

God...in the Gap

Day One

It's a great mystery how our dreams take shape inside us—these images of how our lives should play out. “Life happens while we are busy making others plans,” as John Lennon said. The gap between our dreams...and reality yawns wide at points.

The fine irony is that here—in the gap—is where we best meet God. It's when things don't work out quite like we planned...that the gospel starts to look like the incredibly good news it is.

In the Beginning

Part of the reason the Scriptures were given us is so that we would have the stories of other people to instruct and give us hope (Romans 15: 3). Hebrews 11 has a cast of characters that spans the waterfront of life – truly, pictures of the best of times and the utter worst. And all of it covered and held in the hand of God who loved us all the way to the cross.

It's worth reading all of Hebrews 11 over a few days and just making note of what each person was up against...and what it meant for them to believe God. But a shorter snapshot is this paragraph (verses 32-38):

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worth – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

In the first half of this paragraph what great dreams were realized? What phenomenal answers to prayer did these folks see? (For an even better look, turn to the high points in the stories of Gideon, David, Samuel, Daniel – to name the most famous).

For the record, the verse about those tortured, refusing to accept release, choosing to believe in the better life of the resurrection...refers to the period between the Old and New Testament, specifically the martyrs of the Maccabees (worth Googling), who chose to die by being dismembered publicly...rather than to renounce the God of Israel. The resurrection was where they put their hope, believing that it would all come back together, literally, in infinitely better form.

Now...with the word, OTHERS, the paragraph turns a sudden, dramatic corner in the original language. *Others* suffered mocking and flogging, chains in prison, hiding in caves, awful deaths...because the life *they had in Jesus was just plain better.*

What seasons of your life...what experiences...have metaphorically felt like being sawn in two or struck by a sword or wandering in a desert?

When the desert seemed too dry, when the dream was not like you pictured – when God gave “a different sort of wonderful,” what conclusions have you tended to draw about yourself or about God?

What would it mean in your life to place your deep hope not in your dreams working out...but in God?

Lastly, all the experiences of Hebrews 11 funnel into one blazing verse:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith....Hebrews 12: 1,2

“To fix our eyes on Jesus” is to let go of our agenda, our plan for how our dreams should play out, and to believe that God is writing His story of redemption through our lives. *What would running your own particular race well, with your eyes on Jesus, look like in your life this week?*

In the End:

It is the fellowship with Him that's the prize, not the fulfillment of our dreams.

Day Two

How easy it is to get lost in “what if’s” and “if only’s”! *If only I hadn’t broken that engagement. Or what if my husband dies young like my father did.* If we combine regret over the past...with fear for the future, we will find ourselves paralyzed in the present. And feeling very much alone.

Resting in the sovereignty of God can be one of those good and crucial gifts you stumble upon in the gap between your dreams and reality. Believing that God’s good purposes for your life have been set in motion from before the world began is truly a saving grace (Ephesians 1:3).

In the Beginning

Here are five great verses or passages that broadcast the greatness of God and what that can mean in your life.

As you read these, think of some situation in your life that you feel like you’ve got to manage...or worry about. Something you fear is determined by a powerful person or an intractable problem. Some mistake you made you think can never be remedied.

Try putting each verse in your own words . Then write one way in which this verse reframes the way you see your problem (makes God look bigger, the problem smaller).

Ephesians: 1-3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless in Him.

Job 42: 2

I know that Thou canst do all things and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted.

Proverbs 21:1

The king's heart is like a channel of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever He wishes.

Psalm 18:30

This God—His way is perfect! The word of the Lord proves true. He is a shield to all those who take refuge in Him.

Psalm 37:23

The steps of a righteous man are established by the Lord and He delights in His way. Even when He falls, he shall not be hurled headlong because the Lord is the one who holds his hand.

In the End:

“The things that are not, never were, and we must not mourn them as though God withheld something...”

Jim Elliott

“That is the great conversion of our life: to recognize and believe that the many unexpected events are not just disturbing interruptions of our projects, but the way in which God molds our hearts and prepares us for his return.”

Henri Nouwen

Day Three

Almost every angel appears repeating the same lines: do not fear, for the Lord is with you. That God is present, with you, in the midst of every moment – good, bad, or indifferent – is one of those realities that starts to take on deep meaning as you reach for God in the gap between your dreams and reality.

It literally changes our experience of every experience.

In the Beginning

It's comforting to realize that we aren't the only ones who shake on the inside, and secretly wonder if God has dropped our file folder. In this scene from Mark, Jesus' disciples have the most human of moments.

Read this story in a bit of a different manner. Read it as though you are there, in this present moment, with the waves pounding against your boat, wondering where Jesus is. Read it through three times, picking up the details of what you are feeling on that boat, the questions you are asking, the surprise that overtakes you.

And on that day, when evening had come, He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side." And leaving the multitude, they took Him along with them, just as He was, in the boat; and other boats were with Him. And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up.

And He Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they awoke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?"

And being aroused, he rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm.

And He said to them, "Why are you so timid? How is it that you have no faith?" And they became very much afraid and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

Mark 4: 35-41

In your own life, where is the boat filling up with water?

Where do you sense yourself wondering "if God cares?"

What is the one thing in your life where Jesus is saying, "Why are you so afraid?"

What would it mean in your life to trust that God is with you and totally able to calm the storm (change the situation)or to calm the storm in you?

In the End:

I surrender myself to the 'authority' of God....meaning that I acknowledge God as the *Author*....the One who is writing the story of His redemption through my life.

Day Four

“Oh, to see my name written in your wounds, for in your suffering I am free,” sings Keith Getty. This is so true. To find your own worst moments in the experience of Jesus – to know that He knows like no one will ever know – is to find a fellowship, a connection with Him, deeper than any you’ve experienced with anyone in your life.

In the Beginning

I mentioned that the experiences in life we’d say were “truly awful” are ones which are usually characterized by one or more of these three things:

- Betrayal
- Loss that seems irretrievable
- Humiliation

Let’s take two of these and look at them in the experience of Christ – following the emotional footprints of Jesus. Read this passage from Luke 22: 54-62, not from Peter’s experience – but from how Jesus felt.

Betrayal...

And having arrested Him, they led Him away, and brought Him to the house of the high priest; but Peter was following at a distance. And after they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter was sitting among them.

And a certain servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the firelight, and looking intently at Him, said, “This man was with Him too.” But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know Him.”

And a little later, another saw him and said, “You are one of them too!” But Peter said, “Man, I am not!”

And after about an hour had passed, another man began to insist, saying, “Certainly this man also was with Him, for he is a Galilean too.” But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.” And immediately, while he was still speaking, a cock crowed.

And the Lord turned and looked at Peter.

And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, “Before a cock crows today, you will deny Me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

If you could have talked to Jesus in these moments, why would he have said this felt like the worst sort of betrayal?

From your own experience...in what (smaller) way do you identify with the betrayal Jesus experienced?

Humiliation

Amazingly, Isaiah records the inner thoughts of Christ on the cross. It's like having a private conversation with Him...if you read the emotional impact between the lines. (Isaiah 50: 5-9)

The Lord God has opened My ear and I was not disobedient, nor did I turn back. I gave My back to those who strike Me, and My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.

For the Lord God helps Me, therefore, I am not disgraced; therefore I have set My face like flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed. He who vindicates Me is near; Who will contend with Me? Let us stand up to each other; who has a case against Me? Let him draw near to Me. Behold, the Lord God helps Me; who is he who condemns Me?

What insight does this give you into the humiliation Christ experienced in the cross?

What was of particular comfort to Christ in those moments?

Pray for a bit about your own experience of shame. Where...when...how have you felt shame? What does it mean to you – or what could it potentially mean to you – that Christ carried your shame (as well as your sin) on the cross? How might that affect the way you see a situation or a relationship that triggers your shame?

In the End:

The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak.
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne.
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak.
And not a god has wounds but Thou alone.

Edward Shillito

Day Five

Years ago, my husband came home from seminary and he was sharing with me about his day. An old professor had made a comment in class that left him wondering. "You'll find, in the long run, only one motivation will sustain

you through thick and thin in following Christ," he said. "And that motivation is gratitude."

It's worth pondering. The more you discover Christ as the best of all your best dreams, the more you'll stumble on gratitude.

In the Beginning

In the story of the "sinful woman," Luke gives us a picture of gratitude. In order to get the scene, think of how much shame and disgust a prostitute would encounter in the eyes of a Pharisee. Remember that a woman would never walk in uninvited to a group of men having dinner. She would never unbraid her hair in public (except around her husband). She would hate to cry in front of anyone, especially a bunch of men. Washing anyone's feet would be a deep act of humility. This perfume cost her a bundle.

Now one of the Pharisees was requesting Him to dine with him. And he entered the Pharisee's house, and reclined at the table. And behold, there was a woman in the city who was a sinner; and when she learned that he was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster vial of perfume, and standing behind Him at His feet, weeping, she began to wet His feet with her tears, and kept wiping them with the hair of her head, and kissing His feet, and anointing them with the perfume.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he said to himself, "if this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him and that she is a sinner. And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he replied, "Say it, Teacher."

A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him more?"

Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more." And He said to him, "you have judged correctly." And turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss, but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little. And He said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven...your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Luke 7: 36-50

When have you felt (perhaps in less dramatic fashion!) the utter relief...the absolute wonder...the severe mercy of Jesus wiping some sort of slate completely clean in your life?

You and I have probably not lived a life of prostitution. But...spiritual adultery is another matter. *Spiritual adultery is anything that captures my heart other than God.* Seen in that light, what makes you grateful for God's on-going mercy in your life?

Where does simple gratitude propel you...because Jesus has said to you, "go in peace"?

What do you put up with that you shouldn't have to...because Christ lives in you?

What part of your life is lived out in a devotion that maybe no one understands – but Jesus?

In the End

"Therefore, since we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we offer up to God an acceptable service, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire."

Hebrews 12: 28. 29

Mother Teresa once said that our only calling in life was to belong to Jesus.

Day Five
Review of Leah
Romans 5:1-5

Day Six
Luke 7: 36-50 woman caught in adultery