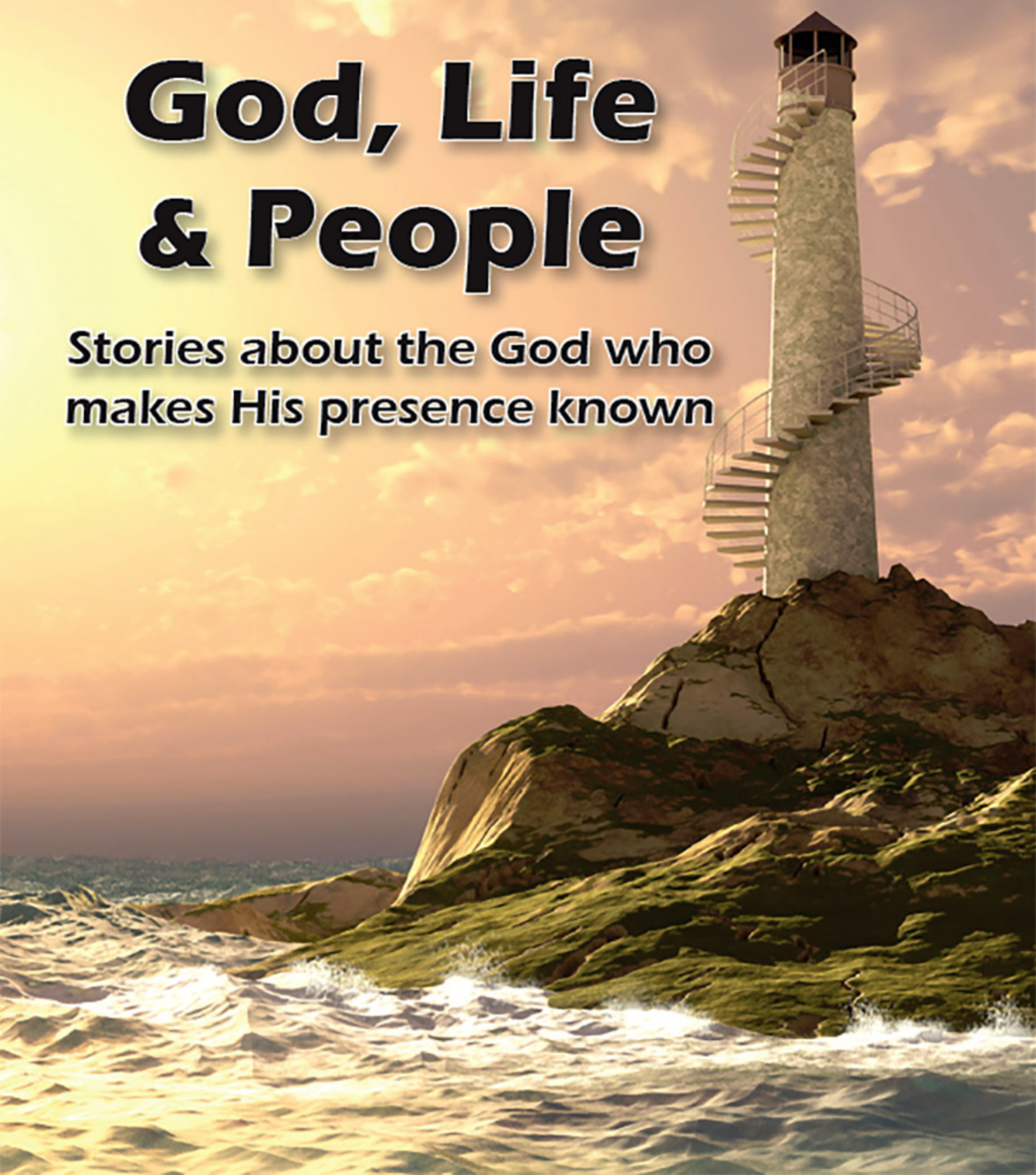


Jim McGuiggan

**God, Life
& People**

**Stories about the God who
makes His presence known**



God, Life
&
People

JIM MCGUIGGAN

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DEDICATION

To Jeanine Patrick

*And in Memory
Of Carolyn Hauser*

Sisters and Sisters in the Lord

FOREWORD

This little book is about God and about life and about people. You can read from the beginning to the end or you can read it from the middle toward the end or from the end to the beginning.

Will Durant, in his younger days, a convicted believer in God, left his faith behind and took an agnostic position. He remained richly blessed (by God, I'd insist) and used that giftedness in a very fine way—take a look at his *History of Civilization*, 11 Volumes, for example. I just want to take note of a remark he made later in his life with his wife Ariel. He said they had both quite given up on the idea that there were really any bad men in the world. It's obvious enough that there *are* such people but my sense of things is that Durant saw so much gallantry, patience and open-heartedness in people that he was willing to grandly overstate the case. I like that! In my own little life, though I've personally seen (and heard of) cruelty and evil that beggars description, I've personally seen (and heard of) gentleness, self-giving and cheerful gallantry that also defies description. I wish I could tell you the stories of some of my friends, Nini, Frank, Dorothy, Charles, Billy, Billie and many strangers I have met whose way touched me deeply and reminded me of the God who makes his presence felt in astonishing places and in astonishing circumstances. I know the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian but I'm one of those who believe that God is wonderfully at work in the lives of those who have not yet owned him

as their God in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. The center and source of all goodness and loveliness is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and it's my genuine desire that in some way he will use this collection of reflections to introduce himself to you or to come nearer.

jmcg June 2014

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Chapter 1

Paradise Promised... at a Hanging!

"Today you will be with me in Paradise!"

Who said that?

"Before this day is out, you'll be with me in Paradise."

Who said that?

What day was that?

Who said that?

Only one person could have said that! At least only one person could have said that and given his followers the assurance to say it to one another when they were dying together in his service—Jesus Christ said it!

And What Day Was That?

It must have been a day when massive crowds were singing his praises, a day when the church leaders urged their flocks to come with them to hear him, a day when his friends glowed in admiration and pride for their hero, a day when the people with the power

supported his cause, a day when good women laughed out loud at the spectacle of it all, when the power to heal flowed from him like Niagara or maybe a day when his followers came back with news that demonic powers couldn't bear their presence or resist the power he had poured out on them!

If so, no wonder he thought it was a heavenly day—the world was glorious, his message had been understood and the nations rejoiced in it. No wonder he could speak words of assurance to a desperate man! The world was at his feet.

That was the day? Hmm.

And where was he when he said it?

It was on a gloomy hill—that's where he was! It was when he was nailed to a rough wooden stake and people gaped on.

"Today...Paradise!"

Today! While the legionnaires of the Empire ruled the country and the world, dealing out misery and death as the way to peace and prosperity—that day he said "this very day!"

Today! While lunatic leaders who didn't know what they were doing yet knew how wise it was to railroad an innocent man to death to maintain the status quo.

Today! While he hung on a public gallows, thirsty, streaked with spit and sweat and blood, rejected by his own people, dismissed as another failed rebel by Rome, deserted by his closest friends and "abandoned" by his Holy Father!

Arrrrgh! What nonsense he spoke!

He spoke as if he was in control. But how could he be in control, for pity's sake, when there he hangs on a public gallows, with a raging thirst and helpless women sobbing their hearts out?

Still, it's awfully sweet. The way he spoke tenderly to that poor wretch. How it warms the heart. It has that soft chamber-music sound, like something Mendelssohn wrote. It's like something you'd expect in a quiet bedroom where a sad dying one hears a word of warm whispered assurance. "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

But it wasn't a whispered promise in a quiet bedroom, was it? It might even have been half-shouted so that it could be heard above the surge of voices and weeping and hoarse yelling and jeering.

He looked at the rage and the stupidity, the hunger for power and the vested interests, the bored Roman soldiers who'd seen hundreds of these killings and he knew exactly what he was looking at—still he claims that the future lies with him!

If we can't rejoice with that dying thief, we're lacking something we desperately need to be fully human but we need to go beyond what these words of Jesus meant for that poor soul. We need to remember the day on which he spoke such words and what they mean for *the world*.

He looked at "a world" that will crucify people—good and bad—and he insisted that the future lay with him.

He was making a claim and not just a promise! Can you beat that? That's Jesus for you!

He claims world dominion is his even while Rome "proves" it's the mistress of the world by doing to him what it wants to do and right now they want to end him! Is he a lunatic or what? Delusional with pain or what? Leaving with a final word of useless defiance or what?

Or was he speaking the gobsmacking, spell-binding truth?

Don't let "the world" fool you! Look at it—look at it with steady eyes and acknowledge it's brutal, rapacious and treacherous power to be real. And then, if you listen really hard you'll hear someone shout above the din:

"Today...Paradise."

Now, do take a few minutes just to sit in a comfortable place without distraction and let all that sink in. Focus on him at that point when he looked across at this desperate and convicted man and hoarsely shouted from a parched throat: "Today! Paradise!"

Use your imagination to *see* it. As you think your way into it and take pleasure in the stunning trust Jesus had in his Holy Father and the assurance he offered the robber he may come to you in that truth and change your life forever.

Chapter 2

God Twisting His Lips

One of the things we admire about people in general is a generous spirit. I'm sure it's true that we don't see enough of it but I'm compelled to say I see a lot more of it—all over the place—than I once expected. And if it's true that we see it in people scattered everywhere we'd fully expect to see it in Jesus Christ.

It doesn't matter to me that some of his critics see him as a bigot—he was no bigot! He was very much a Jew, of course, and he opposed what was false without fear or favor, it's true, but even his critics claim that as one of *their* virtues.¹ He spoke scathingly and without apology to and of those whose teaching enslaved and frightened the rank and file² and he raged against teaching that made his Holy Father look hard and unforgiving and pedantic.³ But he was never slow to

1 Everyone, atheists and believers alike see the exposure of falsehood and misinformation as a virtue, providing it's done in a proper spirit.

2 Matthew 23:2-4, 13 and elsewhere

3 Matthew 9:10-13 and 12:1-7 as examples

praise and praise generously those who acted and spoke nobly, even if they weren't attached to his group of disciples or the Jewish nation.⁴ The longest single conversation that Jesus had with anyone was with a woman, a Samaritan woman, a woman whose moral life has been called in question.⁵ There is nothing in the tone of the text that remotely hints that Jesus thought he was "slumming". His speech is respectful and it might even have been that he spoke with her—as she probably did with him—in a lighthearted tone of irony. Read it that way and see what you think.

I've no wish to deny the seriousness of the discussion but have you never heard two warm-hearted people go at one another in a bantering session? Have you never had the pleasure of engaging in that with your husband or wife or with a friend?⁶

Was the woman mocking him when she reminded him he shouldn't have been speaking to her—a woman, a Samaritan, a religious "enemy"? That wasn't very Jewish!

Still, was she letting him know that when Jews needed help they didn't mind who they got it from?

And might Jesus when he said, "If you knew who you were speaking to..." was he not bantering back even as he was opening the door to truth and loveliness and salvation?

4 Mark 9:38-39

5 John 4:1-26

6 See Matthew 15:22-28 and how he prods the mother

And did she say, “Yeah right, you don’t even have a bucket. Fancy that, you don’t need a bucket. My my, you must be greater than our father Jacob who gave us this well.”

And when Jesus claims that the water he would give is so much better than Jacob’s—it obliterates thirst; is his tone the friendly bantering type?

When she replies, was she mocking him, half laughing, “Oh, then give me a bucket of that and I wouldn’t have to come back here all the time”? ⁷

The one thing we’re certain of is this: Jesus wasn’t looking down at this Samaritan, this woman, and it is to her that he first plainly reveals himself to be “the Coming One.”⁸

Then there was his meeting with the soldier of the occupying forces. Jesus’ Jewish critics said he was “worthy” to have his servant healed, the centurion said he wasn’t “worthy” but if Jesus would please speak a word the servant the legionnaire loved would be well—the soldier said he knew that! Jesus, we’re told, turned to the crowd and said he hadn’t seen faith like that in his own nation! ⁹

You’ll remember how he commended the thankful Samaritan leper who had been cured of his disease and how he told a Jewish teacher to go act like a Samaritan if he wanted to inherit eternal life and how he was so taken by the faith of a little Greek mother who wanted

7 John 4:11-15

8 John 4:26

9 Luke 7:9

her child healed by the one she called the “Son of David” (a Jewish Messianic title) and wouldn’t be put off by the Master’s prodding her to see how far she’d go. And when she said she didn’t want to rob the Jews of their rightful bread but that God’s Savior would hardly begrudge an outsider the crumbs that the little dogs got to eat under the table.¹⁰

These events and texts and more are all attached to the profound truth of God’s love of the world and his sending Jesus on a rescue mission—they’re greater than the use I’m making of them at this moment but they illustrate something that rises out of the larger picture and it’s this: God lets us know he admires the nobility and sweetness of outsiders and he doesn’t mind saying so. Since God commends even outsiders for gallant and lovely behavior I don’t need to apologize for doing it—do I?

Richard Selzer, retired surgeon and Professor of Medicine at Harvard for many years, turned to writing books. In what follows he tells of something lovely that he was involved in. Something Christ-like. Here’s how he put it.

“I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be that way from now on. The surgeon followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you

¹⁰ We’re told people used bread to wipe their hands and crumbs would be plentiful.

that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed...isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously...?

“Will, my mouth always be like this?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.”

She nods, and is silent.

“I like it,” he says, “I think it’s kinda cute.”

All at once I *know* who he is. I understand. I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god.

Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I so close can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works. I remember that the gods appeared in ancient Greece as mortals, and I hold my breath and let the wonder in.”¹¹

11 The story’s from Selzer’s *Mortal Lessons*, (*Notes on the Art of Surgery*), A Harvest Book, NY, 1996

Chapter 3

Esau:

The Face of God Betrayed

God's commitment to save isn't just a willingness to redeem; it's the glad eagerness of a lover. In our better moments don't we sense that? Isn't there a profound current of joy when we're doing something costly for the ones we love dearest in life even if they created chaos for themselves; maybe *especially* if they've done that? To know we're making the sacrifice for him/her or them? In fact, isn't it true that the greater the sacrifice made the greater the joy experienced in making it? If, filled with joyful unbelief they should say, "Oh, but that's too much. You mustn't. Really..." -if they should say that, wouldn't that only fill us more with joy that we have pleased them so?

Can't you remember a time when you did such a thing and don't you remember how good it felt, what joy you experienced? Don't you even now experience the joy in thinking that, even if only once, there was a time when you rose to such a lovely height? Of course!

And can we think less of Jesus Christ whose highest and ceaseless joy is to please his Father and when we remember that it was a loving Father who sent him to save a chaotic, self-destructive and sinful world?

Wouldn't Jesus say about our joy in lovely and costly deeds what he said about providing food for the children? "If you being evil have the heart to find joy in doing what is selfless and kind and liberating how much more does your heavenly Father have such a heart?" If he would commend our natural affection for our children and say it illustrates his Father wouldn't he have commended more our love for those who care nothing for us? You know he would (Matthew 5:43-48)!

He leveled a severe rebuke against hard-bitten judges who would have closed the gates of the kingdom against sinners (Matthew 12:7). He said, "If you had known what Hosea 6:6 meant you wouldn't have made sinners out of the guiltless." He said they *should* have known! In Matthew 9:12-13 he trenchantly dismisses their blind heartlessness with this: "Go and learn what Hosea 6:6 means!"

This truth that God is merciful to a sinful human family is illustrated everywhere in life and Scripture and it is seen, I think, with special clarity in the lives of Jacob and Esau. There we see generosity shown by someone we have come to think little of. Jacob twice cheated his brother Esau. Once when Esau was suffering from exposure and was close to dying Jacob

extorted the family blessing from him¹ and later in an outright act of deceit he pretended he was Esau and stole his birthright blessing from his nearly blind father.² Jacob's conniving cost him thirty years away from home but when returning to Canaan he's scared witless to meet up with Esau who had years earlier sworn to kill him.

When they finally meet³ it wasn't the vengeful face of Esau that Jacob saw—it was the face of a faithful and forgiving God and a warm welcome home, so the still-fearful Jacob confesses, "I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me." (33:10) The love God had shown him in years past and at the river Jabbok the previous night is now astonishingly confirmed in the person of Esau. Esau's affection and forgiveness is free and genuine but we have no reason to think he thought he was revealing God even though he was! The Holy God we've cheated and dishonored throughout our human history, when he finally confronted us face to face, had the face of Jesus.⁴

Joseph forgives and blesses his vindictive and jealous brothers and sets a standard below which we might live but it isn't one below which God lives! No one out-feels or out-loves God and Joseph makes that clear to us. God knows how to bring redemptive chastisement on us but he also knows what it is to look on us and feel for us and have it said of him that, "He

1 Genesis 25:29-34, 27

2 Genesis 27:1-36

3 Genesis 27:41 and 33:1-10

4 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:6; John 14:9

could bear their misery no longer.”⁵ If you’ve read the book of Judges you “know” it’s all about Israel getting “what it deserved” but my suspicion is that that isn’t at all what it is about. It’s real message is about God’s astonishing patience, his incredible mercy and his mesmerizing faithfulness to his commitment to Israel and the entire human family through Israel.⁶ The book of Judges is about Israel getting what it *didn’t* deserve! Jesus would say that those of us who’ve been blessed to have the Bible available to us as the Pharisees had a Bible available to them should have known all this. *God hungers for mercy and not sacrifice!*

I wonder if you’ve ever hurt someone so deeply that you thought they’d never forgive you and then one day you knew you were going to have to see them again face to face and you were frightened out of your wits and filled with shame that you couldn’t get free from. A meeting was arranged at a given place and time, you were early, you stood trembling, your stomach churning and someone behind you, *that* familiar voice, called your name and you turned, knowing you’d die, and you saw the warm smiling face of...God! *I’ve experienced that!*

And in light of this, can I, can we, believe that he who couldn’t bear to watch sinful Israel suffering for a number of years—can we believe that such a heart could bear to watch multiplied millions of his created children suffer for eternal ages without end—*ceaselessly* and eternally?

5 Judges 10:16; Isaiah 63:9

6 Genesis 12:1-3; Isaiah 42:6; 49:6-9

Much less can we believe that such a God with such a heart created those millions for no other reason than to torture them ceaselessly forever because it pleases him to do so! What evil doctrine that is. God's judgment on it!

Think noble things of God!

Chapter 4

I'm All You Dream about

Drumsheugh was sitting under a tree with Margaret, a lovely girl, who along with her mother worked on his farm for him. He was getting himself primed to ask her something and at that very moment she was getting ready to tell him something. But that's another story for later.¹

Nathaniel too was sitting under the shade of a tree, a fig tree; but he had something else on his mind. He was a Jew who had a clean heart and a depressed sort of spirit. Like so many Jews he was longing for the liberation of Israel and it was too long in coming though recently there were rumors that God was on the move and that a baby had been born to be the Messiah. At least that's what some shepherds down south had been saying a few years back and then there was that woman who ran out of the temple, whispering to everyone she met that she had seen the baby.²

¹ See *Jesus and Drumsheugh*

² Luke 2:15-18, 36-38; Matthew 2:16

Then wasn't there some talk about Herod the Great killing babies down in that area? But those stories were years old. Talk, talk, it was all talk—nothing but talk, and nothing is what came of it. Galilee was full of bandit leaders who preyed on their own people and then there was Judas the Galilean who led that revolt that came to nothing!³ It was hardly surprising, then, that when Philip came to the thinker under the fig tree and said they had found the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, that the thinker shot back with weary sarcasm, "Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"⁴

And what was this Israelite thinking about while he was under the fig tree? You must read the entire section—John 1:43-51.

He was thinking about Jacob whose name was changed to Israel; Jacob whose name generated stories of cunning and actual deception, Jacob who was nothing like this young Nathaniel. Jesus sees him coming and says of him, "Look, an Israelite indeed who has no deceit in him."

Nathaniel's dazed response to that gives us our first clue about what he had been reflecting on. He says, "How can you know me?" (Phillips) Nathaniel isn't asking, "Have we met?" as the NRSV seems to suggest. He is struck by the fact that Jesus nails the two words he was thinking about [deception and Israel]. Nathaniel, in effect, is asking Jesus how he could know what he had been thinking.

3 Acts 5:36-38, ignoring critical questions here

4 John 1:43-46 with John 1:14

Jesus tells him he had looked at him under the tree before Philip had called him. Nathaniel now realizes that Jesus not only got the content of his thoughts correct; he was right about where it was going on. That's why he blurts out, "Teacher, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!"

Anyone could have seen Nathaniel sitting under the tree—that wouldn't make him the Messiah. Anyone could pay a compliment to an Israelite and credit him with having a pure heart—that wouldn't make him the Messiah. But Nathaniel knew more than that had happened!

It's at that point that Jesus drives the truth home. In effect he says, "You believe because I knew what you were thinking, what will you think when you learn that you were thinking about *me* and not just Jacob?"

Nathaniel had been reflecting on Jacob's deceitful treatment of his brother Esau and of his running to Mesopotamia to keep from being killed by him.⁵ On his way you'll remember he had that dream of steps leading to heaven, with angels going up and coming down. Jacob wakened and understood that despite his devious and wicked ways God was still with him, still hearing his prayers and that he would maintain his covenant faithfulness with the faithless Jacob who *stole* the blessing rather than trusting God to keep his word to Rebekah.

Christ went on to say, "You think that astonishing? What will you think when you discover that I was the

⁵ Genesis 25, 27 and 28

one you were thinking about? That I am the fulfillment of all the longings Jacob's dream embraces? That I am the assurance that God is with the wanderers and homeless even when they have created their own troubles? That I am the ladder by which messages go up to God and I am the means by which the word of God comes to man?"

Then there's this. Jacob woke from the dream confessing that God was in this place *and* he confesses that he hadn't known it. He then builds an altar and calls the place "Bethel" – *the house of God*.⁶

John in his Gospel, in chapters 2 and 4, will make it clear that Jesus *himself* is the place where God dwells and in whom people are to worship him. In 2:12-22 Jesus rejects the physical temple that's been corrupted and claims himself to be the new temple and in 4:19-26 he tells the Samaritan woman that it's now no longer a debate between Jews and Samaritans about Jerusalem and Gerizim—he himself is the place where people meet God and God meets people.

In Jesus Christ this good-hearted Israelite found so much more than he longed for. Jesus is not only what he dreamed; he was more than he dreamed, more than he knew to dream.

How heartening this is and how true it is. Ask some experienced people if Nathaniel's experience with Jesus has been their experience. They'll tell you it's so.

6 Genesis 28:16-19

I know, as you do, that there have been those who came to Christ but for one reason or another, they lost their way, lost heart and walked away from the Lord. They walked off and told people, “Well, I thought he might be the answer but he turned out to be a disappointment. I need to look elsewhere and who knows, maybe I’ll find it.”

I...sort of understand that and think it profoundly sad. Poor humans, we’re so confused and so vulnerable. Maybe if we met the *real* Jesus Christ, maybe if teachers and Christians in general spoke of the *real* Jesus Christ there’d be fewer people disappointed. Maybe if they could persuade us that the *real* Jesus Christ dreams dreams for us that are glorious beyond our imagining—maybe if they could do that are longings would be shaped for the better, our dreams would be purified and we’d come to believe that the very best is yet to be. Maybe we’d hear Jesus say to us what he said to Nathaniel: “I’m not only what you long for, I’m more than you even know to long for.”

Robert Browning said it like this:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who sath, “A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all,
nor be afraid.”⁷

7 Rabbi Ben Ezra