high standards yet focus on her progress and growth in maturity and encourage the good in her. This is exactly what the cross accomplishes in us. It redefines our relationship with the Father.

Before we came to Christ, we constantly fell short of the law and His divine perfectness. We had no choice but to accept our utter failure in making Him happy, and we found it far easier to hide from Him. Now through Christ, we can run to Him, knowing that He has chosen to see His Son in us, His stature and perfectness. In Christ we are made whole, we are made perfect, and we do everything right. In Christ we obey and follow all that needs to be done. In Him we make our Father fully pleased. Therefore, we never ask God to lower His standard so we can be accepted and meet them. By becoming His son or daughter through Christ, we have met them. Now there is nothing else left to do but make up for lost time.

The last thing on my little boy's mind when he used to ask to join me in the shower was his failures, his shortcomings, his little potbelly, his quirky hair, his morning bad breath, last week's report card, the one coming up next, his unkempt room, or anything remotely negative. He knows who he is and is confident that his father loves him. So, he would jump in and would not be ashamed of his nakedness. I want you to know that is exactly what you should do. Jump in, do not look back at your failures, and trust in what Jesus has done for you already on the cross.

The only healthy way to interact with our Father is to reconstitute the pureness of the relationship between God and His creation before the fall in the garden. I believe this to be true that the cross redeems everything and anything, including the curse of our endless shame and ceaseless feelings of inadequacy that haunt us. It all has been redeemed and nailed to the cross once and for all.

We are to go boldly before our Father. He has called us by our names . . .

*“Where are you, Mani?”*

*“Here I am, Father. I was just busy doing my thing when I heard you calling my name. What is it? Do you wish to talk? Do you want to play or tell me anything? Or do you just want to hang out? Oh, and by the way, Father, how do you like my birthday suit?”*

# Chapter 6 - Don't Try the Impossible Sermon on the Mount Revisited

I have often been accused of preaching deep messages that go over peoples' heads. I am all too often nudged to tone it down a bit, being reminded that "Maybe you understand what you are talking about, but what about the poor folks listening to you?"

I admit that I love to teach biblical truths that are both simple and deep with theological implications that shock the believer. That is not too different from what Jesus often did when He taught. While the gospel is simple, the truth it represents always goes against the mind of human understanding of the kingdom of God.

Such as it is with the Sermon on the Mount. This is the longest recorded sermon or teaching of Jesus recorded in the Bible. The entirety of chapters 5 and 6 of the gospel of Matthew is one long sermon. Much has been written about this sermon, and in most theological circles, it underpins the Christian moral compass and what Jesus taught the proper Christian behavior looks like. One might say it is a checklist of dos and don'ts–the Ten Commandments, New Testament style.

In principle, the sermon is divided into three parts: the first part is titled the Beatitudes, which is actually an imminent prophecy that was fulfilled on the cross. Part two consists mainly of Jesus's interpretation of the Law of Moses, and part three (chapter 6) is what I call the "heart of the true believer."

It is important to understand the deeper meaning embedded within this sermon, especially the Law and Jesus's reasons for preaching it (chapter 5). If this sermon is misunderstood and misapplied in one's life, it can, to my way of thinking, have disastrous consequences that will impede our proper understanding of our real identity in God.

You may be scratching your head and saying, "Really, Mani? Misunderstanding the Sermon on the Mount potentially messing up my mind forever? Are you not being a bit overdramatic? I thought I had that part of the Bible figured out. What are you talking about?"

Now that I have your attention, let us take a closer look at this passage. I suggest you stop reading here, grab your Bible, and read Matthew 5. I do not want you to miss anything.

Okay, now that you have read Matthew 5, I am certain that if you follow and understand what is about to be revealed to you, you will never look at any passage in the New Testament the same way again.

Let us focus on the second part of the sermon, starting in verse seventeen.

> *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (vv. 17–20)*

In order to truly comprehend any passage of the Bible, especially those that relate to direct teachings and sayings of Jesus, one must absolutely place those passages in their proper historical and social context. By that I mean, we must know who Jesus's audiences are, when he spoke those words (before or after the cross), and what the context of the entire speech or teaching was. One of the most damaging methodologies of Bible teaching and study is to randomly pluck verses from different sections of the Bible,

spoken to different audiences and in various ages of history, then string them together, attempting to apply them in such a way as to either prove or disprove a theological point or spiritual concept.

The Bible was not written in chapters or verses. When Jesus taught on the mount facing the Sea of Galilee, with thousands of Judeans and Galileans having come from all walks of life as His audience, He did not pause to place chapter and verse numbers next to his teaching. He spoke in one stroke. It was a single, masterful sermon pertaining to the kingdom of God and how one was to attain it.

First, He was not preaching to the church. The audience sitting on the slopes of the Galilean mountain listening to this young rabbi were nonredeemed men and women, not yet saved and regenerated by the power of the cross. There were seekers, followers, adversaries, enemies, curiosity chasers, soldiers, and public officials all mingled together in the same crowd. But *none* were yet saved and part of the church. So, we have to be very careful not to apply a sermon as a mandate for the church when it was not meant for the church.

However, I am not stating that all things spoken by Jesus before the cross do not apply to the church. There are kingdom truths spoken and taught by Jesus before the cross that apply to all dispensations and times, the church included.

But let us get back to the Law of Moses and Jesus's interpretation of it. The audience that day mostly believed in and lived according to the Law. They held on to it as their only way of attaining acceptance by God and entrance into heaven. The Law was more than just their spiritual anchor; it was a way of life, and they understood their daily existence within the constraints and limits the Law provided. To the Jew, the Law of Moses was everything, and all things were judged against it. For them, the question was paramount: What does this young rabbi have to say about the Law?

Jesus is quick to point out that His ministry is not to remove or replace the Law; after all, He was the author of it all. But he points out to the people that

if they lived according to the Law, they would be judged according to its entirety (outwardly and inwardly). If they were to break the least of the commandments, they would be called the least in the kingdom; and if they were to obey it all, then surely, they would be called great. The problem was that the Law was far deeper and greater in its intent than what was observable by the eye. Even if the person were to match the observable obedience of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, which seemed to be more than adequate to please God, it still was not sufficient in and by itself to satisfy God. In fact, it would completely miss the mark. Let us look at how Jesus explains the enormous and impossible task before those who are intent on fulfilling the Law.

> *For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*
> *You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, "Raca," is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, "You fool!" will be in danger of the fire of hell.*
> *Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar.*
> *First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:20–24)*

Do you think you are not a murderer? Think again. Just last week when that crazy driver pulled in front of you on the highway and just about caused an accident, what were those words you blurted throughout the ordeal? Kind and loving, or harsh and unrepeatable? When your boss asks you to work another weekend away from home while he is out playing golf with his buddies, did you only imagine blessings on him, or did other less kind thoughts occur to you?

I have called other Christian people nincompoops, idiots, fools, charlatans, thieves, and a few more choice words in my Christian walk at one time or another. Examining the intent of the law of murder, we must honestly admit that we all have committed the sin of murder.

I had recently taught about this section of the Sermon on the Mount to a group of Iranian pastors in a conference in Turkey. I and my assistant pastor were driving out of the meeting area. When turning onto the highway, we were looking at our left for traffic and not considering that anyone would be traveling in the wrong direction and at high speed from the right side. As my assistant pastor put his foot on the gas pedal to enter the highway, the car just stalled. The next second, a motorcycle driver came barreling down from the opposite direction and passed a mere foot in front of our vehicle. Both of our hearts skipped a bit. We realized that had our car not divinely stalled, we would have been in a massive accident with likely severe or fatal injuries.

But rather than rejoicing at God's intervention, we both shouted at the motorcycle driver, "You fool!" "Idiot!" "You could have killed us!"

After calming down, we both turned toward each other and started cracking up, realizing that we both had just "committed murder." Pastor Mani Erfan, minister, and teacher of the Word of God had just committed the murder of a Turkish motorcycle driver. That is exactly what Jesus claimed I did if His words were to be taken literally.

> *You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (vv. 27–30)*

This section is easy. What male older than sixteen years old has not broken this law? And if we had to follow the cutting off of limbs, we all need to rush and buy stock in prosthetics manufacturers.

> *It has been said, "Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce." But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (vv. 31–32)*

Let us apply this to the modern evangelical church of today in America. With over 50 percent of Americans divorced or separated, many of whom attend church every week as Bible-believing, born-again members, which makes 50 percent of the church living in open adultery. Basically, Jesus says you divorce because you are not compatible, you have fallen out of love, you just cannot communicate any longer, you have lost that loving feeling; therefore, you are an adulterer. Case closed.

And the list goes on. One after another Jesus exposes that his audience members were all lying, cheating, and double-crossing, no-good murderers when judged by the real Law. The inward Law was constantly being broken, and the men and women who tried to maintain the Law were hopelessly breaking it every single day.

But no pastor considers a literal application of some of these verses to be used as a standard of practice and morality within the church. People sitting in our congregations today are recently divorced or going through it, some are struggling with pornography, many cheat Uncle Sam a little bit by exaggerating their deductions because they don't believe the government is using their tax dollars right, or others can't overcome their anger that is damaging their relationships with their spouses or children, and some can't stand a brother or sister in the church due to unforgiveness. But we do not ever consider them out of fellowship even when we demand that we love

our enemies, not refuse those who ask of us, and pray for those who persecute us and intend to destroy us and our families

How is that? How can we apply some verses and completely ignore others? How is that we as Christians should disregard literally following the first half of the sermon but be asked to obey the second half?

What is a Christian to do to gain acceptance in the Father's house? What makes you and me good Christians, after all? Is it following the deeper law of Matthew 5? Never thinking wrong or never speaking out of anger. Is it giving all we have to charity or perhaps being one of those guys you see on TV who forgives the person who has murdered and killed their little child? What makes a good believer? What measure do we use to feel like we have done it right and made it as a believer?

*Being perfect. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).*

Who can be perfect? Who can meet this standard? Who among us can say yes to all that has or will be ever asked of us? To give to everyone who asks! Who can love a person who just violated your little girl or murdered your little boy? Who can love the people who are intent on harming us and destroying our lives?

I met a Sudanese believer who had experienced Muslim terrorists attack his village. He was forced to watch as his wife was violated. Her attackers then cut off her breasts. He then saw the terrorists murder his children. Who can demand this man to love these men as his own family?

If he is not able to, can we then brand him as a failure in his Christian life? Can we then brand as failures those who struggle with thoughts of anger or adultery? Do you see where I am going with this line of thought? Our Christian identity cannot be measured against the higher Law that Jesus speaks about in Matthew 5. We are all total failures when measured against the Law. We cannot cherry-pick from the list. Our identity rests in what Jesus did *for* us on the cross. We are now children of the Father, fully accepted and fully merited with His loving favor. We are perfect because of His perfection.

We are perfect because He calls us perfect. We are not required or called to become perfect against this higher Law. There is no demand on us to strive to be something that we can never be on our own. We are what we are because Another met that standard.

He did give us all He had. He did forgive and love His enemies. He did refuse to give in to anger and to spite and to call His brother *raca* (an idiot). He did not make a false promise or take a false oath. He did not lust in his heart. He did meet the standard, and in doing so, He was perfect just like the Father.

So it is that you are called to rest in Him as a child rests in the arms of his or her Father. You are a child born to a Father who loves you beyond measure. You will fall, you will miss the mark at times, you will color outside the lines, you will break a few things here and there, you will get bruised and might break a bone, you will break a heart or two and will have your heart broken a few times also, you will lie and try to get out of just punishment. You will certainly blame a sibling for something you did, and you will not want to share but keep it all to yourself. You will feel a bit jealous when a brother or sister gets a gift you wanted yourself. You will get report cards that make you run home and show it off, and you will receive grades that you wished the neighbor's dog would snatch from you and bury. You will cry and laugh. You will play at times and do grown-up stuff at other times. You will break your Father's heart some days and put a big smile on His face another day. It is all okay. It is the life of the Father's child.

While we know what our Father's highest expectation of us is (Matthew 5), and we know how He wants us to behave, we recognize that we cannot always do it exactly right. That is okay too. As long as we try, that is all that ever matters to a good parent.

*I rejoice and I am happy not because I did everything right but because I know how good of a Daddy I have in heaven. I am okay. I have a Father who unconditionally loves me.*

*"You did well, my son. You gave it your best shot. That is all I ever expected from you."*

So is the life of the child in the kingdom of God.

# Chapter 7 - What Is a Son to Do? The Parable of the Prodigal Son

There is no story in the Bible like that of the prodigal son that shows the heart of the Father and His incredible love and mercy toward His children. But there is a lot more to this story than just a lost son finding his way back home and a loving father willing to accept him. I have heard this story as written in the gospel of Luke chapter 15 many times, but it was not until I understood biblical identity that the story took on new significance. Its proper understanding is critical in discerning what real kingdom sonship truly means.

We have been talking about the son-child identity in the previous chapters, but a natural conclusion of this identity is to understand what is expected in a healthy son- or daughter-Father relationship. In other words, what is a son to do? Now that I am in my Father's house, what is expected of me? This is the million-dollar question. Knowing who you are should naturally produce behaviors that emanate from and are rooted in the proper understanding of one's identity.

But this story answers this question in a double-negative context. It essentially tells us what not to do as sons and daughters, and by default, it tells us to do the exact opposite of what the sons did in the parable.

*"Jesus continued: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So, he divided his property between them'" (Luke 15:11).*

Before we get too far into the story, let us stop and consider a key part that is often missed by Bible students. The story is not about a young unbelieving, rebellious son who finds his way back home. Rather, it is about two believers. Both sons represent Christians in the church today. Did you catch that the story talks about "two sons" living in their father's house? We all know that if

we are not a believer, we do not start at the Father's house. That is a privilege given to those who confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

*"Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).*

So, the story begins with two types of believers. Before long, one of them has had enough of this so-called Christian life. He feels like he has missed out big-time on the fun out there! He has been doing what everyone else expected him to do, and he has had enough. Life is too short, and it is passing him by. I mean, look around at all those people having all kinds of fun when he has to show up in Wednesday night's church service . . . again. The world is calling to him. His flesh is weak, and, well, his mind just gave in too.

So, he leaves. He says good-bye to church and the relationship with his Father, which is fine by him. He never got much out of it anyway. He went through the motions, but, seriously, it was not all that it was cracked up to be. He got salvation and he is going to go to heaven, so isn't that the most important thing? The rest of the stuff is a bunch of do's and don'ts that he was not cut out for.

Sound familiar? People come into the body of Christ, and some of them end up leaving, giving a so-called *justifiable* reason. Some are obviously messed-up reasons (lust, adultery, drugs, money, etc.) and some not so clear (being hurt, looked over, rejected by others). In the end, though, it all boils down to selfishness and unwillingness to pay the price required for staying.

We all thought this salvation thing was free . . . wasn't it?

For the first son, the world and all that it offered was too much to resist. Almost all believers struggle with issues of the flesh. We all have that inner dark side that is just waiting to jump out and exercise its will over us. We have to always keep it at bay, or it will run roughshod over us. Temptations abound in our daily lives; the Enemy spins his web of deceit around us, and it is easy to get entangled in it. The first son represents the son who willingly

leaves the house to pursue his own pleasure and follows his own destiny away from the father.

*But here is a problem. Sons are not supposed to leave the Father's house. They are supposed to abide.*

As I read the story of the first son further, another revelation came to me. The son demanded his inheritance, and the father did not resist. Why is that? The father pretty much must have known the son would waste it, so why did he relent? It is because the inheritance legally belongs to the son.

That same thing happens in our churches today. A lot of people come to Christ with a bag full of problems that they want God to fix as soon as possible. The cornerstone of their relationship with God is to find a solution for their problems and to find a way to fulfill their dreams and desires. Along the way they are taught that you can ask anything from God in Jesus's name, and it will be done for them. They are taught that God wants their problems to go away, and their lives fixed. He is in the business of getting them to their desired "blessed life" status they have been dreaming of.

So, they demand their inheritance upfront. And God gives them an upfront portion since they are sons and daughters and now belong to God through adoption. They have a legal right to their inheritance. Some of the very things they want are given to them.

Have you ever wondered why some new believers get everything they ask for right after their salvation? They are cashing in upfront on their inheritance. But often the inheritance is used to serve the son or daughter rather than to further the Father's house. As the new believer develops the habit of using his or her kingdom resources to meet personal needs, there will come a time when those resources appear to have dried up. A time comes when the child suddenly realizes, like the son in the story, that this new life he or she has created is a sham. Misery sets in.

A self-centered Christian life, even with all the privileges we have as sons and daughters of God Himself, can and will usually end up being unfulfilling, empty, and full of frustration.

> *When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." So, he got up and went to his father. (Luke 15:17–20)*

Wow, what a revelation. The son suddenly realized that his attitude needed to change from a selfish, self-centered son who abused the privileges provided to him to a son with a servant's heart. He had a transformation of identity through experiencing the painful consequences of self-centeredness. He was now ready to go back not to demand, but to serve. Not to spend his resources on himself, but to help the father with expanding his.

*It is when he decides to look at himself not "as a child to be served" but as a child "born to serve" and goes back home that he is given the robe and ring of authority immediately by the father.*

*The road to kingship authority comes through the path of sonship servanthood.*

But the story does not end there, for we cannot forget about the older son. His story is even more revelatory of a need for an identity correction than the son who left home. The older brother is shocked by the way the father receives his sibling back into the house. The older son did not leave the house and squander his inheritance like his younger brother. He did not hurt his

father's heart by disobedience and rebellion. He did not go around *sinning* and playing around. Instead, he stayed home and served dutifully in the house, as expected of him. The father's treatment of his little brother is completely unacceptable. Instead of a robe and ring, what about a mop and kick in the rear-end? At least some form of punishment is due. This restoration makes no sense. This grace stuff is totally and completely unfair!

The second son represents the religious mind-set in the church as much as the first son represents the "I come first" crowd, which fills pews every Sunday morning.

While most readers of this passage focus heavily on the plight of the rebellious son and his eventual restoration, they miss the dilemma of the older son and the exceptional challenges faced by the father in dealing with him altogether. The older son has an identity crisis of his own, and it is not so obvious at first. If sons are called to abide in the house of their fathers and obey him, then he has met the standard and done the right thing. To ask him to do anything more is unreasonable and unfair, at best.

But the problem with the older son is not disobedience or apparent selfishness in squandering the father's resources. His problem is his heart condition or, better said, his motives in remaining in his father's house. Let us look at the passage more carefully:

> *The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (vv. 28–30)*

The older son is angry not only toward the younger brother but more so at his father. He is stubborn, not listening to his father's pleadings. He is

judgmental as he seems to relish in reminding everyone of his younger brother's transgressions. He is jealous because he feels he has not received fair treatment. May I add to the list the worst offense of them all: he is self-righteous, as it is clear he feels he has never done anything wrong.

Compared with the younger brother, this son has a lot more issues, which is always the case with the religious, self-righteous children in our Father's house. These are the fruits of a prideful heart that are hidden under the veil of obedience and being "good."

Just as the self-centered son had to face the consequences of his poor choices and become a servant-son to experience redemption, the self-righteous son had to face that his heart is sick and he needs an identity adjustment. Without this, he will never enjoy his life as a servant-son in his father's house.

These are the two mind-sets that plague the children of our Father every day. The two sons in the story represent how-not-to-be models. If we are to claim our position as true children and truly experience our promised identities as children of the Father, we have to measure our actions and our thoughts against the falsities that emanate from a selfish heart and a religious mind.

Throughout the New Testament, we see Jesus hanging out more often with the folks at the bottom of the so-called "holiness" ladder than ever sharing a meal with the higher echelons of the religious elite. He is much more comfortable breaking bread and having his morning coffee with tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, the sick, and the forgotten masses than being in the presence of the Pharisees, the priests, and the so-called "I've got it all together" crowd.

These two groups represent the two ends of the spectrum of the human condition. Clearly, both have issues, but what is even more evident is that the Father has no problem rushing toward and redeeming and restoring the sinner. His struggles with the religious bunch are, however, well documented.

A good friend of mine thought that all sins are rooted in simple selfishness, which is best described as a desire to pursue one's own path rather than to follow Him. The more we try to please the flesh, the deeper we fall into the abyss of hopelessness and despair. Consequently, the deeper we fall, the more we recognize our need for restoration and our impossible plight away from the Father. Sinners caught up in sin are free from the worst sickness of all: self-righteousness and the false sense of holiness.

*In a strange way, a sinner is closer to God than a religious man or woman who thinks they are close to Him by virtue of their actions. Let me shock you. As far as Jesus is concerned, a prostitute of his time was closer to God than a Pharisee ever could be!*

In the context of the prodigal son story, the first son sitting in the midst of the pigs, covered in filth, hungry, and smelling like the putrid sty, realizing he is done and needs his father's mercy before he is lost for good is much closer to the father than the son who stayed behind. This might seem to be a paradox, but, then again, the gospel is and will always be a paradox.

The second son obeys, but his obedience brings no joy to his life. He does it as a duty, not out of love. Having done all and sacrificed all, he is bitter, angry, and mad at the very person he had vowed to serve. The religious mind grows weary, and instead of drawing closer to the Father, he falls farther away. Instead of feeling fulfilled, he feels left out. Instead of rejoicing in grace, he rejects it. What happens if you reject grace?

What are sons and daughters to do?

They are to abide in the Father's house. They are to serve rather than seek to be served. When serving, they should do so out of love for the Father and never out of obligation. They should rest in His goodness and serve as a result

of their deep relationship with Him. They should rejoice in His grace and be fulfilled by His presence.

# PART 2

**YOU ARE A SERVANT**

**Your Identity in the Son**

# Chapter 8 - The Little Great Book Philemon

Reading an entire book of the Bible in one sitting is not easy unless you are tasked with reading the book of Philemon. The shortest book of the New Testament and, in fact, the entire Bible, this one-chapter book seems out of place nudged between Paul's epistles and the greatest Old Testament commentary ever written for the church age: the book of Hebrews.

I often wondered why this letter to Philemon is included in the Bible. I had read it a few times. It never grabbed my attention, and I could not see any significant theological truth hidden in it. Were the church fathers running out of material to include in the Bible when they included it in the official Canon, or was it included because anything Paul wrote should be part of the Bible?

It was not until I started seeking revelation from the Holy Spirit on the true meaning of biblical identity that I saw the hidden gem within this little book. Perhaps no other book in the Bible reveals the "slave identity" more clearly than the book of Philemon. It has now become one of my favorites, and I refer to it often in my teachings.

For those unfamiliar with the book of Philemon, it is a letter written from Paul to a Christian believer and a slave owner named Philemon, asking him to receive back into his household a runaway slave of his, Onesimus.

Onesimus had fled the household of Philemon not because of mistreatment by his master but because Onesimus had stolen from Philemon. This runaway slave crossed paths with Paul in Rome and found himself a newfound faith in Christ. Being born again and recognizing the need for restitution as a sign of true repentance, he was eager to go back to Philemon and make things right. Paul's letter was a personal appeal to an old friend to allow this man to return and not be harmed as the offense of fleeing and stealing from one's master was punishable by nothing short of death.

With the introduction behind us, let us mine the depth of revelation hidden in Philemon's passages.

Upon a deeper look into the letter, we clearly see a unique picture, one in which each character–Onesimus, Philemon, and Paul–are all stand-ins for the church, Jesus (Master), and the Holy Spirit, respectively. Once we replace names and characters, the content takes on a whole new meaning.

Onesimus belonged to Philemon, he was legally his property, yet he sinned and ran away. The Bible says that all things were created by Jesus and nothing that was created was created without Him (John 1:3). We are all created through Christ, and, in the same manner, all of us belong to our Creator. We are His slaves, His property, if I may say. But being so, we all have sinned. What sin is that? We have stolen from Him what belongs rightfully to Him. We have stolen ourselves, our souls, our lives, and our destinies from Him by pursuing our own selfish wills. In this state, the Bible says we were once unprofitable to our Lord (Philemon 11).

In the midst of running away from our Master, we have an encounter with none other than the person of the Holy Spirit, just as Onesimus crosses paths with Paul. We are made aware of our sins, we repent, and we are restored back in our lives. No longer running or hiding, we willingly go back to our Master. But here lies a great truth. Onesimus is now a free man, though not legally, of course. If he decides not to go back to Philemon, no one will force him to do so, for no chains bind him. Paul was certainly in no position to force him to go back. Onesimus could choose to receive Christ and then keep on running and enjoying his so-called freedom.

Why would he willingly choose to go back to a life of slavery? Why would anyone? To choose to lose one's freedom to return to slavery appears beyond human reasoning. But does a choice really exist?

It seems to me that in our modern Christian world, believers have the impression that once they receive salvation and enter into the kingdom of God, they are faced with a plethora of choices to seek their new destinies. The only thing different from their lives prior to becoming believers is that

they have a Helper and a comrade in arms called Jesus to get them whatever they wish. But nothing is further from the truth.

Some time ago, a dear pastor friend showed an illustration of the cross that brings this point to light. He put a cross on the stage, with a person playing the part of Jesus nailed to the cross, one playing the part of an unbeliever, and another in the role of Satan.

In the first scene, the unbeliever is in chains. Satan holds the chains, controlling the unbeliever. The person is unable to move and has no liberty of action, being constantly tortured, and tormented by Satan. Then Jesus gets off the cross, breaks the chains that imprison the unbeliever, and brings him to the foot of the cross. The freed man is jubilant, joyful, and runs around the stage as if he were experiencing pure ecstasy in his soul. Jesus stands by the cross, looking on and smiling.

Once the jubilation is over, the person takes the hand of Jesus. They start walking together, but the new believer is leading, with Jesus tagging along behind him, forgetting the cross in the background, an afterthought. Both Jesus and the believer are joyful, giving the impression that they will live happily ever after with each other. Without warning, the scene abruptly goes dark with an ear-piercing screech.

Right then, my pastor friend comes on stage and asks the audience how many of them imagined their Christian lives like this. Amazingly, almost everyone lifted their hands!

The pastor then dropped the bomb: “What you saw was absolutely not what the Bible teaches about God’s destiny for your newfound life in Jesus Christ!”

He described the faces of the audience. They wore looks of puzzlement, confusion, shock, disbelief. How could their Christian lives be anything but what they had just witnessed? It was as if they were thinking, *Is there a secret Christian life I am not aware of?*

Then the second scene plays out.

It is initially a repeat of the first. Then the believer looks for Jesus after his moment of ecstasy and joy. As he is reaching out to take Jesus's hand by the cross, Jesus smiles. Instead of going along with the new believer, Jesus hands the believer a few nails. The man looks puzzled. Jesus is holding a big hammer while pointing to the cross standing next to them.

As if to completely ignore the uncomfortable situation, the new believer returns the nails to Jesus and encourages Him to go down the "Oh, what a jolly life I have with Jesus road." But Jesus does not budge. With the nails in one hand and the hammer in the other, He looks from the new believer to the cross. Without a word, Jesus invites the new believer to get on the cross and lay himself on it.

Slowly, with fear and trembling and a look of ultimate surrender, the new believer gives in. Jesus is still smiling, His eyes full of love, as He hammers the nails through the man's arms and feet. The new believer screams in pain and begs Jesus to stop, yet the sound of the hammer striking the nails continues.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

With each ring of metal on metal, the screams lessen. The new believer slowly and agonizingly dies. Then pure silence. A cloth is placed on the believer on the cross, and he is no longer visible.

Jesus releases the hammer and mounts the cross in front of the new believer. Hand over hand, feet over feet, only the resurrected Jesus is there. Nothing is visible of the believer.

What is being depicted is *"For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3); and "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).*

The truth is that we do not have the freedom of choice to go on any path or to any destiny we plan for ourselves. We do not possess the right to go and do as we wish. A title deed in our name is in someone else's hand, and He has

the legal claim on us as His own. Plus, we are in possession of stolen property that needs to be returned to its rightful owner. Just as Onesimus recognized that the *only* right path for him was to return to his master's house and serve him as Philemon's property for the rest of his life, the *only* right path for any of us is to understand that we were slaves before Jesus saved us, and the only thing that is different after our salvation is that we are "saved slaves."

You read that correctly. We are saved slaves, just as Onesimus was. We are legally bound to return to our master's home and serve Him until he releases us. We cannot claim a freedom that is not given to us. Any action other than serving our Master constitutes open rebellion against Him and places us outside of our master's protection.

Onesimus clearly recognized his only choice. Paul was eager to make sure he would return. It is the work of the Holy Spirit not only to convict and remind us of righteousness (our son's identity) but also to convict us of sin. What sin is greater than the sin of rebellion? Some people teach that the Holy Spirit does not convict a believer of their sin but only of their righteousness. I beg to differ. He does both. One sin seeped deep into the psyche of every human being born in the flesh, from the seed of Adam, which continues to wage war against the Spirit of God, and that is the seed of rebellion. It is as much the Holy Spirit's task to make certain that any and all rebellion in us is put down so that the resurrected Christ in us can shine through and be shown to the world for the glory of God.

Are we just mere slaves to Christ and nothing more? Read this marvelous answer:

"*Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord" (Philemon vv. 15–16).*

Returning willingly to our Master, we secure eternity for ourselves and are no longer considered slaves or servants but rather brothers and sisters with Him. Paul says that Christ receives us as His own flesh. We, therefore, come

back home not to merely just serve our Master but to be partakers of His inheritance also. We are given equal standing and legal right to what the Master has and His kingdom blessings, albeit we remain by our own volition, a willing servant to Him.

> *It seems that the exercising of our newfound freedom in Christ cannot happen until we give up that freedom first. It is a beautiful picture of our true identity in the Son of God. After being given our freedom through faith in Christ, we willingly become slaves of righteousness.*

*"You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Roman 6:18).*

Who and what is righteousness? Of course, He who was the firstborn of all righteousness, our Lord Jesus Christ.

# Chapter 9 - Choose to Serve and You Will Be Noticed Ruth

It is amazing how the Bible reveals incredible and amazing truth when we read it through the prism of spiritual identity. Just as the previous chapter revealed the wonderful truths placed by the Holy Spirit into the lesser-known book of Philemon, this chapter takes us to another book that also does not necessarily stand out as significant: the book of Ruth.

The story centers around a young Moabite girl (a gentile) named Ruth, her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, and a relative of Naomi, Boaz. Our story starts with Naomi, her husband, and her two sons leaving the Promised Land to immigrate to Moab because of a famine in Israel (Ruth 1:1–2).

While in Moab, Naomi's husband died. Later, her two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. But not long thereafter tragedy befell when both sons passed away. For a household to lose all of its men at such a time in history is nothing short of a catastrophe for Naomi and her daughters-in-law.

But before we press on with our story, let us not miss a significant truth hidden right in the very beginning, which directly relates to finding our individual destinies. First, a good question: Why is a Jewish family leaving the Promised Land that God had given to them through some of the greatest miracles known in human history to live in a foreign land again? One answer is that there was a famine in the land. So, the family went in search of provision. This is exactly what the people of God who leave their destinies and callings do: they give in to the pressing needs of life and search for provision of bread. But where is the true bread?

Jesus says that man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Father (Matthew 4:4). The true bread that can earnestly satisfy our lives can only be found in our personnel "Promised Land," where we are living out our callings and spiritual destinies. When we

step out of His will and search for our needs, we will certainly experience tragedy and loss.

In my thirty-five years of being involved with the church in Iran and with many Iranian Christians, I have come to know one of the biggest tragedies I have ever witnessed is not the persecution of the church by the government of Iran, the imprisonment and torture of Iranian Christians, the closing and destruction of church buildings, the daily harassment of believers, or even the assassination and murder of several Iranian pastors. The worst tragedy of them all has been the steady departure and fleeing of church leaders, pastors, evangelists, prophets, and apostles of God in Iran to foreign lands in search of so-called freedom from persecution. Their fleeing the church to search for provision is not so different from Naomi's family in our story. The provision is economical, social, and spiritual in nature. Freedom to live their spiritual lives without constant fear, to live in peace, and to provide for their families in Iran are the driving factors behind the exodus.

But I have had to ask myself, Where is the true land of bread in the world today? Is it the United States of America? Is it Western Europe or Australia? While there is certainly more natural provision or earthly bread in these lands, are these nations God's land of bread for the Iranian church? The answer is an astounding no!

One of the greatest spiritual awakenings occurring in the modern world today is not happening in the United States, Europe, Africa, India, or even in China. It is happening in the Islamic Republic of Iran. You did not misread that. A providential move of God is occurring in the nation of Iran, right underneath the nose of the demonic Islamic government of Iran, and its impact is so wide and deep that it is changing and transforming the nation forever.

A mere forty years ago, Iranian Christian believers who had experienced new life in Christ were so scarce and few that they could not even be considered a footnote in Iran's culture, destiny, and future. The Iranian church was relegated to the historical Armenian and Assyrian minorities that comprised

the bulk of its members. The few Muslim converts among it were a novelty and curiosity, nothing else. Hundreds of years of Western missionary activities inside the country had accomplished very little, and progress among the Iranian Muslims that comprised over 99 percent of the population was insignificant. Added to this depressing state of affairs was the advent of the Islamic Revolution and its new guard of radical Islamists leaders with their goal of eradicating all Western influence in the country, which included the fledgling church. What hope could the church have in the face of such roaring lions? Defeatism was in the air, and the church could only hope that what little it had would not be snatched from them.

But in the last thirty-five years, and especially during the two decades, a true national-scale spiritual awakening is happening in Iran and can only be described as miraculous. The Lion of Judah has roared and shut the mouths of the pretentious lion of Islam, putting fear in the hearts of the Islamist leaders who once planned its very destruction. Iran has seen between two and four million Muslim converts, and the number is growing every day. The church of Iran is no longer a footnote but a vibrant and energized segment of Iranian society. At its current rate of growth, it will certainly comprise no less than 10 percent of the total Iranian population by the end of the decade, if not sooner.

What is happening in Iran is certainly not because of an organized and successful mission plan orchestrated by the church. It is undoubtedly a unilateral work of the Holy Spirit and the kingdom of heaven itself. Thousands upon thousands of Iranians are and have been recipients of visions and dreams of heaven, countless miracles of healing and numerous living encounters with angels and Jesus Himself are just a few occurrences that have become commonplace across the nation. Heavenly bread is raining on the land of Persia. No doubt Iran has become a modern Canaan or Promised Land. So why in the midst of one of the greatest moves of God in the world today are Christians are fleeing from the very modern Promised Land in search of so-called provision?

The results have been tragic at best. Many men and women of God who were called to be among the great leaders in the fastest growing church in the world today, to be coworkers with Christ to expand the frontiers of the kingdom of God in the heart of the Islam empire but emigrated in search of provision are relegated to driving taxis, being parking attendants, waiting on tables, living on government assistance, and depending on social safety nets in Western societies. Worse yet, they are spread out in so many nations, living in great difficulty and in a state of limbo as refugees with no rights or privileges, begging for sustenance. The very worst part of this story is that the fire that burned so brightly in these great men and women, fueling their spiritual lives for the glory of God, is slowly but assuredly dying to mere flickers. Spiritual giants are reduced to mere grasshoppers, easily crushed by the daily burdens of making ends meet while living among the spiritually dead and moribund foreign lands.

Running away from the land of promise during a time of famine and searching for bread in a foreign land can lead to tragedy. It was true for Naomi, and it is proving true for the thousands of Iranian believers who are feeling from Iran. They are deserting the front lines of the battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of hell as they search for earthly provision, believing the Enemy's false promise of prosperity and blessing. In search of life, they find death. In pursuit of so-called happiness, they lose the true joy that sustained them in the midst of great difficulties. Truly, man does not live by bread alone.

From the heart of the Father, the Holy Spirit is shouting to you to plant yourself in your destiny where God is moving and the kingdom is expanding, where heaven is making an appearance among people, where miracles are common, where God's presence is tangible and eternal life flows like a river. Where the fruits of heaven are so easily seen that even in the difficulties surrounding you, you are filled with His joy and the satisfaction of knowing that He is at work every day and in every place in your life.

When people of God run away from their crosses and pursue what the world offers them instead, the end is not life gained but destiny lost.

This is where the story of Ruth begins, with loss and tragedy for a Jewish family who stood for the household of God in the Old Testament. Naomi was grief-stricken and had lost all hope. She begged her daughters-in-law to leave her and go back to their Moabite families. This makes sense since she had nothing to offer them: no wealth, no sons, no inheritance, and no protection or covering. There was no reason for Orpah or Ruth to stay with Naomi. She insisted they leave, and eventually Orpah relented and went back, but Ruth stayed, and with these timeless words infused with a great measure of humility and deep genuine love for Naomi, she surrendered her life to her:

> *And Ruth said, do not beg me to leave you, to return from following after you. For where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May Jehovah do so to me and more also if anything but death parts you and me. (Ruth 1:16–17)*

Within the Bible are stories or parables whose main characters play multiple roles, or they are types and shadows of a deeper truth hidden within the story. From this point on (verses 16–17) until the very end, Ruth represents the gentile church, Naomi represents the Holy Spirit, and Boaz stands in for Jesus. Once we grasp this, as the story unfolds, it reveals incredible deep truths about the nature and the spirit behind the second identity in the Godhead, which we call servant-slave identity.

Probably no other person in the Old Testament speaks to this identity more than Ruth. She is the shining example and exemplary model of a true servant-slave. Everything about her–her attitude, her demeanor, her perspective in life, her desires, and her wants–are intertwined within this identity.

Several key truths are apparent in this part of the story. First, Ruth's offer of herself as a lifetime servant to Naomi was unconditional. Naomi had

absolutely nothing to offer Ruth other than her company. Naomi could offer no promise of a better future. In fact, when placed in the historical context, their odds of achieving any form of success were zero. Nevertheless, Ruth leaves the comfort of home and the familiar to follow Naomi into the unknown.

This is exactly the type of obedience and humility a healthy servant identity produces in an individual. The questions I often ask myself as a minister is, Why do people become Christians? What keeps some of them in the body of Christ to the very end? What causes so many others to fall away? The answer is the same to all three questions: false expectations.

The proper expectation from the kingdom of God plays a healthy role for a believer, but false expectations prove deadly for a fragile faith. Such false expectations are often planted by eager preachers and pastors who desire to bring people into the church. They want people saved and kept in their churches, so they promise the moon and stars (false expectations, such as health, wealth, and a problem-free life) if the person just believes. We have a lot of that in the church today, and I have been guilty of promoting it myself in the past. “If you just believe in Jesus, everything is going to be okay–your marriage, your business, and your health!” I must have said that hundreds of times while holding the hands of a new believer, confidently promising, without permission, heavenly goodies, and giveaways on behalf of Jesus.

The fact is that while almost every new believer experiences tangible and wonderful changes in their lives, not every personal desire or nagging problem is provided for or resolved quickly . . . or ever. Not every marriage is saved, or every business succeeds, or every sickness is healed, or every life is spared. The life of a Christian is not a guarantee to receive all of our desires here and now packaged the way we want.

We do get it all, everything we need to do the work of the kingdom, but we do not usually get everything we want. That is why Ruth’s proper attitude in offering her life as a servant to Naomi is so critical in understanding what really works in the kingdom of God.

*This is a kingdom principle: I follow Him for Him alone; I love Him purely; I seek only His companionship and presence.*

This is Ruth's view of Naomi and should stand as a template of how we are to be with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It is the way of life that transcends the pursuit of self. It is the cross of unconditional love that we are to bear every day. And when we do not, it sets us up for a crisis of faith. This kingdom principle eliminates nagging questions, lingering doubts, underlying depression, and defeatism that plagues the church today.

Upon the women's return to the land of Israel, Ruth asked permission from Naomi to go into the fields and gather grain left over from the harvest (Ruth 2:2). This gleaning was how the poor provided for themselves. One could say it was an honorable way of begging. Ruth's attitude is remarkable in that she has left everything behind to serve a mother-in-law who could not provide for her. But Ruth is willing to do whatever it takes to care for Naomi.

The Holy Spirit (Naomi) leads us to the land of promise. When we get there, most people expect that it will be an easy ride from there straight to heaven. But Ruth (the church) has to gird herself, go into the fields, and do the work to get by. Most days, the life of a Christian consists of nothing more exciting than picking up the leftover grains from the field. While we have our big dreams and our plans, we find ourselves doing the menial stuff. We want to preach in front of 20,000 people in a large stadium but find ourselves talking to a Sunday school class with six people in it, and half of them are falling asleep. We want to pastor the fastest growing church in the city, with thousands of parishioners, but we are years into starting our big dream church and have a mere hundred complaining souls in the same tiny church building–and we still have to love them. We want to be famous when no one knows who we are. We want to be on TV, reaching millions of lives, and we cannot afford a camera to film the service.

So many of us want to do big things for Him, but all the Holy Spirit allows us to do for a season is to go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain. But what is important is, whose field does He send us? It is into Boaz's field, our kinsman-redeemer (Jesus).

Ruth apparently had been working in the fields of Boaz for a while because, in Ruth 2:5, Boaz asked the harvesters about the young woman in his field. There must have been many more people in the field than just Ruth, so what captured Boaz's attention? I believe it was the way Ruth carried herself, her dignity, her determination. She must have come across as a very honorable beggar.

*When you do the work God sets before you, no matter how menial and insignificant it may appear to you at the time, with a true servant's heart, you will be noticed. "But many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14).*

We all want kingdom promotion and blessings to flow into our lives, but few want to live a servant's life. We all want to hear sermons on how we are loved and can ask for and receive anything, but to go into the fields and gather leftover grain is below our social class. But if we want to be noticed by our Kinsman-Redeemer, we will need to live honorable and dignified lives of service to others.

Ruth says to Boaz, "Why have I found favor in your sight?" That is an incredible question. She is basically saying, "I have not done anything special that you should notice."

> *Boaz replied, "I have been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." (Ruth 2:10)*

In other words, Boaz says, “I have heard of your servant’s heart, that you have made yourself a slave-servant to your mother-in-law [representing Holy Spirit], have come to my fields, and are serving me.”

Consider if the Lord says to you, “I have seen your heart. I have seen you lacking for nothing in your heart, willing to do what it takes to take care of those you love, and you complain not. *I notice you.*” Would that not thrill you?

When you choose to live in your second identity as a servant to the Master, it will not take long for the Master to notice you. Favor follows you, blessings are showered on you, promotion comes, churches grow, ministries flourish, and you grow in Him. Ruth was quickly promoted from a poor foreign girl begging for her daily bread to become the wife of a rich godly man who provided well for her. And better yet, she was elected to be in the lineage of the Savior of the world, Jesus. Talk about being noticed!

Do you want favor to follow you? Then serve as Jesus did. Do you want blessings in your life? Then do the work set before you and live the life you have been given with dignity, character, and without complaint.

Live like Ruth and you will be lifted to a place of honor. You will receive an inheritance that surpasses your wildest expectations.

# Chapter 10 - What Was Your Price?

*For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.*

1 Corinthians 7:22–23

Do you know that you and I were bought at a price? Apparently, there was a sale going on, and we were the merchandise of choice. I do not remember putting myself up for sale, but that is exactly what happened to me. Somebody bought me.

I don't know about you but losing my freedom to become another's property is absolutely not appealing to me. Modern slavery is not on my bucket list, and, frankly, the thought of it sends shivers down my spine.

How did this happen? I do not think I signed up for this when I received my salvation and took Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Oops! *Lord*, did I? I usually like to skip that part of His title, but for better or for worse, *Lord* is intrinsically attached to *Savior*. I like the Savior part a lot–a loving God who gives up heaven and His glory for me, taking the form of a man and becoming flesh, dying on the cross, which is my punishment of death for my sins, and giving me a one-way ticket to heaven. All of this because He loves me. Who can say no to that?

This deal sounds great. No one in their right mind should say no to it. Unless the guys who pass on it know something we do not? Maybe they thought about it and decided that the fine print on the backside of this deal was exacting too heavy of a price that they could not accept. Who has time to read all that fine print, anyway? I belong to the sign-and-read-later club myself. Who has time to go through the entire sixteen pages of legal jargon

when all I want is the goodies right here, right now? By the way, the disclosures are in such small print you need a magnifying glass to read them!

I recall a scene from the movie *The Santa Clause 2*, starring Tim Allen, where he is informed by the lead elf that he has to marry before Christmas Eve, or he will lose his position as Santa Claus. Santa demands to know where that clause is written. The lead elf puts the contract under three sets of magnifying glasses before Tim can read the fine print. But unlike modern contracts and Santa Claus's Mrs. Claus clause, in our Christian walk, the servant-slave clause is not hidden. In fact, it is written in bold large letters all throughout the entire Bible.

I am the type of person who should be prohibited from talking to salespeople, especially when a certain ten-year-old is knocking on my door, with a handful of cookie boxes in tow. I am a sucker for too-good-to-be-true deals, and I have a major soft spot for salespeople. Perhaps this is because I have been in sales myself for all my adult life, or because I cannot say no. If it were not for God's grace, I would be the proud owner of numerous vacation rentals and timeshares around the world. So, when I heard about the unbelievable deal called salvation, and that it was going to cost me absolutely nothing to get a front-row seat in heaven, I was game. You did not have to hard sell me on that deal.

But the problem was that the salespeople who gave me the pitch left some very important details and conditions out. Like being sold to Jesus and being another man's property for the rest of my life part. Say what? Hey, wait a minute! Let me see the fine print.

It is all there. In the same Bible that gives us John 3:16, you can also find 1 Corinthians 7:22–23, Romans 6:13–23, and many more verses like it. Come to think of it, Jesus did not mince words when he said, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers, and sisters--yes, even their own life–such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple"*

*(Luke 14:26–27)*. I can only imagine one has to really hate his or her life to willingly give it up and start a new one as another man's slave.

In my case, even though I came to know Christ through much difficulty and heartache, I never thought of willingly giving it all up as a condition of believing in Him. After being saved, when the brokenness was healed and I started to experience restoration, life started getting better, and I increasingly enjoyed living a whole lot more. The thought of giving it up was the farthest thing on my mind.

This is exactly where the problem lies. No minister really wants to get into the details of this title transfer at the altar when they are praying the prayer of salvation with the poor unsuspecting souls who flock to the front of the church and line up to be prayed for. Probably with all the brokenness, hurt, pain, and guilt that is weighing heavy on the lives of those who are seeking His salvation, it may not be a good time to tell them that the "free gift" is really not free.

It cost the Father His only Son, and it will cost you and me the one thing we care for and value more than anything else: our lives.

Do not misunderstand me. The gift of salvation is free. No one can do anything to earn it. And no one is able to, in their flesh, conduct themselves in any way to please God. Our righteousness born out of our flesh is like a filthy rag to Him.

*We are not talking about a precondition to salvation outside of faith. But a dead flesh, one who gives up his or her right to be, can never take the glory. That is the kind of flesh God can work with.*

The crux of the matter is this: for God to work through and in me in a powerful way, there must be no more me. God does not care much for

shared-custody arrangements. But we ask Him to do just that with all of our lives. We want to retain ownership at least part of the time. On weekends, preferably Sundays, we try to transfer custody over to Him.

Just as this does not work for the poor children who are caught up in the middle of their parents' divorce and are regularly shipped between two homes, eventually we realize that something is inherently wrong in this self-made game of split ownership. We become aware that our spiritual walk and journey is inherently weak, devoid of power, and counterfeit in nature.

The only solution for a broken home that bodes well for the children is the restoration of the marriage and the death of the selfishness that prompted the divorce in the first place. When the husband and wife die to themselves, swallow their pride, and come back together in the spirit of servanthood and love, children become restored and whole again. It is absolutely no different for our personal lives. As a community of believers, we each must return to our Master and Savior in the spirit of humility and servanthood, laying at His feet the one thing that matters to us the most and the only thing we have that means everything to Him: our lives. When there is one home, one Father, and one Master, our spiritual lives align in harmony with His will, and we function as we are designed.

Are we not tired of faking it half the time and making do with a part-time salvation experience–experiencing God on Sundays but rolling in the mud of life for the rest of the week? Living your life as a bond servant, a slave of Jesus Christ, changes everything. For one, you can never experience true spiritual freedom unless you give up your perceived worldly freedom. One of the most fascinating verses in the Bible is *"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25).* In heaven's economy, everything you and I try to keep, we have lost already. Anything we give up willingly, we receive back, and not just in the same measure but exponentially.

People all over the world seek and desire freedom. Millions of people have sought freedom by leaving their homes, families, and countries of birth to

come to the United States of America. I did. I left Iran at the age of sixteen and sought a new future and a life free from tyranny. To live in a free country, to pursue my dreams, to become the best that I could cost me everything. I left my parents, my sister, my extended family; I left friends, the comforts of home, the country, and the culture in which I was raised to go to a land where I knew only a few souls. The people and culture were foreign to me. I experienced significant loss. Life was so very difficult. I left everything to pursue a dream. In a way, I died so that I could live. Had I not left Iran when I did, I am 100 percent certain that I would not have lived to see my fifty-fifth birthday. I experienced the loss of everything for a season, but I gained life, and I testify that it has been an abundant life in return.

It is the very thing that Christ invites us to do. To receive Him as Lord requires us to experience loss at a very deep level. For some, the loss is immediate as friends, colleagues, a mate, or even our entire families reject the "new us." But when others reject us, while it hurts, it is something we cannot control. The loss we are invited to experience is voluntary. It is in the process of self-denial, of setting down our wills and taking up His, asking Him first for direction rather than going off on our own, that we experience true life.

*"I have come that you may have life and have life more abundantly" (John 10:10)* is the essential mission statement of Jesus.

> *In order for Him to give us life, he must die. But for Him to give us life more abundantly, He has to help us die.*

The greatest men in the New Testament, Jesus's apostles, saw themselves as nothing more than slaves and servants of Christ. If we are to look upon them as our role models, we cannot strive to become any greater than them. For me, Paul is the greatest theological mastermind and teacher of the New Testament, but he starts almost every letter introducing himself as the

servant and slave of Christ, whom he chose to serve. I like to say that I wish that my teaching ministry would one day reach a fraction of what Paul's ministry was (and still is), and I sure I would not want to claim a title greater than Paul ever did for himself.

I am invited to a life of service and a position of a slave in my master's house. But I am serving the greatest, most noble, honorable, and loving Master anyone could hope for. To be a slave is to lose the right to lead one's own life. When I look back over my life, I know when I gripped the reins of my life, for I did not fare so well. But now, I rest in knowing that I do not have to go through life alone, trying to control it. I can rest in the goodness and greater wisdom of my Master. I simply have to obey, and the rest is in His good hands. He is good all the time.

Surely, I have been purchased, and I no longer control my own destiny. I have been sold to Another, and I am to serve that household. But I belong not to a human but to the household of God. If there was a time when being sold as a slave would be beneficial and more profitable for me, it would be here and into the family of God Himself. For as many who are called to serve Him without condition and to embrace the Master of their faith, they are no longer just called servant-slaves but His brothers and sisters in faith.

# Chapter 11 - The Son Who Became a Slave and Then a King

If there is one feel-good story in the Bible with an unforgettably great ending, it is the life story of Joseph. If you are not familiar with his story, I'll give you the abbreviated version (you can read all about it in Genesis 37–48).

Joseph was the son of Jacob, who was the son of Isaac. This made Abraham Joseph's great-grandfather. Jacob had twelve sons. Joseph's mother, Rachel, was the love of Jacob's life and died giving birth to Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin. Call it paternal preference, or that Joseph and Benjamin were the tangible product of the love Jacob had labored so hard for, these two boys, Jacob's youngest, were his favorite sons, especially Joseph (Genesis 37:3).

We pick up the story when Joseph is seventeen years old. The first act has him spying on his brothers who were not doing their work. He tells on them to his father. It is clear that all the other boys know of Jacob's favoritism, and it has never sat well with them. In fact, the Bible says that they hated Joseph for it. It is also clear that Joseph may have been a little spoiled.

To make matters worse, young Joseph has several dreams in which his brothers would one day serve him as their master and king. Of course, he tells them all about it (vv. 5–7, 9–10). This only feeds the brothers' jealousy and makes them hate him even more. Even his father warned him about sharing his dreams with his brothers. This young man lacked wisdom and maturity in dealing with his siblings, which cost him dearly.

But the fact is that Joseph was given these dreams. God promised him a future kingship, even though he was young, probably spoiled, certainly immature and unwise, and definitely not qualified yet to be a king and a ruler of his people. He was prequalified by God and not through his own actions.

It is undeniable that he was greatly loved and favored not only by his earthly father but also as the heavenly Father's chosen one too. As much as the robe of many colors that Jacob made for him was a sign of favor and election, the dreams God gave him were a sign and seal of his prophetic destiny and God's favor and election of him.

This is certainly true of many of us as we enter into the household of God. We are given prequalification dreams, visions, and promises of a great inheritance even when we are nowhere close to having our act together.

But what was to transpire in Joseph's life for the next several decades can be construed as a travesty of justice, tragic, inhumane, and crushing to any human soul. The young man was betrayed by his brothers, thrown into a pit, and then sold as a slave to a group of Midianite traders. From there he was sold again to an Egyptian official called Potiphar.

After serving his Egyptian master faithfully, rather than receiving his freedom, he was betrayed a second time, this time by his master's wife. She became angry with him for refusing to sleep with her, so she falsely accused him of attacking her. His master threw him into an Egyptian jail, alone, forgotten, and left to die. You can only imagine what his thoughts were sitting in that terrible Egyptian prison. The physical conditions could not have been pleasant. What happened to all of those dreams of kingship and divine favor? Had God truly forgotten him? No doubt his thoughts went back to his home and father. He might have considered that if he could just be back in his father's tent, he would not lecture his brothers on how they would one day serve him; rather, he would gladly wash their feet. I can only imagine that the furthest thing from Joseph's thoughts were those dreams. His reality shouted loudly of hope lost, old dreams long forgotten, and a life of misery before him.

His journey of slavery, betrayal, and imprisonment had taken him far away from the road to kingship. Yet in a strange, twisted, and convoluted way that only God can design, he was in the perfect place to become the man he needed to be so he could become a king one day.

*You might say that the road to kingship always traverses the valley of servanthood.*

The key to Joseph's story is his faithfulness to the God of forefathers–Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He remained a Jew in heart even though he literally spent nearly a lifetime among one of the most prolific idol-worshiping societies of ancient times: Egypt. He knew what was right before God, and he remained true in his heart at the expense of his freedom. Whether he was tempted by Potiphar's wife or by the years of neglect and abuse he must have suffered at the hands of his masters and captors, Joseph seemed to remain a man of steadfast and resolute character through it all, unwilling to compromise his moral principles. How many of us can claim such a thing when placed in similarly tragic or exceptionally difficult circumstances?

Suffering the pain of rejection or injustice even for a mere day is too much for many of us to handle. We want to retaliate, fight back, get even, or at least complain to God and others that our circumstances are wrong or unfair. It is in our nature to proclaim innocence and boast in self-righteousness. But that is exactly what sabotages the thing God is trying to do in building our servant identity. The image and identity of a servant, which is the true image of Christ in the church, can only truly shine in the moments when we bring our flesh under submission and surrender our will to the process of change and humility. God instills character, steadfast and resolute in goodness, and faithfulness by placing us in very difficult circumstances.

*In essence, to become a truly successful king, one must first master the art of servanthood.*

Servanthood is not a job; it is an identity and a state. Just as much as we have a state of inheritance before the Father as an adopted child, we have a state of a servant before Christ. The only servants who seem to get His approval are “good and faithful servant” types. We cannot avoid this process. There are no shortcuts even though we long to find one. Few believers ever make it through the valleys of servanthood intact and prepared for kingship duties. Too many commit spiritual suicide by making compromises along the way. It is easy to get off the court, find the bench, and declare a holy time-out. Believe me, it is tough playing in the court of destiny.

But Joseph makes his decision. He is determined to make it one way or another. After he spent several long years almost forgotten and languishing in an Egyptian prison, he eventually and supernaturally found himself before Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, because of his ability to decipher and interpret dreams. When there seems to be no way, God always opens a supernatural door of escape.

After a successful interpretation, this former slave and prisoner was elevated to the highest office in the land of Egypt, being granted authority and power second only to Pharaoh himself.

His rise to power was quick and sudden. In fact, so sudden that it can only be categorized as a miracle from the hand of God. He was literally a slave and prisoner one day and a king the next. This is perhaps the best example of the pattern of how heavenly promotions happen. One waits a long time in the same place or position. It is possible to even fall back a few steps. But when it seems impossible to ever accomplish one’s destiny and all hope is lost, feeling forgotten by heaven itself, promotion comes in a meteoric and exponential nature.

We see the same pattern in the life of David. He was chosen and anointed king, but before he ever took his rightful place in the palace in Jerusalem, he had to first serve King Saul, the man he would replace as king. After serving the king faithfully, Saul turned against David, who fled to save his life. He hid

in the wilderness, living as a hunted criminal and even taking refuge in the land of Israel's worst enemies. No doubt he never expected this turn of events when God directed Samuel to anoint David as the next king of Israel. But just when David resigned himself to a life on the run as a wanted criminal, Saul and his son were killed in battle. David was quickly elevated to kingship.

Elisha's is another fine example of enduring servanthood before promotion. God chose him to succeed one of the great prophets of the Old Testament, Elijah (1 Kings 19:19). But Elisha had to first serve Master Elijah for over ten years. The Bible says that Elisha used to pour water on Elijah's hands (2 Kings 3:11). Now that is not a glamorous job for a prophet-to-be, but after these years of servanthood, in one day he received the mantle of Elijah, and not only that, but he also received a double portion of Elijah's spirit, making him one of the greatest prophets of Israel ever. An incredible reward, is it not, for faithfully washing another man's hands and feet?

Many more examples of servanthood before promotion are throughout the Scriptures, from Moses to Paul. But the greatest example is showcased in the life of the superstar and the leading actor of the greatest story ever told: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

# Chapter 12 - The Perfect Servant

> *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.*
>
> *Philippians 2:5–9*

In part, Joseph's life reads like a perfect prequel to the "Real Story" that would unfold centuries later: the life story of Jesus Christ. The only difference was that Joseph was an unwilling player in this incredible biblical theatrical production. He eventually became the star attraction, albeit not by volunteering for the task but by being swept up in circumstances out of his control. On the other hand, Jesus was a willing participant in the greatest act of sacrifice and selflessness ever known in human history.

Joseph's sacrifice saved his kindred and bloodline from perishing in the midst of the famine, but Jesus's sacrifice accomplished far more. He created a unique family of God's own children who are born through the blood and water, born in the human image but of the Spirit of God into eternity. One man brought salvation from physical death to his Jewish family for a season by his obedience through servanthood, a path he did not choose willingly. The other brought eternal life and salvation to all nations by willingly choosing the path of servanthood.

*The measure of one's death and willingness to obey is directly proportional to the extent that life emanates from that sacrifice.*

A thirty, sixty, or hundredfold return is not merely about money. It is all about obedience and the exponential return heaven makes on that obedience.

The story of the Sower of the seed embodies this same principle. For a seed to produce from itself, it must first die. But it dies with the right heart and with the right intentions and produces an exponential return. Jesus says it well, "*Lest a seed falls to the ground and dies, it cannot multiply"* (John 12:24, author's paraphrase). Jesus certainly did fall into the ground, die, and He did multiply.

Jesus's story reveals the incredible power of willing servanthood, even to voluntary death to self. In human history, no man has ever gone to the extent as Jesus did to deny Himself and make His life all about others. In doing so, He radically transformed human history and set heaven and earth on a new destiny and course. May I be bold enough to say that none of what Jesus did historically would have had the same impact and effect if it were not done in the spirit of servanthood? Men marvel at His miracles and teachings. They are amazed by His passion for the sinner. The lost were at the heart of His zeal for God's Word and His house. But what truly confounds us all and sets Jesus apart from all others is that the expression of God's power, authority, and Word is interwoven with a willingness to serve others, even to wash feet, give all, forgive all, including his murderers, without an ounce of bitterness and unforgiveness.

Christ followers who carry their crosses each day and live a life of perpetual dying to self-become true images of the Son. If there is one thing that makes us look and smell and act like Him, it is when we obey like He did and do what the Father asks of us without question. It is at that very moment that Jesus is truly walking the earth through His church.

The mind of Christ is the perfect mind. Truth is established in Him. It is the only correct pattern for kingdom living. There is no other way. Any other path is a dead end. The believer's struggle is right here. Can we navigate our thought-life and frame it within the boundaries of selfless servanthood and pursue the higher cause of the Father's will versus our own?

In my years in ministry, more than 99% percent of all the believers whom I have counseled for personal, marital, relational, and emotional problems were struggling with giving up the helm of their lives to Christ including myself. If they could do that one thing and remove their own wants, needs, and expectations from the picture, they would realize a quick resolution of the apparently impossible problems and difficult situations they were facing.

The pattern of identity is set by Jesus, who is the perfect model. The obedient beloved son fully accepted and fully loved, with all the rights and privileges of being the Son of God Himself, willingly and voluntarily gives up the right to use his position of authority and refuses to abuse His privileges in order to serve and minister to others. He sets Himself on the road of continual sacrifice so that perfect harmony and peace rest in Him and in those who follow Him.

What makes someone the perfect servant? It is the one who not only does it willingly but also stands in as a master yet chooses the opposite position of a servant.

One of the TV programs that I had become quite fond of watching was called *Undercover Boss*. In one episode, the CEO of a large multisite franchised restaurant chain is hired as a teller in one of the chains. Part of his duties as the new guy has him cleaning the bathrooms and kitchen.

The background story continues with the CEO saying that he felt uncomfortable at first with the task of cleaning the bathrooms. But after a few days of this menial task, he felt tremendous respect for those who do this hard job within his organization. In fact, he stated a very telling fact: cleaning the dirty and nasty bathrooms was a tougher challenge than running the daily affairs of the company. Isn't that amazing? But there is a

serious truth in that. Lowering oneself to the position of a servant, performing the least attractive of jobs for others, is the hardest thing one can do. But it can also be the most liberating and transformative action in one's life. For those who embrace a life of elective servanthood, they are sure to see the results: the fruit of humility, faithfulness, compassion, perseverance, contentment, and patience, just to name a few.

Jesus's famous words to Peter during the Last Supper when He bends down to wash his feet take on a whole new meaning and significance: *"If you don't let me wash your feet, Peter, you will have no part in me!" (John 13:8)*

This spiritual truth is often missed in most sermons on this passage of Scripture. What part of Jesus will Peter miss if he does not learn servanthood? Not salvation, as is often taught, as we are saved by grace and faith. Something far more critical and important is skipped over. We are missing out on experiencing being like Jesus, in partaking of His very Spirit, character and mind-set. We miss out on His fellowship!

*You will never experience Jesus fully unless you enter into his fellowship of the cross of servanthood.*

You will never experience the full measure of His life, fully drink of the well of joy, or partake of His resurrection life unless you enter into His identity as a servant. His entire ministry was based on lowering Himself to the lowest position so that He could also ascend to the highest position.

The early apostles did enter into this fellowship, and it not only changed them but allowed them to change the world. As I often have said, no one is greater than his or her master, and we are no greater than Jesus Christ himself.

*Another Look at the Good Samaritan*

> *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*
> *In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'*
> *"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."*
> *Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25–37)*

Typically, we think the parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example of a servant. As the above verses state, a poor fellow was mugged. Those who should be first in line to help someone did not. But the least likely of all heroes showed up, took care of the wounded soul, and healed him. But there is much more to this story than just meets the eye. This is a fascinating picture of how Jesus perceived Himself and His mission on earth.

The parable is given as an answer to an insistent Pharisee or legalist who is trying to justify his own actions. Jesus knew the man did not really care for His ministry or message and was testing Him, so he gave him the answer the man was looking for: if you think you are good enough to earn heaven by following the law, then follow the law. I have nothing to add; go do what you have been doing all along.

The man was not satisfied and became pesky, so Jesus laid out His entire ministry and purpose, but He hid it within this amazing parable.

The poor soul who was mugged is the picture of broken humanity you, me, and everyone else who are going out, doing our business, not wanting to mess up or mess around. But life catches up to us, and before we know it, we get broken, beaten up, insulted, injured, betrayed, stricken, abandoned, rejected, and left for dead. Our wounds are open and bleeding as we lay in the world dying for everyone to see. Yet no one can or is willing to help. The people who are supposed to help us don't.

The priest and the Levite stand for religion and the law. Religious organizations and institutions, human traditions and religious practices are either incapable or unwilling to meet humanity's deep needs and heal its wounds. None can do what only Christ can, and none is willing to do what He does. We arrive at the conclusion that wounded and hurting humanity needs a Savior, and nothing that humanity has come up with, even if religious or godly in appearance, can meet that need.

The answer lies in Servant-minded God. The Good Samaritan is none other than Jesus Himself. For Jesus to equate to a Samaritan goes to the depth of the rejection He endured in His earthly ministry. The least likely Savior, a Nazarene (what good comes from Nazareth?), a mere human child born to a poor Jewish couple, not comely or beautiful (Isaiah 53:2), without formal priestly schooling, outrageously claiming to be God's Son Himself! Just as Samaritans were detestable to the religious Jews, Jesus and His message of the kingdom were detestable to the ears of the religious order and leadership of His time.

But who could overcome all that rejection and hatred to help out the very people who would ultimately reject Him? The Suffering Servant who gave up His rights and privileges to be our Savior. One who is willing to look the other way, ignoring the insults and hatred that would, if possible, thwart His purpose.

He found the wounded soul, cared for him, and healed him with oil and wine, symbols of the Holy Spirit and righteous blood of the new covenant. But this was not the end of the story. Just as the wounded man was unable to do anything for himself, neither can we. Jesus picks us up and asks nothing in return. The Servant-God carries us on His donkey and puts into the care of an innkeeper (Holy Spirit). For two days the payment was made (2000 years of the church age)!

A Servant-God assures us that His mission of care and healing continues even without His physical presence. The church–His bride, the wounded hurting souls He chose to heal and restore–is now in the good hands of the Spirit, resting, recovering, rejuvenating, regenerating, and healing while all debts are paid and no burden is felt.

The perfect Servant, the perfect God, the One who, though rejected, does not reject. Being cast out, He accepts and embraces while seeking nothing in return, not even a thank-you. He carries the burden and lives with the responsibility only because He is Good.

That is right, He is the Good Samaritan.

He is the Good Jesus, the Savior of a dying and hurting world.

# Chapter 13 - Resting in Identity: Understanding the Sabbath Rest

> *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*
>
> *Matthew 11:28–30*

Not until I understood the importance of recognizing spiritual identity did, I even comprehend the significance of this passage. I must have preached about these verses many times, but I am certain that it never impacted the believers in my care the way it was supposed to. I was unable to teach a practical application of the *rest* our Lord Jesus is talking about here. It is easy to say, "Trust in Jesus, come to Him, and you will receive rest and comfort from life's problems and the daily grind. It will be all okay in the end." But honestly, how does this rest really work?

Let me start with one simple but powerful fact. Almost all people who decide to enter into the kingdom of God do so to find and experience some form of rest. But invariably, many, if not most, believers do not experience this when they enter into the church and confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Life experiences have proven to me that this heavenly peace or rest does not work in the way we understand it or want to accept it. I cannot count how many people have come to me to pray for them so that they can have peace in their lives. They cry to God, asking Him to listen to them, to give them some relief. What do we ministers do when faced with such situations? We pray that God gives them peace, and we ask God to cover them with the peace that can only come from Him and heaven alone. As if peace was some

form of a heavenly anti-anxiety medication to be administered by the Holy Spirit on poor folks who cannot keep their emotions under control and make it through life!

After years of asking for peace for myself and others, I finally understand that biblical peace rests solely on understanding righteousness and our divine triune identity. It is not external to us, not something that God prescribes and gives as needed. It is very much a direct fruit of who we believe and perceive ourselves to be. It is received by faith and continuously renewed by living a truth-centered life.

Let me say it this way. What Jesus is conveying in Matthew 11:28 is a completely different message than most believers, and even ministers, understand. It is the perfect verse in the Bible to bring together the two identities we have discussed thus far: the child identity and the servant identity. Matthew 11:28 acts as a bridge between the Son and the Servant persons living within each and every believer.

The word *rest* in this passage originates from the same rest that God entered when He was finished with the work of creation. In the book of Genesis, we read:

> *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the hosts of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all of his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it: because that in it He had rested from all of his work which God created and made. (Genesis 2:1–3, emphasis mine)*

At first glance, it appears that God is resting from some form of exertion. While it is hard to imagine God needing physical rest, it should not be inconceivable to imagine God exerting and utilizing His genius to create the entire living ecosystem. It is clear from the previous six days of creation that God infused the world with a significant amount of design, which required a

plan and work to form and fashion the earth. The Bible also clearly states that God rested from his work. So real work was performed.

An interesting picture of this work is presented in Genesis 1. As each day of creation comes to an end, the phrase "And it was evening and morning" is used. This is a picture of progression and change. As each day moves from the evening to the morning, conditions change and progress from darkness to light . . . or more dramatically, from chaos to order. This is because God is actively working to bring design and order and balance to that specific part of creation.

*God's effort is always directed in bringing order out of chaos, light into the darkness and calm out of a storm. It is the essence of the work of creation.*

Chaos is within the human soul and spirit before we meet the living God. Through the new-birth experience, God works feverishly to bring a sense of peace, order, and completion to our inner person. Light has to break through the darkness that has engulfed our souls, just as darkness had engulfed the earth before the creation and it was without form. This process takes time and does not happen instantaneously, as many of us would hope for.

So why in Genesis 2:1–3 does it say that God sanctified and blessed the seventh day? Why did He not bless and make holy the day He made man or the animals? A significant message is tucked into this verse, which has been right before our eyes all along. God declared the seventh day holy because no work was performed in it. That is the only thing that distinguishes this day from the previous six days.

*You read that right. The lack of action or effort makes it holy. Rest makes it holy.*

*In the kingdom of God what brings rest is holy and what creates chaos is sin.*

When one ceases to work and does not mess with perfection, then he or she rests in that perfection. That is what God considers to be a holy or divine state of being. In fact, God blesses the person who rests in perfection. It requires faith to participate in the perfect state created for us through the sacrifice of Jesus.

To be a servant is to work, of course. It is to toil and labor to please the master. The seventh day is not about lying around and doing nothing. Not at all. Servants are called to work whenever their masters say, no matter what day it is. In fact, this is where the Pharisees and the teachers of the law completely misunderstood the truth behind the veil of the Sabbath day. They demanded no work to be done, none whatsoever. A man was to be stoned to death if he broke the law of the Sabbath. But Sabbath was not about work itself but the intent behind the work.

*The heaviest burden a man or woman of God carries is the self-imposed burden of pleasing God Himself.*

In His perfect wisdom, God calls resting or abiding in Him the perfect holy state. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus calls upon the Jewish nation, which is heavily burdened by the Law and the requirements of fulfilling it, to come to Him so that they can rest in His obedience and fulfillment of the Law. For what they or we could not ever do, He has already done. The rest comes from knowing

that the Father is pleased not because of what we do or accomplish but because of who we are.

A universal example of this truth can be found in almost every healthy family that has a child living in it. Parents are pleased with their children on the basis of their relationship and not what their children do for them. Love supersedes effort, duty, and chores. A divine and deep rest abides in the hearts of those children who live in healthy and love-filled families. They know they are loved and live in that confidence. They behave out of that confidence in which they rest. It is only when parents gauge their love and kindness against a child's strict obedience to the rules that the child loses his or her peace of mind and lives in a constant state of *unrest.*

To be a good and effective servant, you must work within a state of rest and perfection and not work to receive rest. To be a healthy child of God, you must trust and believe in your Father's love and acceptance.

The above statement may sound like an oxymoron at first glance, but it is absolute truth, one that every believer needs to grasp and internalize if they want to be effective ministers and productive servants. To be a world changer and to ensure that your kingdom efforts are truly counted, you have to work in a state of rest and perfection, living with the confidence of your Father's love despite your failures and shortcomings.

"Come to me all that are heavy burdened and I will give you rest" is an invitation to know that the peace we seek in our relationship with the Father is simply accepting what Jesus has already done for us. That is it. Nothing more. We can do nothing to add to or take away from Christ's accomplishment. This peace/rest does not come from the external but is a rest that comes from within, from faith in Him and the Father who sent Jesus. I am loved and I am accepted. I am well liked, and I am the apple of His eye. I have absolute confidence in my Father's love in spite of me. Because of Jesus, I can rest, knowing I am a child in His house.

And what about spiritual works?

Any spiritual work or sacrifice we do that is rooted in the mind-set of an imperfect servant trying to secure acceptance is unworthy. Our efforts do not please God. For it is by faith alone that we please God. Faith is the DNA of all that is pleasing and enjoyable to Him. And this is especially true regarding spiritual work or service and divine sonship. Any work springing from faith is pleasing to God, and any work or service based in unbelief is work wasted.

So, I work and do the bidding of my Father out of faith in the work that has been finished in me. I am a new creation, and I live through the perfection that has been placed in me. It is like a servant wearing the robe and ring of his master. He goes about his tasks resting in the knowledge that his master's name and full authority has been given to him. He does not rely on his own name or resources to do what he has set out to do.

All that we do is measured against this. Why do you do what you do for God? Your answer makes a tremendous difference if you are to ever enjoy your life as a living sacrifice and an obedient servant to Jesus. A lot of people work their tails off for the church and God, but they are miserable, tired, worn out, and unhappy. They work hard, harder than anyone else in the world. They put in long hours serving, helping, comforting, praying, and sacrificing their precious days in order to serve others while hoping to serve and "please" God. All of their efforts come from themselves in the insane hope of being accepted and loved. They are not resting in what Jesus has done for them; rather, they are trying to add to His already-accomplished work. This is an unnecessary tragedy, for all they are laboring to do in the name of "service" will be rejected by the Master.

But when we look at these verses in Matthew, we see a greater truth.

> *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mathew 11:28-30 emphasis mine).*

One rest is given, which we have just discussed, and the other is learned. What is this second rest that has to be learned?

The second rest is all about what we experience in our daily lives. It is not about our relationship with God but our daily experiences. Life can be tough, and there is no getting around it. We have good days and bad days, but what robs our peace most often are not external factors but what is happening in the eight inches between our two ears, which we call the brain.

It seems that we are designed to think constantly. We think about all kinds of stuff, and not all of it can or should be shared with the outside world. On a given day, I think of problems at my company; the projects that were not awarded and why I lost them; tasks I have to finish before the deadline; past mistakes (and lamenting them); ministry projects I have to finish; needs of my marital relationship; my son's diabetes and its complications; my sister's well-being; finances; my dad's health, his old age, and how long I will have him with me; temptations that run amuck; and a slew of other stuff that can fill a book.

Do you see a pattern here? If you summarize my thoughts, you will notice a common subject: me and myself. No wonder I do not experience peace and rest in my personal life. My mind is constantly wrestling with thoughts of my own life, things I do not have, things that are not fully right or not done. While not every thought is selfish in origin, they are centered on me and my hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

The more we think of ourselves, the more disharmony and chaos we bring to our lives. Self-centeredness agitates the calm waters of our peace and raises the dark clouds of confusion. The antidote for this human condition is a constant exercise of selflessness and humility that Christ invites us to in Matthew 11.

What did Jesus think of all the time? Did he think of Himself and His own needs? We all know the answer. He did not come to think of Himself but of us and the Father.

"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus did not live a self-centered life. His focus was the

Father and the creation He was sent to save. Therefore, he experienced an inner peace that comes from being a perfect servant. When we talk about the son-daughter and servant identities, we are not merely speaking about who we are but in what state of mind we live in.

> *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27).*

This is the peace that Jesus leaves with us. It is a way of life, a life of self-immolation. It is a form of self-identification as a beloved servant-son, an invitation to the Sabbath rest that comes when we stop trying to buy His acceptance and His love and start trying to live like His Son.

To live as a true child of God and to trust in His perfect and complete love for us because of Christ and His finished work, we can then enter into and abide in "perfect peace." To learn of Him and His way of life that is rooted in His living as a servant and washer of feet allows us to participate in and partake of a daily feast of peace. You cannot help but experience the joy that comes from *resting* in Him.

*Perfect peace and supernatural rest are set aside for those who understand our identities as beloved children of the Father, who are called to be His and His creation's servant-slaves.*

# Chapter 14 - Winning by Losing The Life of a Servant

Everyone member of the human race is wired to win, some more than others. Losing is not programmed within us, and we try to avoid it at all costs. Frankly, losing does not sound or feel right to anyone. If our children experience it, we try to comfort them and tell them there will be another chance to win. If we experience it, we try to forget it and chalk it up as a learning experience.

As a soccer fan, I will never forget the loss that the national soccer team from Brazil suffered during the World Cup matches held in Brazil in 2014. The semi-final match against Germany was supposed to be the final obstacle leading up to the World Cup Championship match and the eventual fourth World Cup title for Brazil. There seemed a sense of destiny in the air. The nation was preparing itself for the largest and most audacious carnival celebration of all time once the team held the World Cup trophy over their heads.

No one envisioned a loss to Germany, as Brazil had not lost a home match in over thirty-nine years. Well, the loss did come, and it was utter humiliation. The final score of 7 to 1 was like a Mike Tyson being knocked out within thirty-seconds of the first round, or a 70 to 0 throbbing in an American football game. As I watched the game, it seemed that the German players were matched up against Brazilian schoolboys. The Brazilians who had come to the stadium, expecting to see their team win it all, sat dumbfounded and shocked. Many had tears running down their faces, ashamed to glimpse at the scoreboard. The nation appeared to be in a state of absolute disbelief, hoping that this was simply a bad dream that they desperately wanted to wake up from.

No one enters any sports competition with the intention to lose the contest. But in the greatest match of all time, between God and Satan, with the stakes as high as the ultimate control of heaven and earth, the outcome would play itself out in a way no one could have predicted. If there were oddsmakers in Las Vegas, they would have had God and His team favorites to win and certain to also cover the spread. Well, the oddsmakers would have been proven wrong by a large margin.

If we were to consider that the match started when John baptized Jesus in the Jordan and the final seconds of it ticked off with His breathing His last while hanging on the cross, one could say that God's team started off well but went down in a horrific defeat. No doubt, God's team, led by its captain Jesus, experienced a drubbing meant for the record books.

Here is the million-dollar question: Why would God allow His team to lose and not just lose but lose in such a terrible way? The answer is found in the paradoxical nature of the Bible: In God's Rules of Life Handbook, you can only win by first losing, and the height of your victory is in direct relation to the depth of your defeat. In God's view, you can never move upward unless you have first gone downward.

If one were to describe the path Jesus took to the cross, it would not be described upward in nature, but rather a downward spiral. If everyone around Him expected Him to wrap up His earthly ministry with signs and wonders and miracles and a triumphant crowning ceremony in Jerusalem, they were seriously disappointed when the crown of thorns was shoved onto His head before His murderers nailed Him to the cross as His throne.

The story of this man Jesus, who claimed to be God's Son, certainly did not have a happily-ever-after ending. In fact, for those who witnessed His execution at the hands of Roman soldiers on that fateful Friday evening in Jerusalem sometime between AD 30 and 35, it was the most tragic, grotesque, heart wrenching, evil, and unjust ending. The young Messiah's body hung battered, beaten, and bruised beyond recognition, blood and

water pouring from His lifeless body. The air was filled with the stench of defeat, humiliation, loss, confusion, and total helplessness.

What is amazing about the cross is not that God would allow this to happen to His own Son but that He planned for it to happen! In the world of sports, when people enter the game with the intent to lose, it is called match fixing. This orchestrated crucifixion seemed to be the greatest match fixing in the history of humankind.

*Jesus came into the world to win it all for His Father, but a precondition to His ultimate victory was that He was to lose it all first.*

We all know about the resurrection story and how on that Sunday morning, every trace of defeat was wiped out by the glory of an empty tomb. But we cannot forget the bloodied cross that preceded it.

There is a significant lesson in this for us. We Christians are called to a victorious life in Christ, and we want to live our lives in celebration. But we seldom think that losing is the way to experience such a life.

We do not have to look far to see that this truth is ever present in our lives every day. Take for example children learning to walk. They take a single step and fall, and then they take a few more steps and, boom, they fall again. But every step taken is celebrated and every fall forgotten. Sometimes they fall and cry, and other times they are too tired to walk so they go back crawling. In the end, falling is as much a part, if not the greater part, of the learning-to-walk process. The method of inventing is littered with failure. Thomas Edison constructed three thousand different theories in connection with electric light, yet in only two cases did his experiments prove the truth of his theory.

I had a weight trainer who pushed me to do bench presses. One of the last times I was with him, he said, "I want you to try to lift two hundred ten pounds."

"What?!" I said. "That is a lot."

"I know, but I want you to feel the weight and get used to it."

Honestly, I feared that I would have a close encounter with the entire weight collapsing on my face. I was unsure if I could hold it up for even a few seconds. But I tried . . . and failed. I pushed my body to its limit for a few seconds just to keep the weight from sinking into my chest. Now that was a failure by every possible definition, but from my trainer's point of view, it was an essential part of eventually being able to press 210 pounds.

Failure is a natural part of learning, growing, and eventually walking in victory. Our Christian walk is no exception. Recently in a conference in Lebanon, a minister stood up and asked why is it that when he prays for others' healing that some are healed but more often nothing happens. If I am a child of God and He loves me so much and has given me an inheritance of His name and His power, why do I fail? Good question. A common answer is to say that failure is due to a lack of faith, whether it is our own or others' unbelief, hidden sin, or I don't know why, but we should keep on praying anyway. I have been guilty of using all of these answers at one time or another to try to explain away failure. A common dilemma ministers face is, why do we fail when Jesus never failed?

Did Jesus never fail? Is that a correct conclusion? Of course, He did not fail in keeping the Law, and He did not fail the Father by giving in to sin, but can we truly say He did not experience failure?

What about this verse? *"He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them" (Mark 6:5)*. Here, Jesus enters Nazareth, his hometown, where people knew him from childhood. He is unable to perform miracles. Regardless of how we try to explain this away, He could not perform *any* miracles. This is Jesus we are talking about, not me

or you. He is the Son of God. The last time I checked, He walked on water, quieted a vicious storm, and split five loaves of bread and two fish to feed a gathering of five thousand. I am certain that Jesus must have been very disappointed with what happened in Nazareth. I imagine that more than any other people, He wanted to touch and bless His people of Nazareth. He knew them by name. His childhood friends, neighbors, His father's business associates, and Mary's closest friends were all there. He longed to bless them and to show them that the young man who had grown up in their midst was truly the Messiah. But it did not happen. I can also imagine that He left Nazareth with a heavy heart, saddened by their unbelief, and wondering what would have happened if He had succeeded in showing them who He really was.

> *"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes" (Luke 10:13).*

Here we see Him warning Corazon and Bethsaida, two Galilean cities that chose to ignore the miracles Jesus did there. The people rejected Him outright. Jesus must have been frustrated to declare judgment on two entire cities. I cannot help but detect a bit of righteous anger coming from Him. Jesus, who is full of grace and mercy, tells these folks they are going to get it one day!

His desire was for the people to believe in God. Why were they so stubborn and hard-hearted? In dealing with the Jews, He must have felt at times, if not often, like a failure. No matter what He did, what miracles he performed, or the mercy and love He showed, the nation's heart was hard. He was relegated to ministering to society's poorest of the poor and lowest of the low.

Let us not forget Judas. How often did Judas and Jesus talk with each other and share a meal? How many times did they pray together and talk about the kingdom? They were friends and intricately involved with each other's lives

for over three years. To see one of His closest friends and companions betray Him must have broken His heart. Jesus must have thought what He could have done differently or more to prevent Judas from turning against Him. After all, He had chosen the man and called him out to be his disciple. He had invested time and energy to minister life to Judas, and now this! Like any failed relationship, whether a marriage or business partnership, people cannot help but think that they somehow failed each other. For Jesus, Judas was a failed relationship.

As we look at Jesus's life and His primary mission to reconcile the Jew back to the Father, His mission was an abject failure. They turned on Him in the end, and they did so in the cruelest manner.

But for Jesus losing the Jewish nation was ultimately the only way He could truly win them, along with other nations. Recall John 12:24: *"Lest a seed be cast into the ground and die it cannot bear fruit."* For Jesus to reap a harvest of nations, He had to let go of the one nation He was commissioned to save. The Jewish nation became the seed that was cast into the ground so that from its death, the tree of nations would grow out of the cross, encompassing every tribe, every tongue, and every people. Jesus loved His people and loved the land of His people, but He ultimately was asked to fail them and to let them go so that the greater good, which was the salvation of the world, would be accomplished.

*So, it is in the life of servant-slave in the kingdom of God. When we operate within this identity, we are constantly asked to look at the greater good–the higher purpose and the larger harvest that comes when we allow ourselves to suffer loss and experience personal defeat.*

A servant is asked to give up his or her rights for the betterment of the master. However, a good servant learns that what benefits the master's house, ultimately benefits him or her also.

Recently, after suffering a personal tragedy and humiliating setback, I was asking one of my pastors about why I had experienced such a painful defeat even though I was certain that I had listened to and obeyed correctly what God had asked me to do. I believed that when you obey, you are assured of success. But the inescapable reality was that I had obeyed, and I had failed, nonetheless. The answer I received was as shocking as it was revelatory. My pastor simply said, "Why do you think that when God told you to obey Him and do what He asked you to do, He wanted you to succeed? He simply wanted you to do what He asked you to do, even if the end result would be failure. Would you have done it if you knew it was a mission destined to fail? Most of us will not and will pass up on the assignment altogether."

*But the cross was a mission destined for apparent failure from the beginning, yet the greatest victory ever came out of it.*

To operate within the servant-slave identity is to be kingdom minded. Such an identity replaces personal ambitions with a desire to see the master's plans to fruition and His kingdom established. It does not lead to complacency or lack of success, not at all; rather, it requires an entirely new mind-set that defines success in a brand-new way.

Servants give up a lot to serve their masters. Ultimately, their identity is not of an individual but a collective one married to the master. Their journey is filled with the loss of perceived opportunities, rights, comforts, and personal freedoms. They do not live for themselves but for another. Their hearts beat for purposes beyond their own lives, and their dreams go far beyond the realm of self and to the glory of their Master.

Frankly, Jesus's entire earthly life and ministry was a paradox. God came in the form of a flesh-and-blood man with all power and deity limited. Limitless God limited to the natural boundaries of the human body and race. A King is

born in a stable and not in a palace. God with unlimited resources is born to a poor Jewish family. Creator of all things is relegated to washing feet, and the only righteous man instead of being celebrated and honored is hung from a Roman cross in utter and indescribable humiliation. This is a snapshot of Jesus's life. It is a snapshot of the life of a true servant.

We are called to serve Him. We are his bondservants. A life of service to the King of Kings affords us access to unlimited resources and blessings of God, and we enjoy true fellowship with our Creator. We are quite often asked to experience loss and disappointment in our life journey. It seems an inescapable part of our destiny. When Peter refused to let Jesus wash his feet, he was rebuked and warned that he would not have a part in Christ and His kingdom. It is a dire and stern warning. Only true servants who walk in humility and obedience to the Master, who accept loss and the experiences of their cross with honor and grace, truly experience the kingdom.

This is a bitter truth that must be accepted. Our ears are tickled by the false gospel of self and the sweetness of the messages that speak of the Father's love and His blessings. We are drawn to what satisfies our yearning to be accepted, loved, forgiven, and provided and cared for. While there is nothing wrong with that, our identity as a servant takes us to a realm well beyond ourselves.

If we are to experience heaven and the tangible presence of God in our lives, we have to go beyond ourselves as well as our needs and wants. We have to live outside of ourselves, break the boundary of our flesh, and live for the sake and purpose bigger than our own lives.

It is only then that the ups and downs of daily life and the challenges and struggles of the world cannot and will not overcome us. It is only then that the bitter taste of defeat and loss become sweet to us, where tears of sorrow turn to cries of joy, where fatigue and surrender become strength and victory, where humility and quiet acceptance become resilience, power, and the strength of kingship, and ultimately where a mere man becomes

something far greater than man could ever be, but Christ God in man for the hope of glory.

# Chapter 15 - Art of Dying

The world is full of people with exceptional skills. Each with his or her unique gifts. These natural God-given talents are evident in the arts, sciences, politics, business, and sports.

Several people and their accomplishments are etched in our human history as people of great talent and influence. Albert Einstein had a unique gift of seeing the physical universe in terms of mathematical formulas that explained the natural laws of creation. Steve Jobs was a visionary who saw the creation of one of the most commonly used computerized communication devices known to man: the iPhone. Robin Williams had the unique talent of comedic improvisation that had not been seen before his time or since his death. Ronald Reagan was called the Great Communicator. Mother Teresa possessed the unbelievable art of compassion and mercy. Winston Churchill was endowed with the gift of hope, fortitude, and strength that an entire nation needed in its darkest hour for its survival against daunting odds. Martin Luther King was gifted with a unique sense of courage, moral justice, and foresight that eventually led an entire group of people to seek a better future for themselves and their children for generations to come.

Many more men and women, too many to mention here, fill the annals of human history. Their stories are worthy of recognition, for they are amazing tales of what people can achieve when they dedicate themselves to developing and mastering the art and skill endowed to them by their Creator.

In fact, every individual has a unique gift or ability imprinted into their DNA. But so many of us either never get a chance or do not wish to pay the price in developing these skills and gifts to their fullest. It is not a cliché to say that we are all special in our own way, uniquely made by a limitless Creator who

imprints upon each of us a part of Himself. If we were to develop it fully, it would reflect a character or a picture of God for others to see.

God has the highest of all scientific minds, He is the best visionary, the funniest of all comics, and the most skilled communicator. No one has a greater measure of compassion and mercy than He does. He is the giver of all hope and the standard by which all strength is measured, and He is unshakable in the face of difficulty and adversity. The scales of justice and morality flow out of His character. Every incredible gift one uses to achieve some form of greatness is simply a reflection of what is already in the person and character of God Himself.

This brings us to the greatest man in the history of humanity: Jesus Christ. What can we ascribe to this man that designates Him the greatest of all men? What did He accomplish that was so special that stands out in human history so that the passage of time is measured by His birth? Was it His ability to perform significant miracles? But others did miracles before and after Him–Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and Paul, to name a few. Was it His ability to walk on water? Moses parted the sea, and Joshua held back a river. Was it His great teaching skills? Paul's teachings and theological understanding of the gospel was revolutionary and equal to the Sermon on the Mount. Was it His unique birth? Jesus's birth was and will always be the most unique birth, but that is not reflected in a life of accomplishment. I daresay that it was the manner of His death and how He embraced His destiny to die upon the cross that makes Jesus unique among all people, past, present, and future.

If there is an "art to dying," then Jesus is the master artist. He is Michelangelo at the cross. His life painting supersedes anything the Old Masters could produce. His life from the very beginning was a journey to death on the cross. He embraced His destiny and died gracefully, and not just on the cross. He died to Himself every day leading to the cross. What makes Him unique in the annals of history is the manner by which He gave up His life and the pursuit of Himself in order to give life to others and reconcile us to God.

Not long-ago God asked me that if my life was a painting, what would that painting look like? I wondered if I were to suddenly find myself painting on a canvas and through inspiration, I would use light and bright colors of yellow, orange, light green, and light blue in patches on one side of the canvas to reflect the days that were good and joyful. The times when I sensed contentment and satisfaction as well as a measure of happiness. It was the day I started my business, the day I got married to my beautiful wife Shahrzad, the days when my children were born, and the days I received news of great business orders or when I witnessed people getting saved in our ministry.

Then I imagined what I would paint if my mood changed. The Holy Spirit brought up the darker days of my life. The days filled with deep pain and agony, when I experienced loss and depression, when sadness was ever present. The day I learned my eighteen-month-old son had diabetes, or the day I faced the tragedy of the loss of my sister's 17 years old son, or shock of being let go from the very company I had started and built for twenty years. Probably the darkest of it all was the most painful experience of an unexpected and traumatic divorce or living through the terrible consequences of my personal moral failures that almost cost me the blessing of my new family.

As I reflected on these days, I ended up imagining using gloomy colors such as black and dark blue to create a dark side of the canvas. In the middle of the canvas, the two-color patches would meet. On one side the light and the other dark. The Holy Spirit asked, *What do you see?*

I said, "Good and bad, darkness and light, joy and sadness."

*If that is all you ever see, then you have lived a normal life but not a life of excellence and beauty. You have lived a life that so many have lived before you, and many will live after you. Life is about good and bad and the dark and the light and to gain and to lose. But you are not called to live a life like this, Mani.*

I asked, "Lord, what is missing?"

I imagined if I were to take the brush and pull the paint from the dark portion of the canvas up into a line and then pull it again in the opposite direction into another intersecting line. Then take a dark brown color mix it with red and highlight the two lines what would that create? The Holy Spirit asked me again, *What do you see?*

A silhouette of a cross forming from the dark portion of the painting, which was seen more clearly with the red and the brown added to it. In the center of the canvas there stood the cross of my life. I suddenly understood the exercise. If my life were a painting, people should see the cross of Christ formed from the darkness and the valleys and the shadows of my life. In fact, all they should ever see of my life is the cross.

If we allow God to work through us and in us when we fail and plunge into defeat and helplessness, He will turn the darkness into a beautiful cross that stands out for all to see. The mighty cross stands for forgiveness, grace, mercy, love, hope, faith, endurance, patience, lovingkindness, and self-sacrifice. The cross of my life is not formed from my victories and blessings but from my losses, defeats, and humiliations.

I saw it laid out before me; what God has called my life to be: a reflection of Jesus Himself. For if we look at His life, what stands out? What was His purpose? What was His destiny? What did He embrace, and to what end did His life journey take Him? It was Calvary; it was the cross and the life that sprang from it. Like a master artist, a painter of exceptional talent, with each

stroke of His brush, He used every day and every event to fulfill His purpose. The painting of His life has a wooden cross in the center of His life. His baptism, the Holy Spirit's affirmation, the miracles and wonders, the pain of betrayal, the sorrow of His people's rejection, the humiliation at the hands of the religious leaders–the good and the bad–but what stands out is the cross, and that is the only thing that truly matters.

Jesus mastered the art of dying. There is no greater artist of self-sacrifice and self-denial for the cause of others in the history of humanity than Jesus. And we are called by His name. We are Christians, followers of Christ. We are called to live a life in the pattern of our Master. We are apprentices at the feet of the Master, who teaches us daily His art and skill. Every master wishes his pupils to follow in his footsteps, and a good master's desire is for his pupils to surpass him.

Is this even possible? Can anyone truly surpass Jesus?

> *"Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12).*

It is interesting to note that every time I have heard this verse taught, it was in the context of doing greater miracles or healings and other works of outreach ministry. But the works He did that we can surpass doing are obvious. His greatest work was His laying down His life down so that others could live. His greatest pursuit was to humble Himself and obey the call of love and mercy. And from His own suffering he created a church worthy of His Father's kingdom.

It is therefore in this context that I believe He is challenging His believers to die to themselves to such an extent that another great story would be told of the Father's love for His children.

Many new cross stories can be told of people doing things that no one else thought they could do. Yet in Him, this is ultimately our destiny. We are first

to become apprentices of the Master Artist of Death and then to grow up to be masters ourselves.

*His dream for us is that one day we surpass Him and create such a masterpiece of love and self-sacrifice that it rivals the Original One painted two thousand years ago on the foothills of Golgotha.*

*If your life were a painting, what would people see in it today?*

# PART 3

**YOU ARE A KING**

**Your Identity in the Holy Spirit**

# Chapter 16 - Brave Heart David's Story

*The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."*
*But Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me."*
*The LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate."*
*Samuel did what the LORD said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?"*
*Samuel replied, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me." Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.*
*When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD."*
*But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."*
*Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse had 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. "He is tending the sheep."*
*Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives."*

> *So, he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."*
> *So, Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah." (1 Samuel 16:1–13)*

What qualifies a person to be a king in God's eyes? Apparently not anything that makes logical sense to us. His pick: the youngest, the smallest, the least experienced, the last guy in the pecking order, and, if all that is not lowly enough, a shepherd boy.

It is obvious that David was not the natural choice. His own father, who knew him best, certainly did not think so. He chose the other seven brothers before him. It may have been David's age or inexperience, but something tells me that Jesse had a pretty good idea what Samuel was up to, and he just could not imagine David with a crown on his head. It must have been a very strange and somewhat frightening situation in Bethlehem that day.

Frightening because Samuel, one of the great prophets of Israel, has just shown up unannounced and wanted to see the boys. Samuel anointed the young man whom God had designated to be king of Israel; however, King Saul was still occupying the throne. So, imagine the intrigue to have one of your own children anointed king while the present one is still reigning . . . and he hears about it.

Strange because God's man, Samuel, must have had something wrong with him to turn down Jesse's brightest and best. By the time Samuel said no to all of the older sons, he must have thought he got the wrong house. Jesse must have thought the prophet had lost his mind; or that the journey was too arduous; or that Samuel was suffering from heatstroke, exhaustion, old age, or senility. Who knows? But anointing the baby of the family did not make sense.

David's story of kingship does not simply start or end here. It is a long journey filled with many peaks and valleys. It is a story of great triumph and unimaginable tragedy, of holy obedience and catastrophic moral failure, of righteousness and its fruit, and sin and its consequences, of ultimate bravery and fear, of godly servanthood and abuse of power, of absolute trust and the sting of treachery, of genuine love and pure hatred–all compressed in the life of one man who was God's chosen king, and whom God called "a man after my own heart."

There are ample storylines regarding David's life to fill volumes of books, but most of those studies are for a different time and endeavor. Our main focus is what qualified David to be chosen and anointed as king. What identified Him to God as a qualified candidate when others were not? Keeping in mind that David's story plays out well before the dispensation of grace, there is still much to learn about our kingly office and identity through his election and anointing.

*David Was Qualified before He Met Goliath*

Who doesn't love the famous Bible story of the battle between David and Goliath? A young kid with a few smooth stones versus a giant of a man, a descendant of the Nephilim of old, a Philistine warrior twice his size. We all know how this encounter ended. The one single sling of a stone heard around the nation of Israel changed the course of David's life.

God had qualified David to be a king before this encounter ever happened. While David's defeat of Goliath brought him fame, entry into the household of King Saul, and recognition throughout the people of Israel, it was obvious to God that the young man had "chutzpah" (audacious bravery) and a healthy dose of zeal for his God. This is a heart condition, one that cannot be taught. It is an identity marker of a king.

The story says it all. David sought the encounter with his enemy, and while everyone stepped back out of fear, David embraced the conflict willingly. His zeal to defend God's name resonates in the passage in 1 Samuel 17:26:

> *"Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"*

*Kingship and bravery go hand-in-hand.*

We expect kings to be brave, to be at the front of the battle, leading the charge against the enemy. They are to embrace danger, or, as you may say, "eat it for lunch." Timidity and kingship simply don't sit on the same throne together. David showed off this characteristic not only in the defeat of Goliath but even earlier when he killed a lion and a bear while defending his father's sheep.

This is exactly what happens to us as we are filled with the Holy Spirit. As we identify with the third person of the Trinity, we receive an identity marker or branding. The best and clearest example of this is found in the book of Acts:

> *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*
> *Now they were staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all those who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near*

> *Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:1–12)*

There is no doubt that the disciples did something quite out of character for them on that day. These very same men were locked up in an upper room praying and waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit, but it was obvious that were truly scared for their very lives and unsure of what to do next.

Then suddenly upon the coming of the Holy Spirit and resting upon them, they were radically transformed from fearful uncertain men to brave men with such a zeal to proclaim the Kingdom of God that they abandoned all caution and trepidation and marched in the streets of Jerusalem.

We all know what happened next; three thousand souls were added to their numbers. Now that is a great alter-call.

It took great bravery and lots of guts, but the results were a shellacking of the kingdom of darkness by agents of the Kingdom of Light. Now that is what I call a true "Brave-Heart".

# Chapter 17 - Give Me My Mountain Joshua and Caleb

> *Now the people of Judah approached Joshua at Glial, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, "You know what the LORD said to Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me. I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, but my fellow Israelites who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt in fear. I, however, followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly. So, on that day Moses swore to me, 'The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly.'*
> *"Now then, just as the LORD promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the LORD promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there, and their cities were large and fortified, but the LORD helping me, I will drive them out just as he said."*
> *Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. So, Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since because he followed the LORD, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly. (Joshua 14:6–14)*

Have you ever noticed that Old Testament kings, whether from Israel or other ancient civilizations, seem to look for war and conflict? They have an innate desire to conquer and expand their territories at the expense of others. It is not the desire to fight or go to war but the perceived necessity of expansion and conquest that drove these kings into battle.

Caleb was never crowned a king, but certainly a kingship mentality exuded from him. He was a conqueror at heart. Caleb had his eyes set on a certain "hill country" the Lord had promised him long ago when he had entered the Promised Land the first time. Forty years later, he still had his heart set on it. He said to Joshua, "Give me this hill country promised to me that day!" Wow! After all this time, he had never forgotten what belonged to him and his family as an inheritance from the God of Israel.

Forty years is a very long time to keep believing for one thing, especially when you are surrounded by a bunch of complaining, nagging, negative-minded doubters who could not see themselves beyond the problems of that day and looked back on the so-called good old days of Egyptian bondage. But that is what kingship identity is all about. Such men are made for conquest and are designed to overcome an enemy. Give Caleb the nod and he is off and running, chasing Anakites off his land, regardless of how long they have been living in it and how large of a tent they have pitched on it. He is going to take it for his prize. He does not see rights and privileges that the enemy may have to the land. It is his land, his sons', and daughters' inheritance. Hebron belongs to Him. Just get out of his way. The man is in conquest and fighting mode and he just turned a paltry eighty-five years old. His advanced years did not matter to him at all.

A key identity of a King is to be a conqueror. Kingdoms are designed to expand, and kings are designed to make their kingdoms do so.

Here is the key: God's promises are given, but we are called to fight to receive them. The Enemy never cedes territory willingly and never goes down without a fight. He must be bound first, and then what he has can be taken from him. Caleb was promised a land and given an inheritance, but he recognized that he had to fight for it and drive the inhabitants out of "his promised land."

Conqueror-minded kings have a unique way of looking at their neighbors' lands and territories. They consider it theirs to have and their right and inheritance. In our kingly identity, we are given a king's heart. With it is a deep desire to war against the Enemy of our Father and a call to expand the kingdom. We become warrior-conquerors in nature, changing from being passive observers of life to aggressive warriors taking the initiative to do what is necessary to retake lost territory and achieve kingdom success.

It is for this reason that Christians who fail to see themselves as conquerors are doomed to live lives of mediocrity. Churches are littered with kings who have abdicated their crowns and laid down their mantles in exchange for a so-called "normal life" in which they do not fight but only hope the Enemy finds others to war against.

God tagged Joshua, Caleb's old comrade and the only other spy who came back with a good report (see Numbers 13), to lead even a greater conquest: overtaking the land of Canaan and removing all the tribes that inhabited the land. God asks him to lead the Israelites in the face of their greatest challenge and most difficult endeavor, yet he was uniquely qualified for the task. What qualified him? The answer is found in Exodus 33:11:

> *"The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent."*

I can only imagine as Joshua gazed on the remains and the bones of Joseph, the great savior of his people, a Jewish boy who had become a king in the land of Egypt, that he must have wondered at the irony of everything coming full circle. It was up to him to save his people not by fleeing the land but going into it and conquering the land his forefathers had vacated four hundred years earlier to save themselves.

He must have thought, *why me, God? Why did You choose me? Isn't anybody else qualified to do this job? I sure wish Moses were around to scribble out orders and could I just be there to help him.* But the mantle had fallen on him. God chose him because of two very important facts: One, he had never stopped believing in the original promise of God that the land was theirs; and two, he was a man after God's own heart. That is what makes a believer enter a true kingship identity. To believe in the promise, never let go of it, and seek the heart of God in the process.

These are the essential simple truths that many believers know and live by. But when they fail to do so, they experience mission failures. Is it really that hard to believe in God's promises? Is it really that difficult to be a God seeker rather than a my-own-agenda seeker? The answer is a resounding yes. Both tasks are quite difficult. They are in direct contrast to and in contradiction of the fallen state of humanity and our broken state of mind. It is much easier

not to believe than to believe, and it is much more natural for us to seek our own than to seek Him.

We must constantly wage a war on the main battlefield: the eight inches between our ears. Here is where we choose to either believe or deny that the clear promises from God that we heard, saw, or read in the Word are true and achievable. Will we believe His promise for a better life, financial success, a calling and anointing for a greater ministry, physical and emotional healing, and so many more are ours, or will we deny them and just hope for the best?

We want to believe, but time becomes our enemy. We are impatient people. While our true selves are made in the image of an ever patient and loving Creator, our fallen image is crafted and shaped around an impatient and hasty couple who could not wait to taste the fruit of a single tree among thousands of others. They chose to disregard God's promise and instead ate the fruit from the one tree that came with the false promise of becoming like God in the here and now. The human heart always wants what it wants when it wants it. Its desires are for the moment, and it has a hard time believing in what it can't see or touch. The Esau principle is at work in all of us: give me that cup of soup right now, for I am famished!

To believe in a promise for forty years, as Joshua and Caleb did, when everyone around you has lost faith or has long forgotten it is no easy task. To hold on to what seems impossible or unattainable through human effort requires the faith of a true warrior.

*True kings are audacious in that they believe they can do anything. They believe in themselves, and they consider it their Manifest Destiny to conquer and expand their kingdoms, no matter how long it takes.*

Let me say again, no matter how long it takes, stay the course. Giving up is not an option, but that is exactly where you wage your war. You war against the disappointment of delayed dreams and unanswered prayers; you battle against feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness that the Enemy keeps piling on you. Resist the ever-present voice of your flesh that calls you to the seemingly easier path of surrender and trust in the small inner voice of the Spirit, who strengthens you to hold on and continue to press into your destiny. That is why Joshua was selected from among the millions of Jewish men who left Egypt with him. He remained in the tent and in the presence of God.

But that is not the whole story. Even Joshua had to be reminded three times not to be afraid before entering the land. Believing in the promise, never quitting, and pursuing God amid a desert experience does not exclude us from having to face fear. There is no shame in experiencing fear while reaching our promised lands. If you were to ask any soldier preparing to go into battle if they had to face fear, no matter how brave they may be, they would say absolutely yes.

*Kings are not impervious to fear; they simply overcome it and won't allow it to define them.*

For Joshua, it was the fear of failure as well as disappointing God and the new generation of Jews entering the Promised Land. Could he really succeed? Was he truly qualified to lead these people? If Moses could not do it, what made him qualified for the task at hand? I am sure a thousand questions and doubts raced through Joshua's mind as he was contemplating the command of God to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. The obstacles were many. A raging river spread itself between the Jewish nation and its destiny. And once the people crossed the river, a powerful enemy stood firmly entrenched in fortified cities.

God reminded Joshua not to let fear overcome him and not to be discouraged. Why did God repeat Himself three times? I assume it is because forty years of failure and wandering had built up in the people, and a king's job is to lead and not to retreat.

A king's heart is to press ahead, lead an army and by overcoming fear himself instill faith in orders to follow him. That is why the heart of a king made in the image of God Himself, is fashioned about a lion's heart specifically from a certain Jewish tribe called Judah.

Our kingly identity requires us to be courageous, to exercise faith in a new measure, and to overcome fear. We are to believe in ourselves and in our God, in whom we are fashioned. Equipped thusly, we then can seek and attack the Enemy, with full intent to retake territory lost and rightfully belonging to us. This is what it is to be a warrior at heart and never to consider retreating or ceding territory.

This courage is instilled and crafted in us as part of our natural transformation into the image of God Himself. This supernatural courage is not earned or learned. It is designed within our new-birth DNA. We simply must believe it and allow it to function.

We each have our Jordan Rivers before us and a Jericho of impenetrable walls blocking our way to our promise. We all have obstacles that seem insurmountable, threatening us to feel less than qualified to take them. Each of us must overcome our past failures and inadequacies, our imperfections, and shortcomings.

*We will be tempted to question our resources available to us, but kings don't get caught up with what they can't do; they are all about what they can do and what they believe is their right to do!*

You read that correctly. You and I have the right to fight for what is promised to us, our rightful inheritance. We have a right to claim and expand and demand the Enemy to leave our promised lands. We are called to be bold and courageous. We are assigned to be warrior kings.

So, let me ask you, what kind of heart do you have? Where is your crown right now? Is it firmly fixed on your head, or is it lying on the ground or tucked away in the closet of fear?

# Chapter 18 - Chasing Donkeys Saul's Rise to Kingship

King Saul cannot be considered a great success story. He is not a man you would want to model your life after. King Saul has always been a footnote, and not a pleasant one at that, in the life of one of the greatest figures of the Old Testament: David.

But surprisingly, we can learn much from Saul's life, and it's not all that bad. In fact, the story of Saul's rise to kingship is full of kingship-identity truths. Interestingly, Saul's election to kingship could not have had a more inconspicuous and peculiar beginning. Let's pick up the story in the book of 1 Samuel 9:3:

> *"Now the donkeys belonging to Saul's father Kish were lost, and Kish said to his son Saul, "Take one of the servants with you and go and look for the donkeys."*

The prelude to his meteoric rise to power and kingship authority was the "glorious" task of looking for a bunch of lost donkeys. The man set out on a mundane task of fixing a financial family problem and ended up being anointed the king of Israel. How is that possible? Well, in God's universe, that is just about the most obvious way you get elected for higher office.

> *"So, he passed through the hill country of Ephraim and through the area around Shalisha, but they did not find them. They went on into the district of Shaalim, but the donkeys were not there. Then he passed through the territory of Benjamin, but they did not find them" (v. 4).*

Have you ever looked back at your life before meeting Christ and wonder how you got yourself into the messes that seemed to plague you? Problems all around you, no solutions in sight, and no matter where you went and what you did, you couldn't find a way out. I have coined a name for the problems

that lead us to the cross: “our lost donkeys.” Some have one, and some, like Saul, have a bunch of lost donkeys running around. But in the end, they lead us through a very long journey to the only person who can truly help us: Jesus.

In this story, however, Samuel stands as a type of shadow of Jesus.

> *“But the servant replied, ‘Look, in this town there is a man of God; he is highly respected, and everything he says comes true. Let's go there now. Perhaps he will tell us what way to take’” (v. 6).*

That pretty much says it. Somehow, somewhere there is always a solution to every person’s unsolvable problem, and that solution leads humanity back to God. The donkeys are doing their job, running away, hiding, and making sure we can’t find them on our own. So, we are forced to make a decision to either give up or seek a man of God. Well, who better than Jesus Himself?

> *As they were going up the hill to the town, they met some young women coming out to draw water, and they asked them, “Is the prophet here?”*
> *"He is," they answered. "He’s ahead of you. Hurry now; he has just come to our town today, for the people have a sacrifice at the high place. (vv. 11–12)*

What we don’t realize is that God is using our lost donkeys for a greater purpose. He is using them as a divine setup to get us where He is. In fact, He has set Himself up to be exactly where you find yourself looking for your answers. He has arrived “there” ahead of you. It is no surprise to anyone who has allowed Him into their lives that the situations before that providential moment when they placed their trust and faith in Jesus were a series of events that led them to their divine calling.

> *They went up to the town, and as they were entering it, there was Samuel, coming toward them on his way up to the high place. Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel: “About this time tomorrow I will*

> *send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him ruler over my people Israel; he will deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. I have looked on my people, for their cry has reached me."*
> *When Samuel caught sight of Saul, the LORD said to him, "This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people." (vv. 14–17)*

I have a question: What did Saul do to qualify himself to be God's answer to the cries of His people? What battle did he win, or what war did he wage? What enemies of Israel did he subjugate and defeat to become the ruler of Israel? Absolutely nothing!

There is no record in the Bible of previous exploits of Saul. We find him mentioned for the first time in this chapter of 1 Samuel, and his story starts as a young man simply looking for a herd of lost donkeys. So, what qualified him to be a king?

He was elected and qualified by God to be the next ruler. The One who elects and promotes is the One who matters. His choice is final and the only one that counts. The beautiful picture we see here is that we are no different from Saul. We were all running around looking for our own lost donkeys when out of nowhere we meet Jesus, who, unbeknown to us, has chosen us to be kings and rulers in this world. He sees in us the potential we don't see, and He knows us in ways that we can't imagine. We are given a calling far greater and higher than our most elaborate and highest imaginations, far above and beyond where our dreams take us. Our perception of ourselves can't possibly reach as far and as high as God's view of us and how much He believes how great we can be.

Interestingly, when Samuel and Saul meet, the decision is already made. God has already selected him as king of Israel. All that is left is the formalities. Saul is carrying the title and the position of honor before lifting a finger.

> *Then Samuel brought Saul and his servant into the hall and seated them at the head of those who were invited–about*

> *thirty in number. So, the cook took up the thigh with what was on it and set it in front of Saul. Samuel said, "Here is what has been kept for you. Eat, because it was set aside for you for this occasion from the time I said, 'I have invited guests.'" And Saul dined with Samuel that day. Samuel said to the cook, "Bring the piece of meat I gave you, the one I told you to lay aside." (vv. 22–24)*

At the banquet table, Saul is given the seat of high honor, next to the prophet. He is given the choicest meat. Saul enjoys the honors before he is declared the king to the tribes and before he has defeated the Philistines or done any kingly act. This is a picture of our position in the heavenly place, next to our Savior Jesus. We are elected and honored at a seat next to the King of Kings from the moment we meet Him. We gain access to the best of heaven from the moment we enter His kingdom. We receive this honor and blessing not after we have proven ourselves to be worthy or once we have served Him diligently for years but at the moment of our salvation. The honor worthy of a king is an inheritance we have in Christ. It is given to us only because of who He is.

> *"Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, 'Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance?'" (10:1).*

We again see that a kingly anointing is also not earned; it is given. God commanded that Samuel anoint Saul, which the prophet did.

The same principle works for us as believers. The moment we are saved, we are anointed kings and are given kingdom assignments. We are empowered by God to be kings. No matter how we feel about ourselves, in what weakened states we enter the kingdom, or how ugly we feel; regardless of what we have done or not done in the past, including past failures, character flaws, and bad habits; none of it really matters. *Once we are saved, we*

*become a king with full rights and privileges. We only have to receive this identity by faith to then operate in it.*

All of us come into the kingdom of God in some form of brokenness. It is hard for a broken man or woman to see themselves as an empowered king just by believing in Christ as Savior. But by faith we receive all things in the kingdom, and our identity is no different.

You are what you believe you are in your heart. I am certain that Saul must have been asking himself, "What is going on? How did I end up here, next to Samuel, and what made me so special to be the king of Israel?" But here is a very important point: It seems clear that Saul did not object to the calling and election of God, for he does not argue against or reject it.

Many times, God is trying to promote and encourage us to see what He sees. But false humility takes hold of us. We want to act humble and meek and say things like, "No I am not good enough to do that," or, "I am not worthy enough for such a calling," or, "Who am I? There are a lot better or more qualified folks out there than me." That may all be true. In fact, I am certain that there are many highly qualified people who are smarter, stronger, and more well-rounded who could do a much better job than I can for God. But that's not the point because He chose me, and He chose you–not them. God chose us and crowned us kings, which count for something. We have to step into our destinies, accept our assignments, and allow Him to anoint and empower us to do and accomplish our kingdom tasks. We need not only to believe that we are qualified but also that we are perfect for the job.

When you look in the mirror what do you see? When you hear yourself speak, what do you hear?

In my years in the ministry, I have heard God's people say things like

- I just can't do it!
- I am not able to go on anymore!
- I am not cut out for this type of ministry or warfare!
- I am too afraid to do this!

- I am not strong enough or anointed like so-and-so.
- And the list goes on and on.

The fact is that you are and will always be able to fulfill your kingly assignment. While God is in the habit of picking out "failures" like you and me to come into His service, He never asks us to continue to fail while in His service. He is a master craftsman and designer. He takes great pleasure from taking broken vessels and turning them into masterful works of art worthy to be placed in the temple of God as an instrument of worship.

While Saul did not finish his race well, he certainly did well at the start. He accepted his calling and believed in his destiny. This is very important because so many of us never see ourselves greater than our past failures. Through faith, we need to see ourselves in the victories assigned to and laid out before.

One of the biggest questions people ask me is, how do I know what my kingly assignment is?

> *When you leave me today, you will meet two men near Rachel's tomb, at Zelzah on the border of Benjamin. They will say to you, 'The donkeys you set out to look for have been found. And now your father has stopped thinking about them and is worried about you. He is asking, "What shall I do about my son?"'*
> *Then you will go on from there until you reach the great tree of Tabor. Three men going up to worship God at Bethel will meet you there. One will be carrying three young goats, another three loaves of bread, and another a skin of wine. They will greet you and offer you two loaves of bread, which you will accept from them.*
> *After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, timbrels, pipes, and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the L*

> *ORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you. (vv. 2–7)*

First, I have good news! Your donkeys either have been found or will soon be found. When people come to Jesus with their list of problems (lost donkeys), all they care about is finding them. That's it. But that's not God's way. He helps you find them because they are the vehicle to bring you to Jesus. They are simply a steppingstone to finding your destiny. When I came to salvation, I had a long list of problems and issues that seemed impossible to solve. My herd of lost donkeys was running circles around me, and I had no earthly idea of how to overcome them. But for a stubborn Iranian Muslim kid, the only way I was going to acknowledge Jesus as God's only Son, I had to find a bunch of donkeys–and I mean a bunch. I had to get so desperate for God that I could not turn to anyone except Him for help.

In the end, He solved my problems and miraculously delivered me from what I considered to be my personal hell. My point is to tell you not to get caught up in your immediate problems or challenges. These lost donkeys will turn up, and you have God's Word and promises to hold on to. Once Samuel told Saul not to worry about his immediate concerns, he instructed him to go to Gibeah of God.

Gibeah was a hill belonging to God, but there is a problem here: there is a Philistine outpost on it! There should not be a Philistine outpost on a hill belonging to God. So, Samuel sent Saul to a place where he could see for himself his kingly assignment: defeat the Philistines and retake the territory that had been taken from God's people. On the way to fulfill his job, he met prophets who prophesied to him and confirmed his assignment. This assured Saul of his assignment so that he would not doubt what he was to do.

This is incredible! Do you know that once you receive Christ, not only do you receive the place and honor of a king but also you are promised to get your

own “Gibeah of God”? Another couple of questions you may be asking are, “Where is this Gibeah for me? How do I recognize it; when will I know of it?”

For many of us, our past experiences and brokenness, where God calls us out of, becomes our Gibeah. For a drug addict, it is helping free others from their addictions. For a prostitute, it is helping to free young girls from the vicious cycle of abuse. For a divorcee, it becomes a deep desire to help those who are caught in the cycle of depression and loss. For a young Muslim kid from Iran, it is a calling to take the gospel to Muslims, to free them from the same bondage he was delivered from. For businesspeople, it becomes the revelation of why they were given the skills to succeed and how to use their resources. For a young woman who had a child at a young age, it turns into the compassion and empathy to minister to a new generation of young unwed mothers. The list goes on.

While it is not a universal truth that everyone is called to take back territory from the place they were called out of, this holds true for many of us.

In the end, kings are called to conquer and reign. What are you doing? Are you conquering, or are you ceding territory? Do you believe you can do all things in Christ, or have you lost your will to fight and laid down your shield? Are you charging up the hill of Gibeah in your life and kicking the enemy out of your mind, feelings, business, children, marriage, and a slew of places he has taken from you? Or are you sitting idly by, hoping he gets tired and moves on to greener pastures than yours? Are you a child of the King, holding firmly to your princely crown, or have you abdicated it?

*Capture your Gibeah, take back what belongs to you, let go of the past, and press into your calling while believing that the One who has called you into this good work is faithful to see you finish it with victory.*

# Chapter 19 - War or Peace Winning as a King

It's nice to be born into a royal family, isn't it? It comes with so many benefits that it's hard to argue against wanting to be one of the royals. For one, regarding dealing with people, you pretty much get what you want without an argument, just a "Yes, sir" or "Yes, ma'am." A royal receives less friction. And it takes less effort to get things done when you have a royal title attached to your name.

People naturally are inclined to listen to you, remember what you said, and actually do what you request of them. We can call that a miracle in itself in any situation. Kings possess natural authority and influence that open closed doors, remove obstacles to progress, eliminate objections, exact agreement, and compromise over conflict, and simply garner cooperation where there was none before. Such is the impact of the favor of a king.

Kings do not have to ask for permission to speak or request another party to listen to them. They simply speak into a situation and demand action. Call that what you may–influence, power, authority, or favor–it goes a long way in making life easier and far more productive for the person who wears the title.

And isn't that exactly what we want in life? Just to make it a little bit easier and get things done faster and more efficiently with less friction and resistance. Everywhere I go, I hear Christian businesspeople talk about how much resistance and adversity they are facing. It seems a given by believers who are trying to do something bigger than themselves for God and His kingdom that the world throws up every roadblock possible across their paths. This pattern of disruption and resistance is often repeated in not just business but also ministry and other endeavors that believers with kingly assignments face regularly.

I faced it when I started my kingly assignment–when I opened the doors for my company 22 years ago. I did exactly what God told me. I obeyed, but instead of heaven opening and pouring hundreds of dollar bills on my head, I found myself surrounded by a bunch of problems. I felt like roadkill looking into the beady eyes of vultures that had gathered for a meal! It seemed that problems stuck to me like metal shavings to a magnet. No matter what I did right, the weight of warfare against me was, at times, unbearable. I know how it feels when we kings feel the burden of our assignments while having to stand against wave after wave of resistance, rejection, and closed doors. It feels like those obstacles are pushing us back to the shore and away from our blessings.

The key to overcoming this is a combination of two things kings are known for: warfare and favor. While I shared about a king's heart earlier in Chapter 17 "Give Me My Mountain," now I'll tell you about a revelation God gave me from the book of Deuteronomy, which exemplifies the pattern God uses to help His kings initiate their callings and reach their lands of destiny.

Moses and the children of Israel were preparing to enter into the Promised Land. But before they could go in after their forty years of wandering in the desert, they had to go through the land of King Sihon.

> *From the Desert of Kedemoth I sent messengers to Sihon king of Heshbon offering peace and saying, "Let us pass through your country. We will stay on the main road; we will not turn aside to the right or to the left. Sell us food to eat and water to drink for their price in silver. Only let us pass through on foot–as the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir, and the Moabites, who live in Ar, did for us–until we cross the Jordan into the land the Lord our God is giving us." But Sihon, king of Heshbon refused to let us pass through. For the LORD your God had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate in order to give him into your hands, as he has now done.*

> *The LORD said to me, "See, I have begun to deliver Sihon and his country over to you. Now begin to conquer and possess his land." (Deuteronomy 2:26–31).*

The name *Sihon* means "warrior," and as we read, Moses did not want to pick a fight with this king; instead, he offered him a chance to avoid the fight and allow him and the people to through the land. But as it goes, the Devil can't resist a good fight, and He is inclined to fight and war against us. None of us want or desire to enter warfare at any time, but particularly when we enter into our destiny and act in our kingship identities. Who wants to fight and get bloodied on the first day of saying yes to God? But the nature of our callings and identity invites warfare, so battle lines are formed quickly as we take our first few steps toward our promised land.

King Sihon represents the initial warfare that you and I face, and our inclination is to quit before we even get started. For me it was threats of lawsuits launched against me on the second day after I quit my job to start my business. Before I could even gather my thoughts on how to initiate the business, the threats and attacks that came after me were quite frightening. For a person with limited resources and fear already set in by the vastness of the task ahead, it was a battle I was not mentally prepared for.

What options did I have? Actually, none.

I had to face my King Sihon, and I had to overcome him with courage and wisdom. I had to press through his land as it stood between me and my destiny. This initial warfare is by no means the last one we face, but the first of many as we enter our calling. It is important that we have the willingness to press through the initial difficult obstacles and go about the business of taking dominion and capturing back what belongs to our Father.

While King Sihon was the first to show up, the second king, Og, appeared right after Him. Og was an Amalekite, the race of giants. His name means "long stiff-necked" or "long-necked." This prideful giant of a king exemplifies the spirit of false pride that kings must overcome.

> *"Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverb 16:18)*

Like it or not, Moses had to fight this battle. King Og came against Moses. To engage or not to engage in battle was not an option. The war against pride and its utter destruction is our only option for entering into our calling and kingship identity. Kings cannot fool around with false pride in their lives, for it leads to poor judgment that eventually results in downfall. There is no point in building a kingdom that will one day fall apart. God calls us to tear down false idols and root out pride issues before we even try to fulfill our assignments.

> *"So, the LORD our God also delivered into our hands King Og of Bashan, with all of His people, and we attacked him until no survivors remained. . .. All of these cities were fortified with high walls, gates, and bars besides a great many rural towns. And we utterly destroyed them" (Deuteronomy 3:3, 5–6).*

For me, my King Og was self-dependency. I had always worked and supplied my needs through self-effort, and while I acknowledged God as my source, ultimately my financial idol was Mani Erfan. Deep within I trusted myself and my own hands to get things done. I had not learned to trust God in my finances, and since my kingship assignment required gathering wealth, being a good steward, and starting a business, I had to shatter this idol of self-reliance and overcome my deeply entrenched pride. This was not going to be easy. Through years of working and succeeding in corporate America and being recognized as an achiever and a self-made person, being promoted many times for success and making a great income, I had formed a false image of who was truly the source of my success. This had to be destroyed. What it took to accomplish this task was quite unpleasant, and the prime requirement of it was for me to experience *utter failure*.

During the first two years of my business, I failed and failed often. Sales call after sales call ended with "No" or "Not interested," and sometimes "Don't even waste our time" responses. I experienced hundreds of rejections, very

few successes, and the few I had were often recanted or canceled. I worked tirelessly for a contract and then the approval of the engineer, just to see a higher manager shut it all down with a stroke of a pen. Contracts initially awarded to me were canceled and re-awarded to a competitor, something that never happens in my industry. Yet it happened to me not once but multiple times. I saw my financial resources dwindle; my income reduced to a fraction of what it was before I trusted God and started my dream business. I cried often, I became very tired and lonely, and it sometimes took everything I had to maintain hope in the promise of success God had given me.

I went to the edge of quitting many times. It took godly people to pull me back before I leaped to my defeat. Temptations to walk away from my calling came from all directions, with great job offers with good income if I'd just quit my business and work for someone else. But all during this incredibly trying time, I was learning that I was not in control, that I needed God to succeed, that I was not able to figure everything out, that my finances were not in my hands but in His. More than anything else, I had to come to the place where I could be trusted with the wealth that would flow into my life.

I was broken so that I could be built up. The warfare I faced–external and internal–was designed to lead me to my kingly identity. But winning is what kings do. Losing is not an option. Kings are designed to win in war or peace.

So, we fight and engage our Sihons and Ogs. We win our wartime enemies by confronting them with conviction, strength, and patience. We overcome by experiencing brokenness brought upon us externally and internally. We fight our enemies without and within our borders.

Notice the phrase *winning in war and peace*. A struggle is always raging in the life of a king, who never has downtime. While in the beginning stages of our kingly identity we are engaged in full-fledged warfare with Satan and overcoming our own fallen state, we are also designed to win at times of peace. How is that and what does this really mean?

*Favor is the essential tool that God gives His kings to expand their kingdoms and conquer territory without firing a single shot. This is the method by which kings operate not in warfare but to establish their will and accomplish their plans.*

As kings we are endowed with a healthy dose of unmerited favor: Grace, which is approval and an open door to those who are walking in their kingly assignments. It is to be promoted to the position of authority while being provided the resources needed to accomplish their assignments. It is through godly favor–grace–that kings win even at times of peace.

When I was starting my business, I faced several major obstacles that had nothing to do with personal pride or litigious lawsuits. I needed investment capital of at least $500,000. I did not have it, and not a single bank was interested in lending a young man with a crazy idea of starting a catalyst company that sort of cash. What is a king to do? Frankly, nothing. However, when you are doing what you are supposed to, favor will precede you in every step of your destiny.

How did God fix my huge problem? He brought a successful Christian businessman, Jim, whom I met through our church affiliation. Despite being extremely busy and overloaded with success and work himself, the Holy Spirit told him to extend favor to me and show me kindness by investing in me and the God idea, which was the seed of kingly hope I carried within me.

Hearing the story from Jim's view, the business concept seemed impossible in human logic. As I said, he was already exceptionally busy and did not have time to consider starting a new venture. In fact, he was recovering from a failed partnership with another Christian, and he had promised himself he would never enter another partnership. Plus, he was already making more money than he could possibly spend and was not motivated to work harder to make more. Nothing in his life pointed to a need for him to say yes to me.

Isn't that pretty much Esther's story? She was not the prettiest women among the many gathered from across the land, and she certainly did not have material wealth or a royal bloodline to make her particularly stand out or be useful to the most powerful man in the ancient world at that time, namely the King Ahasuerus, ruler of Persia.

Yet the Bible says that Esther found favor in the eyes of the king! "The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti" (Esther 2:17 ESV).

It was not her beauty or her natural state that attracted the favor of God through the King. It was her kingly destiny and her heavenly purpose that had been activated. *When you activate your destiny and walk into your calling, you become a magnet of God's favor.*

Because I had decided to walk in faith into my calling and activate my God-given design to be a kingly priest in the marketplace, Jim was prompted to become my partner and to extend his resources to me, which were ultimately my Father's resources. Once he prayed and asked God what he ought to do with my request, the battle was won. The answer was given, and favor did its work. I did not have to fight for it or struggle to find a solution. The miracle of favor worked on my behalf and supernaturally opened a closed door.

Not only was I given the resources I needed, but I also ended up with the most outstanding partner any man could ever hope for. God always gives us the best. Just as Esther did not become just any queen but the queen of Persia, the world's most powerful empire at that time.

This is just a small example of how God's grace operates in times of peace to help us win, and win often, in our assignments. I can write example after example of how God's favor operated and continues to operate in my business, but it would require a book on its own, for the testimonies are too numerous to list here. But I can't help sharing just one more story, which I know will bless you.

Many years ago, in the formative years of one of my businesses, God told me that He would have Arab Muslims pay for and finance my outreach ministry to Muslims across the Middle East. When I heard this, I was sure I did not hear correctly. Why, and how, would Arab Muslims pay for my ministry evangelizing other Muslims? This sounded wrong in so many ways and so illogical that only God could make such a claim!

I did not dare to understand how this would come about. I did know that if this happened, it would definitely go down as a modern-day miracle. But as you have probably already guessed, it did happen. I met a number of Arabs in Saudi Arabia with whom I did business. God's favor toward me poured into their hearts to such a degree that they decided not only to sell me the goods I needed to resell at a fair market price, but they sold them at a steep discount in order for me to maximize my profit. Essentially, they cut out 30 to 50 percent of their own profit to give it to me, even knowing that I was a Christian and a tv minister evangelizing other Muslims! This blessing has continued in my life for the last twenty-two years and has poured large resources into my life and ministry, just as God had prophesied. How is it? Favor of God in times of peace. Without struggling, doors open, and men do what they are not inclined to do to enable and activate us to our place of success.

> *Kingly favor is like a river flowing from the midst of God's throne room, carving a path of destiny before us, and leading us through the land, guiding us and breaking up dams of resistance before we even reach them.*

You're a king, and you are a winner.

You will overcome your enemies, and you will be showered with His favor. In war or peace, *you will win.*

# Chapter 20 - Kings Don't Compromise Their Crowns

Stand for what you believe. That seems to be a novel idea nowadays. In the age of moral compromise, relative truth replacing the absolute truth of the Word, and doing what feels right for the moment and who cares about the consequences, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for Christians to be and remain people of principle.

The time of moral outrage is long gone in Western societies. What is evil is now considered good, and what was considered good is now called evil. The world appears to be upside down, and it is becoming more difficult to be and remain good in the midst of the ever-present and ever-growing evil that abounds. Every believer knows this. A sense of hopelessness is creeping into the church, like a tsunami of evil overtaking the world, rushing toward us with such power that we fear we can do nothing to stop it. All that is left is to run away as fast as we can and hope that we can find a hiding place to survive the devastation.

We feel surrounded by enemies at every corner. Everywhere we look, evil is evident, and it's growing in strength and influence. Witchcraft and occultism is celebrated, open homosexuality and sexual deviancy is worn as a badge of honor, trust is no longer a person's word but a forty-page legal contract written by a lawyer, greed and the willingness to do anything to succeed are taught as absolute requirements for success, self-worship is the religion of the day, God is ceremonially kicked out of every public forum, and if that were not enough, radical Islam and its hordes want to wipe out Christians from the face of the earth.

The truth is that we have nowhere to hide. No country is a true refuge for believers. There is not a place upon the face of the earth that is "safe" for Christians, where our values and our God are celebrated and praised. Darkness is growing upon the face of the earth, and we are being increasingly marginalized in the world system.

Faced with the dim prospects of what lies ahead, many believers have relegated themselves to a form of escapism, namely belief in the rapture of the church in the near future. To be very clear, I believe that the Bible does teach such a unique event will take place in the future, and while we can endlessly argue its timing and exact details, it is clear that the belief in the rapture has done little to empower the church to resist and fight the wave of evil coming against it. In fact, it has produced a form of moral passivity in which the believers have concluded that mounting any real resistance against this enemy is futile and pointless as believers won't be around for much longer anyway.

Is that how a king behaves, or should behave, in the face of adversity? The answer is a resounding no.

Kings don't look for a way of escape; rather, they either make a stand when they are surrounded or charge into the front lines of the enemy. True kings are not escapists; they are warriors wearing a twelve-pound piece of jewelry on their heads, which they would trade only for a battle helmet when needed.

If you know anything about Texas history, you are familiar with the Alamo, the site of a famous battle in which the Texas army made a stand in their fight for Texas's independence from Mexico. The fighters held up in the Alamo were badly outnumbered and outgunned. They fought to the last man. While it was ultimately a complete defeat for the Texans, the Alamo became the rallying cry for the remainder of the war. The valiant soldiers of Texas going into future battles cried, "Remember the Alamo!" The bravery of the souls who fought and gave their lives for the cause of freedom in Alamo became the spirit of the war that ultimately led to victory and the independence of Texas. Bravery in the face of incredible odds makes for a good story. Better yet, it makes for great inspiration that not only inspires one generation but many generations of people long after the dust and the smoke have settled from the battlefront of a bygone war.

Within the pages of the Old Testament, we find the history of a young Jewish boy who faced a similar plight. His people and his city were surrounded by a ferocious, well-armed enemy. The city walls were being breached, the Jewish army was weak and in total disarray, and the king feared for his life. God seemed to have abandoned the people and the city, for defeat was imminent. It is in this backdrop that Daniel found himself trapped in a city burning and people destined to be taken captive.

The war for Judah and the city of Jerusalem was lost. But a new war was looming, one for the soul and identity of the Jewish people. A war to keep a fledgling faith rooted in the worship of a single unseen God called Jehovah alive against unimaginable odds and great adversity.

This war was not to be fought with armies of men. Instead, its combatants were Daniel and three of his friends pitted against the most powerful kings and empire of their time: the mighty King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon followed by King Darius, who reigned over Persia. What were Daniel and his friends to do? Having lost their families and most of their friends in the destruction of Jerusalem, they were alone in a foreign land. Even their names were changed, and they were forced to follow foreign customs. It seems natural not to expect much from these young men other than a series of calculated compromises just to stay alive. Why make a stand against the most powerful men in the world when it would be much easier to go with the flow? The odds were certainly stacked against them.

But kingship identity reveals itself in many ways and being a person with “unwavering principles” is one of them. If there were men with strong principles who were unwilling to compromise even at the cost of their own lives, it was Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Daniel’s story includes several instances of these men standing up for God’s truth. They didn’t eat the king’s food that violated their dietary laws, they were thrown into a fiery furnace for not bowing in worship to the king, but one story stands out. Let’s pick it up in chapter 6:

> *So, these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers, and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den. Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." So, King Darius put the decree in writing. (Daniel 6:6–9)*

*When it comes to whether or not to compromise a value or belief, the choice usually boils down to what a person worships. An individual will either worship themselves, including whatever holds their affections, or worship God.*

We serve what we worship. Whatever holds our attention, whatever we strive to attain, that is what we bow before. Today, worship of self is the prevalent religion, and compromise is the flavor of choice. We really have only two choices. Worship God and live, or worship anything else and die. We inadvertently take communion with the idol of self, which brings death.

A decree was made in Babylon: worship an idol formed in the image of the powerful king or die. Daniel's choice was clear. Though he served the king and submitted to his rule, he worshiped the King of Kings and bowed only to Him.

He could have pretended to worship the king in public but in the privacy of his home pledge his allegiance to the God of his forefathers. That or publicly refused to worship the image and invite the ire and judgment of an angry and

merciless king. It would seem prudent to go with the first choice. After all, God truly knew Daniel's heart and would not judge him, would he?

> *Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom in his early days. (v. 10)*

With compromise out of the question, Daniel chose to face off against the king, a suicidal decision for sure.

The truth is that once a king gives in to fear, he has already lost his crown.

Kings are meant to stand their ground, leading their subjects to naturally find strength in their courage. Godly kingship is rooted in standing up for righteousness.

We are faced with the same dilemma. The world threatens our ideals and standards. Whether we like it or not, our lives are under a microscope of those who look down upon us Christians and judge our God and our faith according to what we do and whether or not we are courageous enough to hold on to our godly principles or give in to fear and abandon them all.

As a direct consequence of Daniel's choice not to worship the king, he was thrown into the lion's den. Not a pleasant place to spend the night. Where instead of being served a good meal, you find yourself on the menu as the main course. With death certain, we do not see even a flicker of a change of heart in Daniel. He would rather be a Babylonian lion's meal than to break the commandment of God and kneel before an idol made by human hands.

> *So, the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"*
>
> *A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.*
>
> *At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"*
>
> *Daniel answered, "May the king live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, Your Majesty." (vv. 16–22)*

So it is, he was divinely protected and supernaturally saved from destruction. Soon thereafter, Daniel's enemies were charged and thrown into the den. The lion did its job while Daniel was promoted in the king's palace. Now that's what I called a complete victory.

But not all stories end up as rosy as this. Standing up for what is right and upholding godly values usually . . . no, always comes at a significant price. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, and pastor during World War II, stood against the evils of the Nazi party and its demonic theology, never wavering, or conceding ground in his moral outrage. He did not, however, miraculously escape from his lion's den; rather, his Nazi captors executed him days before the surrender of the German army and the unceremonious suicide of its demented leader, Adolf Hitler.

But his unwavering faith and courage to stand for good against evil, and his martyrdom in opposition to Nazism continues to greatly influence and

inspire many generations of Christian leaders across the world, especially those who face tyrannical governments. Christian movements against the Apartheid South Africa government and those within Communist Eastern Europe were and are significantly influenced by his life of courage.

Recall the story of Bishop Haik Hovsepian-Mehr, the leader of the Assemblies of God churches in Iran, which fought for the release of Christian religious prisoners who were held and tortured in Iran for no reason other than their faith. He was warned many times not to speak openly about Christianity and not to stand against the Islamic government in Iran or the Ayatollahs. But to Bishop Haik, the choice was clear. Be afraid and remain silent and allow the suffering of his brothers and sisters in Christ to continue, or risk it all and bring the world's attention to their plight so that they might be freed. Bishop Haik paid the ultimate price as he was assassinated by government internal security agents in January 1994. But his martyrdom had the opposite impact than the government intended. Instead of sending the fledgling Iranian church into hiding, many young leaders rose up to the challenge, vowing their own blood to preach the gospel in Iran against all odds. The result was incredible growth in the church of Iran, which now numbers in the millions a mere two decades from Haik's assassination.

When a king decides to act like one, he or she inspires others to rise up in their own kingship identity.

Daniel was promoted instead of being destroyed. Godly kings who do not compromise their principles never lose in God's economy. Regardless of the outcome in human terms, whether we escape the lion's den or get eaten, the outcome glorifies God. We take direct territory from the enemy and are placed in a position of power and influence, or we inspire others to do so even if we do not see the direct impact of our courage.

Daniel is remembered in history as one of the greatest statesmen and prophets. His name and legacy live on still after 2500 years. How many legacies make it through a year let alone through millennia?

As kings we are made in the image of our Creator. We are designed to create perpetual legacies and our kingdoms are made to last through the test of time. *We are meant to build everlasting kingdoms.*

Don't sell your destiny and your birthright kingdom for a mere cup of soup like Esau did–and there are several soup flavors available. Reading Esau's story, we are shocked that he could possibly give away his inheritance for a paltry thing like a cup of soup. Well, it's easy, people do it every day. In fact, churches are full of people who are willing to just get by, make it through the day, don't rock the boat, compromise their values just to be happy. They look the other way when it suits their interests. They cross out Bible verses they don't like and devise new interpretations of the gospel to fit their god into their situation and live by their desires, but their deep thirst and hunger of self are never satisfied.

In fact, life is an exchange. The gospel is all about an exchange, and we decide what type of exchange we participate in.

A bull's life and blood are exchanged for a nation so that it may receive mercy. Christ's life and righteousness are exchanged for our sins and death. We exchange our own plans and our own desires at the foot of the cross for a higher call and greater kingship destiny. And even after salvation, we have a choice: exchange it back for our cup of soup–walk away from it when life gets tough, when we fear losing something we desire for the sake of God, when we are under attack for our faith. Or we can remain standing up for righteousness, even when no one else is.

You are a king. You are designed to build a perpetual legacy for God in your life. You will have to live by and stand on principle. You will face your own lion dens from which there is no escape. Are you willing to face them? Are you willing to enter in? Are you ready to write a story that will be told for generations to come?

# Chapter 21 - From Glory to Glory Understanding the Cycle of Identity

I was wondering how to bring everything we've discussed in this book to a close. I have always felt the Bible was a grand masterpiece, a work similar to Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, the Pastoral Symphony. All parts within this piece are in perfect harmony with one another, working together to form a presentation of the composer's intent and heart.

The Bible is an exceptionally unique book. Through dozens of authors over centuries of time, all of its chapters and books fit together in perfect harmony, like Beethoven's Symphony. Or like a puzzle: As each piece is fitted, additional revelation comes to light. When all the pieces are in place, a picture is revealed.

The grand design of understanding identity is ultimately to understand God Himself. We are made in His image and in His likeness. All the parts of identity are perfectly connected together, each can stand on its own, but we cannot truly understand ourselves, our experiences, our lives, and God's way of dealing with us without understanding how all the three biblical identities work together.

So, there is one more revelation that brings these three distinct identities together just as the Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together to reveal God Himself. I call this the "Spiritual Cycle of Identity and Destiny" (SCID).

Solomon understood the cyclical nature of creation and life where he penned these famous verses in the book of Ecclesiastes:

> *There is a time for everything,*
> *and a season for every activity under the heavens:*
> *a time to be born and a time to die,*
> *a time to plant and a time to uproot,*

*a time to kill and a time to heal,*
*a time to tear down and a time to build,*
*a time to weep and a time to laugh,*
*a time to mourn and a time to dance,*
*a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,*
*a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,*
*a time to search and a time to give up,*
*a time to keep and a time to throw away,*
*a time to tear and a time to mend,*
*a time to be silent and a time to speak,*
*a time to love and a time to hate,*
*a time for war and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8)*

We live in a world of cycles, seasons, and times. A twenty-four-hour-per-day cycle of sunup and sundown, a week of seven days repeating itself over and over again, twelve months and four seasons each year, coming and going on a perfect schedule. These cycles are born out of a greater design of the Creator. In fact, understanding cycles and seasons are extremely important in understanding the Bible and God Himself.

Seasons run on a cycle: spring brings forth life; summer follows, and life increases to its full measure; then fall follows and life retracts, slowly withering; and then finally winter comes, and life hides within the dark shadows, just long enough until spring arrives. Thus begins a new cycle. Interestingly, this physical pattern is also seen in our spiritual lives, and I can emphatically say that our identities are also cyclical in nature.

For example, God gives a dream and a vision alongside the new birth (salvation). As a child enters the kingdom of God through Christ, God plants in his or her heart a dream, a vision, and a calling. It springs forth like a new shoot out of the ground. Young Christians usually say that they have had a dream or vision from God to do something big for Him and bring glory to His name. When I hear young believers tell me about their grand and fantastic dreams, I am both delighted and terrified for them. They don't realize that

they just have entered a spiritual cycle designed by God in order for them to live out their identities and achieve their eternal destinies.

These cycles always follow the pattern of identity. The believer receives a promise of an inheritance (which we call a dream or a vision) from the Father. The believer is the inheritor, and the Father gives him a glimpse of his inheritance. It is sort of a sneak peek into the treasure chest of heaven. A child is allowed to see what theirs is legally and what they can experience and accomplish by being a child of God.

This is the beginning of the journey. If we accept it and receive it by faith as a child, then we are invited to experience a season of servanthood and living as a bondservant to the dream. What I mean is that God allows us to go through a season in which events, people, and the world appear not to cooperate with us as we hoped. In fact, they actually push us further away from it.

We are forced to wait, to do things that may seem to have nothing to do with the actual dream we had from God. We find ourselves going places and doing things that seem irrelevant to the master plan we received from Him earlier. Then seasons of difficulty come when we find ourselves doubting that we can ever reach the dream, or we wonder if we even heard Him correctly. We are tempted to set aside the dream and forget all about it.

Have you been here before? Are you in this season or cycle now in your life? I have been here before and I am certain I will be there again. In this difficult part of our spiritual cycle, we experience a death of sorts. We get to the end of ourselves and realize what we received in our dream or vision cannot be accomplished through ourselves or in our strength. We experience death to ourselves and even to the dream. Yet we are called to remain faithful, steady, Ruth-like to do what we have to do and do it as best as we can. In these cycles, we don't get to hear God much. He appears silent and indifferent, as if He has left us to our own devices. We feel lonely, hopeless, weak, and defeated. But we are truly being observed, tested, and evaluated to see what kind of kings we will be.

This is the exact portion of the Spiritual Cycle of Identity and Destiny that most Christians fail to understand or comprehend. Leaders and pastors usually fail to prepare their flocks for it. It is the years Joseph spent in Potiphar's house as a slave, it is the years in waiting for the promise of the son to be fulfilled for Abraham, it is the years David spent in hiding and running from Saul, it is the season of begging for Ruth, the years Moses spent as a shepherd before going to Egypt to free the people, and it is the 120 years of Noah building the ark. None of these people expected the years of waiting, the humiliations they had to endure, the pain of injustice, the betrayal of friends and family, the doubts they faced, the unexpected silence of the Creator, the many temptations to give up and give in to the Enemy. But all of them endured, and to that end, they all became kings in their own right.

Every one of these stories started with a dream, a vision, and a promise. A dream that a young man will rule over his brothers, a promise that a childless man old with a wife way past her childbearing age will have so many children they can't be counted, a young shepherd boy being anointed king of Israel, the promise of better life for Ruth, the call to be the savior of a people held in bondage. Hence the second cycle of identity if lived well always leads to the revelation of the third identity.

This third identity is to be a king in the image of the King of Kings. What the modern church today teaches is that a son can leapfrog to become a king without ever experiencing the second identity of a servant. This form of the gospel cannot do anything but cause premature birth of the dream planted in the spiritual wombs of the believers who think they can avoid the pain and challenges of servanthood.

The dream is like a seed, a child placed in a womb, fed by the spiritual blood and life source of the one called to carry it through its full term. It will take its designated time, no less and no more. It must have time to develop. Carrying it will be painful, even uncomfortable at times. It will push us to our natural and spiritual limits, but with great love, patience, and endurance, a dream is realized, and a crown is placed on our heads.

The cycle of kingship has its pleasures and victories. It is in this cycle that we take territory from the Enemy, we have our greatest impact on our society, and we achieve our dreams and live out our destinies. But the cycle is not over yet! There is more.

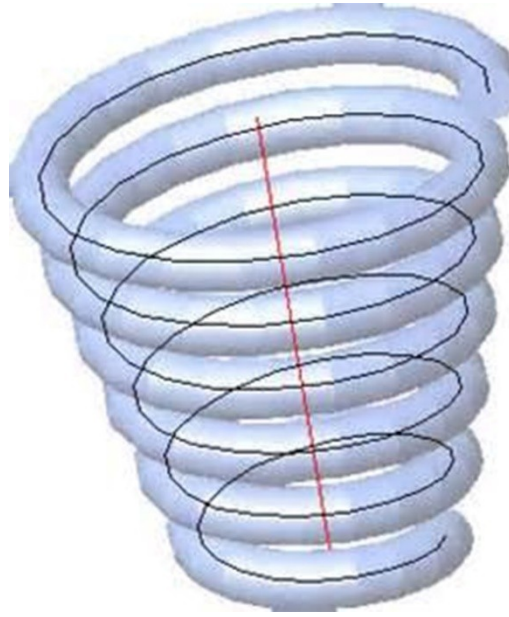
Just as seasons come and go, and all cycles are designed to repeat themselves, cycles of spiritual identity repeat themselves too. Once we achieve our dreams, we are given a new dream and a new vision from the Dreamer of dreams and the greatest visionary of all time, Creator God.

With the new dream, we are again reminded of our endless inheritance in our Father, the limitless fountain of His hope and blessings for us as His children. Then we are invited to the fellowship of the cross to die to this new dream, to serve again, and patiently wait until He is done working in and through us the image of Christ. Once we pass through this valley, we are raised up again as kings.

> *"And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit and again into a greater mission and a greater purpose" (2 Corinthians 3:18).*

Wow! From glory to glory. Each experience builds on the past; each cycle elevates and lifts us up to a higher place. Following the same pattern and cycle of being a child of God, learning how to be a servant, and living like a king, we move from one level of understanding God to a higher plane of comprehending and understanding Him and becoming a clearer and truer reflection of our Creator's image.

In the end, the Holy Spirit showed me a picture of what these cycles look like if we were to draw a rendering of it. An ever-increasing helix.



Looking down onto the helix, it looks like a circle, a complete cycle, but as we view it from the side, it shows that each cycle leads to a higher plane. At the end of each cycle, the person living and traversing it reaches a higher level of understanding and elevation. This is exactly how the Spiritual Cycle of Identity and Destiny works. It repeats over and over and over again, bringing us ever closer to Him and allowing us to show the world who our God really is.

For many of us, these cycles either repeat themselves only a few times or not even one cycle is completed. Just as the children of Israel rebelled in the desert after being freed from Egypt, we rebel against the pain and experience of the desert, aborting the dream and destiny altogether. We return back to the starting point, never being able to finish the cycle, never to be crowned as kings, and never experiencing true victory.

It is sad but true that most believers are stuck in the same cycle over and over again. They simply don't pass the test of servanthood. The church has

become the house of the mediocre, where the failure of character is celebrated under the banner of grace so often that people are never invited to the death and the resurrection life that can only come from truly experiencing the cross. They are accepted as such and surrounded by the same, and all go through their entire Christian life experiences stuck in the desert of mediocrity, hoping that somehow, they can jump the line and skip through these cycles.

But for those of us who have now learned who we are and what our identities in God are, we can prepare to receive our inheritance, dreams, and destinies, and we can endure the pain and sufferings of servanthood with dignity, hope, and patience, enjoying the fruits of kingship with the highest level of character and humility.

I invite the church of our Lord Jesus Christ to learn and embrace its true identity and live lives worthy of God who, through His love, called us to be His own and created us to be His perfect image.

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**Mani Erfan**