

Chapter Five

The Art of Reflection

Think about what I am saying. The Lord will give you understanding in all these things.
(2 Timothy 2:7)

It is no fun having your deranged ‘employer’ throwing spears at you! On the run from King Saul, David lost the plot and joined forces with the Philistines. The time came when he was called upon to fight against his fellow Israelites. It was at this crucial moment that the commander of the Philistine army intervened, questioning his loyalty and sending him away.

It is a supreme example of the Lord’s overruling. While he was away, David’s home town was overrun by raiders. His wives and children were taken away – and, as if that were not enough, his own men were so desperate that they were speaking of stoning him.

At this terrible moment, when fear and despair could so easily have shut out the Still Small Voice, David ‘found strength in the Lord.’¹ No phrase better conveys the depths of his relationship with the Lord. Here is a man so used to quieting his soul that he is able to discern God’s strategy, even under such intense pressure.

My mind goes back to a man on a Pacific island, who heard the Lord telling him to cross the island and leave. He arrived at the port just in time to catch the last steamer out before the Japanese invaded the island.

Or the Christians in a town in Denmark during the Second World War who were warned through a prophecy to be out of town on a certain day. It turned out to be the very day the Gestapo raided the town. There is nothing theoretical about cultivating the art of reflection.

The Daily Review

Dr Pierson once visited a minister who had been in hospital for six long months. The doctor ventured to suggest that God might have permitted this illness as the only means by which He could cause this busy man to listen more to Him. He had hardly left the hospital before the Lord caught up with him: ‘You too have been too active for Me, and have not taken enough time to be occupied with Me.’ This experience made such an impression on Dr Pierson that he later wrote:

I resolved to practice what I preached. At the close of each day, I sit for one hour in the quiet of my study, not to speak to the Lord, but to lay the day’s life and work open to the Lord’s penetrating gaze and appraisal, and to listen to what He has to say to me.²

Even if we cannot devote anything like a whole hour to it, the great benefit of attempting such a review is that it gives us a second chance to ponder the events of the day, and to pick up on the nudges that the Lord has sent out way. We can ‘replay’ them, as if we were watching them pass before our eyes on a video. Then, as opportunities we have missed, or unkind words that we have uttered come to mind, we can ‘press the pause button’ and attend to the issues the Lord is highlighting.

As we make time to reflect, words that people have spoken return to our memory. Words of encouragement that confirm we are on the right path; or words of warning that save us from error – half-warnings even, that we might have missed had we been too engrossed in our own affairs.

Many people find keeping a journal aids this process of reflection. Rather than recording just the outward events, it will prove richer if we can include fuller details of how we believe the Lord is leading us. Such reflection enables us to trace patterns and to discern links where before we might have seen only isolated events.

Turning sight into insight

‘Daniel, I have come to give you insight and understanding.’ (Daniel 9:22)

The first time I drove up the ‘Atlantic highway’ on the west coast of Devon, I glimpsed large radar dishes. They reminded me how serious the issue of cyber warfare has become. Dedicated organizations hack into top security computers, passing on highly sensitive information to potentially hostile powers. In the wrong hands, this information could be used not only to replicate weapons systems, but even potentially, to paralyze vital communications systems. Since cyber warfare is sure to play a significant (perhaps a determining) role in any future world conflict, this is an appropriate topic to take up in prayer.

The Lord has many ways of alerting us to things that are on His heart. As I was walking down a cobbled street in a Devonian village a few minutes later, I heard a mother calling her child. I instantly felt prompted to pray for someone of that name. I rang her a few hours later, as I usually try to do when I sense such leadings, and found that there was indeed a pressing reason why the Lord had put her on my heart.

I also find that God uses ‘look-alikes’ as one of His ways to call me to pray. For a fleeting moment, some passer-by reminds me in a certain profile of someone else I know. I take it as a pointer to pray for the person I am reminded of. On other occasions a certain make or colour of a car serves to remind me of someone who drives a similar model.

Do such ‘coincidences’ really come from God? I find that in perhaps three-quarters of such instances there is an immediate reason why these people have been brought to mind.

More than we realize at the time, our prayers may be paving the way for the Spirit to open something up *for* them – or to protect them *from* some danger. In any case: how can anything but good come from praying for them?

Even fleeting thoughts may correspond to someone's real need. My car broke down in a motorway service station once, when I was on my way to spend a weekend with some friends, who were following on an hour or two behind me. As they approached the service station, one of them had the thought, 'Perhaps Robert has broken down in there.' Unfortunately, he pushed it aside, and had to drive a long way back later on to pick me up!

The Lord uses not only words but also sights, sounds and even smells to trigger associations that lead to prayer and action – or simply to bring comfort. As I was wheeled into hospital theatre for a rather unpleasant operation, I distinctly smelt the reassuring wood-fire smoke of our favourite cottage in the Lake District.

On another occasion, after hearing a distressing report about someone who means a lot to us, our bedroom was suddenly invaded by the distinct fragrance of lilies, reminding us of the lilies that surround *his* apartment. On these two occasions at least, the Still Small Voice became the Sweet Smelling Fragrance!

Many of the clearest nudges I receive come while I am writing. It is as though the Holy Spirit is alerting me by sending me the equivalent of an e-mail.

A few come with such urgency that I feel the need to drop everything and pray. Normally, I just make a note of them, and resolve to return to them later.

For Reflection and Prayer

I need to be careful not to get so carried away with the fact that the Lord is sharing something with me that I forget to take it up properly later on.

*Lord, help us to recognize it is no coincidence when
You bring people to our minds. Help us to remain a
while longer in Your presence, in case You have more
to say to us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Sharing the Lord's heart

The real prophets of our day are those who can perceive what is happening in modern society, see where it will lead us, and give a value judgment upon it . . . We should not just absorb facts, but think about their significance. (Richard Foster)

I was walking past a shopping mall the other day, when I felt the Lord saying in my heart:

‘This is a generation that has all but forgotten Me. It has everything it wants, but it does not know or honour Me. These are the Temples they have made – and they will take the consequences.’

Scripture is clear that God judges cities and nations according to the opportunities they have been given.³ We in the West have espoused wrong priorities, and made Mammon more important than devotion to the Almighty. We have acted as if *any* deity were His equal, and as though God’s laws were an impediment to be avoided, rather than a structure on which to base our society.

With little understanding of the spiritual laws of sowing and reaping, let alone of God’s holiness, more and more anti-Christian policies are being implemented in western nations. Combined with the increasingly ‘politically correct’ climate that causes people to impose their own self-censorship, these measures constitute a real threat to the distinctive Christian voice in our nation.

God is raising up many prayer warriors as a shield for our prodigal continent, but let us be under no illusion: judgment has already begun, and we need to continue fervent in prayer and repentance. We are on the thinnest of ice as a continent.

Father, we recognize that we entirely merit Your judgment. We cry out to You that we, who know You, may respond in such a way that this work of judgment may yet prove redemptive rather than purely destructive – and that You may be more merciful to us than we deserve. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Listen for wider issues

I will give you what you asked for! I will give you a wise and understanding mind. (1 Kings 3:12)

God is interested in everything that happens, and through His Still Small Voice He interprets matters to us. When Stephen Parker conducted a survey of how believers made their decisions, however, he noted a heavy preponderance of what we might call ‘privatized’ leadings.⁴ None of the people he interviewed mentioned any example of being directed into public, social or political actions this has nothing to do with the Lord not wanting us to take an active interest or involvement in these fields; it is more a sign that we are in great danger of ‘privatizing’ the Still Small Voice.

As we seek the Lord’s strategy for our lives, our churches and our communities, we may well find ourselves praying for people groups, regions and nations with as much longing as we have for matters closer to home and heart.

Such an attitude worries the powers of darkness, who promptly set out to try to neutralize the danger. They may, for example, try to lull us into believing that we are doing all right as we are. If they can succeed in nurturing complacency, we will see little need to reach out for the *more* that God has in store for us. Alternatively, the enemy reverts to brute

force, trying to make us believe that the task we are facing is so far beyond our abilities and resources that we may as well abandon it altogether.

If *that* does not work, they may try to fool us into thinking that listening to the Still Small Voice will make us too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use in a technologically complex society.

Let us start by restating something that ought to be self-evident, but which often gets forgotten or ignored, and that is that the Lord *wants* to speak about wider issues. A substantial proportion of our ministry has been spent in providing informed intercessory insights to help people pray about world events. We have directed people's focus far and wide – not because any one person or group could possibly respond to all the information we send out but rather on the basis that the Lord can, at any moment, 'harness' what they have read, and turn it into heart-felt prayer.⁵

For Reflection and Prayer

*As surely as the Bible teacher waits on the Lord
to discover what passage of Scripture to expound,
so may we listen to You, Father,
about the things we are involved in –
and about the things that are happening in our day.
We lift to You now especially . . .*

Spiritual Warfare

The more we develop the art of reflection, the more likely we are to discern the specific spiritual influences that are at work in churches, situations and localities.

Wherever Jesus went, He wrestled to set men's souls free from the various miseries that were overwhelming them. He saw in His Spirit the battle that had to be fought against the powers of darkness, and He was fully aware of strongholds embodied in certain people and places.

The warfare was at its most intense in Jerusalem, where the religious leaders had espoused the dangerous assumption that when the Messiah came, *they* would be the ones who would be offered star billing in His Kingdom. How insulted they must have felt by Jesus' declaration that the first would be last, and the last first.

The Scribes and Pharisees had seen many things that should have melted their hearts – but religious pride had rendered the Still Small Voice inaudible to their ears. That is why they felt nothing but anger and jealousy when people were helped and healed. The Lord was grieved at their hard hearts. He denounced them as hypocrites, and declared that they would be excluded from God's Kingdom purposes. Their critical spirit made it all but impossible for them to acknowledge the Messiah they professed to be waiting for.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew* Aslan has just sung creation into being, but Digory's reprehensible uncle is as incapable of appreciating the wonder of a new land being born as the Pharisees were of honouring the Lord Jesus.

When the great moment came and the Beasts spoke, he missed the whole point. When the Lion had first begun singing, long ago when it was still quite dark, he had realized that the noise was a song. And he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a lion ('only a lion,' as he said to himself), he tried his hardest to make believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing – only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world. And the longer and more beautifully the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring.

Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. And when at last the Lion spoke and said, 'Narnia awake,' he didn't hear any words: he heard only a snarl. And when the Beasts spoke in answer, he heard only barkings, growlings, bayings and howlings.⁶

Jesus pronounced serious 'woes' against the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, because words of love would not have even begun to convey to them the seriousness of their situation. A woe is the opposite of a blessing. It is more like a curse.

Jesus' zeal for His Father's house did not blind Him to the consequences of what He was doing. He knew full well when he knotted a rope and drove the money lenders out of the Temple that, when they had recovered from their humiliation, the religious leaders would pursue Him to death.

Prayerful detective work often reveals patterns of attack or abuse that are, to some degree at least, satanically induced. When we realize what we are really up against, we pray and fight harder. I remember once 'seeing' an imp sitting astride a computer that refused to work. When I commanded it to go, the computer started working again. It was an object lesson in spiritual warfare. As always, discernment is vital. Computers also malfunction when you type in wrong commands!

Something more sinister than mere human differences is often at work when Christians fall out with one another. The devil loves to stir people up to bring false accusations against godly men and women. Paul prayed that he, along with other leaders, might be protected from evil⁷ because he knew how easy it is for Satan to outwit believers.

Evil is not an intellectual problem; it is a spiritual one. For us, as for Jesus, a major part of our work is not just helping to set individual people free in their walk with the Lord, but involving ourselves in the fight against systematic evil.

Paul recognized the activities of demons within human structures, but he did not make the mistake of confusing social institutions with the demonic powers themselves.

Tom Marshall has seriously helpful things to say about integrating faith, spiritual warfare and our place of work.⁸ He points out that corporations are not f themselves either evil or godly; it is the decisions they make, and the influences that are brought to bear on them which bring businesses, governments and churches under Godly or demonic spheres of influence.

As we set out to serve the Lord in these institutions, we will inevitably come up against prejudices and vested interests. Spiritual opposition then is all but inevitable. This is why it is important to prepare carefully for the task ahead.

Just as Paul mobilized people to pray for him,⁹ so we must set up networks of communication, involving people who have a heart to see God glorified in these places and organizations.

May the Lord use all who are seeking to make an impact for Him in institutions. Why not lift such people before the Lord now?

For Reflection and Prayer

*Help me to overcome evil, Lord –
not just by avoiding infringing specific laws,
but by honestly facing the things I need to face.
May no pressures from within or without
blunt my zeal for serving You.
May truth, humility and love
keep me from the evil one.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Weighted questions change our angle of approach

He who sacrifices thank-offerings honours Me, and prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God. (Psalm 50:23)

When I look through the viewfinder of my camera, I sometimes sense that the balance of a picture does not look quite right. If I move a short distance and try another angle, it often lines up better.

It is rather like this in prayer. If we are not getting through on one track, it may be time to change the angle of our praying. Suppose that you have been praying for a long time for someone (or something) that is very dear to your heart. With the passing of time, such prayer can easily become less a matter of dynamic faith than of merely expressing our wishes – vocalizing our unbelief even.

Instead of coming in from 'underneath' what is clearly a protracted problem, try praying something like this: 'Lord, thank You that You are far more concerned than I could ever

be for . . . Even now You are looking for the best way to answer all these years of prayer. Thank You!

Such an injection of gratitude refreshes our spirit, and restores us to an attitude of faith. What happens, though, when we feel as though we are getting no answer to questions that need answers, such as, ‘Lord should I do such and such today?’ Try taking the most sensible way forward and praying something like, ‘Ok, Lord, I’m planning to do this – is there any reason why I should *not* go ahead and do it?’

‘Weighting’ questions in this way often breaks the logjam, and gets us moving again. After all, the Lord has promised that we will hear a voice behind us if we are in danger of going off course.¹⁰

We may also fare much better if we approach God by looking up at Him in praise and worship, rather than down at our faults and difficulties. Otherwise we may find ourselves getting stuck at confessing our failings and bewailing our predicaments – whether they be real or imaginary ones.

That is what looking *away* unto Jesus is all about. The other day, as I was confessing for the umpteenth time, the particular way in which I felt I had failed someone, the Lord cut across my muttering and told me to stop repenting. ‘Stop repenting, Lord? But surely repentance is the key to going deeper with You?’

‘It is, but there is a fine line between repentance and remorse – and you are in danger of stepping over it. Don’t you believe 1 John 1:9? If you keep on asking for forgiveness, instead of receiving it, all you are doing is expressing your unbelief. That just does the devil’s work for him. By the way, it is all but impossible to resent people you are praying for!’

For Reflection and Prayer

Remorse does nothing to lift our spirits, let alone to bless anyone else. In the example I quoted above, the Lord went on to say, ‘Step out and *bless* the people you feel you have failed.’ Does that ring bells for you? Go ahead and try it.

Overcoming disappointment

I have noticed that many with an undoubted ability to hear the Still Small Voice never seem to develop the gift very far. Many become discouraged by the setbacks and crushings that that come their way.

A well-known leader challenged a friend of ours, who has a distinct prophetic edge, ‘How do you *know* the Lord speaks to you?’ Whatever the motive for asking the question, its effect was devastation, causing overwhelming doubts about my friend’s

relationship with the Lord to set in – even to the point where she all but lost the desire just to sit and ask Him what He was doing.

Sensing that there was more to this than one isolated challenge, I dug deeper, and discovered a recurring pattern. When she was a teenager, she had begun to exercise a powerful healing ministry. Her best friend pleaded with her to stop doing something so intensely embarrassing. As happens all too often, fear of man won the day, and this precious ministry ground to an immediate halt.

The Lord prompted me next to ask about her birth. It turned out to have been traumatic and life-threatening. The physical squeezing mirrored the spiritual clampdown, and gave us a key to pray for fresh release.

If the enemy can succeed in denting our trust, it follows that we will hold back from using the authority the Lord has invested in us. Effectively, this relegates us to the spiritual sidelines. Trust and confidence are therefore central battlegrounds. Once disappointment finds a lodging in our heart, it plays a persistent refrain: ‘I’ve been here before; it didn’t work then, so what’s the point of trying again?’

Disappointment is like a leak dripping through the roof. It seeps into our attic, where it strengthens into full-blown discouragement. Now decidedly polluted, the water seeps through the ceiling, and drips into the living spaces of our heart in various noxious and malodorous forms, promoting festering conditions such as self-pity, envy, bitterness, fear – and touchiness.

Every one of these deadly foes is a leak that needs attention. Fail to take action, and these foul waters will pass through yet another floor until they become a stinking stagnant pool that floods the basement of our lives with their monstrous effluent: despair and cynicism.

This graphic image shows us just how important it is to give the Lord our hurts and disappointments at an earlier stage, before these mega foes of faith set in. Once they have established a base in our hearts, we need a major operation to get living water flowing again, and to remove the polluted water.

What will it take to restore our cutting edge? Usually the ministry of others, combined with proactive faith on our part, and a willingness to forgive those who have dented our confidence.

For Reflection and Prayer

*Lord, when we, like the disciples, come down
from mountain top experiences, and are unable
to move mountains into the sea or set the epileptic free,
may we yield no foothold to discouragement.
God of the breakthrough,
we keep pursuing You;*

*turn these present disappointments . . .
into Your holy appointments,
In Jesus' name. Amen.*

When visions fade from view

The Lord usually gives a 'starter' promise at the outset of some project or vision. Somewhere along the way, this almost invariably fades from view. This is when our faith is tested.

Gaining the Lord's perspective requires persistence. When visions fade from view, our attempts to reflect on what is happening may feel alarmingly like a merry-go-round. We go over and over matters in our heads until it feels as though we are going in circles – rather like driving round and round Hyde Park Corner in London, until we begin to wonder if we are going to run out of gas. It is a great relief when we finally spot the direction sign we were searching for, and are free to continue the journey.

At a time when I was searching for a Personal Assistant, Sally Mowbray wrote to me out of the blue, offering her services. Not feeling anything either way, but realizing that it must have taken a lot of courage for her to write, Ros and I decided to go and visit her to see what the Lord might have in store.

Unbeknownst to us, a friend rang Sally just before we arrived to tell her that this was going to be a highly significant encounter. It quickly became abundantly obvious that this was entirely a 'God-thing' – and so it has proved to be. We are so grateful.

For Reflection and Prayer

In the English Lake District, I was intrigued to see a stream whose waters suddenly vanished underground, leaving an empty rock-strewn bed continuing down the mountainside. Geographers call this phenomenon a swallow hole. Don't panic if something similar happens to you spiritually. Stay true to the course the Lord has set you on. Push through the obstacles. Explore the possibilities. Leave no stone unturned. The waters will resurface further downstream!

*Father, forgive us when we say that You have left us,
and speak and act as though our trials are too great
when, in reality, it is our trust which is too small.
Help us to embrace the royal road of repentance
and the gritty road of perseverance –
for somewhere along these paths
Your purposes will re-emerge and triumph.*

Changing course when course changes are called for

Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. (Acts 16:6)

When the captain of a ship contacts the engine room for a change of course, he expects his orders to be obeyed immediately. We must be equally as alert to heed our Captain's orders – especially if He indicates that a change of course is called for.

Never one to make his plans lightly, Paul must have had excellent reasons for wanting to go to Bithynia – but it was not to be. By ways we are not informed about, the Spirit of the Lord intervened to prevent him from doing so. All that matters is that the apostles obeyed the warning, and headed right away from the region they had been hoping to evangelize.

On another occasion Paul announced that he intended to go on a mission to Spain.¹¹ As it turned out, he ended his days in captivity, a long way from either Spain or Jerusalem. Did Paul rattle his chains and bemoan how unfair it was that the Lord had set Peter free from prison while his own life was being poured out like a drink offering?

Not a bit of it. Refusing all trace of self-pity, Paul turned his prison experience to his advantage by penning the Epistles that today, along with the Gospels, form the backbone of the New Testament. How many millions have his letters reached? Countless more than would have been the case had he achieved his original goal and preached the gospel in the Iberian Peninsula.

When the unexpected happens, and our plans are overturned, may we be flexible enough to hear the Still Small Voice telling us to try something different.

For Reflection and Prayer

Let's face the fact, folks. Not all our hopes and dreams will be fulfilled. Reflect on some of the opportunities the Lord has *not* allowed to come your way. Eight times out of ten, you can probably look back and realize what a good thing it was that those particular doors did not open up. If God had granted you what you thought you wanted so badly at the time, it might have prevented you from getting to the 'somewhere else' He had in mind for you. Or it might have been too much for you to bear. And the other times? That is where we have to leave it all with the Lord. He is so much wiser than we are!

*Father, in every time of change,
keep us alert and ready.
At every cross roads on the way,
be our sign-post, guide and Comforter
When doors slam shut in our faces,
grant us not just a passive resignation
but an active expectation that You can bring about
something still richer by opening other doors instead.*

Hearing ‘beyond’ our traditions

Nobody is being enough to carry a cross and a prejudice! One of the best ways to pinpoint our prejudices is to ask someone who knows us well to highlight what they have noticed.

In this section we are asking the Lord to highlight our limitations, and to take us beyond them. All that God says and does will be in line with His will as it is revealed in Scripture, but our understanding of His Word may be more blinkered than we realize as a result of our doctrinal upbringing and past experience. From time to time the Lord pushes these boundaries.

Rising from the dead, ascending into heaven, pouring out the Holy Spirit – right until the end Jesus kept surprising His disciples into confronting their prejudices. Left to themselves, they would have repelled the woman with the flow of blood, scattered the milling children, and sent the lepers (the great untouchables) packing – to say nothing of withholding the gospel from the Gentile world.

It is worth reflecting on what might never have happened to the Church had Paul not had the courage to stand up to Peter. He pleaded with the leaders of the Jerusalem Church to look beyond their Jewish traditions and embrace God’s call to the wider world.¹² Through the centuries, countless churches and denominations have parroted the argument that certain gifts were ‘for the early Church only.’ Ross Patterson describes how the otherwise godly Bishop Ryland rebuked the young William Carey, telling him that if the Lord really did intend to convert the heathen, He would do it without involving us.¹³

How grateful we can be that Carey did not allow the bishop’s tirade to squash his missionary heart. Carey’s motto ‘*Expect great things from God*’ kept him going through the setbacks and obstacles – and his pioneering work in India paved the way for a host of subsequent overseas missions.

In our day, it sounds strange to believe that anyone could equate the ‘Great Commission’ as being ‘for the first disciples only’ – until, that is, we remember all the voices that continue to urge us to desist from any form of missionary endeavour. In the name of tolerance we are exhorted to respect other faiths, even to the point of watering down Jesus’ call to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. May we be as resistant to these siren calls as William Carey was – and as open to receive the Lord’s true directives.

For Reflection and Prayer

*Enlarge the scope of our listening, Father.
May the Holy Spirit direct our thinking,
rather than our minds quenching Your Spirit.*

*May neither fear nor prejudice hold us back
from seeking Your face and following Your leading.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Thinking laterally

Ros and I often say to each other when watching the news, 'What isn't being said?'

The Lord's leading will cause us to explore themes and to go to places that matter profoundly to the Lord, but which merit little or no mention in Church or media circles. At other times we may sense that what we are reading or watching is being slanted in a particular direction. Rather than simply responding to what is being served up for us, the Lord may want to show us a different way to pray about that particular situation.

I am about to give the draft manuscript of this book to a few friends to read through. It will be relatively easy for them to spot the spelling mistakes, and perhaps to take issue with particular points. It is asking rather more of them to notice things that I have *not* included that might have made it more punchy. May the Lord help us to think outside the box!

In step with the Spirit

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:25)

When I was a young Christian worker in Oxford, I used to visit a remarkable old lady. Although she was completely blind, she had the courage to walk along busy streets on her own, right into the city centre. 'I put my hand in the hand of the Lord,' she declared, 'and off we go together!' How about that for an example of keeping in step with the Spirit?

Some thirty years ago, I prayed for someone in great need. Just after I had read aloud some wonderful verses from Hosea, she received a powerful infilling of the Holy Spirit. With the enthusiasm of the convert, I dragged a friend round the following evening, told him how wonderful it was to be filled with the Spirit, and duly read aloud those same verses.

Precisely nothing happened. I was out of step with the Spirit or the simple reason that there is no such thing as a formula for going deeper with the Lord. Just as David waited on the Lord to receive His strategy for each new battle, so we must seek the Lord's wisdom for every situation that we face.

The strategies that worked well twenty years ago are no longer the best ones to reach today's largely unchurched post-modernist generation, for whom relationships and experience are more important than a top heavy hierarchical approach. Many secular

professions are similarly encouraging an enquiry-based approach to learning rather than settling for traditional didactic methods.

This is a vital area to explore, not least because so many believers are left feeling permanently hungry as a result of hearing too many words but seeing too little power Sunday by Sunday. Large swathes of the Church leave excellent men and women cooped up in their seats, with their spiritual wings clipped. More focused support and encouragement could empower these people to go out and accomplish marvels.¹⁴

I am increasingly comfortable using the word ‘church’ as a verb rather than just a noun. Whilst the Protestant reformation restored vital doctrines, it did little to permanently alter the way church services and structures operated. Luther may have promoted the *priesthood* of all believers, but he lacked the vision to implement the *ministry* of all believers.

As Paul wrote in Titus 2:14 ‘He is purifying for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good.’ One of the ways the Lord can use our ability to hear His voice is to help us contribute to the new, more participatory forms of church that He is developing.

The goals of this ‘mega shift’ that is occurring are broadly in line with those of previous generations, but the means of expressing and achieving them will be radically different. Young ones are sure to be at the fore, but God will use older ones, like Joshua, to encourage and mentor them.¹⁵ There are few more important things to pray about than passing on the baton to a generation who will go further than we have done.

For Reflection and Prayer

*Lord, help us as fellowships and as individuals
to be in tune with Your plans and purposes –
even when You appear to be stepping right off the map.*

Yielding that leads to life

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. (1 Cor 15:36)

You may be familiar with the following story. A young minister reached the conclusion that in order to further the ministry that the Lord was developing through him amongst young people, he would need to devote the whole of his life to it. After tendering his resignation in a painful meeting at his denominational headquarters, he and his wife were driving home when they had a serious accident, His wife was flung from the car following a collision and lay lifeless on the side of the road.

Within the space of a few hours this man had lost the two most precious things in his life: his wife and his ministry. At this moment of utter desolation, he heard the voice of the

Lord more clearly than he had ever known before, 'Will you still follow Me?' You can almost hear the Lord Jesus asking Peter the same question at a time when many were turning back because the cost of following Him was proving too high.¹⁶

Like Peter, this servant of the Lord also knew that there was nowhere else for him to turn to, and so he reaffirmed his willingness to follow the Lord, no matter what the cost. It was at this critical juncture that the Lord spoke a second time, telling him to pray for his wife. A desperate battle ensued, before life began to return into his wife's body.

The man's name is Loren Cunningham. Together with his wife Darlene, they went on to found *Youth with a Mission*: an organization that has reached countless young people for Christ.¹⁷ If Loren had settled for calling an undertaker and being an early widower, just think of all that would have been lost to the Kingdom. This is why reflection is so important. Are we facing situations we need to 'yield' back to the Lord? Or are we needing to take a stand and not yield an inch?

For Reflection and Prayer

*Lord Jesus, we find it hard when You call time on
something that has meant a lot to us
Like Peter, we want to build booths to prolong the
blessing, and to provide a sense of permanence
Teach us afresh the grace of yieldedness.
May we experience the truth of Jim Elliot's words:
'he is no fool who loses that which he cannot keep
in order to gain what he cannot lost.'*

Listening for enlargement

Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, 'Oh that You would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that you would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain.' So God granted him what he requested. (1 Chronicles 4:10 NKJ)

Almost overnight, millions of Christians have begun praying a hitherto somewhat overlooked passage from the book of Chronicles. It is so entirely appropriate to pray to make an impact for the Kingdom that we could almost say that if we are not praying the 'Prayer of Jabez' then why is this?¹⁸

Those of us who are wary of the often exaggerated claims of the 'prosperity gospel' may find ourselves veering too far in the opposite direction. There is nothing humble about under performing in order to avoid going over-the-top. To play safe risks turning the Scriptures upside down. 'Reduce the size of your tent' might be a word to an elderly couple to downsize their family home, but the general tenor of Scripture urges us to have faith and extend our service for Him.

For Reflection and Prayer

To realize how wonderful God's promises really are, it can be helpful to turn them upside down. It is nonsense, of course, but if such an exercise helps us to realize how powerful the verses are the 'right way up,' then perhaps it can help to enlarge our vision, and to pray and act with more confidence.

The Lord is my slave-driver, who leaves me short of change. He drives me on by day and night, and drains me of my strength down paths I did not want to take. (Not Psalm 23:1-3)

Now may the God of all discouragement drain you of all joy and peace as you continue to doubt Him, so that you may end up feeling entirely helpless. (Not the Epistles to the Romans 15:13)

Now to Him who is able to do less than we can ask or imagine, due to the lack of power that is at work within us. (Not the Epistle to the Ephesians 3:20)

References

¹ 1 Samuel 29:4, 30:6

² Dr Pierson was the son-in-law of George Mueller who founded the Bristol orphanages. Mueller's extraordinary faith inspired generations of Christians to trust the promises in God's Word more fully.

³ Matthew 11:21-24 cf Isaiah 28:21-22. We will look in much greater detail at what the Lord is saying to the nations in *Led by the Spirit*.

⁴ Stephen Parker *Led by the Spirit* (Sheffield Academic Press).

⁵ You will find opportunities to surf and pray on our web site www.ruachministries.org – especially in the section 'Intercessory Insights.'

⁶ C.S. Lewis *The Magician's Nephew* (Harper Collins) pp.116-117

⁷ 2 Thessalonians 3:2, 2 Corinthians 2:11

⁸ Tom Marshall *Understanding Leadership*. (Sovereign World). See the chapter 'Meet the Corporation.' Writing as both a successful businessman and a church leader, Tom has extremely helpful insights to share concerning both worlds.

⁹ Eg Col 4:3, 1 Thess 5:25, 2 Thess 3:1

¹⁰ Isaiah 30:21

¹¹ Romans 15:24,28

¹² Galatians 2:11f, Acts 15:1-29

¹³ Ross Patterson *The Antioch Factor* (Sovereign World)

¹⁴ David Oliver and James Thwaites outline this problem on page 70 of their book *Church that Works* (Authentic Lifestyle). Wolfgang Simson also explores this new way of learning: see especially his chapter, 'Fathering the next generation' in *Houses that change the world – the return of the house churches.* (Authentic Media) pp. 257-258. James Rutz has extremely important things to share about making Church more participatory in his ground-breaking publication, *Megashift* (Empowerment Press, Colorado Springs).

¹⁵ See my article, 'The Joshua Generation,' on our web site www.ruachministries.org (Articles and Publications).

¹⁶ John 6:66-68

¹⁷ Loren Cunningham *Winning God's way* (Front Line Publications)

¹⁸ So named after Bruce Wilkinson's best-selling book *The Prayer of Jabez* (Multnomah, 2000)