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**Sunday 25 July 2021 to Sunday 1 August 2021**

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Sunday 25 July 2021

# Little is much

by Verena Johnson

**Here is a small boy with five small barley loaves and two fish, but how far will they go among so many? (John 6:9)**

Read John 6:1–21

Ever been asked to do something impossible? Imagine how the disciples felt looking out over that huge crowd when Jesus asked, ‘Where shall we buy bread for all these people to eat?’

Philip gives a practical reply focusing on what they don’t have, which is more than half a year's wages to even give everyone a bite. Andrew gives an answer that focuses on what they do have – five small barley loaves and two fish. Not much at all, in fact. While it’s a more positive answer than Philip’s, I can’t help wondering how stupid or embarrassed Andrew felt as he even mentioned this ridiculously small amount.

I also can’t help wondering why no-one else in that great crowd had brought anything at all with them to eat. Apparently, this boy’s mother was the only person with any foresight in the whole Galilee area. That boy probably also had a clean hanky, water and a warm jacket (just in case).

I wonder how that boy felt when he gave Jesus his food. Did he think he was going to go hungry? Did he trust that Jesus would put it to good use? Was he curious to see what Jesus would do? Did he expect a miracle?

Did the disciples expect a miracle, even after Jesus asked them to get everyone to sit down? And what about the crowd?

Regardless of their doubts or expectations, Jesus blew everyone away with what he did with that little amount of food. In Jesus’ hands, little was turned into much and small was turned into great.

We often forget what Jesus can do with our little. We can become focused on what we don’t have rather than on what we do have. Even if we look at what we do have, we can feel embarrassed, inadequate or lacking, because it doesn’t seem like we have much to offer.

This story reminds us of the Jesus factor. He can take our little and turn it into much. He can take our small gifts, talents and abilities and use them for great things. All we have to do is give them to Jesus as that boy did, and like that boy, we will see what Jesus can do with them!

**Dear Jesus, I give you all I am and all I have today, even though it may seem like a small offering. I place myself in your hands, trusting that you will use me. Help me take advantage of every opportunity you give me today, knowing that in and with you, little is much. Amen.**

Monday 26 July 2021

# Direct access

by Verena Johnson

**‘Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die’ (Deuteronomy 18:16b).**

Read Deuteronomy 18:15–22

How sad that the Israelites did not want to hear from God directly or see the fire of his great presence because of their fear.

They asked for a mediator to stand between them and God. As a result of their request, they had a whole series of mediators throughout their history, starting with Moses and followed by a stream of prophets, priests, judges and kings. The Israelites did not listen to God themselves; they relied on ‘mediators’ to tell them what God said.

Many of these ‘mediators’ honoured God, listened to him and spoke the words he put in their mouths, even though the people didn’t always listen or like what they had to say.

However, many more did not. They spoke words in God’s name that he hadn’t said, or even worse, they spoke things in the name of other gods. They often said what people wanted to hear rather than what people needed to hear. This is where the whole arrangement went downhill.

Thank God that Jesus came as the ultimate mediator between God and us and gave his life so we could have direct access to God again.

We don’t have to rely on mediators anymore. We can speak to God directly and hear what he has to say to us any time we want. We can read his word and listen to the Holy Spirit as he speaks into our hearts and lives. We can talk with God in prayer and listen to what he has to say to us.

God wants us to be with him with no-one else between us. He invites us into a close and intimate one-on-one relationship with him.

The problem is people haven’t changed. We are no different to the Israelites. Sometimes our fears get in the way of our relationship with God, and we don’t always listen to or like what he has to say.

But he is always there, loving us, forgiving us, inviting us and calling us to be with him. He has so much he wants to say to us if only we are listening.

**Loving God, thank you for inviting us into an intimate relationship with you. Open our spiritual ears to hear you when you speak to us. Open our hearts and minds to receive what you have to say to us. Amen.**

Tuesday 27 July 2021

# Banishing bitterness

by Verena Johnson

**May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge (Ruth 2:12b).**

Read Ruth 2:1–18

I love the story of Ruth. Ruth is a young widow who leaves everything she has ever known to accompany her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to her homeland. Naomi thought she had lost everything, but she gained a devoted companion and carer in Ruth. God’s hand was already at work in Naomi’s life.

Naomi doesn’t see it, of course; she has lost all hope. All she can see is her losses. ‘I went away full, but I came back empty’. She is very bitter and blames God for everything, ‘The Lord has afflicted me, the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me’. She even changes her name to Mara, which means ‘bitter’!

Even though Naomi is no advertisement for her God, Ruth declares, ‘Your people will be my people and your God my God’.

This Moabite foreigner takes refuge under the wings of the God of Israel that Naomi had written off and was so upset with. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Naomi’s God becomes Ruth’s God. Ruth is like a ray of hope and light in the dark cloud of bitterness enveloping Naomi.

Enter Boaz – a relative Naomi had obviously forgotten. This godly man brings another ray of hope and light into Naomi’s darkness, one she actually notices. God is at work again.

Boaz asks God to repay and reward Ruth for what she has done, and God does. To cut a long story short, God blesses Ruth and Naomi so greatly and obviously that even Naomi has to see it and acknowledge it. Finally, her bitterness is banished.

Bitterness is subtle and insidious. It grows in us bit by bit until its darkness envelops us if we let it. Bitterness can blind us to anything good and rob us of all hope. Bitterness can also lead us to blame God and turn away from him instead of turning to him.

God wants us to turn to him and give him our bitterness. If we take refuge under his wings, we will see rays of hope and light from God that will break through and banish any darkness. We will see his hand and be reminded that he is still at work. Under his loving wings, there is comfort, peace and healing.

**Loving God, thank you that you keep loving us even if we’re bitter or we blame you. Thank you that we can find refuge under your wings. Thank you for the comfort, peace and healing we find there. Amen.**

Wednesday 28 July 2021

# Even if he does not

by Verena Johnson

**But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up (Daniel 3:18).**

Read Daniel 3:16–28

In the face of a furious King Nebuchadnezzar and the threat of being thrown into a fiery furnace, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to back down and worship an idol.

If you read what they said, it seems that these three men had complete faith in God’s ability to save them. They knew the truth that God is all-powerful and totally able to rescue his people from anything. After all, what is a fiery furnace compared to the Lord Almighty? Even one that is seven times hotter than usual!

But then comes the twist in what they said. They also knew that there was no guarantee that God would rescue them. What is more, they told the king that even though they didn’t know whether or not God would actually save them, they were okay with that.

How could they have such faith, confidence and peace when faced with the possibility of being thrown in the furnace and God not doing anything about it?

Our faith can often waver when God appears to be doing nothing. How do you react when God doesn’t come through? Or doesn’t come through in the way that you want or expect? What happens to your peace and calm then? I know what happens to mine.

These three men kept their eyes fixed on God, not the furnace. God gave them their faith in him. God gave them their confidence to trust in him. God gave them his peace, which in this case, certainly surpasses all understanding. God was literally with them in the fire.

So how can you and I have this same faith, confidence and peace when we are faced with the fiery furnaces of life? With troubles and trials? With persecution?

The same God who was there with them is here with you. He is at work in you as well. Keep your eyes fixed on him and not on your troubles. He will give you the faith, confidence, peace and everything else that you need when you face hard things with him, regardless of the outcome.

**Loving God, help me keep my eyes fixed on you when I am faced with the fiery furnaces of life. Thank you that you are always there with me in the midst of them. Please give me the faith, confidence and peace that I need as I walk through them with you. Amen.**

Thursday 29 July 2021

# A surprising love story

by Verena Johnson

**So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions’ den. The king said to Daniel, ‘May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!’ (Daniel 6:16)**

Read Daniel 6

What a great story. It’s got everything. Intrigue, nasty villains who get what’s coming to them, an innocent victim who has been set up for a fall, a happy ending … and a surprising love story.

Yes, I said love story. This is a story of how God won the heart of a selfish and egotistical king.

The satraps and administrators never dreamed that their evil plot to trap Daniel would be overturned and used by God. Who would’ve thought that a decree to worship the king only would result in another decree to fear and revere the God of Daniel?

Through this story, we see an arrogant and proud king tricked into making a decree because of the size of his ego. We read that this same king was greatly distressed when he realised the consequences of that decree for Daniel, and he made every effort to try to save him. Ever wanted to kick yourself for making a wrong decision or doing something stupid, and then you tried to make it right?

This self-centred mighty ruler finally realised that he could do nothing to save Daniel. He was powerless. Ever been in a situation where you felt totally powerless?

I wonder if it was a first for Darius. All his power and status counted for nothing in the face of his decree. Realising this, the king who wanted to be prayed to actually offered this amazing prayer for Daniel as he was thrown into the lions’ den, ‘May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!’

King Darius tossed and turned through a sleepless and solitary night and then got up at dawn and rushed to the lions’ den. Have you ever had one of those nights where you long for morning to come?

Back at the lions’ den, an anguished Darius asked, ‘Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?’

The king is totally overjoyed to find out that God has done an incredible miracle and saved Daniel. However, that joy is nothing to the joy in heaven as this king, who wanted to be worshipped, acknowledges that God is the living and eternal God.

**Almighty and all-powerful God, thank you that in and through you, all things are possible. Help me turn to you, not just when I feel powerless but all the time. Help me turn to you before making decisions, not just for the clean-up operations afterwards. Thank you for all you did to win my heart. Amen.**

Friday 30 July 2021

# Fish Friday

by Verena Johnson

**When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple (Jonah 2:7).**

Read Jonah 2:1–10

As today is a Friday, I think it’s very appropriate to have a ‘fish’ story. I have some Catholic friends who still have fish every Friday.

I remember helping my brother-in-law clean and fillet 60 plus garfish in our kitchen one day. We had quite a production line going. By the end of it all, everything stunk of fish. Me, my clothes, the kitchen, in fact, the whole house! Even after cleaning everything up, opening all the windows and washing clothes, there was still a vaguely fishy smell in the house for days afterwards.

Imagine what it was like for Jonah inside that fish. The smell alone would have been phenomenal and overpowering. I wonder how long it took for the stink on him to go after he finished up back on dry land again in a pile of fish vomit. Maybe the Ninevites were constantly looking for the fish stall that had to be close by as he preached.

Jonah had been so busy running away from God and what he had been asked to do that he thought drowning was preferable. Until he actually was drowning. As his life was ebbing away, he finally remembered God and turned to him, ‘I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you’.

Revelation 5:8 describes our prayers as incense, ‘They were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people’.

So, inside the dark, foul, reeking stomach of that fish, there arose the sweet-smelling incense of Jonah’s heartfelt prayer as he thanked God for saving him, and he promised to make good on his vow. There was a beautiful aroma of praise and the heady perfume of surrender and obedience.

When your life stinks, or you’re in the middle of ‘fishy’ circumstances or dark places, offer up the sweet incense of your prayers to the God who has saved you and will save you. The same God who saved Jonah. The really surprising thing is that the aroma of your prayers also changes the atmosphere in you as well as around you.

**Dear God who saves, thank you for saving me and for continuing to save me amid all that happens in my life. Help me to always turn to you and offer you the sweet incense of my prayers and the aroma of my praise regardless of circumstances. Amen.**

Saturday 31 July 2021

# It's raining manna

by Verena Johnson

**He rained down manna for the people to eat, and he gave them the grain of heaven (Psalm 78:24).**

Read Psalm 78:23–29

We started this week with the feeding of the 5000, and now we’re finishing it with God providing manna in the wilderness.

Psalm 78 was a reminder to the Israelites of God’s incredible goodness to them in the past when he rescued them from Egypt and led them safely through the wilderness. They are encouraged to ‘set their hope in God and not forget the works of God’ (Psalm 78:7).

God’s works and goodness to them were so apparent when he ‘rained down’ manna and quail for them to eat their fill. Every day, except for the Sabbath, he provided food in plenty for them to eat. God miraculously provided every mouthful of food they ate. How amazing, how wonderful and how worthy of praise. You’d think those Israelites would’ve spent their days in the wilderness living in thankfulness.

They didn’t.

Despite the obvious works and goodness of God, the Israelites majored in complaining and rebellion. Check out the rest of the psalm. They ‘refused to walk according to his law’ (verse 10); ‘they tested God’ (verse 18); ‘they spoke against God’ (verse 19); ‘they had no faith in God’ (verse 22); ‘they tested God again’ (verse 41); ‘they did not keep in mind his power’ (verse 42); ‘they tested the Most High God and rebelled against him’ (verse 56).

How could they?

Before we become too quick to judge them, let’s take a bit of a look at ourselves. How can we complain and rebel against the God who suffered and died for us and became the bread of life for us? But we do. How can we take God’s provision for granted or as a right? How can we be so busy focusing on and worrying about what we don’t have that we forget to thank and praise God for what we do have? How can we not see God’s provision for us and keep wanting more or better or different?

Our God ‘rains down’ his blessings on us every day. He feeds us with his bread of life. Take the time today to thank him for his provision. Ask him to show you how he has provided for you in the past and trust him with your needs for the future.

**God, my loving provider, thank you for your provision and all the blessings you rain down on me. Forgive me for when I have rebelled against you, complained, taken your provision for granted or as a right, or wanted more, better or different than what you have given me. Help me to count blessings and trust you for my future needs. Amen.**

Sunday 1 August 2021

# Doing the work of God

by Pastor Mark Gierus

**‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’ (John 6:28,29).**

Read John 6:24–35

Have you ever been confused about what God really wants from you?

What should I do, God? Should I sign up for a new program that has something to do with mission? Perhaps I need to pray harder or read every word of the Bible? Am I working hard enough for you?

Often the work of the devil is to draw us into thinking like this – am I doing enough?

You see, the devil often burdens us with lies like this – are you doing more and more for Jesus? Instead of doing things out of faith, we get drawn into thinking, am I doing enough for faith? Faith is a gift not earned at all by our works for God, rather given so we can walk in the works, the good deeds of God as Saint Paul reminded us, ‘we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do’ (Ephesians 2).

Jesus tells us today as he did the people of his day a very simple truth. It has faith at the heart of the matter. You see, it is not so much what we do in life; rather, it is what is done in faith. If all our actions are done to others out of our faith in Jesus, then lives are changed because people meet the one who is both the author and perfector of our faith, Jesus Christ.

So, what is it that we must do to perform the works of God? The work of God is simply this: to believe in the one whom the Father has sent. In other words, to believe in Jesus. I don’t know about you, but that is somewhat freeing, isn’t it? To do the works of God is simply to believe. In faith, we receive all God has promised us in his only Son – eternal life, salvation and forgiveness of sins. And in faith, our good deeds and our works are for God’s glory by sharing his love with the world.

**Gracious Father, you call us to do good works, and the good work is to believe in your only Son, Jesus. Strengthen our faith, so we see your Son in our life and follow him boldly living in this world where you have placed us to share your love through our actions in Jesus. Amen.**