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**Sunday 27 June to Sunday 4 July 2021**

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Sunday 27 June 2021

# Strange ways

by Chelsea Pietsch

**She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse (Mark 5:26).**

Read Mark 5:21–43

In this passage, Jesus heals a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. He also raises a 12-year-old girl from the dead.

When we read these miraculous accounts, we can quickly forget the suffering that came before the glorious ending. Yes, it’s wonderful that people got healed. But why did they have to suffer so much in the first place? Why did God not spare or relieve them from their heavy trial?

Can you imagine 12 years of bleeding? The poor woman would have been anemic. She would have lacked energy and found her day-to-day life hard to manage, as those who suffer chronic conditions understand. The Scriptures also tell us that she had spent all of her money on doctors’ bills, so perhaps she experienced anxiety about finances as well. And that’s to say nothing of the shame and humiliation she would have felt for having such a condition in the first place.

And what about the 12-year-old girl? What about her parents? If Christ was going to heal her anyway, why didn’t he intervene before she was dead? Why didn’t he act before there had to be the ‘crying and loud wailing’ that we read about? Why didn’t he push through the crowd and come quicker? Why, Lord, why?

We all suffer in this life. One trouble passes, another rolls in. Sometimes our suffering feels bearable. Other times way, it feels way too heavy. While God doesn’t necessarily cause our suffering, he also allows it. Otherwise, why would he not swoop in and intervene before suffering befalls us? Is he just allowing the natural consequences of our free will to play out?

Despite the pain of suffering, the Scriptures remind us that it need not be in vain. In fact, it may even be the path that leads to transformation.

Had this woman not bled for so long, maybe she wouldn’t have ever been desperate enough to turn to Christ. Similarly, had his daughter not been dying, maybe Jairus would never have sought out the Lord for help.

Can you think of a time in your life where your suffering led you to cry out to God with desperation you’d never known before? Are you still in that dark place, or do you look back now and see how God mysteriously used your suffering to draw you closer to himself and to make you more like him?

**Dear Lord, your word tells us that if we share in your sufferings, we may also share in your glory (Romans 8:17). Sustain us in our suffering, and help us not lose sight of your promised glory. Amen.**

Monday 28 June 2021

# Memory loss and despair

by Chelsea Pietsch

**She said to Elijah, ‘What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?’ (1 Kings 17:18)**

Read 1 Kings 17:17–24

The widow at Zarephath was a woman who experienced the Lord’s faithfulness firsthand. Earlier in chapter 17, she expected to die on account of running out of food. But when the prophet Elijah appeared, she shared her last provisions with him. And – thanks be to God – her flour and oil didn’t run out as she had anticipated (verse 16).

You might expect that after an experience such as this, the goodness and mercy of the Lord would be etched in her mind so that she would be forever changed. You might expect that when another trial came her way, she would remember what God had done for her and trustingly say, ‘God has provided for me in the past; he will again’. Not so.

When the widow faces her next serious trial (her son becomes deathly ill), she quickly falls into despair. She turns to Elijah in a panicked state and blames him, saying, ‘What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?’

How often are we like the widow at Zarephath? Despite having experienced the blessing of God in our lives, when suffering befalls us or someone we love, we are quick to blame others and despair. We forget how God has provided for us in the past, and we despise the suffering that comes our way.

This response is very telling. It reveals our lack of faith, and it exposes our hidden belief that no adversity could befall us. It shows us up to be ‘theologians of glory’ – people who expect Christ’s comfort but not his cross.

Yet, despite the widow’s lack of faith, and despite ours, God gives what we do not deserve. In the widow’s case, Elijah stretches himself out on the boy three times, and he lives. Christ, too, grants us life even when we expect – and perhaps even deserve – death. He takes our despair to the cross, and in exchange, gives us healing and peace.

Can you think of a time in your life when God delivered you from a state of despair, even when you failed to turn to him?

**Dear Heavenly Father, have mercy on our unbelief and save us from despair. Please send me your Holy Spirit to increase my faith in Christ, your Son. Amen.**

Tuesday 29 June 2021

# Remember me

by Chelsea Pietsch

**This is what the Lord, the God of your father David says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will heal you (2 Kings 20:5).**

Read 2 Kings 20:1–7

Hezekiah is ill and has just received word from the Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, that he is going to die. ‘Put your house in order’, he is told.

What would you do if you were told that your death was imminent? What actions would you take? To whom would you turn?

Hezekiah’s first response is to pray. He turns his face towards the wall, perhaps to hide his quivering lip. His prayer is not necessarily a plea for longer life, though maybe that is implied. He asks God to ‘remember’ how he has strived to lead a faithful and holy life. And after he says this, he weeps. Bitterly.

Hezekiah’s tears are not necessarily tears of despair or even fear, as one might first assume. Perhaps they are just a way to mark the end of life and the gravity of death. Death is confronting. It separates us from the world we know and the people we love. It is also ultimately unknowable – a mystery to those of us on this side of life.

Irrespective of Hezekiah’s motives, it is clear that God feels moved by his prayer. If God has decided death for the good king, then he has now changed his mind.

This reading reminds us of the active and reciprocal nature of prayer. God hears us. Sometimes, as in the case of Hezekiah, prayer apparently prompts God to change course.

Hezekiah’s prayer ‘remember me’ also gives us words to say when we ourselves are at the point of death. Do you remember another instance in Jesus’ life when someone cried out to him, ‘remember me’, at the point of death?

**Dear Jesus, now and at the hour of our death, grant us the faith and courage to pour out our emotions first and foremost to you. And remember us. Amen.**

Wednesday 30 June 2021

# No longer ashamed

by Chelsea Pietsch

**No longer will Jacob be ashamed; no longer will their faces grow pale (Isaiah 29:22).**

Read Isaiah 29:18–24

Have you ever felt ashamed of your Christian faith and beliefs? Perhaps you’ve slipped your cross necklace back under your jumper before picking the kids up from school? Perhaps you’ve placed your Bible in your drawer or under your novel so that it won’t be easily seen? Or maybe you’ve felt your heart rate increase or cheeks blush in the company of others who have made hostile comments about people of faith or the Bible?

If you have felt this way, you are not alone. We live in a society that is increasingly hostile to Christianity. The Christian faith is so often portrayed and perceived as a thing of the past, the old jumper that everyone’s outgrown. Sometimes it’s even portrayed as a cult – something that is patently bad for you.

With the feeling of alienation comes grief. We can feel misunderstood and alone. It might be hard to find friends and colleagues with whom we can relate meaningfully. There’s also the grief of having access to something true and beautiful – the pearl of great price – that other people look on merely as an artefact of curiosity, or even worse, something to be laughed at or scorned.

Yet this reading gives us hope. It shows us that, one day, the Lord will reveal his beauty, truth and goodness for all to hear and see. The deaf shall hear, the blind will see, the mockers will cease, and false accusations will be no more. Things will be made right. We will no longer feel like aliens, and when we speak, our voices will no longer tremble, and our cheeks will not blush.

**Dear Lord, when we experience the scorn of the world, help us not to be ashamed but praise you because we bear your name (1 Peter 4:16). Amen.**

Thursday 1 July 2021

# Set up

by Chelsea Pietsch

**So he stretched [his hand] out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus (Matthew 12:13,14).**

Read Matthew 12:9–21

Why was a man with a withered hand in the synagogue? Had he come on his own volition, or had the Pharisees arranged for him to be there so that they might accuse Jesus (verse 10)?

Have you ever tried to set someone up? Perhaps you have sprung on a situation with the intention of trapping someone, making them uncomfortable, seeing how they respond? You know they’ll find the situation confronting, and you orchestrate a surprise encounter.

Perhaps you’ve been on the receiving end, and you have felt set up. How did you manage the situation? Were you able to engage in the situation serenely, or did you become frustrated at the apparent manipulation? Angry, even?

The Pharisees didn’t care two hoots about the man with the withered hand. They were just interested in using him to make a point. They wanted to trap Jesus. They wanted to gather evidence that he was a lawbreaker and against them.

They questioned Jesus, ‘Is it lawful to heal a man on the Sabbath?’ You can imagine them nudging the man before Jesus, like a pawn on a chess set, as they asked this.

Jesus knew the Pharisees would have valued their sheep more than this man. They would dive into a pit on the day of rest to save a sheep, but they were not interested in rescuing this man from his plight. ‘How much more valuable is a man than a sheep!’ he said (verse 12).

Christ turned this ‘trap’ into a teaching opportunity about the value of the human person. This man had worth. All humans have greater value than animals. And with four words, ‘Stretch out your hand’, he healed the man’s hand.

The Pharisees were appalled – and pleased. They got what they wanted. Their trap worked. Jesus had broken the law by healing on the Sabbath. They were unmoved by his act of mercy and love, and they plotted to kill him. They revealed themselves to be joyless legalists interested in pointscoring. They also missed the point of God’s Sabbath. Is it lawful for Christ to heal us on the Sabbath? It is.

**Dear Lord, forgive me for the times I have unlovingly sought to trap or manipulate others. Heal me, too, this Sabbath. Amen.**

Friday 2 July 2021

# Theo-drama

by Chelsea Pietsch

**‘Aeneas,’ Peter said to him, ‘Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat’. Immediately Aeneas got up (Acts 9:34).**

Read Acts 9:32–43

When I read this passage, I am struck by the power and authority granted by God to the Apostle Peter. Fancy being able to command a paralysed man to walk?! That is a miracle beyond what I am capable of doing.

I note that I am not alone. The other people mentioned in this text were not given the same gifts or calling as Peter. Neither Aeneas, Tabitha, nor Simon the tanner had his power to heal. This is true, irrespective of their faith or discipleship.

It is a mystery to us why God assigns different gifts and callings to different people. Why did it have to be Aeneas and Tabitha who needed healing and not Peter? Why did Peter get to be the one to save the day?

The reality is that it wasn’t up to Peter, Aeneas, Tabitha or Simon, nor is it up to ourselves. God is the creator of this universe, and we are his creatures. He invites us to be a part of a cosmic drama. We are not the creator or director but the actors. And the gifts assigned to us are not always the ones we’d choose for ourselves.

We can’t always see where things are heading, nor how the play will ultimately resolve. But we can trust our director. We can trust that no matter what contours, climaxes and lulls may be embedded in the drama, God works for the good of those who love him. We have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

We need not be worried whether or not we play a ‘leading role’. But what is that anyway? As the Scriptures reveal to us time and time again, sometimes the seemingly smaller parts in God’s cosmic drama turn out to be more central than we’d perhaps ever anticipate.

**Dear Lord, I surrender to you my life and vision. I trust in your direction. Lead on! Amen.**

Saturday 3 July 2021

# Lift up your eyes

by Chelsea Pietsch

**[O]ur eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us (Psalm 123:2b).**

Read Psalm 123

Back in 2011, my husband and I had the joy and privilege of travelling to Patmos, Greece. This is where St John received his revelation on the Lord’s Day (Revelation 1:9–10). After several days of exploring the island, we packed our backpacks, checked out of our accommodation and made our way down to a café, where we awaited an afternoon ferry to Turkey.

At the time, I made the mistake of giving a small dog a tidbit from our lunch table. Well, from that moment on, this little dog followed me around for hours. His eyes were on me in hopeful anticipation, and his tongue hung out, showing the joy of apparent newfound friendship. I had shown him a bit of mercy, and he was not going to let me out of his sight.

This psalm speaks of lifting one’s eyes to the Lord and not looking away until he has mercy on us. The psalmist uses the analogies of a servant looking to the hand of their master and a maid looking to the hand of her mistress. These are images of people who are utterly dependent on the mercy of someone else for their preservation.

To whom do you turn your gaze for help? To whom do you go when you are in need, run-down or at your wits’ end? The psalmist encourages us not to look to ourselves, nor any ordinary person, habit or thing. The psalmist encourages us to lift our eyes to the very author of the universe, our merciful and benevolent king, the giver of all good things.

Can you lift your eyes now above your computer screen, to the sky, and imagine you are looking into the eyes of Christ enthroned in heaven?

**Dear Lord, the eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing (Psalm 145:15,16). Amen.**

Sunday 4 July 2021

# Who has authority?

by Pastor Jim Strelan

**He sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits (Mark 6:7).**

Read Mark 6:1–13

How are you with authority? There are lots of people who have authority, and generally, we accept that. The government, the police, parents and those in schools have a hierarchy of authority going from the top and moving down to even the student body. Martin Luther taught that all those earthly authorities are extensions of God. Whether they recognise it or not, they work on behalf of God.

Jesus sends his disciples out, and he gives them authority. Their authority is not to do with their own abilities. It’s not to do with how much they have or how much they own – ‘take nothing for the journey except a staff’ (Mark 6:8). It doesn’t depend on their training or particular expertise. They go with the authority of Jesus, and in that authority, they drive out demons and heal the sick.

How are you with authority in your faith journey? Sometimes we can think that it’s only certain people who have this kind of authority. We can think that it’s only the pastor who has that authority, and we insist the pastor must be of a particular gender. But the authority is not the disciples’. Without the authority of Jesus, the disciples would have been timid and ineffective. It is the authority of Jesus, and it’s the highest authority there is. He gives it, and they go out in his name and do things they wouldn’t have thought conceivable.

We are to respect all authority that acts for the common good. The authority of Jesus is the highest of all, and he gives it to those who want to serve on his behalf – even you.

**Jesus, I acknowledge that all authority is yours. Thank you for empowering all those who act in your name, even me. Amen.**