



God's Great Questions

WEEK 1: "What is your name?"

Genesis 32:27: "The man asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered."

In the Bible, names have always had a very specific and special usage. The book of Genesis (בְּרֵאשִׁית which literally means "in [the] *head of*" or "in [the] *beginning of*") lists many names of people – names that portray peoples' origins, their occupations, their futures, their *characters*: Adam's name (derived from אֲדָמָה *Adamah*, meaning 'ground') is rooted in *origin*, Jabez (יַעֲבֵז meaning 'pain') was named on account of his mother saying, 'Because I bore him in *pain*' (Gen. 21:6); Esau was named because of an *attribute*, i.e. being 'hairy,' and Jacob was the one 'who grasped the heel of' – a Hebraic idiom for someone who 'deceives' and so it goes on. Many prophets of old had the name of God אֱל 'El' intertwined in their names, referring to a 'set-apart' calling to prophetic service, like Samuel, *Elijah*, Daniel, *Elisha*, Ezekiel etc.

So, names have great symbolic importance in Scripture. But sometimes, there comes a time for *re-naming*.

When God asked Jacob his name, He certainly wasn't demonstrating ignorance. This question served as a powerful catalyst to get Jacob thinking, to drive him to repentance and essentially, to the 'crucifixion' of self and the stripping of the title. Some names given in Scripture have a negative connotation that needs to be rid of; a name that was given by broken people, difficult situations, unfair decisions – names are for that matter, *given* to us. However, the responsibility remains with us whether we *wear* them. God wills for us to hand over to Him even what people have labeled and hung over our necks. When Jacob responds, he does not simply say, 'I am [Jacob,]' but 'I am [he who deceives.]' How precious then, is it not, that God responds, 'You will no longer be [Deceiver,] but [one who prevails/reigns *with* God], not *against* Him.

Jacob knew this confrontation was coming (as did Elijah when he left his slave behind before venturing into the desert, or Jesus as He wandered deeper into Gethsemane after leaving His disciples to wait and pray). There comes a moment of isolated '*God-I*' confrontation, where a decision must be made.



After an evening of intense struggle between these two natures – the fallen name he had received and the new name he wanted to become – Jacob had a profound change in his body and soul. He walked away with a broken-in, crippled nature covered over with a seal of promise - the [one who prevails]!

God has always been in the business of changing people and a change of name is but an outward sign of the inward change. What would you say if God asked you your name? Do you only see fears, worries and weaknesses? God is in the business of changing names and lives. We should learn to see who we are through the second birth – the re-naming phase – which is indeed the most important!

“To the one who *prevails*, ... I will give him a white stone, with a *new name* written on it that no one knows except the one who receives it.” (Revelation 2:17, ESV [*emphasis added*])

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ Jesus, he is a *new creation*; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV [*Emphasis added*])

Jesus, thank You for defeating my flesh and re-naming me. Thank You that You have called me Your own and branded me as a bond-servant. Help me to live in this truth daily and when the enemy holds up his hand against me, that I can hold up your cross and say to him, ‘It is finished.’

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WEEK 2: “What is that in your hand?”

Exodus 4:2: “Then the Lord said to him, ‘What is that in your hand?’ ‘A staff,’ he replied.”

This question arises after Moses’ excuses and reasons for his unqualified position to do the task that God had called him to do. When pondering this question, it often seems that God desires of us to bring our ‘possessions’ to the altar. Whether it be the loaves and fish of the young Jewish boy (John 6:9), the widow’s two copper coins (Mark 12:41), the twenty loaves of barley bread with ears of corn (2



Kings 4:43), David's sling and the five stones (1 Samuel 17:40), the leftover grain Ruth gleaned from the field (Ruth 2), Moses' staff – what do you have in your hand?

When looking at all these examples, it's significant how all of them are simple, ordinary things. Yet, it's precious to think that they represented that person's 'all'. Nothing was held back when it was presented. In a sense, it meant the giving over of the 'self' to a 'Greater Hand'. How beautiful then that God honours this act of humble surrender by blessing the very thing we give over. As Moses' staff was used by God to display His power through a transformational occurrence of staff to serpent and in the parting of the Red Sea, He will use whatever you surrender to display His magnificence in beautiful paradox. The common becomes mighty when God anoints it.

Secondly, in looking at the example of Moses, there is a point of sober humility that had to be reached. Dr Greg Killian (of *Bet Emunah*) puts it like this: "The *midrash* comments that the Lord informed Moses, 'even if you are unwilling to fulfil my mission, this staff, inanimate as it is, is capable of executing My will.' This sobering message should ideally assure Moses' continued commitment despite his lingering ambivalence. It also depersonalises Moses (which may contribute to his conviction)." A part of us needs to understand that we are not the *possessors* of what we acquire. Just because we are *holding* it, doesn't mean that it is *ours*. I love how David puts it in 1 Chronicles 29:14: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? ***For everything comes from You, and we have given You only what comes from Your own hand.***" (CSB) [*emphasis added*].

God is waiting to use what He has placed in your hand. Child of God, loosen your grip and trust in the strong hand of an Almighty Saviour.

*I grasp Thy strength, make it mine own,
My heart with peace is blest;
I lose my hold, and then comes down
Darkness, and cold unrest.
Let me no more my comfort draw
From my frail hold of Thee,
In this alone rejoice with awe—
Thy mighty grasp of me.*

*Out of that weak, unquiet drift
That comes but to depart,
To that pure heaven my spirit lift
Where Thou unchanging art.
Lay hold of me with Thy strong grasp,
Let Thy almighty arm
In its embrace my weakness clasp,
And I shall fear no harm.*

- J. C. Shairp

*Lord God, all we hold dear, is yours. Help us to become aware of what You've placed in our hands, to give it back to You for Your glory. May we be 'wearers' of what You have placed in our hands, and not 'possessors' of it. Thank You, Father, for sobering us and reminding us that 'if [we] keep quiet, even the **stones** will cry out [Luke 19:40].'* Amen.

Bet Emunah. [Online]. Available at: betemunah.org [2019/10/28].

Bevere, L. *What's in your hand?* [Online]. Available at:

<https://messengerinternational.org/blog/devotional/whats-hand/> [2019/10/28].

WEEK 3: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

1 Kings 19:13: “When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”



Elijah the Prophet had experienced many breakthroughs from his God, throughout his life's calling. When Jezebel threatened him with death, he hastened to the desert. According to *Keil and Delitzsh*, Elijah did not flee as a result of fear, because he did not merely withdraw to the kingdom of Judah, where he would have been safe under Jehoshaphat from all the persecutions of Jezebel. Instead, Elijah continued on towards *Beersheba* and into the desert. I would venture to say that Elijah

needed a reminder of God's provision. Similar to Jacob, he needed a 'God-I' confrontation:

Interestingly, the distance from Beersheba to *Horeb* is about 200 miles (± 320 km). Elijah would not have required 40 days to travel there, if God's intention had simply been for him to reach the mountain. However, with the nourishment the angel provided, Elijah was not only able to cover the distance to Horeb, but also to wander in the desert for 40 days and 40 nights – 40 whole days, as Moses had formerly wandered with all Israel for 40 years. This was to remind Elijah that the Lord was still the same God who had nourished and sustained His whole nation in the desert with manna from heaven and water from the Rock (1 Kings 19:6 - the bread cake and the pitcher of water; and Exodus 16, 17). This was a simple demonstration of God's provision for his basic needs: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:33)

Elijah reaches *the* cave, (Heb. lit. המערה - the Hebrew shows a definite article). Here, many commentators claim that the definite article gives the reader a subtle hint to which cave it could have referred to - none other than the cleft of the rock that Moses hid in when the Lord passed him by (Exodus 33:22).

Then the question came: *What are you doing here, Elijah?*

Jews of that time – as many other cultures – held their holy mountains and sites in high regard. Elijah could have been spurred on by a cultural catalyst. Perhaps in the confusion and uncertainty of the moment, Elijah's default was to cling to this cultural spur and to satisfy his curiosity and assist his faith and devotion with the sight of that famous place where the law was given and where so many great things were done – hoping to meet with God Himself there. However, the question God poses

could easily have been accompanied by His Son's words in John 4:21: "Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." Elijah came all this way, perhaps because he had to be reminded by God that He is omniscient and *Emmanuel* – God with us – despite where we find ourselves geographically, culturally, or emotionally.

Sometimes, the simple questions, the gentle ways of God, make the biggest impact. As Herder and Henry so beautifully put it: "[It] was to [point] to the fiery zeal of the prophet, who wanted to reform everything by means of the tempest [in stark contrast to] the gentle way which God pursues, and to proclaim the long-suffering and mildness of His nature, as the Voice had already done to Moses on that very spot; hence the beautiful change in the divine appearance." (Herder, *Geist der hebr. Poesie*, 1788, ii. p. 52)

"Gracious souls are more affected by the tender mercies of the Lord, than by His terrors. The mild voice of Him who speaks from the cross, or the mercy-seat, is accompanied with peculiar power in taking possession of the heart (Henry)."

Am I where I should be, whither God calls me, where my business lies, and where I may be useful? It concerns us often to ask whether we are in God's will or inside a religious 'cave' fashioned by our own perceptions of where the Almighty lives.

Lord, thank You that You are still the same God who led Your people to wander in the desert, from Moses, to Elijah, to David, to Jesus. You gave them sustenance. When I am in the desert, help me to remember that You have brought my forefathers through and to delight in the provision and sustenance of Your Son. Thank You that I can never be separated from Your presence and that You will always remain Emmanuel - God with me. Amen.

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Keil, C. F. & Delitzsh, F. Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/cmt/kad/kg1019.htm> [2019/11/18].

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Words of Life Ministries. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.wordsoflife.co.uk/bible-studies/study-7-what-are-you-doing-here-elijah/> [2019/11/18].

WEEK 4: Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Job 38:4 "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand'."

Lit. Where were you when I fixed, established, founded, firmly put in place ('yasad' יָסַד) the foundations of the earth?

I love the field of science. When I started writing this devotion, I had many ideas of the detailed research I could elaborate on, the deep mysteries of God I could venture into and the treasure trove of discovery bursting at its seams. However, after typing the first sentence, I inevitably remembered Elijah's 'God-I' moment with that 'Silent Presence' - so serene, so fine, yet so powerful. So, I retraced my steps and gradually halted my intellectual pursuit. Maybe there was something else God wanted to highlight. After a sudden pause, it dawned on me how obvious it was: I eventually contemplated typing out the above verse in big, bold letters and leaving no space in between for any other flawed, wordy interpretation. Just the verse. No add-on.

This devotion is about a *God's-eye* view.



When I read the above verse, the only response I could muster was to hurl my face in my hands and — as Job did — repent in dust and ashes. What more could I add to a question like that?

Where was I?

The fact that God answered Job's questions with not only a question, but a detailed description of things we could never dream of nor imagine, shows us how the answer to our "Job"-questions is, quite simply, the revelation of the awesomeness of God! His magnitude puts everything into perspective — even our questions.

When Moses doubted and questioned God, one of the ways God answered was in revealing His sovereignty: "Who gave human beings their mouths? [...] Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11) Before Isaiah was commissioned as a prophet, he had the revelation of the sovereignty of God; of His holiness (cf. Isaiah 6). Jesus was asked: "Good Teacher, what good must I do to get eternal life?" He responded, "There is only One who is good." (Luke 18:19) When John the Baptist sent a message to Jesus asking whether He is truly the Messiah, His answer was not, 'Yes,' but rather, "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is preached to the poor." (Matthew 11:5). *Who* could do these things, if not a sovereign God? Paul knew well of the oral accounts passed down to him, recounting God's majesty: "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us?' [...] But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" (Romans 9:19-20)

In the first chapter of Revelation, John starts by giving an in-depth description of the glory and awesomeness of God's physical appearance: we need to first *perceive* Him for *who* He is - the God of the universe, clothed with indescribable power and majesty, a God of enormity, who "alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. [...] He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted. [...] If he snatches away, who can stop him? Who can say to him, 'What are you doing?'" (Job 9:8-12).

Recently, I read an excerpt from the works of *Johannes Kepler*, a renowned German astronomer and mathematician, who had a beautiful 'God-I' confrontation. While he was doing calculations, he often stopped mid-way through a sum and composed many poems of great praise and wonder at a God who is so big and unfathomable. Even in his particular academic field, there would be a beautiful pristine moment where scientific calculations broke forth into worship:

"It now remains that at last, with my eyes and hands removed from the tablet of demonstrations and lifted up towards the heavens, I should pray, devout and supplicating, to the Father of lights: O Thou Who dost by the light of nature promote in us the desire for the light of grace, that by its means Thou mayest transport us into the light of glory, I give thanks to Thee, O Lord Creator, Who hast delighted me with Thy makings and in the works of Thy hands have I exulted. Behold! now, I have completed that work of my profession, having employed as much power of mind as Thou didst give to me; to the men who are going to read those demonstrations I have made manifest the glory of Thy works, as much of its infinity as the narrows of my intellect could apprehend. Great is our Lord [...] praise Him ye heavens, praise Him, ye sun, moon, and planets, use every sense for perceiving, every tongue for declaring your Creator!" (cf. Psalm 8)

I want to challenge you today: are your worries and cares truly able to stand before an almighty, invincible King? Are they weighing you down because you have failed to weigh them up against a Creator of galaxies, a fiery-eyed Ruler, who knows every star by name and every hair on your head? How many of your problems are due to a miscalculation of God's supremacy; a flawed perspective of *King vs. thing*? I am convinced that as we surrender our perspectives to be conquered and determined by an incomparable God, we will not be able to withhold ourselves from bursting into song and worship. And as this happens, the world's cares 'will grow strangely dim...'

Why? Because, the Foundation-Builder *chose* to tabernacle with us before we even existed.

Most holy King, we repent of allowing the cares of this world to take a front-row seat in our lives. Forgive us for allowing the world to narrow down our perspective and that we often fail to see our problems in the light of Your supreme Being. Thank You, Lord, that You desire to reveal Yourself to us and that you loved us before we even were. We bow our hearts before You and acknowledge that You alone, Holy Father, determine our perspective. Amen.

Nickel, J. 2012. *Mathematics: Is God Silent?* Publisher: *Ross House Books*.

WEEK 5: Who touched Me?

Luke 8:43-48 "As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed Him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. She came up behind Him and touched the edge of His cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped. 'Who touched me?' Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the people are crowding and pressing against You.' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from Me.' Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at His feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched Him and how she had been instantly healed. Then He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.'"

and Mark 5:25-34

The Greek word *haptomai* (ἅπτομαι lit. to modify or change by touching) is used in this Biblical account when Jesus is touched by a woman suffering for 12 years from uncontrollable bleeding. The New Testament Greek term refers to her as the *haemorrhissa* (ἡ αἱμορροῦσα, "bleeding woman").

Although the medical diagnosis of this woman is unclear, she was considered a ceremonially unclean woman and, according to Jewish law, would have been labelled as a *Niddah* נִדָּה (menstruating woman) of low status. In order to be regarded as clean, the flow of blood would need to stop for at least 7 days (cf. Leviticus 15:28-30, 2 Samuel 11:4). Because of the constant bleeding, this woman lived in a continual state of 'uncleanness' which would have brought upon her social and religious isolation.



In the Hebrew language, one often finds idiomatic nuances operating behind a seemingly ordinary verb. To touch נָגַע *Naga* in Hebrew can be translated as 'to reach [out to],' 'to draw near,' 'to cast' and is often followed by the preposition 'in.' The Hebrew translated version of the New Testament literally reads, 'Who touched *in* Me?' In such a crowded situation, it was inevitable that many rubbed past Jesus and bumped into Him and yet, this woman's touch was of a much deeper essence — it was a touch that brought on change; it was intentional and focused and spoke to Jesus' very core.

In its Semitic root, *Naga* is of Persian origin, used to denote a leper touching someone else, resulting in the latter person *becoming* a leper. It was all about passing the leprosy onto someone else. Jesus was — in a sense — subtly prophesying to His role as a scapegoat, pre-crucifixion. Not only did this holy transaction between Jesus and the woman result in her being healed, but it disadvantaged Jesus (the power flowing from Him). Here, within this passage, a pre-crucifixion demonstration occurred! The woman — drowning in debt, sickness and at a loss of her identity — reaches out to touch the hem of Jesus' garment and is not only healed, but reinstated as a daughter of the Most High King (vs 48: "**Daughter**, your faith has made you well.>").

The fact that this woman touched Jesus deeply is one thing; but *where* did she touch Him? Scripture tells us in Luke that the woman touched the “hem” *kanaph* of Jesus’ garment:

In Numbers, God instructs His people to “make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner” as a reminder that they were set-apart peculiar people called to keep His commandments (Numbers 15:37-41). It seems like a strange instruction until we learn that in the Ancient Near East, the corner of a person’s garment represented his identity — it was a symbol of who he was and what he stood for. In the book of Ruth, Ruth asked Boaz to spread the corner of his garment over her (Ruth 3:9). This is seen as nothing less than a request for him to **identify** with her. The same Hebrew word can mean “wing.” Therefore, many translations render Ruth’s request as, “Spread your wings over your servant.” Ponder even further on the horrendous symbolic significance that this understanding brings to the story of when David cut off the hem of Saul’s garment.

This symbolic reference is of such significance, that the Old Testament even closes with a prophecy of the Messiah and the corners of His garment: “But unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His **wings** [כַּנָּפִי *kanaph* ‘hem’].” (Malachi 4:2, KJV, the same word refers both to “wings” and “corners of a garment,” *emphasis added*)

As a devout Jew, Jesus may very well have worn tassels, though His would not have been as elaborate as those of the Pharisees. When the woman reached out to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment, it was in many cases more than a grab for the most accessible part of His person: it was a sign that she wanted to **identify** with Him and vice versa.

Perhaps Malachi 4:2 was even in her mind as she reached out and thought, “This is finally the one with healing in His wings.”

Thank You, Jesus, that I can trust in You to reinstate me to what You have called me to be. Thank You, dearest Saviour, that You have chosen to identify with Your children by climbing down from Your most deserved, blessed position and humbly ministering to the most lowly souls. Show me, Jesus, how to identify with others in a similar way and to point them to the One with healing in His wings. Amen.

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Brown, Driver & Briggs. 1882. *Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Boston, New York.

Chaim Ben Torah. *Hebrew Word Study*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.chaimbentorah.com/2018/04/hebrew-word-study-anointed/> [2019/12/01].

WEEK 6: "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?"

Jonah 4:11 "Do you have a good reason to be angry?" ... "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?"

In the story of Jonah, we see an interesting display of a God wilfully turning in compassion, while at the same time, His prophet walked away. The rebellion might possibly be dealt with, it would seem, by wiping out the city of Nineveh, but God, being who He is, will not do this unless necessary. It brings to mind a gloriously beautiful passage of the Old Testament where God relents from His grave sentence, only to shine on Israel the magnificent ray of mercy and lovingkindness of His deep and complex nature:



"Yet how can I give thee up, Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim [the cities destroyed with Sodom]? My heart recoils within Me, all My compassions are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger. I will not return to Ephraim to destroy him again. For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst..." - Hosea 11:8-10

It is against this heart of God that Jonah rebelled and had to be disciplined by God, as His prophet, to look at the 'lost' through God's own merciful eyes. Jonah can be contrasted with Christ in the New Testament where Jesus Himself said: "...behold something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41). What did He mean by that? Jonah's ultimate failure was in *not sympathising* with God. When we bear God's heart, we bear it in its entirety. Both Jesus and Jonah knew God. Jesus was in sympathy with God; Jonah was not. Jesus beheld the city and wept over it; Jonah ran away from it. Praise God that we have a High Priest who did not run away from His task, but "for the joy [of accomplishing the goal] set before Him, endured the cross, disregarding the shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 11:2 AMP).

David was called "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22). Why? I believe because David knew how to sympathise. He had sympathy for Saul and Saul's lineage (Mephiboseth), for his own children's lives and for **Shimei**, son of Gera (2 Samuel 16:5-13). Because of David's grace on Shimei's life, the latter became the forefather of Mordecai, Esther's uncle (See reference list: I. Singer, M. Seligsohn, Bacher, W., *Mordecai*)! One never knows how many generations later your merciful deeds may eventually impact!

I want to encourage us at the start of this year to already make a conscious effort to forgive as our Father and show grace and mercy to someone who needs it. It is not condemnation that saves, but rather unconditional love.

"Thus the voice of Jonah to us today calls us not only to know God, but to be in sympathy with Him, to feel His pity, to carry out His activity, and to show to men what a God He really is." (G. C. Morgan, in *Voices of Twelve Hebrew Prophets*)

“And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41-44 ESV)

“The King was shaken. So he went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. As he walked, he cried, ‘My son Absalom! O my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! Absalom, my son, my son!’” (2 Samuel 19:1 AMP)

This is an important lesson on having grace, because much grace has been given to us (Luke 12:48). We are no better than Nineveh, but it is only by the grace of God that we are new creations in Him. God alone is the determining factor.

Dear Father, please help me to have compassion on those who are different to me. Show me, dearest Saviour, how to gaze at them through the eyes of the Redeemer of the world, pushing none away but rather drawing all the lost nigh. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Morgan, G.C. 1979. *Voices of Twelve Hebrew Prophets*. Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Singer, I., Seligsohn, M., Bacher, W. ‘Mordecai’, *Jewish Encyclopaedia*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10983-mordecai> [2020/05/07].

WEEK 7: “Can these dry bones live?”

Ezekiel 37:3: “He asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ I said, ‘Sovereign LORD, you alone know.’”

Devotional song: *Michael Card, Valley of dry bones* —
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrP7raJl5zq>



Within this beautiful promise to resurrect a broken nation, God provides man with an encouraging reminder — that He is not only a God of the mountains, but also a God of the valleys! This story of the valley of dry bones shows us a sequence of events that took place: 1) the Lord placed Ezekiel in the middle of a valley, 2) God spoke strongly to two of Ezekiel’s senses (his sight and his hearing) by a) **showing** him the valley and allowing him to **see** it from different angles (vs 2: “He caused me to pass all around them...”). The whole passage is very descriptive, describing each process in detail, e.g. “sinews on the bones,” “flesh grew”, “skin covered them”, etc. and b) making him prophecy to the bones and **hear** the thundering noise as bones rattled and joined together. 3) Lastly, God

commanded him to prophecy that new life blow into the cadavers' lungs and only then do they rise to their feet and are considered an "exceedingly great army".

I would like to highlight four important things that some of us often overlook when reading this passage:

Firstly, God's chosen setting: Ezekiel lived during the 'Babylonian Captivity' on the banks of the Khebar river, in Tel Abib (not to be confused with modern day *Tel Aviv*) together with other exiles from Judah. The valley that God shows Ezekiel in a vision, is called a *qeber* קֶבֶר 'grave.' Mass graves often point to large-scale massacres and to a sense of shame and defeat. When an army was conquered in battle in Biblical times, the victors would often strip the valuables from the slain and leave their enemies' bodies unburied. This image of a valley covered with bones was not merely an abstract concept: Ezekiel lived at a time when one could find literal valleys of bones where the slain enemy had been overwhelmed and there was no one to bury them. In the Bible, a corpse not properly buried was considered to be accursed by God. Furthermore, to be buried outside one's homeland, was also a terrible reality: burial with one's own family and in one's own land was important to the Israelites. To die and be buried far from one's homeland was considered a divine punishment. Burial also relates to prophetic action, e.g. when Jacob refused to be buried in Egypt and was buried in Canaan instead, it "testifies to the fact that he believes Canaan will once again be his family's home" (Genesis 50:5, 13; cf. Exodus 13:19; Mounce 2006).

Secondly, when God shows Ezekiel the valley, Ezekiel considers it an important addition to refer to these bones as **very** dry: "...and lo, they were very dry" (lit. יבשות מאד *yiveishot me'od* "very dry/much withered"). This tells us that these bones must have lain there for a very long period of time; that the place in which they lay was arid and dry and thus pointed to the spiritual hopelessness and barrenness of the situation. According to the *Blue Letter Bible Commentary*, "...apart from their presence in a living body, bones are dead. Dry bones are not only dead; they have been long dead [...] If something never had life, it will not leave bones. Yet when something has been dead so long, we normally give up hope it will ever live again." This arid valley of death creates the perfect setting and platform on which God could base His question and test His prophet-servant: "Son of man, can *these* bones live?"

Thirdly, no one hopes that scattered, detached bones might live. Admirably, Ezekiel responded to God's question with the only hope that could be found, saying "O Lord God, *You* know." Ezekiel had no hope in the bones, but he placed his hope in his God. This is a beautiful testimony to Ezekiel's faith in his God whom — he knew — could resurrect those bones. Do we continue to fix our eyes on a God high above the seemingly impossible? Do we look beyond what we can see and listen beyond what we can hear?

Fourth, and lastly, God commanded Ezekiel to prophecy to the four winds to *breathe into* the cadavers. The important thing to note is that, without any life-giving breath, we remain dead. Even though we might 'look' like humans with flesh and bones intact, we should not be fooled into thinking that this is enough. This army could only arise with the life-giving influx of God's Spirit. We as the Church also need to guard against this state of 'false existence'. Are we simply an empty shell, a religious institution or a lifeless cadaver thinking that we are God's army when we have no life-giving breath inside of us? May we not be satisfied until the 'four winds' blow over us and give us life-giving breath! This was not a work of creation (making something from nothing), this was a work of revival (restoring life to something long dead). However, both actions require the essential: the 'breath of God'. In the Hebrew language, breath and spirit are embodied in the same word *ruah* רוּחַ. Therefore,

God is not only speaking about reviving the physical body to life, but He is referring to an even deeper spiritual revival, of a nation, a global Church, an individual to a higher life and a higher call.

May God open our 'graves' and 'resurrect' what has 'died' in us and urge us to — as Paul and Isaiah commands — 'strengthen your limp hands and weak knees...' (Hebrews 12:12; Isaiah 35:3)

"Awake, O north wind, and come, south wind; make my garden breathe out fragrance [for the one in whom my soul delights], let its spices flow forth." (Song of Solomon 4:16 AMP)

O, dearest Father, come and open the graves inside of me and revive what has grown cold and laid dormant and dead for too long. I pray that the four winds of Your Spirit will blow over this body and over this Church and may we arise to serve You with rejuvenated vigour and passion. Thank You for a valley of promise and that Your Spirit is our life-giving medium. Amen.

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WEEK 8: "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your ceiled houses, while *this house* lies in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4)

Haggai 1:4: "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your ceiled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"

In 538 BC, upon reading Isaiah 45, written about 200 years prior to his birth (see *Reference List*), Cyrus the Great, the ruler and founder of the *Achaemenid* Empire (the first Persian Empire) issued a decree, allowing 50 000 Jews to return to their homeland. They had the blessed privilege to rebuild their temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonian forces in 586 BC (Cf. Ezra 1:2-4; 6:3-5). Two years later (536 BC), the Jews finished the foundation of the temple amid great rejoicing. However, construction was quickly halted when Samaritans, among other peoples, out of fear of the temple giving a political and religious leverage to an already flourishing



Jewish community, viciously opposed the project until 520 BC. Haggai and Zechariah began to preach during this time wherein they hoped to arouse the Jewish nation from their lethargy. Haggai's oracles showed his concern for the immediate reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. He believed that the economic distress of the people was primarily caused by their negligent delay in *continuing* and *finishing* the process.

A commentary by *Morgan* reads: "The years had passed and nothing stood but perhaps the first courses upon the foundations. It goes without saying that by this time the work was overgrown with grass and silted with rubbish."

The above question asked by God to His people, was really the answer to a 16-year old assumption they had fabricated in order to excuse themselves: "The time has not come that the Lord's house should be rebuilt." Isn't this quite a common excuse that many Christians tend to have? People are very fond of declaring that things ought to be done in various ways, but that the time for doing it has not yet come. In answer to this assumption, the Lord gave them a three-fold contrast: a contrast of 1) persons, 2) houses and 3) conditions.

In the first contrast of persons, God is not named in the rhetorical question, but the people are named twice. When a pronoun in Hebrew is repeated twice, it often serves as a textual marker to indicate emphasis for whatever reason. Here, we see the pronoun 'you' repeated and 'fronted' (i.e. placed in a unique syntactic position in a phrase) in a remarkable way as לָכֶם אֲתֶם *lachem atem* lit. 'you, *even you*,' unquestionably placing emphasis on the second occurrence. Is it a time for you, *you* to dwell in your ceiled houses? This could have served as a reminder to the people of who they really were: a people with a remarkable history and with an obvious clear knowledge of the supreme importance of the Temple of God above all other things.

The second contrast speaks of the two houses: 'your houses' and 'this house.' Interlinked with that, we have the third contrast of the conditions of these two types. The people were dwelling in costly houses, embellished with beauty and well-furnished. In contrast to popular belief, *Eisen* explains that the exile "nevertheless had a great benefit to the Jewish people. There were no more corrupt kings or nobility – in Babylon the Torah scholars had complete authority. Moreover, the Babylonians were not anti-Semites *per se*; while they only wanted to destroy Judah as an independent political power, they harboured no ill feelings toward the Jewish religion. As such, Jews were given their own cities, where earlier exiled Jews welcomed them warmly. The Talmud tells us that God chose Babylon as the place of exile for several reasons: Aramaic, the language of Babylon, was very similar to Hebrew. Abraham was born in Babylon, so the Jews were not regarded as foreigners. And it was easy to make a living from the abundant date trees. All told, then, life was pleasant for the Jews once they reached Babylon."

Consequently, a comfort and an attitude of complacency ensued — something which God wanted to address. Haggai further exemplifies the hollowness of their secure lifestyle (vs 5-7): "You have planted much, but you harvest little; you eat, but you do not have enough; you drink, but you do not have enough to be intoxicated; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns wages, earns them in a bag with holes in it. Consider! Consider your ways!" The Lord calls them to reflect. How strongly the following verse resonates with this timeless message of Haggai:

*“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”
- Revelation 3:18 (NIV)*

May we not be found in a state of materialistic passivity where we sow much, but harvest little. According to *Morgan*, “There was a fine scorn in this description [Haggai 1:4], and in all likelihood it was intended to describe a spiritual rather than an actual material condition.” Consider the fact that these were people who had *known* God. The book of Haggai is addressed to those who have walked with God and have had a history of being His people. This beautiful book of Haggai calls all of us to watch ourselves and assess our spiritual conditions daily. There is such a danger of putting ‘things’ first and forgetting the consequent disaster of looking upon that which is supreme as though it were secondary. The cure, however, is always to be found in a restored personal relationship with our Father.

*Toil without recompense is poverty,
Eating without feeding is hunger,
Drink without quenching is undying thirst,
Clothing without warmth is the chilly fact of death,
Wages without purchasing power is disillusionment.
The husks without the kernel,
The frame without the picture,
Life without living.
-G. C. Morgan*

Dear reader, let’s put the first things first. Let’s continue to place God’s supremacy at the front of all that we have, who we are and what we do. Let us not procrastinate in the work of the Lord, for fear that ‘the time has not yet come.’ The time is *now*, *wherever* we find ourselves. “So, as the Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...’” [Hebrews 3:7, NIV]

Thank You, Father for awakening my heart to this timeless message of Haggai. Open my spiritual ears, dearest Saviour, to consider my ways and alter it according to Your Word and Holy Spirit’s guidance. Amen.

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Series: God’s Great Questions

WEEK 9: “Simon, bar Yonah [son of Jonah], do you love Me more than these?”

John 21:15: “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’” (NIV)



From the shore, Christ called to the disciples to throw their net out again. Oh, *what* a precious, delicate memory it must have triggered inside of them to think back on the first encounter where they had witnessed Christ filling their nets with a great catch (cf. Luke 5:1-11)! Clearly, this command was a lot more personal as it gave a subtle hint to *Who* was, in fact, speaking. John immediately connected the dots of intimate experience and said to Simon Peter: “T’s the Lord!” In reaction,

Simon Peter is again the first to jump in the water; eager to prove his loyalty to Christ (Matthew 14:22-31).

The setting in which the question (John 21:15) was asked, was that of a **charcoal** fire — the very same word in Greek *anthrakia* ἀνθρακιά is used to describe the fire Simon Peter was sitting at when he betrayed Christ weeks before (cf. John 18:18). This Greek word is only found twice in the whole New Testament! The Apostle John would not have made a point of using both occurrences in his account, if it was not to point to something: Christ, so deliberate in His setup of the scenario, was actually *staging* a second scene in order to confront and restore a broken heart. A similar fire, a similar setting, but two *very* different outcomes (betrayal vs. restoration)! Christ asked *three* questions, because Simon Peter had denied Him *three* times. This was not an arbitrary, random act. It was for the very reinstatement of Simon Peter to discipleship. *Everything* was planned.

Now, in my *personal* opinion, this passage in John 21, is probably one of the most unfortunate, limited passages to read in the English translation. Therefore, allow me to run with you through a quick and important exegesis to better understand why Jesus repeatedly asked this question. Let’s jump in!

Simon Peter — a man who often revved his mouth, while his brain stayed in neutral — had committed the very sin he claimed he never would:

‘Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will [...] Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.”’ (Matt. 26:33)

Within this genius setup that Christ had prepared for Simon Peter, Jesus was reminding him of this very promise he had made just a few weeks before. “Do you love Me more than these [disciples]?” The concept of love in the Greek, has quite a few different terms. Within this passage, Jesus and Simon Peter use two different Greek words in their discussion: *Agapao* ἀγαπάω (to love unconditionally and sacrificially, as God Himself loves sinful men) and *Phileo* φιλέω (a natural affection, fondness). See table below:

John 21:15 - Simon, son of Yonah, do you love Me?		
	Jesus asks	Simon Peter replies
John 21:15	Love - Agapao	Love - Phileo
John 21:16	Love - Agapao	Love - Phileo
John 21:17	Love - Phileo	Love - Phileo

Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love (*Agapao*) Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love (*Phileo*) You” [How could Simon Peter have the right or the courage to rise to Christ’s love after denying Him *thrice?*]. He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Yonah, do you love (*Agapao*) Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love (*Phileo*) You.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of Yonah, do you love (*Phileo*) Me?” At the third time Jesus asks the question, He changes to *Phileo* love.

Notice how Simon Peter is referred to by Jesus as ‘Simon’, not ‘Peter’. Perhaps Jesus was exemplifying Romans 7, in that it was not Peter who had sinned, but Simon — the old flesh. Also note how Peter reacted: it was not his usual boisterous personality that was speaking. Here, however, we see a very different man confronted with his inabilities and his false perception of his own strength and dominance. He does not answer arrogantly, but with a repentant spirit, opens up in himself a potential usage by reflecting Jesus’ own glory back to Him in saying, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You” (cf. Ezekiel 37 - “Sovereign Lord, You alone know!”). But what follows, is the truly beautiful reinstatement:

“Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” (John 21:18)

One might think this a terrible prophecy to hear from the Messiah, but to Simon Peter, this meant reinstatement to the point of being worthy to die for the Son of God (cf. Matthew 20:20-28). Jesus was telling Peter that he was going to have faith great enough to be the kind of man he hoped to become. We can only imagine the joy and relief that he felt! Peter begins the chapter by chasing his former vocation as a fisherman, but Jesus reinstates him to the role of a shepherd of the Church, the future body of Christ in Jerusalem, and Simon Peter did just that. He became one of the greatest apostles and servants of Christ that has ever lived. He was given the “keys to the kingdom” (Matt. 16:18-19) and allowed to preach the first gospel sermon to both the Jews (Acts 2) and the Gentiles (Acts 10).

What does this mean for you and me? It means that, even though we may have failed the Lord miserably, it is never too late. Christ looks at His children with *possibility* and *potential*, not with condemnation. When we slip, He will go to great lengths to intimately poke at our hearts, in order to reinstate and strengthen us again. The Lifter of our heads — yes, indeed, He *is*.

Thank You, my dearest Saviour, that You pursue such intimate conviction with us. Thank You, Jesus, that You do not settle for second best in our lives and that You pursue man with such passion when You see potential. Help me, Lord, to run into Your arms and not let shame keep me from kneeling before Your surgical hand of restoration. Reinstate me, oh Lord, I pray, to live and die for You! In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

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WEEK 10: “Eli, Eli lema sabachthani?”

Matthew 27:46 “About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”)

And Psalm 22

Devotional song: Michael Card, Love Crucified Arose — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiuli4SWzoM>

I am fully aware of the madness of this modest attempt at surveying and writing a devotional on the most noteworthy event in all of history — the hour in which Christ was torn away from the Father, in order that we may have the veil torn from our faces!

Perhaps it's rather ambitious for our last devotional in the series, but nevertheless it would plague me if I refused to look openly upon the crucified Jesus as the complete, heavenly climax, trace my fingers over His bruised face and be deeply acquainted with His heart. I don't think we will



ever fully understand what happened on that day or in that hour; how much was given up and to what extent.

As Hagner puts it:

“Perhaps it is best simply to let the words stand as they are — stark in their impenetrability to us mortals.”

Firstly, we look at the different variations of this profound utterance “Eli, Eli lema sabachthani?” When looking at the text, it is noticeable that the Greek used, is in fact only a transcription (a form in which a speech sound or a foreign character is represented phonetically) of the original Aramaic/Hebrew. In the Gospel of Matthew, we see a change compared to Mark’s Aramaic transcription in Greek of the term ‘God, God,’ ελωι ελωι, *elōi elōi* into Hebrew ηλι ηλι, *ēli ēli*. This was probably done to create a closer phonetic similarity with Ἠλίαν, “Elijah” and a more logical narrative (vs 47 “When some of those standing there heard this, they said, ‘He’s calling Elijah’”). The remaining words of the question in Matthew, however, is written in Hebrew. According to Hagner, what seems to be rather peculiar, is that “both Luke and John do not preserve Jesus’ call: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ and that they replace it with different words. Obviously, this sentence was already difficult for people in earliest Christianity.”

The form of the words is one thing, however, the **meaning** of the words in the mouth of *Jesus*, is something about which one can only wonder. Both Mark and Matthew avoid interpretive comment on Christ’s utterance. Even other writers of the New Testament — whose task involved interpretation and clarification — never refer to Christ’s heart-rending cry. Hagner reiterates this astronomic significance:

“Jesus as the sin-bearing sacrifice must endure the temporary abandonment of his Father, i.e., separation from God. Horrible as this would be for any creature of God, when it concerns One who is uniquely the Son of God [...] it is impossible to assess what this may have meant to Jesus. This is one of the most impenetrable mysteries of the entire Gospel narrative.”

Verse 46 is one of the verses in which “the entire history of European piety is mirrored” (cf. Luz 2005) with a common division in its reception into two main parts. The first thousand years of Christian history tried to understand how the heavenly Son of God Himself could cry out such a thing. In the second Christian millennium, Jesus was increasingly rediscovered as a human being, and His cry became simply the cry of human suffering.

Martin Luther broke away from the common-held belief of his day and emphasised that Christ not only had to suffer bodily but also had to endure the entire depth of spiritual suffering to the point of being *abandoned* by God. The magnitude of His *passio* reveals the depth of the damnation from which we are saved by Christ. Such a weight of sin on Christ’s shoulders, lies in such sharp contrast to the Father’s holiness, that perhaps a natural segregation was only to be expected! I personally, do not think the question should be asked *whether* the Father abandoned Christ, but rather *why* the Father would abandon His Son. Perhaps the Father turned His face away from all that Christ represented in that hour and because of the impossibility for light and darkness to co-exist. At that moment, Jesus was hanging there utterly drenched in sin and in stark opposition to all that the Father was and is! Can we ever understand the **severity** of this? Christ *embodied* the concept of a Jewish scapegoat!

“God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21; NIV, Emphasis added)

Interestingly, another perspective — and one that became especially important in the Middle Ages — is that Jesus spoke the words of the Psalm because He was seeing the sins of the people for whom He died. Christ

represents the sinful human being for whom He dies. It is from that perspective that Jesus prays vicariously. Since Augustine, the idea surfaced that Christ prayed here as the head of His body, the Church. Paschasius Radbertus described this prayer of Jesus not as a cry of despair but as a sacrament:

“He weeps for the misery of those whose nature He takes on.”

Considering all of the above, I have no final answer to give — clearly, opinion and perspectives have not been lacking over the centuries; that much we can deduce. As none of the New Testament authors comment on the actual meaning of vs 46, perhaps the silence speaks for itself. What I do wish to leave with us, is that even if Christ was separated from the Father for a moment, it was *in order to* restore to us an eternal *Emmanuel*-blessing. The veil separating the Holiest of Holies was torn in two so we can have access to the Father, every minute, every second. That is what Jesus desires for us to hold onto – God eternal, an ever-present help in times of trouble, with *all* else fading into the background.

“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission.” (Hebrews 5:7-10; NIV)

“...and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.” (Colossians 1:20; NIV)

“But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:11-14; NIV)

Lord, there are no words to thank You for what You have gone through for me. You are the reincarnation of the year of Jubilee — Your precious blood setting my captive soul free! My life I choose to lay down before You. I come to You as a bondservant, ready to do Your will. Thank You for all Your Spirit’s richness and the important questions You’ve communicated to us as Your creation. I believe in You and that my flesh must die with You in order to live in You eternal. I bless You with a life of gratitude. In Jesus’ mighty name, Amen.

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