

COFFEE BREAKERS

...when you need a break from the daily grind...

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

#1 of 8: Miriam: a picture of giftedness

➤ **READY TO GO**

Have you ever heard the expression: “He is such a gifted musician” or “she is such a gifted speaker”? You’ve perhaps been left wondering if you have any gifts at all. But these things are not really gifts, but talents – a natural ability to do something really well. But the situation is different for Christians. Sure, we can have natural talent in music or whatever, but the Bible makes it clear that God gives a spiritual gift or gifts to every Christian to serve in the church. Although she lived long ago, Miriam had a number of gifts – in fact she was a picture of giftedness.

➤ **READ**

- Read Exodus 2:1-8. What special gift do you think Miriam displays in this story?
- How do you respond to this gift either in yourself or someone else?
- Read Exodus 15:20-21. What gift does she display in this incident and how does this challenge or encourage you?
- Read Micah 6:4. What gift is highlighted in this verse and how do you respond to this gift in yourself or others?
- Read Numbers 12:1-16. What attitude does Miriam display here and how does this affect your view of her or yourself?
- What practical lesson can we learn from the way God dealt with Miriam in this incident?

➤ **REFLECT**

Miriam was a gifted lady! In fact, she seems to have been gifted with at least three spiritual gifts – wisdom, prophecy and leadership. Quite a combo! She showed great wisdom in how she dealt with the situation of her baby brother in the Nile. If she hadn’t done so, one of God’s greatest servants would have died in infancy and the course of history would have been significantly altered for the worse. Then she displayed a prophetic gift and was described as a prophetess as she led worship of God following the Israelites’ great deliverance from Egypt. Finally, she is described by Micah as a leader along with her two brothers. However, she was certainly not perfect. She developed a rotten attitude toward Moses, bad-mouthing him and ending up with leprosy, although God healed her after her brother prayed for her. No, being gifted by God doesn’t guarantee we’ll never have a bad attitude and give vent to it!

Whatever our gifts, let’s remember that God has given them so that we might build up the church – not puff up ourselves! Are you using your gifts to serve God as he gives you opportunity?

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#2 of 8: Joseph: a picture of commitment

➤ **READY TO GO**

Commitment. When you hear that word, what image comes to mind? Perhaps a bride and groom standing at the altar. That should be a picture of life-long commitment, but with so many marriages ending in divorce, and with fewer and fewer couples actually getting married at all, this perhaps isn't the best example. Or in football, we sometimes hear of a "committed challenge" which basically means a heavy physical challenge that flattens the opposing player! To be committed means we are wholeheartedly devoted to something or someone and this has implications for the way we live. Consider the life of Joseph and we'll see what commitment looks like...

➤ **READ**

- Read Genesis 39:7-18. To what do you think Joseph demonstrated commitment in this incident?
- What practical lessons do you learn from the way Joseph responded to the situation he faced?
- Read Genesis 37:5-8 and 40:16-23. What aspect of commitment in Joseph's life is highlighted in these verses?
- To what extent does your life mirror the principles Joseph displayed and how are you going to deal with this challenge?
- Read Genesis 41:1-7 and 41:47-49. In what way did Joseph demonstrate commitment in this story?
- What practical lesson can we learn from the way Joseph served God in his position of responsibility in Egypt?

➤ **REFLECT**

Joseph was a picture of commitment in at least three different areas of his life. First of all, he was committed to sexual purity. Finding himself in a compromised situation with his boss's wife, he first of all reasoned with her and, when that didn't work, he ran away! Sometimes extreme measures are needed to deal with potentially explosive situations. Why did he do that? Because he feared sin above everything. Joseph was also committed to truth-telling, even when the consequences were unpleasant. What an important thing in an age when some people even deny there is such a thing as truth. Finally, when he was given a position of great responsibility in Egypt, Joseph showed that he was committed to serving God with excellence.

God is looking for commitment from you and me. He wants us to follow and serve him wholeheartedly. After all, Jesus Christ, God's Son, was totally committed to doing His Father's will. This means that He is totally committed to the task of saving His people, even to the extent of dying on the cross for us. In light of this, what excuse have we got for half-hearted commitment?

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#3 of 8: Naomi: a picture of survival

➤ **READY TO GO**

Although the mountains of the Scottish Highlands are not very high, they are very dangerous because of the rapidity with which the weather can change. In the mountains there are small survival huts known as 'bothies', and shelters dug into the ground. Last winter an elderly man became lost in deteriorating weather on the mountains, sparking a major search for him. He survived, and was eventually found alive and well having spent the night in one of these tiny shelters. Such shelters can help with surviving adverse weather, but what about surviving the hard circumstances of life? How do we cope? Naomi, who features in the Old Testament book of Ruth, got through a very dark period of her life. She is a picture of survival.

➤ **READ**

- Read Ruth 1:1-22. What hard experiences did Naomi suffer in her family (verses 3-5)?
- What further trial did Naomi have to suffer (verses 11-14) and to what extent can you identify with her experience?
- What challenge or encouragement do you derive from Ruth's attitude towards Naomi (verses 14-18)?
- To what extent do you think Naomi's attitude was justified (verses 19-21) and when have you ever responded in a similar way?
- What encouragement do you derive from details stated in verse 22?
- Read Ruth 4:13-22. What practical lesson do you learn from the conclusion of Naomi's life story?

➤ **REFLECT**

I don't think it's possible to read Naomi's story without sensing some of her pain. She emigrated to escape from famine and lived in a foreign land for about 10 years. But during that time she lost her husband and her two sons. She became bitter, so much so, that when she returned home she told the people in the town not to call her Naomi, which means pleasant, but Mara, which means bitter although she never really lost her faith. While we can understand the circumstances which made her bitter, it's important to remember that bitterness is always a choice. We don't have to become bitter in the face of difficulties. The best way to avoid bitterness is to see all of our trials through the perspective of the cross of Jesus Christ. At the cross He replaced bitterness with forgiveness, focused our minds on eternity and showed how a perspective can be radically changed – by turning his death into the victory of the resurrection!

Naomi became bitter but that didn't mean God didn't still have a plan for her. She eventually became the virtual mother of great King David's grandfather, Obed, and so nursed one of the ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ. For her, and also for us, living victoriously is, in the words of Scottish minister, Alexander Whyte, "a series of new beginnings."

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#4 of 8: Habakkuk: a picture of confidence

➤ **READY TO GO**

When you think of a confident person, what image comes to mind? Perhaps it's someone who is sure of their abilities, sets goals, expects to achieve something and often does. On the other hand what do you think it means to lack confidence? Perhaps someone who reacts defensively to criticism, uses problems as an excuse not to try, expects the worst and often gets it. But these are really examples of people who have, or lack confidence, in themselves. In the big issues of life, self-confidence is not going to make it. It's God-confidence we need. In the Old Testament we have an outstanding example of someone whose confidence was not in himself but in God. This person's name is Habakkuk.

➤ **READ**

- Read Habakkuk 1:1-13. What was Habakkuk's complaint to God (verses 1-4) and to what extent can you echo his sentiment as you pray?
- What surprised Habakkuk about God's response to his prayer (verses 5-7)? How do you respond to this?
- What challenge or encouragement do you derive from Habakkuk's prayer, prompted by God's surprising answer (verses 12-13)?
- Read Habakkuk 2:1 and 3:1, 2. What do you learn from Habakkuk's attitude that you can apply to your own prayers?
- Read Habakkuk 3:17-19. To what extent can you identify with some of the scenarios contemplated by Habakkuk?
- What practical lesson do you learn from the conclusion of Habakkuk's prayer?

➤ **REFLECT**

God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint about the wickedness of his land certainly shocked him. God was going to use an even worse nation – Babylon – to punish Israel. After much prayer and soul-searching, Habakkuk eventually came to realise that God is control and can do exactly as He pleases. Although the answer shook his neat little ideas of how God should or should not run His world, Habakkuk's experience of God solidified his confidence in God. At the end of his prayer Habakkuk came to a position of complete confidence in God, no matter what. And his confidence results in a deliberate personal choice to rejoice – not in the dreadful circumstances – but in God.

Rejoicing FOR dreadful circumstances is unnatural, but rejoicing IN dreadful circumstances is supernatural and comes from a deep confidence that God works even bad things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). This confidence only comes from doing what Habakkuk did – waiting on God. Only then can we make a choice to rejoice.

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#5 of 8: Mary of Nazareth: a picture of purpose

➤ **READY TO GO**

Purpose is one of today's buzzwords. Every organisation, no matter how small, tends to have a purpose statement. We all want to know our purpose, why we are here. Some modern thinkers have challenged the idea that there is a big picture to life, but it can be so important to know why we're doing what we're doing. Without a clear purpose we can sink into directionless apathy. It's great to have someone whom we can turn to as an example of a person who fulfilled her life's purpose, even though it cost her much to do so. Let me introduce you to Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus.

➤ **READ**

- Read Luke 1:26-38. How did Mary respond at first to the angel's statement and how does this encourage you?
- What challenge do you derive from Mary's eventual acceptance of God's will for her life?
- Read Luke 2:41-52. Why did Jesus' words puzzle Mary and what do they tell us about Jesus' true identity and purpose?
- Read John 2:1-5. Notice the way Mary responded to Jesus. What does this indicate about the changing nature of their relationship?
- Read John 19:25-27. How do Jesus' last words to Mary confirm or challenge any view of him which you might hold?
- Read Acts 1:12-14. What practical lessons do you learn from the Bible's last mention of Mary?

➤ **REFLECT**

Mary was a true picture of purpose but in order to fulfil God's purpose for her life she had to do three crucial things. First of all, she had to respond to God's call. She was scared half to death by the appearance of the angel - and who wouldn't be, considering the implications of what he said? Yet she came to that point of complete submission to the will of God. Secondly, she had to relinquish control. There seem to have been a struggle going on between her desire to control her Son, and the need for her to let go of him so that he could fulfil his Father's purpose for his life and for the world. Then, finally, she had to identify with other Christ followers. Amazingly, although she was privileged to be the mother of the Saviour of the world it was only when she acknowledged him as her Saviour and identified with other believers that her true purpose was complete.

Fulfilling our life's purpose is not about seeing a blueprint for our life and following the details. It's about taking that first step of obedience and submission to the will of God whatever it might mean for us. Mary did that, and God saved the world through her Son.

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#6 of 8: Zaccheus: a picture of a new beginning

➤ **READY TO GO**

How many of you have made New Year resolutions? Like “I’m going to get fit by going to the gym and following a strict diet” or “I’m going to get up half an hour earlier to read my Bible” or “I’m going to keep the garage tidy” etc. A New Year resolution often doesn’t last beyond 2 January. But there is something great about a new beginning, a fresh start, like a road after a snowfall where no-one has walked. Often we need a new beginning in life, a chance to put the past behind us and move on to be the kind of people we ought to be. Meet someone who really needed a new beginning and received one through an encounter with Jesus – Zaccheus, a tax collector from Jericho.

➤ **READ**

Read Luke 19:1-10

- What do you think is the significance of the detail given about Jesus’ travel plans (verse 1)?
- What do learn about Zaccheus (verses 2-4) and to what extent can you see yourself in any aspect of his life?
- In what way does Jesus’ statement surprise you and what practical lesson can you take on board from Zaccheus’ response (verses 5-6)?
- What do you learn from the people’s response and in what way do you think you might respond to a similar situation (verse 7)?
- What practical lesson do you learn from the way Zaccheus behaved after his encounter with Jesus (verse 8)?
- Jesus revealed his life’s purpose to Zaccheus (verse 10). How does this encourage you as you seek to become, or live as, a follower of Jesus Christ (verses 9-10)?

➤ **REFLECT**

There is something about Jesus that is fascinating. Zaccheus certainly thought so. He recognised deep down that there was a yearning need in his life that only Jesus could meet. And he wasn’t disappointed. I’m sure he must have been amazed that Jesus took an interest in him when all he had wanted was to catch a glimpse of Jesus *incognito*. And yet the way Zaccheus responded proved beyond doubt that his encounter with Jesus was a new beginning for him. He made restitution – he gave back what he had stolen four times over - and gave half of his possessions to the poor. He proved he had repented, turned from his old sinful life and embraced a new one as a follower of Jesus. A crucial word in all of his breathless new life excitement was “Lord”. It’s impossible to call Jesus “Lord” and not be completely changed in worldview and conduct.

A new beginning, as far as our spiritual lives are concerned, always means treading two very old, well - worn paths. Many people have gone that way, including Zaccheus. The two tracks are repentance – a complete U turn – and faith – reaching out our hand to place it in the pierced hand of Jesus.

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#7 of 8: *Mary of Bethany: a picture of busyness*

➤ **READY TO GO**

Prrng... there goes the phone. Tiddleytum... there's a text message. Beep – oh there's an e-mail... and on it goes. How do we decide which to deal with first? They are all calling for our attention. How do we separate those things which are genuinely important from those which are urgent but not important? Anyway, what is **really** important? It's very easy to find ourselves responding to those things which demand our attention while neglecting things that are genuinely important. A woman in the Bible, Martha, found herself in just this situation. Jesus and his disciples had just dropped in and all the preparations that had to be made put Martha in a flat spin. She needed to prioritise things...

➤ **READ**

- **Read Luke 10:38-42.** Which woman in this story do you find it easier to identify with and why? (verses 38-39)
- What can you do over the next few days and weeks to make it easier for you to hear what Jesus is saying to you? (verse 39)
- Can you think of any time in your life when you have doubted the Lord's care? How did you deal with that problem? (verse 40)
- What words describe the problem Martha had with organising her priorities (verses 40-42) and what practical lessons do you learn from this?
- **Read John 11:20-27.** What positive qualities about Martha are highlighted here (verses 20-24) and how does this encourage you?
- What strikes you about Martha's response to Jesus' statement and to what extent do you share her statement of faith? (verses 25-26)

➤ **REFLECT**

Martha was a busy woman. Her busyness was out of necessity, because she needed to attend to Jesus and the disciples, but it was also out of control and out of order. This busyness defined her and she found herself being dominated by the urgent (making preparations) at the expense of the important (spending time with Jesus). Yet Jesus didn't reprimand her, but graciously pointed out her mistake. Later on in Martha's life we find that she had learnt the lesson of how to balance activity with devotion. When her brother died and she heard Jesus was coming she went to meet him with a request – there's activity. When Jesus asked her if she believed that he was the resurrection and the life, she replied with one of the greatest statements of faith recorded anywhere in the Bible – there's devotion.

We need to be both Martha and Mary. Activity is needed if we are to effectively serve and follow Christ. But devotion is needed to underpin our activity or else we'll just burn ourselves out trying to do things in our own strength and achieve little of lasting value.

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#8 of 8: Peter: a picture of restoration

➤ **READY TO GO**

Are you into restoring furniture? Do you like going to an auction sale and buying an old piece of furniture because you can see the potential in it? It would make a beautiful table or dresser once it has been restored. So you buy it cheaply, get it home and begin to work on it. Sand it down a few times and wipe off the dust. Sand it down some more and give it coat after coat after coat of varnish or paint. It's now as good as new! That's restoration. If we have messed up in our lives big time we need to be sanded down and polished so that we can be restored to our former condition or better. And Jesus is the Master Restorer. In fact it's his speciality, as the experience of Peter shows us.

➤ **READ**

- **Read Luke 22:31-34.** What warning or encouragement do you take from Jesus' words to Peter? (verses 31-32)
- What practical lesson do you learn from Peter's confidence and Jesus' prediction about Peter's behaviour? (verses 33-34)
- **Read Luke 22:54-62.** Can you identify any steps which led Peter to disown Jesus and what practical lesson do you learn? (verses 54-60)
- How did Peter respond when he realised what he had done (verses 1-62)? How does this encourage you?
- **Read John 21:15-19.** What strikes you about the way Jesus restored Peter (verses 15-17) and how does this challenge you?
- What evidence can you find elsewhere in the New Testament that Peter heeded Christ's call to follow him wholeheartedly? (verses 18-19)

➤ **REFLECT**

Peter was the most impulsive, the most in-your-face of all Jesus' disciples. This was his greatest strength. It was also his greatest weakness. He thought he was more committed to Jesus than he actually was and it took a catastrophic experience of crashing and burning in just a few hours before he realised his weakness. Yet the purpose of Jesus was not to destroy Peter but destroy his self-confidence so that he would be more dependent on him. Having sandpapered Peter, Jesus dusted him down set him on his feet and said "Follow Me." Peter's restoration was complete and in the power of the Holy Spirit of Christ, Peter led the work of building the church through his preaching.

Peter was told *he* would fail. And he did. Peter was told that *his faith* wouldn't fail because Christ had prayed for him. And it didn't. Peter was told he would be restored. And he was. Restored to something better than he had ever been. A wholehearted, Holy Spirit-filled follower of the Master Restorer.